

Best Practices and Lessons Learned from a Multi-Jurisdictional Scan

The George School: A Case Study

The Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative offers case studies that show what trauma-sensitive schools do and can look like. A trauma-sensitive school is one in which all students feel safe, welcomed, and supported and where addressing trauma's impact on learning on a school-wide basis is at the center of its educational mission.

The principal of The George School felt her institution needed to work on communication and community within their environment and decided to adopt a trauma-sensitive approach. The George School first approached this change by focusing on the adults in the school and improving their abilities to communicate with and to one another. All staff including school custodians participated in this process in the form of professional-development days that targeted the school as a whole entity, rather than a grouping of individual classrooms.



When conducting their study, the George School adopted six core values to facilitate the addition of trauma-sensitive knowledge and practice within the school. These values were:

- a shared understanding of trauma's impact on learning and the need for a school-wide approach;
- supporting all students to feel safe physically, socially, emotionally, and academically;
- addressing students' needs in holistic ways, taking into account their relationships, self-regulation, academic competence, and physical and emotional health and well-being;
- explicitly connecting students to the school community and providing multiple opportunities to practice newly developing skills;
- embracing teamwork and the sharing of staff responsibilities for/to all students; and,
- anticipating and being ready to adapt to the ever-changing needs of students and the surrounding community.



Changes in everyday practices at the school included: greeting every student as the day began (intentional fostering of relationships); mixing classes to support social growth (trauma-sensitive classroom strategies); and, engagement with students (collaboration), among others. These mechanisms for change can become highly specified to schools based on the personnel available and other variables that shape a school's composition. The adoption and use of trauma-sensitive knowledge has shown to improve the function of the school system at The George School.

Outcomes at The George School included:

- decreased office referrals and use of disciplinary actions;
- improved staff and student relationships;
- decreased crisis reports from teachers and other personnel;
- increased parent communication and engagement through the gratitude for parents noticing the benefits of the educational changes; and,
- increased staff cohesion.



The benefits from this trauma-sensitive approach at The George School worked wonders for the children but also resulted in a better self-reported working environment for school staff. A highlighted outcome was increased staff cohesion. Increased staff cohesion among other things lessens work burnout and turnover within school systems.



Other Lessons Learned From the Multi-Jurisdictional Scan

Across other studies done on schools following their adoption of trauma-sensitive school practices, similar benefits have been observed. The most commonly adopted principles include:

1. Develop an understanding of trauma and stress.
2. Establish a culture of safety and predictability.
3. Foster compassionate and dependable relationships with students.
4. Promote resilience and social-emotional learning.
5. Facilitate empowerment and collaboration.

Across this multi-jurisdictional scan the most commonly reported improvements to the schools were:

- Significant increase in the understanding of trauma and trauma-sensitive practices from school staff
- Improvements in students' abilities to learn
- Improvements in school attendance and observations of students being on task.

“We wouldn’t have been aware of the impacts of trauma even though we were dealing with them constantly. [Before adopting a trauma-sensitive lens] we were writing tighter and more rigid behavior plans and procedures. We would not have been able to offer people different ways of managing behavior.” (Dorado et al., 2016)

For all references and more information please see the full report: Case studies referenced in this brief come from: Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative (2019), Dorado, et al. (2016) & Osher, Berg, & Jones (2016)