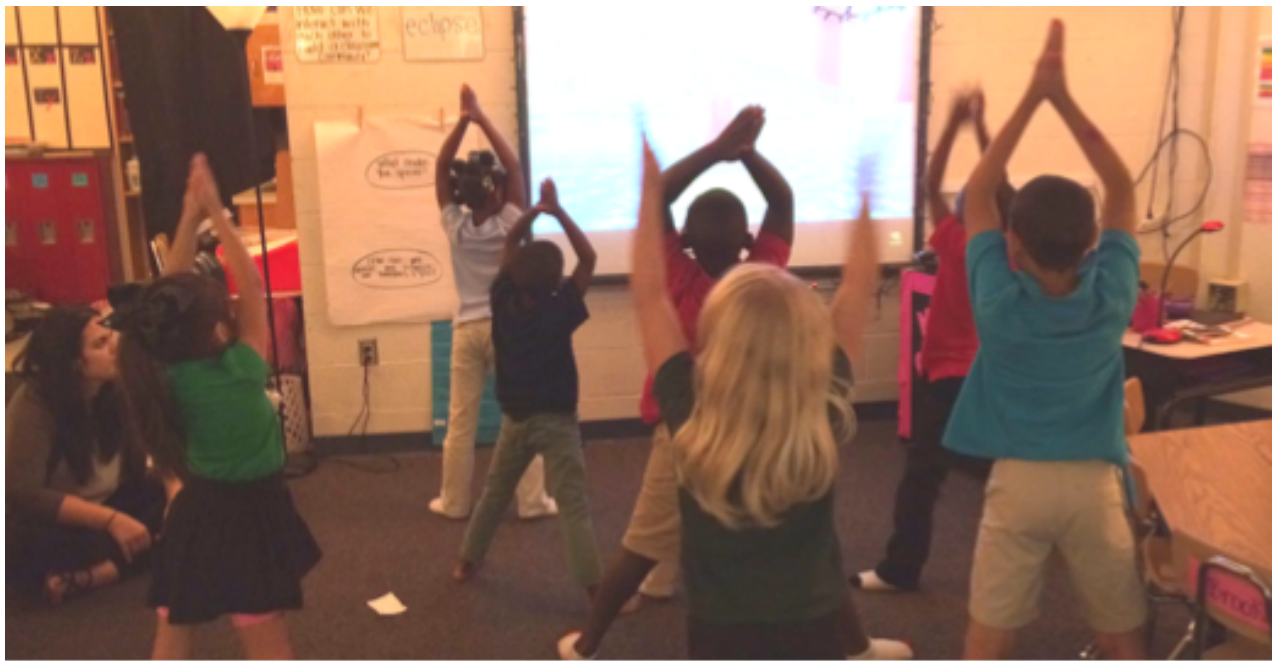


# How Leaders Can Shift Mindsets and Create a Trauma-Informed Student Support Form



The Intersection of  
Trauma-Informed Practice,  
Social Emotional Learning & PBIS

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**T**his world of evidence-based, developmentally appropriate best practices can seem hard to navigate. Utilizing multi-tiered, systemic programs and supports in your school community can be easier to implement than expected. To start, it helps to understand why these programs are important, an overview of each of them, and how they intersect and compliment each other. Then, get examples and how-tos for implementing these best practices in your school.

## Why are Trauma-Informed Programs Important?

An increasing number of children and adolescents are facing trauma, struggling with stress and anxiety, and battling new challenges as a result of technology, particularly social media. These childhood traumas are just one piece of the climate and culture concerns schools and districts experience throughout the school year. Across the country, educators and leaders want to see the systemic impact and change around:

- Student and staff well-being;
- Teacher happiness and retention;
- Student focus and attendance;
- Student management of emotions; and
- School safety.

As leaders begin to discuss how to navigate these obstacles and inspire change, many questions arise. How can we improve teacher and student attendance? How can we improve the culture of our classrooms and school? What current programs or systems are in place to support students and staff wellbeing? What is currently working, and, perhaps more importantly, what's not?

Trauma-informed practices, social emotional learning programs and positive behavioral interventions and supports are important because they can provide a foundation and roadmap for navigating these challenges. These programs are often chosen and implemented in response to a problem, set of needs, or as part of a school or district-wide social emotional learning initiative. When implemented successfully, and integrated thoughtfully, these programs have the power to have a tremendous impact on students, staff, parents, and the overall school community.

### Trauma-Informed Practice

A trauma-informed mindset is an ongoing commitment to learning about trauma; both what types of trauma are present and also the impact it is having on students, staff, and families. This dedication to increasing knowledge, understanding, and awareness of trauma is at the core of a trauma-informed mindset.

Madisien Steele, Fall Hamilton Elementary Trauma-Informed Coordinator in Metro Nashville Public Schools explains:

“I like to think of it [trauma-informed practice] as a spotlight. When you’re watching a show, the spotlight is on the performer and you can’t see what’s going on in the background. Trauma-informed practices help us expand that spotlight to a floodlight. We’re no longer just going to look at what’s wrong with the child but we’re going to see what else is happening in the background. We’re going to look at the child’s home situation, family life, etc. so we have a better understanding of what’s going on” ([How Trauma Informed Practices and SEL Strengthen School Culture](#), 2018).

Trauma-informed practices require collaboration and support for all members of a community or organization based on the traumas they have, or could, encounter. [Grafton’s trauma-informed care model](#) recommends six key principles. By integrating these principles into classrooms and schools, educators will be able to better understand students, meet their needs, and empower them to find success.

## The six key principles include:

- 1** Evaluate the function and intent of behaviors: Use initial and ongoing assessments to highlight antecedents and consequences of a behavior, which will inform next steps in hopes of improving care.

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- 2** Promote a culture of comfort: A trauma-informed environment is best utilized as a holistic commitment, i.e. not just focusing on an isolated teacher-student interaction, but addressing the wellbeing and needs at all levels of a school/district.

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- 3** Recognize practices that are re-traumatizing: Assess and evaluate data and self-reflections to best understand the triggers to avoid.

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- 4** Reinforce training for all employees: Similar to the reasons for ongoing and differentiated teaching and re-teaching, staff need to be trained and retrained. Trauma-informed practices require an open-minded, growth mindset that allows for continued learning and reflection.

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- 5** Transform the language used: Language used by adults and students should reflect respect, compassion, and care.

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**6** Recognize the role of the caregiver as an opportunity to heal: Caregivers have the incredible opportunity to “reverse the effects and impact of trauma, heal individuals and create an environment that is safe, comforting and trustworthy. It ultimately requires professionals to be kind, courteous, and respectful and to do whatever is needed to ensure that a person is valued and honored” ([Six Principles of Trauma Informed Care](#), 2015).

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Trauma-informed practice is important because most people have, or will, experience a form of trauma at some stage in their life. A CDC/Kaiser Permanente Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study examined the prevalence of childhood trauma across the United States. Findings included that 64% of people will have at least one ACE by the time they are 19, with 38% having two or more ACEs (CDC, 2016). This provides important insight on more than just the student population, but on the adults - educators, parents, guardians - as well. Educators must be equipped with trauma-informed practices in order to best meet the needs of students, families, communities, staff, and themselves.

## Social Emotional Learning

The [Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning \(CASEL\)](#) defines social-emotional learning as “the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively:

- Apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions;
- Set and achieve positive goals;
- Feel and show empathy for others;
- Establish and maintain positive relationships; and
- Make decisions responsibly” (CASEL, 2018).

By developing these skills, children and adults are better prepared to address and strengthen their social and emotional wellbeing. For schools, this means learning environments that are safe, supportive, and more successful. These five core competencies closely align to [David Goleman’s four pillars of emotional intelligence](#). Emotional intelligence influences success in school and in the workplace. Social-emotional learning provides the foundation children need to achieve lifelong happiness.

## The five core competencies of social emotional learning are:

### Self-awareness:

- Identifying emotions
- Expressing emotions
- Mindfulness
- Self-confidence
- Recognizing strengths

### Self-management:

- Managing emotions
- Resilience
- Stress management
- Impulse control
- Self-motivation

### Social awareness:

- Empathy
- Discovering differences
- Diversity appreciation
- Civic engagement
- Respect for others

### Relationship skills:

- Conflict resolution
- Active listening
- Cooperation
- Teamwork
- Communication

### Responsible decision making:

- Identifying problems
- Solving problems
- Analyzing situations
- Goal setting
- Leadership skills

The Aspen Institute’s National Commission on Social, Emotional and Academic Learning recently released scientific statements of evidence that demonstrate the lasting impact social-emotional programming has on students, staff, school culture, and the surrounding community. Students are more able to remain mentally present throughout the school day when social-emotional programming is present. Evidence demonstrates that students learn more when they are able to manage their emotions, form meaningful relationships, and demonstrate resilience. SEL programming can also increase executive functioning, self-efficacy, and persistence.

## Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

Positive behavioral interventions and support (PBIS) is a “multi-tiered approach to social, emotional and behavior support. The broad purpose of PBIS is to improve the effectiveness, efficiency and equity of schools and other agencies. PBIS improves social, emotional and academic outcomes for all students, including students with disabilities and students from underrepresented groups” ([Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports](#), 2018).

While PBIS practices vary from school to school, they generally include some foundational components. PBIS focuses on setting clear behavior expectations for students and staff throughout the school day, and then rewarding students with positive incentives when these expectations are met. When expectations are not met, a behavior referral form is generally used to track data regarding who is not meeting expectations, where and when behavior problems are occurring and what consequence was implemented as a result.

## How do TIP, SEL, and PBIS Work Together?

It's clear that trauma-informed practices, SEL, and PBIS can help better meet students where they are. However, it's important to think about how these programs can be intertwined with one another in order to achieve true success.

Trauma-informed practices is truly a mindset; once educators have shifted to this perspective, they've established a strong foundation that can better support social emotional learning and PBIS. Building students' social emotional skills is a trauma-informed practice, and although PBIS is not inherently trauma-informed, there are components of the system that do live under this umbrella. Figure 1, on page 6, helps map the intersections of these programs. In unity, these three practices build, strengthen, and support one another.

Social emotional learning not only compliments trauma-informed practices, it is a trauma-informed practice in and of itself. Many interventions have been able to improve children's social and emotional competencies, increase their prosocial behaviors, and, in some cases, reduce levels of negative behaviors at home, in school, or in the local community (Durlak and Weissberg, 2007). Social emotional learning provides the tools to better identify, understand, express, and manage emotions. Experiencing trauma affects these social emotional skills and abilities.

Social emotional learning programs can complement PBIS because they ensure that all students and teachers are receiving a standard baseline in terms of social and emotional support, create a common language around mental health, and provide strategies for emotional management and conflict resolution. Some social emotional learning programs are similar to a Tier I support within the PBIS framework, because they are a daily routine that all students and staff engage in. Social emotional learning should also explain what some of the PBIS expectations mean, as those expectations often directly correspond to the five core SEL competencies. SEL programs also educate students and teachers on strategies for managing emotions. These emotional management strategies are important because they can help students de-escalate and meet

expectations even when faced with challenging situations. A strong social emotional learning curriculum will teach students skills and tools to help them thrive within PBIS and other structures.

## Program Implementation and Sustainability

It is clear that trauma-informed practices, SEL and PBIS can lead to positive outcomes for students, but how do we think about implementation, evaluation, and sustainability? The three pillars of behavioral and academic achievement are the synchronicity between data, systems, and practices (shown below in figure I). Data helps inform systems and practices and daily practices actively reflect the systems chosen. The systems and practices should all root back to data and continue to be re-evaluated and assessed.



Figure I. Trauma-Informed Practice: Elements and Outcomes



Most decisions will start in the data section as a needs assessment is the foundation for all action-planning. Data also includes researching appropriate programs and strategies to best address the needs found and goals set. After the needs have been identified, it is time to choose and implement a system. There are likely multiple systems within a classroom, school, and community. These systems may include a social emotional learning curriculum, positive behavioral interventions, and structure for trauma-informed practices and restorative justice. As practices and systems continue ongoing, so should (re)assessments, (re)evaluation, and related changes based on that data. One method many schools use to track behavior data in particular is a student referral form. This can be a powerful data collection tool, and with some tweaks, it can also encourage staff members to maintain their trauma informed mindset.

## What is a Trauma-Informed Student Support Form?

Trauma-informed practices is a thread that should be woven into and throughout programs, curriculum, processes, conversations, data, and documentation. As schools and districts begin to shift to a trauma-informed mindset, updating current practices and systems will follow. One of these systems that should be updated to reflect this shift is the typical referral form. Trauma-informed work focuses on building relationships, cultivating safe communities, and supporting social emotional learning. Typical referral forms do not always mirror those values or practices. The trauma informed student support forms found on pages 12- 13 can be used to encourage relationship building, rebuilding communities, and reinforce social emotional skills. The student support form should be completed by both the student and the staff member involved, or whoever witnessed the behavior.

Traditionally, a referral form provided schools with a streamlined system to track behavior incidents. The forms were particularly helpful because they dove deep into details, such as: a detailed list of problem behaviors for a staff member to select from, the time and location of the problem behavior, and who else was involved. This gave school leaders a rich source of data and they could even evaluate if certain locations or times of days were particularly problematic for certain students or for the school community as a whole. Many referral forms also link a behavior to a direct consequence.

Different schools choose to use different forms to track their incidents and will revise forms to meet their own needs. There's no denying that a referral form is a valuable data tracking tool. There are, however, some key components of these forms that often don't support a trauma-informed mindset. To begin, simply labeling the forms as referral forms does not exemplify a mindset that we are here to create a supportive environment for our students to thrive. Another significant example is labeling incidents as "problem behaviors" and including a detailed list of what these might entail. This puts the emphasis on the behavior

versus understanding the bigger picture “why” and what might be causing this behavior. Linking particular behaviors to consequences can also be problematic in that different students have different needs and require varying levels of support in order to meet expectations.

## How do you Create a Trauma-Informed Referral Form?

There are a number of quick changes that can be made to referral forms to transition them into trauma-informed student support forms, such as: providing a space to describe student behavior rather than a checklist, leaving room for student reflection, and providing an opportunity to think about next steps. On pages 12-13, there is a developmentally appropriate example of a student support form.

Student support forms serve a dual purpose of necessary documentation and, perhaps more importantly, student-led reflections and key next steps. To be most effective for both student and staff, the form would be completed by all involved parties in a timely manner and with as much detail as possible. The student support form provides data on student behavior and can provide insight on overall school culture and climate. Additionally, if logged and tracked, the form will not only show school and classroom trends, but individual student needs as well. For instance, if a student has multiple student support forms in their file, then the needs and actions likely need to be reevaluated to address the on-going concern. The student support form is best used with ongoing follow-up. The type of follow-up will vary from case to case and largely depend on what the next step was, and if it actually happened as planned.

A trauma-informed student support form will give space to describe a behavior rather than an opportunity to check off problem behaviors. Many referral forms are inundated with checkboxes, but student behavior is much more complicated than a check-box; thus, providing an open space for description allows staff to accurately and objectively describe the incident. A student support form should accompany dedicated time and space to allow for student reflection and planning of next steps. Importantly, it is not meant to be a document only completed by an adult, but rather a collaboration among student(s) and adult(s). This not only helps with more accurate documentation of the behavior, but better buy-in among all parties during initial next steps and throughout the ongoing follow-up.

On the following page is an overview of the parts of the student support form to provide you a deeper understanding of the trauma-informed intention behind each section.

## Student Support Form (side 1, page 12)

**Student Name, Staff Member, Grade, Date, Time & Location Sections:** These first two sections will help provide context for the incident, as well as provide important information needed for data tracking.

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**Behavior Description:** The involved staff member should describe the behavior with as much detail and as objectively as possible. They should be mindful that the involved student and their family, and other staff members, might read this form.

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**Who else was involved?:** The staff member will provide data and insight to the immediate behavioral follow-up and response.

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**Immediate Response or Intervention:** Knowing what the first steps were is useful in reflection of practices and for ongoing data tracking.

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**Parent or Guardian Contact:** Trauma-informed mindset and practices best incorporate change agents at all levels, especially keeping parents informed and supported throughout the processes.

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**Next Steps:** The next step(s) should be an action that reflects and relates to the harm that was done. Ideally, this action helps repair the harm and trust broken. Next step(s) will look different from classroom to classroom, school to school, and community to community. A next step could be a developmentally and age-appropriate logical consequence, i.e. writing a letter of apology or helping clean up after intentionally making a mess. In trauma-informed best practices, arbitrary consequences should be avoided.

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## Student Support Form (side 2, page 13)

**Student Reflection:** Incorporating student reflection is an integral piece for trauma-informed work. Allowing the student to write or draw their responses shows acknowledgement that wherever they are emotionally and/or potentially academically, they can and should express themselves.

The student should have the opportunity to express their point of view, reflect, and respond on possible next steps. This section should be adapted as needed to reflect developmentally appropriate language for the student. Allowing time and space for student input also helps with buy-in on next steps and ongoing follow-up.

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**Signatures:** Having multiple signatures acknowledges that multiple parties were involved in creating and moving forward based on the information in this form.

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## How do TIP, SEL and PBIS Live in School?

Utilizing a trauma-informed mindset with a social emotional learning program and PBIS can lead to powerful results. Parents and teachers might report a decrease in stress and students an increase in emotional management. Take a closer look into the experience of a fourth-grade student, as told by Madisien Steele:

“This particular student had a significant trauma history and chronic behavior issues. One day they were having a difficult time in music class and the teacher called the crisis team. By the time I got there, they had already put Move This World’s “Emogers” (emotional management) strategies to work. They told me, ‘I can’t talk right now. I need to get a drink of water.’ After they got their drink they said, ‘I need to count.’ Finally, they said, ‘I’m going to take some deep breaths.’ They continued to go through strategies until they were ready to go back to class. It was amazing to see them recognize what they needed in a particular moment and regulate themselves.

Since starting Move This World, I hear students encouraging one another and taking a more proactive stance to helping one another. I see a difference in the faculty as well. They’re putting these strategies to use for themselves, which is a powerful model for students. We’re all human and we experience these things, too.”

Move This World is a social emotional learning program that provides PreK-12 educators and students with short videos to strengthen their social and emotional wellbeing in order to create healthy environments where effective teaching and learning can occur. Through evidence-based, developmentally appropriate videos used to open and close instructional time, Move This World ritualizes a daily practice of identifying, expressing and managing emotions.

Many Move This World partner schools also use Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) systems. Many behaviors that lead to conflict are a result of students' social and emotional skills being underdeveloped. Some students don't yet have the capacity to appropriately express themselves, manage conflict and de-escalate in challenging or stressful situations. Move This World helps students build these foundational skills. When implemented with fidelity, PBIS and SEL create a balanced approach to discipline: "Together, they offer the full range of strategies and techniques needed for effective classroom management and schoolwide discipline" (Bear, 2010). CASEL explains that, "SEL & PBIS are both rooted in the belief that students learn best in a safe and well-managed learning environment" (CASEL, 2018).

## Welcome to a Trauma-Informed School

Congratulations on taking your first steps toward cohesive trauma-informed practices that work in collaboration with social emotional learning programs and positive behavioral and intervention supports. Educate your team about the trauma-informed student referral form. Support them as they transition into using trauma-informed language and practices on a regular basis. Keep tracking data, evaluating, reassessing, and adjusting as needed to best meet the needs of your school and community. Among all of that, continue checking in with your own social emotional needs and wellbeing. Take care of yourself to best take care of and model the care others should be taking on themselves and in their relationships.

## Trauma-Informed Student Support Form

On the following two pages, print the trauma-informed student support form and start implementing immediately.

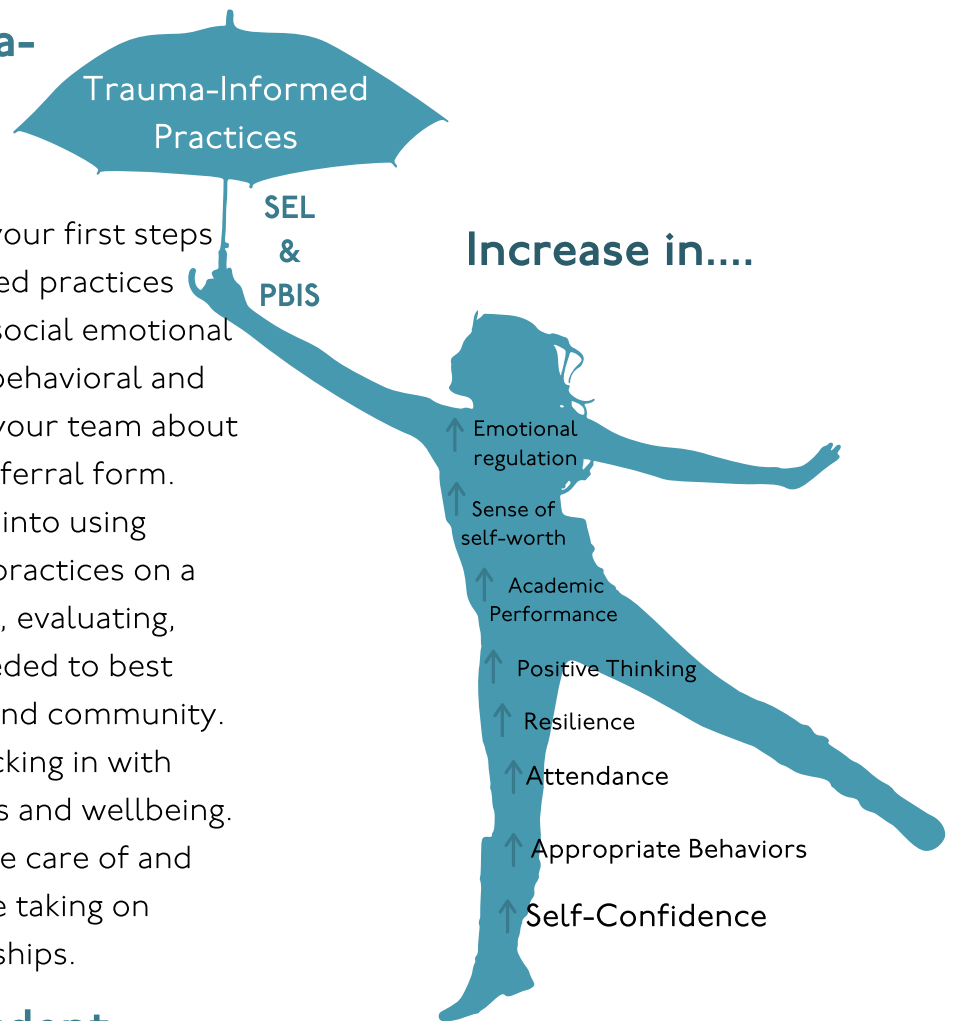


Figure 2. Positive Outcomes of Trauma-Informed Practices with SEL and PBIS system

# Student Support Form

Student Name	Staff Member	Grade	Date	Time
<b>Location</b>				
Classroom	Bathroom	Cafeteria	Parking lot	
Playground	Gym	On the bus	Assembly, field trip or special event	
Hallway	Library	Walk to/from school	Other: _____	
<b>Behavior Description</b>				
<b>Who else was involved?</b>				
Peers: _____		Teachers/Staff: _____		
Other: _____		Unknown	No one	
<b>Immediate Response or Intervention</b>				
Private Conversation	Space & Time	Written Reflection	Peace/Calm Corner	
Seat Change	Planned Ignoring	Proximity	Classroom Visit	
Bounce/Errand	Other: _____			
<b>Parent or Guardian Contact</b>				
Date: _____		Time: _____		
Email	Telephone	Outcome of Contact:		
Letter	Conference	_____		
_____				
<b>Next Steps</b>				
Mediation	Conferencing	Service Learning	Other: _____	
<b>Referred by Signature</b>				

# Student Reflection

Use the spaces below to draw or write your responses.

Describe what happened in your own words.

How did you feel? Why do think you felt that way?

How could you have responded differently? How would you like to respond in the future?

What next steps you will take from here? List 2 to 3 actions you can take immediately.

Student Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Teacher or Staff Member Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

# Afterword

By Mathew Portell, Principal of Fall-Hamilton Elementary School

**A**s current research continues to build our capacity as educators to understand the impact of adversity and trauma on the lives of the majority of students in our classrooms, we must evaluate our systems and approaches to ensure ALL students are supported. It is clear that trauma is not isolated to a specific demographic or geographical area, so our transformations must be holistic and systematic.

We can no longer approach behavior from a compliance mindset; it is evident through research that we must shift our paradigm to focus on creating systems of support for all children grounded in strong, stable, and nurturing relationships. We must become more trauma-informed.

Being trauma-informed serves as an umbrella for many effective pedagogical practices that are commonly utilized in schools. Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) serves as the foundation for all trauma-informed work. Understanding that as humans we are social and emotional beings and there are skills that need to be fostered and developed over time and as a part of learning is a key shift. SEL must be integrated into educational settings and should not be separated. When students struggle to develop these skills either because of trauma or developmental deficiencies, we must create individualized supports. Positive Behavior Intervention Support is a widely known approach which provides a three tiered structure of individualized support for students. Over the past several years, my school Fall-Hamilton Elementary, has utilized both of these approaches to assist in becoming a trauma-informed school.

In 2015-2016, my school, Fall-Hamilton Elementary, begun our paradigm shift to being trauma-informed by developing multi-tiered systems of support for all children. However, we did not focus only on our students; we also focused on our teachers and staff. Our journey is filled with purpose, synergy, strategy, and ultimately positive results. Being trauma-informed is not about a specific program; it is about shifting educators' mindsets from compliance and control and creating, to a cohesiveness within adults who support all students and each other. We began the journey to move from asking students "What is wrong with you?" to "What has happened to you?"

Fall-Hamilton teachers and staff engage in monthly professional learning focused on creating a trauma-informed school environment, which has included trauma-informed practices, de-escalation, self-care, and even implicit bias. Every adult in the school, including support staff, serves as a mentor for a Tier II student. That is nearly 50 students! The mentors (teacher/staff) meet with their mentees (students) at the



beginning and end of every day. They set goals, create plans, and positively reinforce if the student's goals are met. Students engage in daily morning meetings and closing circles where they discuss their emotions and talk about strategies. This creates a space of community and connectedness for all involved. Fall-Hamilton Elementary also has peace corners in every room including the library, gym, and front office. This is a designated space where students can go to utilize the emogers or de-escalation strategies they have been taught. This allows them time and a space to manage their emotions.

As we began to focus on building strong relationships, supporting students in building their emotional vocabulary, and teaching them emogers our student success academically and behaviorally has substantially improved. An emoger is an emotion management and de-escalation strategy as named by the social emotional learning program Move This World. One social emotional success story we had began with a first grader who started mid-year. The first day he started school we knew that he was going to need significant support. He struggled to identify his emotions and lacked the skills and strategies to manage his emotions when he became overwhelmed. Before the end of the of the first day I unknowingly made a mistake. I escorted him to my office and closed the door. He immediately went into fight and flight! He destroyed my office in minutes. After a brief conversation with his mother, she openly explained to me that he had been abused by an alcoholic father. One of his traumatic experiences was being locked in a small space. My heart broke. I immediately apologized to the student and we jumped into action and built supports through our check in/check out mentor system and individual peace corner, and we did not use physical containment. Now nearly a year later, the child shows no signs of escalation or aggression. He even independently began to meet with his mentor on the second day of the school this year. We are also preparing for him to become a student mentor in the coming months.

**Being trauma-informed is not about a specific program; it is about shifting educators' mindsets from compliance and control and creating, to a cohesiveness within adults who support all students and each other.**

As a part of our transition to become more trauma-informed, we had to evaluate the purpose of utilizing an office behavior referral. Traditionally referrals are looked at as an intervention to change behavior and to promote compliance and punishment, so we set out to change this. Simply by changing the name of the form from referral to support acknowledges the shift of being trauma-informed. Referrals should be utilized to teach and support students.



As Fall-Hamilton Elementary continues to strive to become more trauma-informed we have not only changed school policies to support the shift, we also adjust many protocols including our office referral. By utilizing this new style of office referral we are not only increasing student accountability by allowing them to have voice, but also students are given the opportunity to explain the situation from their perspective while we also hold them accountable for utilizing the strategies they have been taught. We will use this form not for punishment, but to assist in guiding our approach around natural consequence, relationship healing, and restitution.

We must shift from the idea of fixing broken kids to fixing broken systems. Our students are not broken, they just need to be supported by adults who sincerely care about them. However, many of our systems are broken and archaic in nature. By utilizing this student support form we will be targeting creating systems that put kids' needs first through supporting them in productive ways.

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