



TRANSFORMING TRAUMA-

SCHOOLS WITH INFORMED CARE

No school is immune to the effects of student trauma.

By implementing schoolwide trauma-sensitive programs,
you can help students be that much more successful.

BY KATY O'GRADY

Research on trauma is eye-opening – it affects children's brain development, behavior and health for the rest of their lives. Behind the trauma are the adverse childhood experiences students endure, including physical or verbal abuse, divorced or imprisoned parents, neglect, exposure to substance abuse and more. In schools, trauma surfaces when students struggle to behave and learn due to difficulties with concentration, memory, organization and language.

No classroom is immune to the effects of trauma. “Yes, abuse causes trauma, but any divorce, any grief, any verbal abuse, those kinds of things exist, no matter what race, income or poverty level,” said Tawnya Pringle, school counselor at Hoover High School in San Diego, Calif.

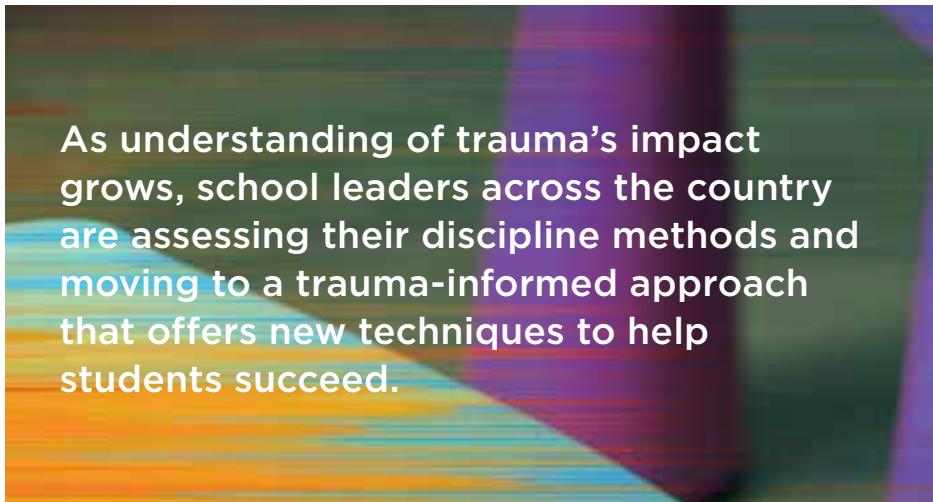
As understanding of trauma’s impact grows, school leaders across the country are assessing their discipline methods and moving to a trauma-informed (also called trauma-sensitive) approach, which offers new techniques to help students succeed. Pringle describes trauma-informed care as a cultural shift in how we look at behavior with students.

For students with trauma, schools are often the one place that isn’t chaotic. “We can’t assume that the bell ringing is going to instantly shift them into a mental state where they can take in new information and make meaning of it,” said Joe Austin, the principal at Hoover High School. “We’ve got to create practices and build a climate in our classrooms so kids have a chance to feel safe, to feel heard.”

According to the Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative (traumasensitiveschools.org), trauma-sensitive schools have six core attributes:

- Shared understanding among all staff; a whole-school approach to trauma sensitivity
- Safety for all children – physical, social/emotional and academic
- In addressing students’ needs, consideration of their relationships, self-regulation, academic competence and physical and emotional well-being
- Connection of students to the school community and opportunities to practice new skills
- Embraced teamwork and shared staff responsibility for all students
- Leaders’ and staff members’ anticipation of and adaptation to students’ ever-changing needs

“This is best practice now,” said Rebecca Lallier, school counselor at the pre-K–5 Dothan Brook School in White River Junction, Vt., a 2016 RAMP School of Distinction. She believes trauma training is needed for experienced teachers and as a component of teaching and school counseling programs. “People can’t say, ‘No, I teach math.’ Students are not going



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to learn math unless they can self-regulate and feel safe in school and not be triggered by our reaction to their behavior.”

Moving Toward Trauma-Informed

At Holden and Eddington Elementary Schools in the Bangor, Maine, area, school counselor Elena Perello started working with students two years ago about growth vs. fixed mindsets and perseverance. Both schools have established positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) programs that readily incorporate trauma-informed care. In 2016, Perello and her superintendent gave a presentation about trauma to all staff members, with small group work around strategies for the classroom. Perello has found that when one or two teachers begin using resources she suggests, such as mind breaks or breathing exercises, other teachers become interested. “They will hear, ‘Oh, it really helps my kids calm down and focus before we start math,’ and before you know it, it’s all up and down the hall,” she said.

Perello’s partnership with her superintendent points to the central role of administrators in establishing a school as trauma-informed.

Trauma-informed care needs to start with the school leader, letting all staff know this is going to be a focus throughout all the grades, Pringle said. Administrators can also make sure training takes place for school counselors, teachers and all staff. Austin sees the role of administrators as providing “the big picture, to set a tone that we might

get further faster without showdowsns that are created by taking behavior personally.”

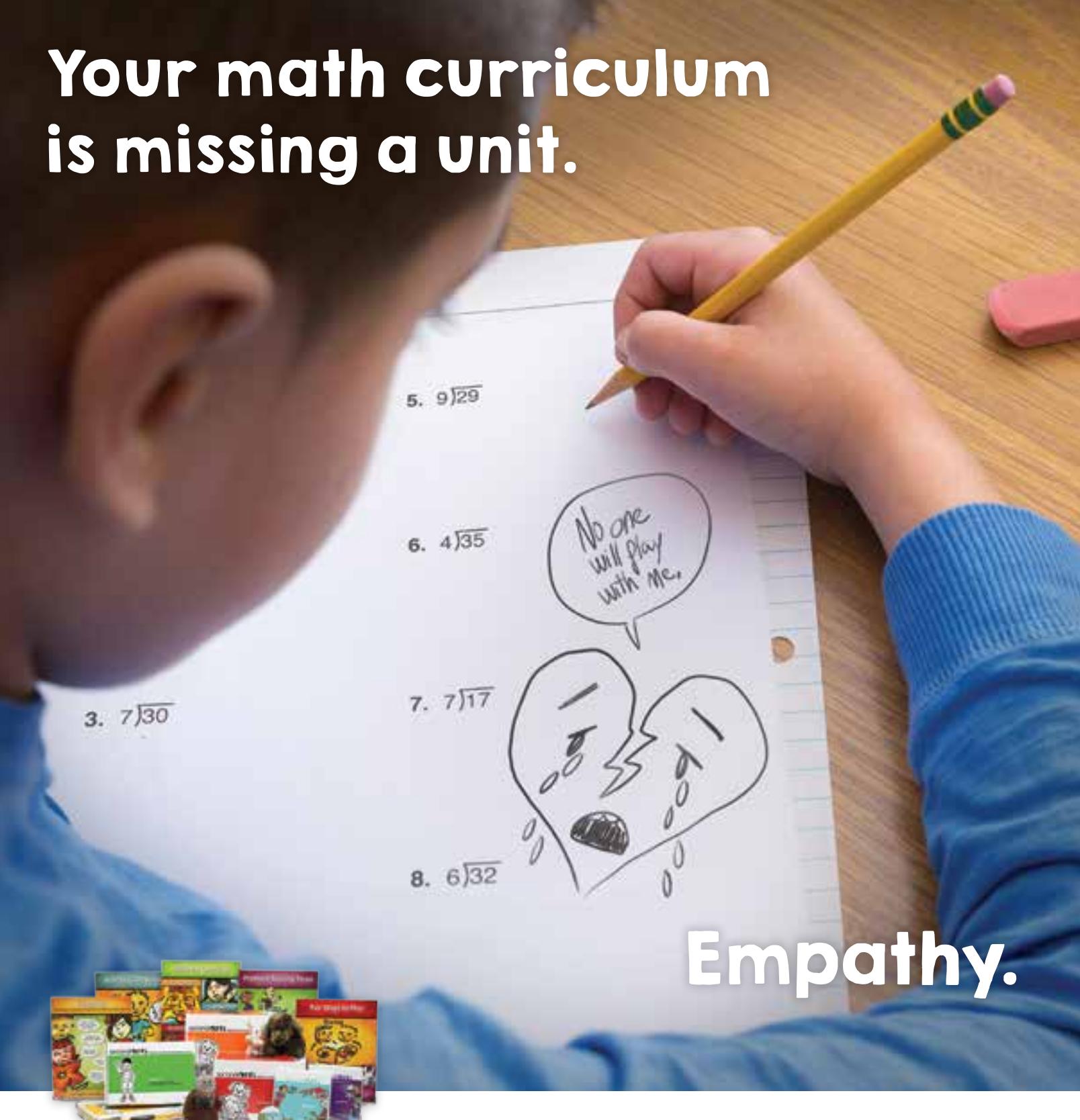
Building students’ connection to school is another vital component of trauma-informed care. Pringle’s school makes sure struggling students “are connected to something here besides just coming to school every day,” she said. This may mean working to engage a student in one of Hoover’s four academies, which create “more of a family; they’ll go through their schooling with some of the same kids, and the academy directors work with the school counselors and keep track of kids who are not doing quite as well, so there are extra eyes,” Pringle said.

Lallier’s elementary school staff and faculty have also focused on increasing students’ sense of belonging as they introduced trauma-informed care. Their program aimed to help teachers as more and more students arrived with a history of trauma. Lallier began sharing information in staff meetings and individual conversations about the impact of trauma and how the brain works. Self-regulation was a particular problem with Dothan Brook’s youngest students, so the school assembled an advisory council geared toward that age group’s needs. This led to staff learning more about trauma, development and attachment and sending a team to an intensive, four-day trauma program in summer 2016.

Using Restorative Justice

In 2014, Hoover High School staff began looking at suspension numbers;

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the student population of 2,000 received between 300 and 400 suspensions. However, neither suspension nor loss of privileges seemed to be having any tangible impact on student behavior. The district began training all staff about trauma-informed care and the impact of adverse childhood experiences on the brain, learning and behavior. Added to that new knowledge, the Hoover staff changed its disciplinary approach to focus on restorative practices. When the district offered training on restorative circles as a way to develop climate in classrooms, faculty jumped at the opportunity to learn more. "We threw it out there to our faculty over the summer and were blown away by the response," Austin said. In summer and fall 2014, 50 of Hoover's 70 teachers took the training.

A restorative circle brings together everyone involved in a particular situation, with the aim of understanding and exploring how the situation has affected those involved, including the community, and identifying what can be done to make things right. "If there was a fight or defiance, that was brought into a restorative circle where we could do some intervention with all parties, have time

for people owning up to what they have done and seeing how it affected others," Pringle said.

The combination of trauma-informed care and restorative circles led to Hoover's suspension rate dropping by 80 percent that year. "It wasn't a metric I had put out there, 'thou shalt not suspend,'" Austin said. He believes behaviors change with the new approach. "The kids don't wind up making the same mistakes over and over again or following the same kind of behavioral patterns." The school's reduction in suspensions held for the 2015–16 school year and looks to be continuing into 2017.

The second new approach at Hoover began in fall 2016 with a new class called psychology and restorative practice. Students' time is split between learning about the brain and psychology and going into classrooms and leading restorative circles. "It could be on a specific topic or checking in with the students, or the teacher may say, 'I'm having an issue with bullying or disrespect for the classroom rules.' The restorative practice teacher leads them on how to run the circle, but then they go in on their own," Pringle said. With 72 students participating, both

periods of the class are full. "It's the most exciting change I've witnessed," Austin said. "Talk about transferrable skills. If I could send kids out into the adult world as conflict resolution agents of change? That is the kind of an impact that is a big deal."

In Alexandria, Va., Nellie Hauchman hopes restorative circles will also prove beneficial at Carl Sandburg Middle School, where she is the school counselor for English learners. The RAMP school has high numbers of students who are recent arrivals to the United States, primarily from Central American countries. Many have experienced tremendous trauma, such as seeing family members murdered or tortured. "They've taken long journeys on foot from their home countries, been abused sexually and physically on their journeys and endured separation from families for extended periods of time," Hauchman said. After attending a session on restorative circles, she concluded Sandburg could benefit from the practice. She believes listening – the core of the circle concept – and support could, for many of her students, provide the empowerment to help them through their difficult transition.

Hauchman's school does not yet have a trauma-informed program, but one is in place on the other side of the county at Herndon Middle School, where the student population is similar to Sandburg's. Meghan Azzara is a school counselor at Herndon, where parental involvement and community partnerships are essential to her work with immigrant students. The school offers separate support groups for boys and girls who are recently reunified with family members or new to the country. Azzara and her colleagues also provide evening programs for parents, to help acclimate them to U.S. schools, the services offered and how to navigate the school system and support their children. She credits parents for recognizing their children have experienced traumas without the parents' support. "A lot of times the parents are calling us requesting the meetings," she said.

Changes Beyond Behavior

Changing the school's approach to trauma certainly resolves student behavior issues, but it also has other benefits.

TRAUMA RESOURCES FOR SCHOOL COUNSELORS

Films:

"Resilience"
<http://kpjfilms.co/resilience/>

"Paper Tigers"
<http://kpjfilms.co/paper-tigers/>

TED Talk on trauma from pediatrician Nadine Burke
www.ted.com/talks/nadine_burke_harris_how_childhood_trauma_affects_health_across_a_lifetime

The Sanctuary Model from Dr. Sandra Bloom
<http://sanctuaryweb.com/>

"Mindset" by Carol Dweck
<http://mindsetonline.com/>

Books by Paul Tough
"How Children Succeed" and "Whatever It Takes" <http://www.paultough.com/the-books/how-children-succeed/>

Improvement in academics has earned district recognition for Lallier's school, and she reports teachers are understanding student behavior in amazing new ways. For example, recognizing that a child felt overwhelmed, a fourth-grade teacher was able to set aside her own frustration and say, "Right now we have a 3 year old, because that's where this kid's brain is, so I'm going to interact with this child as if he were a 3 year old. I'm going to make him feel safe and feel supported." In general, she feels staff members are now more effective and confident and have the perspective that "these kids are all our kids." She has also observed greater staff empathy for parents and what may have happened in their lives. "We don't need to know what happened, but we can do what we can to help them feel safe, too," she said.

At Pringle's school, many teachers have used professional development time for trauma training beyond what the district provided initially. And, like Lallier, she has seen a change in the teachers, a more positive tone around issues with challenging students. Instead of an e-mail saying, "I need a parent conference right away, because this kid's not doing anything," the tone now might be, "I was wondering if we could have a parent/teacher/school counselor restorative conference because I'm seeing some behaviors, and I really want to help this child succeed. The road they're going down is not going well right now, but I want to see what we can do," Pringle said.

How to Get Started

School counselors are the experts in the building for getting a school started on a trauma-informed path. They can begin expanding their knowledge about the topic, introduce it to leadership and consider what information they can provide to staff. "The discussion can come from a place of saying, 'Whoa, look at these attendance or behavioral issues...have we thought about the impact of trauma? Sometimes you have to do some education with your administrator,'" Lallier said.

Perello recommends beginning PBIS if the program is not already in place. For school counselors who encounter resistance, she suggests starting small, with

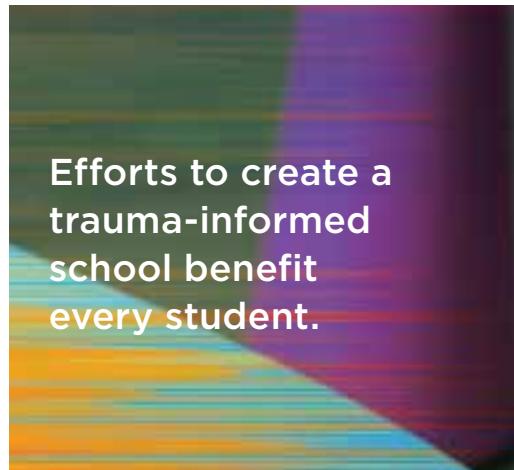
one grade level and one curriculum such as "Mind Up." Once the students begin to learn it and the teachers and parents see this, interest will spread. She strongly advocates for seeking and sharing new tools and approaches. "We can't teach them all math or language arts the same way, so the more different strategies we have for social/emotional development, the more kids we're able to reach," Perello said. Keeping the principal and superintendent informed is vital, too; their support is needed for schoolwide involvement and staff training.

To begin using restorative circles, Austin suggests finding a handful of teachers interested in using the practice for creating climate and resolving conflict in their classrooms. "It's not easy work. My first restorative conference I led was an absolute disaster, but I've gotten better at it over time," he said. Both he and Pringle recommend finding a way to involve students in leading the practice themselves. "You want it to become embedded in the school culture, within the kids," Pringle said.

Challenges for School Counselors

Compassion fatigue is one hazard of trauma-informed care, and Lallier and her colleagues are working to address this in an intentional, ongoing way. Hauchman has also experienced the difficulty of limited support services outside the school. The traumatized children at Sandburg "are not ready for any classroom because they can't get away from all of the stress they're under and all they've been through. There's just such a disconnect," she said. Meeting basic needs is a major struggle for students at Azzara's school, too. However, Herndon Middle School has a strong partnership with a local church that provides food, housing support and even legal assistance to families in need. The school itself sends many students home with weekend meals, has an open clothing closet for students and families and provides an afterschool program to support students without computers at home.

Inside schools, challenges to trauma-informed care can come from teachers who may perceive the approach as soft on behavior or lacking discipline. "You



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have to be clear, you have to speak early and often that the motivation for this is to engage students, to roll up our sleeves and really change behaviors," Austin said. When facing a negative mindset from a teacher having issues in the classroom, Pringle has had success doing a restorative circle in the class and giving the teacher a voice with the students. This allows teachers to share their viewpoint as well and shows students the classroom issues also affect the teachers.

Pringle loves that trauma-informed care helps the rest of the school staff and faculty view students the same way school counselors do and helps others realize there's always a root cause for why students behave the way they do. She hopes attitudes will not revert to zero tolerance for fighting. "You're suspended for five days. And then what? How is a kid learning? Being able to apologize or take responsibility for that behavior can help it," she said.

Efforts to create a trauma-informed school benefit every student. "Helping kids learn how to self-calm, how to be less impulsive and use more self-control strategies and deep breathing techniques, those types of things will also help them do better academically," Perello said.

Lallier agrees. "Ultimately, on the other side of this, the school's going to be more successful, kids are going to be more academically successful, people are going to be happier and more comfortable." 

Katy O'Grady is a freelance writer who last wrote for *ASCA School Counselor* about youth apprenticeships.