

# Responding to Trauma through Policies that Create Supportive Learning Environments

*This brief introduces a **Trauma-Informed Policy Framework to Create Supportive Learning Environments** to help state officials create supportive learning environments that meet the needs of students with a history of traumatic experiences and ensure that all students succeed in school.<sup>1</sup> A supportive learning environment is a school that provides a safe and positive school culture and climate, and attends to the physical, mental, social, emotional, and academic needs of all students.*

## Introduction

Trauma can significantly undermine a student’s ability to learn and thrive in school.<sup>2</sup> Studies estimate that 45 percent of all children have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience, such as parental divorce, death, or incarceration; household mental illness or substance abuse; domestic violence; being a victim of violence or witnessing violence; or economic hardship.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, this figure represents a conservative estimate, as measures of adverse childhood experiences do not include many potentially traumatic experiences in childhood, such as bullying; homelessness; community violence; human trafficking; natural disasters; war, terrorism, or political violence; and forced displacement.<sup>4</sup>

Recent school shootings have raised questions about how schools can address the needs of children who witness or become victims of violence. Shifts in federal immigration policy have increased the prospect that children will be separated from their parents.<sup>5,6</sup> Widespread opioid addiction and overdosing mean greater numbers of children suffering from abuse and neglect and placement in foster care.<sup>7</sup> Further, children from historically marginalized communities may have intergenerational trauma due to extended and repeated experiences of discriminatory treatment and unequal access to public services.<sup>8,9</sup> With each additional adverse experience, children are at increased risk of experiencing traumatic stress; they may develop reactions that negatively affect their physical health, mental health, and academic development long after the event.<sup>10,11</sup>

Research has long supported the critical roles that schools can and do play in supporting development beyond academic instruction.<sup>12,13,14</sup> Schools have traditionally provided a safe haven where children build strong relationships with trusted adults who support their healthy development.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, the structures and expectations of school can be especially challenging for students who experience traumatic stress, potentially making school a place that worsens students’ trauma symptoms, or even retraumatizes them. It is typical, for example, for many children to engage in disruptive or alarming behaviors, or to have difficulty paying attention in

### What is trauma?

*Children who suffer from child traumatic stress are those who have been exposed to one or more traumas. . . and develop reactions that persist and affect their daily lives after the events have ended. Traumatic reactions can include. . . intense and ongoing emotional upset, depressive symptoms or anxiety, behavioral changes, difficulties with self-regulation, problems relating to others or forming attachments, regression or loss of previously acquired skills, attention and academic difficulties, nightmares, difficulty sleeping and eating, and physical symptoms.*

— National Child Traumatic Stress Network

class, following a traumatic event.<sup>16</sup> Schools can cause further harm when such struggles are met with harsh punishment, rather than support; or with criticism, rather than understanding.

Further, schools' efforts to provide support can backfire: When schools focus on trauma screening to identify and treat students, unintended consequences may ensue. Not all children exposed to adversity experience traumatic stress, and broad initiatives to identify students with a history of adverse childhood experiences can stigmatize, alienate, and unnecessarily alarm students and families.<sup>17,18</sup> A forthcoming Child Trends review of programs and practices to address trauma in schools has found little evidence to support most school-based interventions administered by non-clinical staff (e.g., classroom teachers or administration).<sup>19</sup> Moreover, research exploring school efforts to implement academic, behavioral, and health supports for students has consistently shown that discrete programs designed to address specific student needs must be supported by universal, schoolwide shifts in culture and practice.<sup>20</sup> Where schools have a concern about a child with unaddressed mental health needs, family engagement and referral to a trauma-informed mental health clinician for a culturally sensitive assessment are essential to formulating an appropriate response. Schools should collaborate with community partners, including local mental health agencies, to provide such services. However, services alone are not enough. To serve children affected by traumatic stress, school communities need universal, schoolwide shifts in culture and practice to create supportive learning environments for all students.<sup>21</sup>

## A schoolwide shift to help all children

A supportive learning environment is a school that provides a safe and positive school culture and climate, and attends to the physical, mental, social, emotional, and academic needs of all students. Supportive learning environments can mitigate the harmful effects of childhood trauma; facilitate access to services for the children who need them; and establish the policies, norms, and structures that ensure all students can learn and thrive.<sup>22,23</sup> Preparing schools to support the whole child may also mitigate the risk that children will endure additional trauma in school—this is a critical step in prevention given that children impacted by trauma are more likely than their peers to experience additional adversity. While many schools are not yet fully equipped to create supportive learning environments, educators are increasingly calling for new capacity, training, and support.<sup>24</sup>

Creating supportive learning environments requires consideration of how to address students' physical, mental, emotional, and social needs universally—for all students and across the whole school environment. Doing so requires the creation of a schoolwide culture in which structures, programs, and policies support rather than exclude or inadvertently overlook the needs of children. As schools strengthen their capacity to address the varied social, emotional, health, and instructional needs of all students, they create opportunities to better serve student subgroups at greater risk of traumatic stress and academic disengagement. These subgroups include, but may not be limited to, children who have experienced poverty and homelessness, children in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, LGBTQ students, children of color, children from immigrant families, and children with disabilities and special health care needs.

## Steps toward trauma-informed education policy

Many state policymakers have introduced legislation aimed at addressing traumatic stress in schools: In 2018, at least seven states passed such legislation. Such policies often support new training for educators about trauma and adverse childhood experiences or encourage efforts to identify and treat children with a history of trauma.<sup>25</sup>

As policymakers undertake these efforts to address student trauma, they must avoid the pitfalls that would inadvertently stigmatize children with a trauma history. Policies should help schools create supportive learning environments, and not simply identify and treat students. They should ensure that state policies facilitate, and do not hinder, individual schools' efforts to create such environments. Descriptive studies suggest that schools need the flexibility to tailor their efforts to fit the needs of their communities and build buy-in for culture and practice shifts among their key stakeholders.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, policymakers should integrate and improve upon ongoing initiatives to advance school safety and address education inequity. This will require a process of reviewing,

revising, and integrating existing efforts to improve student physical and emotional safety, health, instruction, and school climate.

## How we built our framework

The framework is grounded in an emerging consensus on key components of trauma-informed schools,<sup>27</sup> which are largely based upon the four guiding principles of trauma-informed care defined by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (see glossary). These components include a focus on schoolwide, universal practices as a foundation for more targeted or intensive services.<sup>28</sup> The framework also recognizes the research that student learning is dependent on addressing students' basic needs, in addition to focusing on their social, emotional, and academic development.<sup>29,30</sup> The framework's structure builds upon evidence that initiatives are more likely to be sustained if developed through an inquiry-based, community-led process,<sup>31</sup> but recognizes that policy can provide scaffolding and capacity for such processes.<sup>32</sup>

This guidance also builds upon other recent recommendations for advancing student learning, school equity, and school health, including:

- *From a Nation at Risk to a Nation at Hope: Recommendations from the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development* by the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development<sup>33</sup>
- *Creating Policies to Support Healthy Schools: Policymaker, Educator, and Student Perspectives* by Child Trends<sup>34</sup>
- *Leading for Equity: Opportunities for State Education Chiefs* by The Aspen Institute Education and Society Program and the Council of Chief State School Officers<sup>35</sup>
- *The School Discipline Consensus Report: Strategies from the Field to Keep Students Engaged in School and Out of the Juvenile Justice System* by the Council of State Governments Justice Center<sup>36</sup>

### How does trauma affect learning?

"...traumatic experiences have the power to undermine the development of linguistic and communicative skills, thwart the establishment of a coherent sense of self, and compromise the ability to attend to classroom tasks and instructions, organize and remember new information, and grasp cause-and-effect relationships—all of which are necessary to process information effectively."

— Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative

## A Trauma-Informed Policy Framework to Create Supportive Learning Environments

The goal of this framework is to establish a policy context that provides schools with the time and resources to learn about the impact of trauma on their classrooms and communities; build a supportive school culture based on their unique context and circumstances; and implement an integrated approach to supports, policies, and procedures.<sup>37</sup> The framework features a three-part strategy to help states create learning environments that are sensitive to the needs of students who experience trauma and support all students.

- **Part 1: Build a Statewide Initiative to Create Supportive Learning Environments.** State policy should establish a vision for teaching and learning environments that integrates the goals of academic success, health, safety, and supportive school climates, and creates a process for school communities and state agencies to explore how to actualize this vision.
- **Part 2: Review and Revise State Policy.** Existing state policy may serve to either facilitate or hinder efforts to create supportive learning environments. It is critical that policymakers review and revise state policies to

align initiatives influencing the safety and culture of learning environments and ensure current policies conform with trauma-informed principles.

- **Part 3: Support Locally Based, School-Driven Initiatives to Create Supportive Learning Environments.** State policy should provide school communities with the resources to engage in a broad-based process of exploring the needs of the local community, examining schools' readiness to shift their culture and capacity to meet the needs of all children, and integrate efforts to improve school safety, student health, and school climate.

The guidance includes existing state policies to demonstrate how a variety of states have approached some components of the framework. However, these examples are excerpts pulled from more comprehensive statutes and regulations. We encourage readers to examine the policy texts surrounding the excerpts to gain clarity as to how terms are defined, and to better understand the context in which certain provisions were established. In addition, for each excerpt, we have included directions to help readers use the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) State Policy Database on School Health to research policies covering similar topics from other states.<sup>38</sup>

Further, the use of statutes and regulations from the NASBE State Policy Database is merely illustrative and is not intended to place limitations on the wide range of policy vehicles or sources of leadership that states might utilize to implement the framework. This guide's intended audience includes state legislators, state board of education members, governors, chief state school officers and state education agencies, children's cabinets, and other critical state officials in a position to launch a broad-based initiative to shift the culture and climate of schools.

## Part I: Build a statewide initiative to create supportive learning environments

To launch the implementation of the framework, states should develop a clear vision that describes how schools will create environments that address the physical, mental, social, emotional, and academic needs of all students, with attention to children exposed to traumatic experiences. Meanwhile, state policymakers and school communities should participate in learning opportunities meant to increase their knowledge of trauma and its implications for learning. Such learning opportunities should use strategies to develop a shared understanding of trauma across state actors and between school staff with different roles and responsibilities. Further, the state should engage in fact-finding activities to help them identify how to shift policies, procedures, capacity, and culture—at both the state and school levels—so that school communities have the resources and opportunity to build more optimal conditions for learning among students with traumatic stress. The state should also begin developing strategies and tools, grounded in implementation science,<sup>39</sup> to help school communities engage in local action planning.

As noted earlier, the state leaders responsible for initiating the implementation of the framework and convening the taskforce may differ from state to state. In some states, it may be appropriate to build a taskforce charged by the state legislature (as provided for in the examples); in other states, it may be more expedient for the governor or state board of education to convene the taskforce.

### Principle 1 — Define a vision for school safety and support

- Principle 1.1 — Present a vision statement that promotes the creation of supportive learning environments by promoting student health and safety
- Principle 1.2 — Acknowledge the need to address trauma as part of an integrated effort to create supportive learning environments

#### Highlights from current policy

Massachusetts (Mass. Gen. Laws ch. 69 § 1P): (a) As used in this section the term “safe and supportive schools” shall mean schools that foster a safe, positive, healthy and inclusive whole-school learning environment that: (i)

enables students to develop positive relationships with adults and peers, regulate their emotions and behavior, achieve academic and non-academic success in school and maintain physical and psychological health and well-being; and (ii) integrates services and aligns initiatives that promote students' behavioral health, including social and emotional learning, bullying prevention, trauma sensitivity, dropout prevention, truancy reduction, children's mental health, foster care and homeless youth education, inclusion of students with disabilities, positive behavioral approaches that reduce suspensions and expulsions and other similar initiatives.

*NASBE Policy Database Category (Subcategory): Social and Emotional Climate (State Models and Supports)*

## Principle 2 — Establish a taskforce to operationalize state vision

- Principle 2.1 — Establish a standing multi-disciplinary, public-private taskforce to investigate key questions related to accomplishing the state's vision and make recommendations to the state board of education and state legislature
- Principle 2.2 — Direct the taskforce to include a wide variety of stakeholders—including state officials; school and district administrators, teachers, and school health staff; researchers; students and families; community-based organizations—to identify state agency and school needs
- Principle 2.3 — Provide leadership roles within the taskforce to school community members (e.g., school and district administrators, classroom educators, students, and families) representative of the state's diversity by race, ethnicity, disability, and other characteristics
- Principle 2.4 — Direct the taskforce to investigate state infrastructure, capacity, and expertise to support schools
- Principle 2.5 — Direct the taskforce to investigate the collection, reporting, and public accessibility of data related to supportive learning environments
- Principle 2.6 — Direct the taskforce to investigate workforce development, professional development standards, and school staffing
- Principle 2.7 — Direct the taskforce to investigate state statutes, regulations, and administrative requirements that may further, or inhibit, school efforts to create supportive learning environments

### Highlights from current policy

District of Columbia (D.C. Code § 38-827.01): (a) There is established the Healthy Youth and Schools Commission with the purpose of advising the Mayor and the Council on health, wellness, and nutritional issues concerning youth and schools in the District, including: (1) School meals; (2) Farm-to-school programs; (3) Physical activity and physical education; (4) Health education; (5) Environmental programs; (6) School gardens; (7) Sexual health programming; (8) Chronic disease prevention; (9) Emotional, social, and mental health services; (10) Substance abuse; and (11) Violence prevention.

*NASBE Policy Database Category (Subcategory): Overall WSCC Framework (State-level Wellness Councils)*

Texas (Tex. Admin. Code §37.350): (d) Composition. (1) The committee shall be composed of one representative from the Texas Department of Agriculture (TDA), appointed by the Commissioner of Agriculture; one representative from the Texas Education Agency (TEA), appointed by the Commissioner of Education; the department's School Health Program Coordinator or other department representative; one representative from the Governor's Advisory Council on Physical Fitness (GACPF), to be designated by the GACPF; and 17 members appointed by the Executive Commissioner of the Health and Human Services Commission which shall consist of: (A) two individuals representing school superintendents or other school administrators; and/or school district board members; (B) one registered nurse with school district or school health administrative nursing experience; (C) five consumer members who are parents of school-age children with at least one parent of a child with special needs; (D) one physician, or physician's assistant, or nurse practitioner providing health services to school-aged children;

(E) one representative working in the school setting with certification in student counseling and guidance and/or safety; (F) four members representing organizations and/or agencies involved with the health of school children; (G) one representative working in the school setting with certification as a physical educator; (H) one representative working in the school setting with certification as a health educator; (I) one representative working in the school setting as part of the district's school nutrition services; [(J) at least two classroom educators working with a school setting, representing general and special education; and (K) two student representatives].\* (2) During all phases of the membership selection process, the following information will be regarded with special consideration in an effort to build a committee reflective of the current Texas population: race, gender, age and ethnic diversity; urban, rural and suburban diversity; and, a broad statewide geographic representation whenever possible. (3) Membership shall include one alternate member for each category representing a component of comprehensive school health. The alternate will automatically be appointed as a member if the designated appointee is unable or unwilling to fulfill that role; or, whenever there is a vacancy in a membership category before the end of a member's term. The appointed alternate will take the place of the member only during the term of office when the vacancy occurred. The appointed alternate will perform the same duties and have the same privileges as the appointed member.

*\*Bracketed language added by Child Trends.*

*NASBE Policy Database Category (Subcategory): Overall WSCC Framework (State-level Wellness Councils)*

Massachusetts (Mass. Gen. Laws ch. 69 § 1P): The commission shall: (i) investigate and make recommendations to the board on updating, improving and refining the [safe and supportive schools] framework and the self-assessment tool as appropriate; (ii) identify strategies for increasing schools' capacity to carry out the administrative functions identified by the behavioral health and public schools task force; (iii) propose steps for improving schools' access to clinically, culturally and linguistically appropriate services; (iv) identify and recommend evidenced-based training programs and professional development for school staff on addressing students' behavioral health and creating safe and supportive learning environments; (v) identify federal funding sources that can be leveraged to support statewide implementation of the framework; (vi) develop recommendations on best practices for collaboration with families, including families of children with behavioral health needs; and (vii) examine and recommend model approaches for integrating school action plans, required under subsection (e), with school improvement plans and for using the framework to organize other school and district improvement processes.

*NASBE Policy Database Category (Subcategory): Social and Emotional Climate (State Models and Supports)*

## **Principle 3 — Ensure a baseline of knowledge for all school staff on trauma**

- Principle 3.1 — Provide professional development on cultural competency and implicit bias for school staff
- Principle 3.2 — Provide state- or district-administered professional development and learning opportunities to familiarize school staff with trauma's impact on schools and communities

### **Highlights from current policy**

Nevada (Nev. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 391A.370): 2. The board of trustees of each school district and the governing body of each charter school shall ensure that the teachers and administrators employed by the school district or charter school have access to high-quality, ongoing professional development training. The professional development training must meet the standards prescribed by the State Board pursuant to subsection 1 and include, without limitation, training concerning: (d) The cultural competency required to meet the social, emotional and academic needs of certain categories of pupils enrolled in the school, including, without limitation, pupils who are at risk, pupils who are English learners, pupils with disabilities and gifted and talented pupils.

*NASBE Policy Database Category (Subcategory): Social and Emotional Climate (Professional Development for Cultural Competency)*

Tennessee (Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-230): (a) As used in this section, "adverse childhood experiences" or "ACEs" mean stressful or traumatic events experienced by a minor child. ACEs include, but are not limited to, a child witnessing, or being the victim of, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, physical neglect, emotional neglect, domestic violence, substance abuse, mental illness, parental separation or divorce, and incarceration. (b) The department of education shall develop *[or adopt]\** an evidence-based training program on ACEs for school leaders and teachers. The training may be delivered through the trainer of trainers model under § 49-1-213, and shall include: (1) The effects of ACEs on a child's mental, physical, social, behavioral, emotional, and cognitive development; (2) ACEs as a risk factor for the development of substance abuse disorders and other at-risk health behaviors; (3) Trauma-informed principles and practices for classrooms; *[...]\**

*\*Bracketed language added by Child Trends.*

*NASBE Policy Database Category (Subcategory): Counseling, Psychological, and Social Services (Professional Development for Trauma)*

## Principle 4 — Establish state supports for districts and schools

- Principle 4.1 — Provide state technical assistance, resources, and guidance to help schools engage in a process of developing a locally driven plan to create supportive learning environments.

### Highlights from current policy

Georgia (Ga. Code Ann. § 20-2-155): The State Board of Education shall establish a state-wide school climate management program to help local schools and systems requesting assistance in developing school climate improvement and management processes. Such projects will be designed to optimize local resources through voluntary community, student, teacher, administrator, and other school personnel participation. These processes will be designed for, but will not be limited to, promoting positive gains in student achievement scores, student and teacher morale, community support, and student and teacher attendance, while decreasing student suspensions, expulsions, dropouts, and other negative aspects of the total school environment. The state board upon request of a local school system is authorized to provide the necessary on-site technical assistance to local schools and systems and to offer other assistance through regional and state-wide conferences and workshops, printed material, and such other assistance as may be deemed appropriate under this Code section. The state board shall, upon request of a local school system, produce model codes of behavior and discipline and shall produce guidelines for application and administration of such codes.

*NASBE Policy Database Category (Subcategory): Social and Emotional Climate (State Models and Supports)*

Nevada (Nev. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 388.885): 1. The Department shall, to the extent money is available, establish a statewide framework for providing and coordinating integrated student supports for pupils enrolled in public schools and the families of such pupils. The statewide framework must: (a) Establish minimum standards for the provision of integrated student supports by school districts and charter schools. Such standards must be designed to allow a school district or charter school the flexibility to address the unique needs of the pupils enrolled in the school district or charter school. (b) Establish a protocol for providing and coordinating integrated student supports. Such a protocol must be designed to: (1) Support a school-based approach to promoting the success of all pupils by establishing a means to identify barriers to academic achievement and educational attainment of all pupils and a method for intervening and providing coordinated supports to reduce those barriers; (2) Encourage the provision of education in a manner that is centered around pupils and their families and is culturally and linguistically appropriate; (3) Encourage providers of integrated student supports to collaborate to improve academic achievement and educational attainment, including, without limitation, by: (I) Engaging in shared decision-making; (II) Establishing a referral process that reduces duplication of services and increases efficiencies in the manner in which barriers to academic achievement and educational attainment are addressed by such providers; and (III) Establishing productive working relationships between such providers; (4) Encourage collaboration between the Department and local educational agencies to develop training regarding: (I) Best practices for providing integrated student supports; (II) Establishing effective integrated student support teams

comprised of persons or governmental entities providing integrated student supports; (III) Effective communication between providers of integrated student supports; and (IV) Compliance with applicable state and federal law; and (5) Support statewide and local organizations in their efforts to provide leadership, coordination, technical assistance, professional development and advocacy to improve access to integrated student supports and expand upon existing integrated student supports that address the physical, emotional and educational needs of pupils. (c) Include integration and coordination across school- and community-based providers of integrated student support services through the establishment of partnerships and systems that support this framework.

*NASBE Policy Database Category (Subcategory): Community Involvement (School-Community and Interagency Partnerships)*

## Part II: Review and revise state policy

Initiatives to advance child physical and mental health, improve school safety and security, and address education inequity are often siloed and fragmented. States should consider how policy might help schools integrate and expand such efforts and, in doing so, support students' equitable access to health and safety supports. This includes helping schools ensure that students' basic needs—such as proper nutrition, clothing, housing, transportation, physical and mental health services—are addressed. Schools should not be expected to meet these needs alone, so states should look for policy opportunities to expand capacity and promote partnerships between schools and other systems and organizations. Further, states should address policy barriers inhibiting school capacity. Policies that limit Medicaid reimbursements for free, school-based health services, for example, may present obstacles to schools looking for resources to bolster student supports.

State policies that allow or encourage exclusionary or punitive practices may restrict students' access to services and cause further trauma. For student behaviors that may reflect underlying unmet needs—such as bullying and truancy—punitive practices may be especially counterproductive. Policymakers should examine current policies for such provisions and consider how to support school communities in transitioning away from such practices.

Reviewing and revising policies is necessarily an iterative process, requiring that states draw upon the experiences of school communities, available research and evidence, and state datasets for guidance and next steps. Although policymakers can and should make progress using the principles outlined below, further recommendations regarding legislative, regulatory, or administrative changes may be identified by the work of the taskforce established in Part 1.

### Principle 5 — Reduce barriers to accessing health and safety supports

- Principle 5.1 — Reduce administrative, financial, and other barriers to accessing services and supports that promote student social, emotional, mental, and physical health
- Principle 5.2 — Increase school capacity to connect students to services and supports that promote student social, emotional, mental, and physical health

#### Highlights from current policy

New Mexico (N.M. Stat. § 22-13C-4): A. Regardless of whether or not a student has money to pay for a meal or owes money for earlier meals, a school: (1) shall provide a United States department of agriculture reimbursable meal to a student who requests one, unless the student's parent or guardian has specifically provided written permission to the school to withhold a meal; and (2) shall not require that a student throw away a meal after it has been served because of the student's inability to pay for the meal or because money is owed for earlier meals.

*NASBE Policy Database Category (Subcategory): Nutrition Environment and Services (Unpaid Meal Charge Policy-- Supports Students)*

California (Cal. Ed. Code § 49010): (a) A pupil enrolled in a public school shall not be required to pay a pupil fee for participation in an educational activity. (b) All of the following requirements apply to the prohibition identified in subdivision (a): (1) All supplies, materials, and equipment needed to participate in educational activities shall be provided to pupils free of charge. (3) School districts and schools shall not establish a two-tier educational system by requiring a minimal educational standard and also offering a second, higher educational standard that pupils may only obtain through payment of a fee or purchase of additional supplies that the school district or school does not provide.

*NASBE Policy Database Category (Subcategory): Physical Activity and Physical Education (Sports Participation Fees-Prohibited)*

Washington (Wash. Rev. Code Ann. § 28A.300.139(2)(a) The Washington integrated student supports protocol must be sufficiently flexible to adapt to the unique needs of schools and districts across the state, yet sufficiently structured to provide all students with the individual support they need for academic success. . . .(c) The framework must facilitate the ability of any academic or nonacademic provider to support the needs of at-risk students, including, but not limited to: Out-of-school providers, social workers, mental health counselors, physicians, dentists, speech therapists, and audiologists.

*NASBE Policy Database Category (Subcategory): Community Involvement (School-Community and Interagency Partnerships)*

## **Principle 6 — Reduce and replace school policies and procedures that traumatize students**

- Principle 6.1 — Minimize the use of policies, practices and procedures that exclude, ostracize, segregate, or physically harm students
- Principle 6.2 — Support school transitions toward safe and supportive alternatives that meet both student and school needs

### **Highlights from current policy**

Illinois (105 Ill. Comp. Stat. § 5/10-22.6): (b-5) Among the many possible disciplinary interventions and consequences available to school officials, school exclusions, such as out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, are the most serious. School officials shall limit the number and duration of expulsions and suspensions to the greatest extent practicable, and it is recommended that they use them only for legitimate educational purposes. To ensure that students are not excluded from school unnecessarily, it is recommended that school officials consider forms of non-exclusionary discipline prior to using out-of-school suspensions or expulsions. (b-10) Unless otherwise required by federal law or this Code, school boards may not institute zero-tolerance policies by which school administrators are required to suspend or expel students for particular behaviors. (b-15) Out-of-school suspensions of 3 days or less may be used only if the student's continuing presence in school would pose a threat to school safety or a disruption to other students' learning opportunities. For purposes of this subsection (b-15), "threat to school safety or a disruption to other students' learning opportunities" shall be determined on a case-by-case basis by the school board or its designee. School officials shall make all reasonable efforts to resolve such threats, address such disruptions, and minimize the length of suspensions to the greatest extent practicable. [...]\*

*\*Bracketed language added by Child Trends.*

*NASBE Policy Database Category (Subcategory): Social and Emotional Climate (Limits on Exclusionary Discipline)*

Virginia (Va. Code Ann. § 22.1-16.6): The Board of Education shall establish guidelines for alternatives to short-term and long-term suspension for consideration by local school boards. Such alternatives may include positive behavior incentives, mediation, peer-to-peer counseling, community service, and other intervention alternatives.

*NASBE Policy Database Category (Subcategory): Social and Emotional Climate (Alternatives to Exclusionary Discipline)*

Iowa (Iowa Code § 283A.11): 5. a. A school is prohibited from posting a list of students who owe money for school meals and from engaging in any of the following acts directed toward a student because the student cannot pay for a meal or owes a meal debt: (1) Publicly identifying or stigmatizing the student, including but not limited to requiring the student to consume the meal at a table set aside for such purpose or to discard a meal after the meal has been served. (2) Requiring the student to wear a wristband, hand stamp, or identification marks, or to do chores or other work to pay for meals. (3) Denying participation in an afterschool program or other extracurricular activity to the student. (4) Providing an alternative meal that is only offered to a student who has accrued meal debt. A school that offers the option of an alternative meal shall present the meal in the same manner to any student requesting an alternative meal so as not to identify a student as having accrued meal debt.

*NASBE Policy Database Category (Category): Nutrition Environment and Services (Unpaid Meal Charge Policy-- Supports Students)*

Louisiana (La. Rev. Stat. § 17:416.21): C. (1) Physical restraint shall be used only:

(a) When a student's behavior presents a threat of imminent risk of harm to self or others and only as a last resort to protect the safety of self and others. (b) To the degree necessary to stop dangerous behavior. (c) In a manner that causes no physical injury to the student, results in the least possible discomfort, and does not interfere in any way with a student's breathing or ability to communicate with others.

(2) No student shall be subjected to any form of mechanical restraint. (3) No student shall be physically restrained in a manner that places excessive pressure on the student's chest or back or that causes asphyxia. (4) A student shall be physically restrained only in a manner that is directly proportionate to the circumstances and to the student's size, age, and severity of behavior. D. Seclusion and physical restraint shall not be used as a form of discipline or punishment, as a threat to control, bully, or obtain behavioral compliance, or for the convenience of school personnel. E. No student shall be subjected to unreasonable, unsafe, or unwarranted use of seclusion or physical restraint. F. A student shall not be placed in seclusion or physically restrained if he or she is known to have any medical or psychological condition that precludes such action, as certified by a licensed health care provider in a written statement provided to the school in which the student is enrolled.

*NASBE Policy Database Category (Subcategory): Physical Environment (Restraint and Seclusion)*

## Part III: Support school-driven initiatives to create supportive learning environments

Part III is grounded in the principle that state policy should provide schools with the time and resources to identify what is most urgent to address within their school communities, to reflect on their current needs and the actions that need to be taken, and to develop locally tailored action plans that both address school culture and balance the needs of individual students. This gives schools the opportunity to focus on the whole child, create a school culture that is supportive of adults and students, and reach out to families— making schools the hub of a vibrant community. These efforts require collaborative leadership and the teamwork of the entire school staff.

For this section, we deliberately include no excerpts from current state statutes and regulations. The state's approach to Principle 7 should be highly contextualized and conform with the findings and recommendations of the taskforce. In one state, a taskforce may recommend the establishment of a new grant program or the redesign of one or more existing grant programs to support local planning. In another state, the taskforce might recommend the use of a pilot initiative—with an intensive period of assessment, evaluation, and learning in a subset of districts and schools—after which the initiative is implemented statewide. States may also find that, beyond direct financial supports, schools and school districts may need access to additional tools, technical assistance, and opportunities for peer learning.

## **Principle 7 — Establish funding mechanisms to support broad-based, local action planning**

- Principle 7.1 — Provide financial resources to help individual school communities—including school staff, students, and families—engage in a learning and planning process to create supportive learning environments
- Principle 7.2 — Encourage the development of educator leaders to facilitate broad-based investigation by school communities
- Principle 7.3 — Encourage school communities to investigate their readiness, motivation, and capacity to implement schoolwide culture change
- Principle 7.4 — Encourage school communities to deliberate how they will build and maintain a shared understanding of trauma and its implications for teaching and learning
- Principle 7.5 — Encourage school communities to deliberate how their school will meet students’ physical, mental, social, and emotional needs while using culturally responsive practices
- Principle 7.6 — Encourage school communities to identify strategies to promote employee wellness and supportive working conditions, including supports for staff with vicarious trauma
- Principle 7.7 — Promote cross-agency and school-community coordination to expand school options for supporting students and families
- Principle 7.8 — Encourage partnerships with parents and communities in school decision making

## Glossary

**Implementation science:** A field of study that focuses on identifying and developing effective strategies to support the sustained integration—and not merely dissemination—of new approaches, services, policies, programs, or procedures into routine practice.<sup>40</sup>

**School climate and school culture:** These concepts are closely related. School climate refers to the quality of the environment as experienced by the school community, including interpersonal relationships, respect for diversity, and feelings of physical and emotional safety. School culture refers to the beliefs, values, and norms shared by members of the school community.

**School community:** The stakeholders directly connected to an individual school, including all school staff, students, and families.

**Schoolwide:** In the context of schools, “schoolwide” and “universal” are often used interchangeably. For purposes of this document, we use this term to refer to norms, practices, and procedures used by all staff for all students.

**Trauma-informed:** “A program, organization, or system that is trauma-informed: realizes the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery; recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system; responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and seeks to actively resist re-traumatization.”<sup>41</sup>

**Universal:** In the context of schools, “schoolwide” and “universal” are often used interchangeably. Often referred to as primary, these services and supports are offered to all students, and are implemented by all staff in all settings, to proactively promote student health and wellness and prevent social, emotional, physical, and mental health challenges.<sup>42</sup> Such approaches are distinct from targeted or intensive services, which are provided only to a subset of students.

**Vicarious trauma:** Trauma experienced by those that learn about trauma experienced by another individual.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For purposes of this document, we use the term “state” to refer to the 50 contiguous and non-contiguous states and the District of Columbia. However, we imagine that many of the concepts utilized in this framework would be useful to education officials in U.S. territories (e.g., American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands) and in tribal education agencies.

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