

# Building Equitable, Safe and Supportive Schools

## Trauma and Culturally Sensitive Practices for Guidance

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The term *safe and supportive schools* has been sprinkled across our headlines and news feeds, but is it another buzzword or here to stay? The term is much more than reactive legislation and strategies in response to school tragedies. The idea of wanting equity, safety, and support in schools is not new, nor should it be anything less than a priority across classrooms, schools, and districts. In this white paper, you will learn how trauma-informed and sensitive practices are the foundation for equitable, safe, and supportive schools and learning environments. You also will discover easy-to-implement next steps and tips for planning for the future.

## What Is an Equitable, Safe, and Supportive School?

Learning happens in different ways, places, and times. Learning environments are created by physical spaces; physical materials; and many types of players, including students, support staff, paraprofessionals, teachers, administrators, families, safety resource officers, community members, and more. Many aspects of the school/learning environment can help students, staff, and families feel safe and supported. The U.S. Department of Education has outlined three categories of safe and supportive schools: environment, safety, and engagement.

Evidence-based best practices would imply that trauma-informed and sensitive practices should be the basis of these categories (Figure 1; U.S. Government, n.d.a).

According to the World Health Organization, “a school’s environment can enhance social and emotional well-being, and learning when it:

- is warm, friendly and rewards learning;
- promotes cooperation rather than competition;
- facilitates supportive, open communications;
- views the provision of creative opportunities as important;
- prevents physical punishment, bullying, harassment and violence, by encouraging the development of procedures and policies that do not support physical punishment and that promote non-violent interaction on the playground, in class and among staff and students; and
- promotes the rights of [everyone] through equal opportunities and democratic procedures” (World Health Organization, n.d., page 1).

Figure 1. Pillars of Equitable, Safe, and Supportive Schools



*Adapted from U.S. Government (n.d.a)*



## Trauma-Informed and Culturally Sensitive Practices

A trauma-informed and culturally sensitive mindset is an ongoing commitment to learning about trauma. This commitment relates to both an understanding of past and present trauma and the trauma's impact on staff, students, and families. This dedication to increasing knowledge, understanding, and gaining awareness of trauma is at the core of a trauma-sensitive mindset. Madisien Steele, the trauma-informed practitioner at Fall-Hamilton Enhanced Option Elementary School in Metro Nashville Public Schools explains as follows:

*“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-sensitive practices require collaboration and support for all members of a community or organization based on the traumas they have, or could, encounter. [Grafton Integrated Health Network’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.

- 1. Evaluate the function and intent of behaviors.**

Use initial and ongoing assessments to highlight the antecedents and consequences of a behavior, which will inform next steps for improving care.

- 2. Promote a culture of comfort.**

A trauma-informed environment is best employed as a holistic commitment (i.e., not only focusing on an isolated teacher-student interaction but also addressing the well-being and needs at all levels of a school or district.

3. **Recognize practices that are re-traumatizing.**

Assess and evaluate data and self-reflections to best understand the triggers to avoid.

4. **Reinforce training for all employees.**

Similar to the reasons for ongoing and differentiated teaching and reteaching, staff need to be trained and retrained. Trauma-informed practices require an open-minded growth mindset that allows for continued learning and reflection.

5. **Transform the language used.**

Language used by adults and students should reflect respect, compassion, and care.

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” (Adyanthaya, 2014).

Trauma-sensitive practices are important because most people have, or will, experience a form of trauma at some stage in their life. A Centers for Disease Control and Prevention/Kaiser Permanente adverse childhood experiences (ACE) study examined the prevalence of childhood trauma across the United States. The 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 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016). This study provided important insight on more than just the student population, including adults—educators, parents, guardians—as well. Educators must be equipped with trauma-sensitive practices to best meet the needs of students, families, communities, staff, and themselves. Trauma-sensitive practices range from social-emotional learning, using student support forms, to being equitable, and creating opportunities for relationship building. Trauma-sensitive mindsets and practices will affect all areas of a safe and supportive school: environment, safety, and engagement.

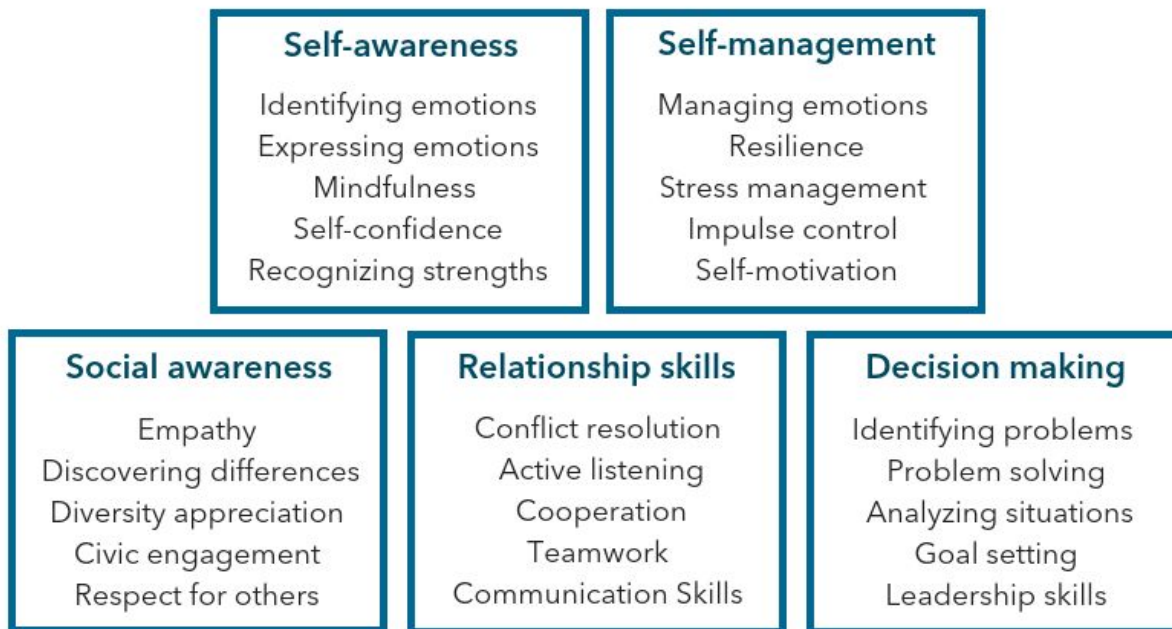
## Social-Emotional Learning

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

- 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 well-being. For schools, this means learning environments that are safe, supportive, and more successful. These five core competencies closely align to [Daniel Goleman’s four pillars of emotional intelligence](#). Emotional intelligence influences success in school and the workplace. Social-emotional learning provides the foundation needed to achieve lifelong happiness. It is important that teachers and leaders also have the opportunity to build their social-emotional skills and capacities. This process should be a multitiered approach of development and practice in the classroom alongside students, in staff meetings and trainings alongside peers, and developing at-home strategies and systems of support.

Figure 2. The Five Core Competencies of Social-Emotional Learning



*Adapted from Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (n.d.b)*

The Aspen Institute’s National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Learning recently released [scientific statements of evidence](#) that demonstrate the lasting impact that social-emotional programming has on students, staff, school culture, and the surrounding community. Students are more likely to remain mentally present throughout the school day when social-emotional programming is present. Evidence demonstrates that students learn more when they can manage their emotions, form meaningful relationships, and demonstrate resilience. SEL programming also can increase executive functioning, self-efficacy, and persistence (5 Ways to Implement Social Emotional Learning for Student Success, n.d.).

SEL health and related competencies will strengthen the school environment, safety, and engagement. For example, social-emotional skills will help address student incidents and reactions to disciplinary plans (environment), peer-to-peer interactions and bullying prevention (safety), and respect for differences (engagement). Ongoing training and development for staff and students contribute to building SEL skills and forming an equitable, safe, and supportive environment.



## Trauma-Sensitive Environment

Schools and learning environments vary across the United States and the world. This broad category addresses everything from the physical facilities and accessibilities of a school, to the people and types of roles, to school and instructional-related policies. “Teachers should be able to provide immersive, well-scaffolded culturally responsive instruction that builds metacognitive skills and accounts for students’ prior knowledge and experiences and creates a social and emotional environment that fosters safety, engagement, learning, deeper learning, and creativity” (Osher, Moroney, & Williamson, 2018, p. 225).

Many aspects of the learning environment can help the players—students, staff, and families—feel safe and supported. Trauma-sensitive environments help ensure safe and supportive schools in several ways. Trauma-sensitive decisions about physical spaces are safe and supportive environments that are conscientious of physical, social, emotional, and other needs and abilities. Learning environments are made up of physical spaces, materials, people and other conditions that influence learning. These physical spaces include instructional areas as well as other noninstructional areas of the school and district. In addition to having equitable opportunities for teaching and learning, the nonphysical components of equitable, trauma-sensitive engagement include having a trauma-sensitive disciplinary plan and other mental health and wellness supports.

Establish classroom-, school-, and districtwide systems to develop trauma-sensitive mindsets and social-emotional skills. Whole school implementation of culturally responsive SEL programs and expectations help ensure buy-in, fidelity of implementation, and consistency related to common language and practices. The following are types of trauma-sensitive environment and learning experiences that students benefit from.

- “Classroom discourse that allows students to learn how to communicate effectively with their peers, persuade others using facts, defend an argument, and solve problems collectively.
- Instruction that involves rigorous and challenging academic content, helps students learn to both recognize and regulate their own frustration and to leverage their resources and persevere.
- Collaborative learning, that includes opportunities for direct instruction and feedback, so students can learn to take responsibility for their own learning and how to work with their

peers toward a common goal” (Osher, D., Moroney, D., & Williamson, S. L., 2018, page 225-226).

- Adequate and accessible facilities for both instructional and noninstructional spaces.
- Decoration that promotes learning, safety, supportiveness, and diversity.
- A culturally diverse environment and materials and colors promote calm and learning.
- Trauma-sensitive disciplinary policy and systems that are clear and equitably, fairly, and consistently enforced.
- Addressing the physical, social, emotional, psychological, and mental health of the school community members (i.e., students, staff, resource officers, and family members).

## Trauma-Sensitive Safety

The goal of trauma-informed safety is to create environments where all participants feel safe. Physical safety is only one part of an equitable, safe, and supportive school. The many facets of safety include emotional, psychological, and identity safety. Trauma-sensitive safety decisions allow for proactive problem solving and responding to traumas in a conscientious way, avoiding potential re-triggering. Trauma-sensitive safety decisions can help school staff and leaders take pause when planning a safety response. Leaders can ask themselves the following questions:

- How might this safety-related event or decision affect students, staff, and other school community members?
- How might student feelings affect their learning and whether they feel safe and supported in school?
- What exposure to risk, trauma, and adverse experiences are potentially possible for students and staff both in and out of school?
- What related supports, services, and trainings are needed for students and staff?

Trauma-sensitive safety is a much larger concept than thinking about physical safety in a silo. Safety includes physical, psychosocial, emotional, mental, and other types of exposure to trauma or re-traumatization. All types of safety coincide and should therefore be thought of as one cog in a larger machine that is an equitable, safe, and supportive school. To address trauma-sensitive safety prevention and reactive responses, schools and districts should use trauma-sensitive curriculum and trainings. According to a recent study led by McGraw-Hill Education, teachers want additional trainings and classroom time related to SEL. A good

starting point for staff professional development is CASEL's [Guiding Questions for Educators: Promote Equity Using SEL](#).

## Trauma-Sensitive Engagement

Safe and supportive school engagement involves positive relationships, involvement, and participation in the school community. This can range from classroom instruction to school activities. Trauma-sensitive SEL curricula and programs help provide the foundational skills necessary for positive, safe, and supportive engagement. "SEL can support robust equity which includes the ability to participate successfully in **deeper learning, collaborate** with others, and **address challenges** [emphasis added] that individuals and the world face" (Gregory, Farrington, & Osher, 2018, p. 51).

Trauma-sensitive engagement can encourage and incorporate SEL tactics to help build the skills and empathy necessary for respecting and embracing differences. Respecting diversity helps prevent potential unsafe and unsupportive moments based on misunderstandings, fear, and discrimination. Classroom and community teamwork, SEL practice and education, and opportunities for positive collaboration are easy ways to improve engagement in a school or district. Specifically, these events should be informative but fun and enjoyable whenever possible. Multicultural clubs and movie nights can be no- or low-cost community engagement opportunities.

Equitable engagement and feeling safe and supportive in schools is inconsistent within student experiences across the United States. Data documents "persistent disparities for students of color, English language learners, students with disabilities, students whose families and communities struggle with poverty, and students who experience trauma and other adversities" (Osher, Moroney, & Williamson, 2018, p. 1). The University of Wisconsin-Extension, Cooperative Extension (n.d.) has a Sustainable Equitable Engagement Process: A responsible and equitable process for intentionally engaging underserved audiences. The process outlines steps for capacity building and sustainable engagement, with the goal of improving inclusion, equity, opportunity, and access across the community.

# Why Is an Equitable, Safe, and Supportive School Important?

Safe and supportive schools are about comfortable learning environments that are accessible for all school staff, students, and families. The benefits of a trauma-sensitive, equitable, safe, and supportive school include positive academic and behavioral outcomes. Safe and supportive schools address a variety of needs, including physical, psychological, social, emotional, mental, and academic needs.

*Where the atmosphere in a school is uncaring, unsupportive and unrewarding, the mental health, as well as the work of pupils and teachers, can be adversely affected. The impact of this unfriendly atmosphere is particularly damaging if it persists for many years. (World Health Organization, n.d.)*

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

- student and staff well-being,
- teacher happiness and retention,
- student focus and attendance,
- student management of emotions, and
- school safety.

According to a 2018 Social Emotional Learning Report, completed by McGraw-Hill Education, “the overwhelming majority of administrators (96%), teachers (93%) and parents (81%) believe that social emotional learning is just as important as academic learning” (p. 5). In addition, the report concluded that teachers want even more time dedicated to teaching SEL in the classroom and want more related supports. As leaders begin to discuss how to navigate these obstacles and inspire change, many questions arise.

- Are students and staff feeling safe and supported in schools?

- How can we help all students participate in instructional and noninstructional school activities?
- How can we improve the culture of our classrooms and school?
- What current programs or systems are in place to support students and staff well-being?
- What is currently working, and, perhaps more importantly, what's not?

Trauma-sensitive practices, including SEL programs and supports, are important because they can provide a foundation and roadmap for navigating these challenges. These approaches can and should be implemented proactively as part of school- or districtwide strategic plans. When implemented successfully, and integrated thoughtfully, these programs have the power to produce a tremendous impact on students, staff, parents, and the overall school community. School climate can affect attendance and graduation rates, academic performance, relationship building, and teacher retention.

“Schools can promote a positive school climate for students and staff by fostering connectedness through meaningful relationships, creating a sense of safety and freedom from violence, and providing an environment that is tailored to the needs of students” (U.S. Government, n.d.b). However, a negative school climate is tied to correlations negatively impacting success, achievement, and wellness.



Table 1. Positive and negative correlations related to school climate.

<b>A positive school climate is linked to the following:</b>	<b>A negative school climate is linked to the following:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Improved student motivation.</li><li>• Increased student attendance and teacher retention.</li><li>• Reduced achievement gaps.</li><li>• Increased high school completion and prevention of school dropouts.</li><li>• Improved teacher satisfaction rates, while decreasing rates of teacher turnover.</li><li>• Positive impact on the mental and behavioral health of students.</li><li>• Increased feelings of belonging.</li><li>• Decreased depressive and risky behaviors.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Decreased attendance and graduation rates.</li><li>• Poor student achievement.</li><li>• Facilitated opportunities for bullying, violence and suicide.</li><li>• Problems and struggles related to self-esteem, depression, and psychosocial development.</li><li>• Disproportionately negatively affecting students with disabilities and LGBT students (Youth.gov).</li></ul>

*Adapted from U.S. Government (n.d.b)*

"Research shows that when schools and districts focus on improving school climate, students are more likely to engage in the curriculum, develop positive relationships, and demonstrate positive behaviors" (National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, n.d.). As students and educators feel increasingly more safe and supported, the room for risk taking and potential personal, academic, and professional growth expands. Taking risks is an integral part of social emotional and academic development. These experiences help develop problem-solving skills, resilience, empathy, emotional regulation, and management. SEL provides the foundations necessary for this process.

## Next Steps: Equitable, Safe, and Supportive Schools

Creating trauma-sensitive, equitable, safe, and supportive schools is an ongoing process and commitment. Many aspects of becoming a more equitable, safe, and supportive school for all players involve prioritization in school and district strategic plans. Follow and repeat the three phases of implementation outlined in Figure 3 to create a trauma-sensitive, equitable, safe, and supportive school.

Figure 3. Three phases for creating equitable, safe, and supportive schools



*Adapted from Osher, Moroney, & Williamson, 2018*

Steps toward trauma-sensitive equity, safety, and support in schools happens at macro and micro levels across the school, district, and nationwide. The next steps vary depending on the level and can vary on cost, time to implement, and more. Review the following table for some strategies to implement today and into your strategic plans.

Table 2. Classroom, schoolwide, and districtwide actionable steps towards being trauma-informed, culturally sensitive, equitable, safe, and supportive.

Classroom	Schoolwide	Districtwide
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Diverse learning materials and methods of engagement</li> <li>● Incorporate real-world scenarios</li> <li>● Involve student voice and experiences</li> <li>● Relationship and community building</li> <li>● Opportunities for collaboration</li> <li>● Locate free online and community resources and initiatives</li> <li>● Incorporate culturally sensitive and responsive teaching</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Strategic plans that prioritize trauma-sensitive, equitable engagement</li> <li>● Budget for trauma-sensitive, culturally responsive instructional materials for professional development</li> <li>● Professional development and trainings for staff and families on               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ diversity and respecting differences</li> <li>○ empathy</li> <li>○ equitable learning</li> <li>○ culturally sensitive and responsive teaching and other trauma-sensitive topics</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Involve student, family, and teacher voices</li> <li>● Create opportunities for meaningful, joyful, positive engagement (i.e., classroom project, schoolwide community event)</li> <li>● Locate free online and community resources and initiatives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Strategic plans that prioritize trauma-sensitive, equitable, safe, and supportive schools</li> <li>● Offer student and staff health and wellness supports</li> <li>● Professional development and trainings for staff and families on               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ diversity and respecting differences</li> <li>○ empathy</li> <li>○ equitable learning and other trauma-sensitive topics</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Involve student, family, teacher, and leader voices</li> <li>● Update current disciplinary plans and systems (i.e., using a trauma-sensitive student support form)</li> <li>● Utilize culturally and diversity sensitive practices</li> </ul>

## Downloadable Resources

Building equitable, safe, and supportive learning environments will be an ongoing learning experience for students, staff, and families. Use trauma-informed and culturally sensitive resources and training for guidance. The National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments has a variety of free resources for a range of implementation stages and users. [Creating a Safe and Respectful Environment in Our Nation’s Classrooms](#) and the [School Climate Improvement Resource Package](#) are two resources that include data, strategies, and implementation toolkits.

Cultural sensitivity and responsiveness is part of an equitable, safe, and supportive school. Tony Kline, Ph.D., provides an overview of [Culturally Responsive Teaching](#) on the Change Kids Lives website (n.d.). Additionally, Teaching Tolerance, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, published a [Culturally Responsive Teaching Awards Celebration resource](#) (2011). Both resources provide an overview on understanding cultural sensitivity and responsiveness, why it is important, and actionable next steps.

## Classroom Checklist

Assessing self and community for equity, safety, and inclusion is an ongoing process. Print the classroom checklist (Figure 4) on the following page and start implementing immediately. This is meant to be a starting point for taking a safety “temperature check” with possible next steps for your classroom. Then use it as a conversation starter with your colleagues, mentors, and supervisors to figure out the best plan of action in your school or district.



Figure 4. Classroom checklist



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