

COALITION FOR TRAUMA-INFORMED SCHOOLS' MODEL RECOMMENDATIONS ON RESTRAINT AND SECLUSION FOR VIRGINIA PUBLIC SCHOOL DIVISIONS*

FOCUS ON PREVENTION THROUGH SYSTEMS CHANGE

RECOMMENDATION ONE - DEVELOP TRAUMA EXPERTISE

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are traumatic for students and place students at risk for negative outcomes. There is a significant relationship between exposure to trauma and behavior problems within and outside of the school setting. ACEs can include exposure to trauma in school settings. A large percentage of children at risk for escalating emotionally and/or behaviorally have a history of trauma, the outcomes of which include severe mistrust of adults and/or peers, fears of being harmed by adults in positions of authority, fears of being harmed by peers, high startle reflex, perception of the world as hostile and dangerous with subsequent hypervigilance for any possible threats, avoidance of any environments which remind them of past traumas, such as seclusion rooms. The Coalition recommends that the school division build capacity for trauma screening and trauma-sensitive responses and practices and develop relationships with clinicians who have expertise in trauma.

A physical exam of the child should be completed by a medical professional to assess for any physical injuries if there has been a restraint applied.

RECOMMENDATION TWO - INCREASE SCHOOL-BASED STAFFING TO SUPPORT STUDENT NEEDS

Students with high social and emotional needs require staff to be available to prevent and address emotional and physical dysregulation. Current staffing and training are inadequate to address the needs of students in general education and across special education and alternative placements state-wide. The Coalition recommends an increase in the number of school-based social workers, psychologists and counselors. All staff can be trained in trauma-responsive techniques, including paraprofessionals.

RECOMMENDATION THREE - LEVERAGE MULTIDISCIPLINARY EXPERTISE

The school division can leverage existing multi-disciplinary expertise by collaborating with its local human services resources and related services personnel. Examples include (1) establishing a protocol for timely assessment by county human services personnel of students who are experiencing acute distress, using telemedicine if necessary to access expertise, and (2) creating physical space that is embedded within each school to provide for therapeutic intervention, such as a space for sensory tools used by occupational therapists or a space for therapeutic day treatment to meet the mental health needs of students.

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RECOMMENDATION FOUR - IMPROVE SCHOOL CLIMATE

The Coalition recommends that the school division improve school climate by reforming school culture. Systemic change is possible through the use of proactive relationship-based approaches. These would result in improved academic outcomes due to better social emotional health and increased student access to instruction. Relationship-based approaches develop trust. They are individualized to the student, developmentally appropriate, aligned to neuroscience, trauma-sensitive and preserve bodily integrity. Proactive approaches can ensure that students and staff feel emotionally, physically, and relationally safe and empowered in a collaborative environment where they have choices and trust one another. Child development must be taken into account. Schools should meet children where they are, without blaming or stigmatizing. The school division should review existing language in school policies and review school practices to ensure the language used to describe student behavior does not encourage use of a control and compliance model of behavior intervention. For example, students might be described as making choices, even when the behavior at issue is clearly a result of their developmental age, a stress response, a medical condition or other disabling condition. At times, the language used assigns criminality and/or intentionality to students when none exists.

Students need to feel safe physically, socially, emotionally and academically. Student input should be valued, along with that of staff and parents. The Coalition recommends that the school division review school climate on a division-wide level to eliminate strategies that shame students, e.g. public behavior scores (such as red, yellow and green), publicly posting student achievement data or shaming students in front of their peers. Relationships should be deliberately fostered for every child through daily practices that affirm the student is seen, valued and respected.

RECOMMENDATION FIVE - REQUIRE STAFF TRAINING ON TRUST RELATIONSHIPS

Individuals who have experienced trauma typically present with attachment weaknesses. This makes trust in relationships the most essential requirement to ensure success. Staff training should focus on establishing and maintaining trust relationships that protect the dignity of, and respect for, the student to prevent escalation. The Coalition recommends that training be mandatory, provided face-to-face and interactive rather than through online modules. Training goals may include:

- Adopting a mindset of compassion and comfort instead of control and compliance.
- Adopting the use of known interventions that can help maintain or restore regulation and prevent escalation, such as bilateral motor activities, rhythmic activities, walking, dancing, art and music.
- Focusing IEP goals on skill development that is pro-social and supports classroom participation, rather than “extinguishing” behaviors associated with trauma and disability.
- Asking students questions that permit them to share their perspective.
- Allowing students to retreat/withdraw when necessary.
- Avoiding battles for control.
- Deliberately building trust and reliability with students.

- Training on co-regulation strategies and recognizing subtle symptoms of emotional and physical dysregulation.

RECOMMENDATION SIX - SUPPORT STAFF NEEDS RELATING TO COMPASSION FATIGUE AND SECONDARY TRAUMA

Staff who work closely with children with intense social emotional needs are at higher risk of “burn-out” as a result of secondary trauma. Staff can present with compassion fatigue, placing themselves and students at risk. Staff working in environments that concentrate children with intense needs also need support themselves. The school division should prioritize providing supports to staff who are at high risk. The school division should develop strategies to help staff members avoid compassion fatigue and reduce repeated exposure to trauma.

RECOMMENDATION SEVEN - ENSURE ALL SUPPORTS HAVE BEEN ATTEMPTED IN THE LEAST RESTRICTIVE SETTING

Frequently, children who suddenly present with violent or disruptive behaviors are moved too quickly from a less restrictive setting to a more restrictive setting before supports are put into place. The school division can ensure that all supports have been attempted in the general education setting *before* a transfer to an alternative setting or a more restrictive special education placement.

RECOMMENDATION EIGHT - SUPPORT PROBLEM-SOLVING THROUGH HIGH QUALITY FUNCTIONAL BEHAVIORAL ASSESSMENTS

Functional Behavioral Assessments are important tools for identifying triggers that lead to undesirable behaviors. Details about the physical and social environment in which the student is functioning should be included in data collection. It is difficult to problem-solve if triggers of student behavior are not identified. For example, vague descriptions of the function of a behavior such as “attention seeking,” “task avoidance,” or “escape” do not identify staff or peer interactions or environmental factors that may explain *why a student is behaving that way*. Identifying medical conditions, sensory sensitivities and trauma echoes may be key to interpreting behaviors of concern. The Coalition recommends that each school within the division develop high quality data collection standards as a part of Functional Behavior Assessments so that the information collected will enable staff to problem solve with parents and students. Rigorous data standards can be incorporated into standardized data collection forms for use and adaptation by staff.

RECOMMENDATION NINE - ADOPT NON-RESTRAINT SYSTEMS TO PREVENT PHYSICALLY AGGRESSIVE CONDUCT

When students are showing signs of distress, they are likely to escalate further when they are touched or when task demands are made. The school division should implement strategies that do not include restraint, as a first measure, to avoid student escalation. If staff can avoid interactions that lead to further escalation, a student is far more likely to stop the behavior of concern. For example, students may need to withdraw from interacting verbally with staff and may require time before they can successfully reengage in any task. In particular, co-regulatory activities such as being close by, listening to the student, offering to go for a walk, being beside student but not directly facing them allow students to calm down, and do not require placing hands on a student.

IMPLEMENT CHANGES TO END SECLUSION AND REDUCE RESTRAINT

RECOMMENDATION TEN - END SECLUSION, ELIMINATE DEDICATED SECLUSION ROOMS & REVIEW “SELF-REFERRAL” PRACTICES

The isolation of students in separate rooms or in areas where they are physically prevented from leaving is harmful, tends to escalate fight or flight responses, is dangerous to staff and students alike, has no therapeutic value and causes trauma. Due to seclusion, students are presenting with higher needs that are more difficult to meet. This is extremely damaging to school culture and is very expensive due to the need to place children in more restrictive settings to meet their special education needs. Therefore, the school division should end seclusion altogether in all schools, including those that serve children with behavioral challenges. Seclusion robs students of their sense of safety, their dignity and their opportunity to learn.

The existence of dedicated seclusion rooms can create a culture of accepting student isolation as a behavior modification tool. Any dedicated seclusion rooms in the school division should be eliminated because their existence creates a culture of overreliance on physical isolation as a problem-solving strategy. The use of seclusion interferes with the ability of students to develop healthy attachment with adults. It is also medically contraindicated for many students with pre-existing conditions. Furthermore, isolation in a seclusion room reinforces negative self-perception and is stigmatizing, whether or not it is locked or the door is closed. Therefore, the school division should eliminate dedicated seclusion rooms.

The Coalition recommends that the school division review its existing practices to ensure that self-isolation or “self-referral” practices are not encouraged. To develop self-advocacy, some students are encouraged to identify their need for breaks, and, at times, are prompted to self-isolate. To the extent possible, student breaks should take place in the classroom. If students need to withdraw from the classroom, they should be encouraged to access staff support in previously identified safe locations, such as the counselor’s office or the clinic.

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RECOMMENDATION ELEVEN - ELIMINATE “ONE SIZE FITS ALL” STRATEGIES

The needs of students vary. However, those students who have a trauma profile frequently present with symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. These students have a high likelihood of engaging in “fight or flight” behaviors. These are brain-based and part of the autonomic nervous system. Therefore, these responses are not choices.

Some self-contained classroom models adopt “one size fits all” strategies into their programs. These may include a variety of segregated settings where children have little to no exposure to general education students. Program-wide use of strategies such as points sheets and levels systems can trigger stress responses due to unrealistic behavioral expectations and the intensity of self-monitoring and monitoring by staff and parents. Alternatively, the use of individualized strategies can take into account the student’s triggers and their capacity to control their responses.

The Coalition recommends eliminating “one size fits all” strategies that are not trauma-sensitive in favor of developing individualized behavior plans for students whose behavior interferes with their learning. Behavior intervention plans should be reviewed regularly for their effectiveness.

RECOMMENDATION TWELVE - REDUCE CONCENTRATION OF HIGH NEED STUDENTS

Any practice that concentrates high-need students who are more likely to have a trauma history increases the likelihood that those students will “feed off” one another, creating an unpleasant and hostile environment for staff and students in the classroom. Instead, the school division should work to serve children in the least restrictive environment through the use of carefully crafted services and accommodations that preserve student dignity.

RECOMMENDATION THIRTEEN - GIVE THE GIFT OF TIME

When in “fight or flight,” individuals are unable to access their pre-frontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for rational thinking. Brain research shows it takes 20-60 minutes for the brain to recover once the perception of fear has passed. Asking a student to “process” an event, to admit responsibility for a behavior or to apologize or clean up before they can access their pre-frontal cortex is likely to result in repeated escalation. Once they appear calm, the Coalition recommends allowing students at least 20 additional minutes to recover *before any new social or academic demands are placed upon them*, or more time depending on the individual needs of the child. A supportive adult should be with them during this recovery time. Based on trauma literature, discussion of any restraint and any feelings associated with a restraining event is not recommended, rather staff should make sure basic necessities are provided for, unless the child initiates the discussion.

RECOMMENDATION FOURTEEN - DEVELOP PERFORMANCE MEASURES FOR ADMINISTRATORS ON IMPLEMENTATION OF TRAUMA-SENSITIVE PRACTICES

Administrators are the most influential individuals in a school because they set the tone that establishes school culture. It is essential that administrators have “buy-in” for any shift in culture to become a trauma-sensitive school. Therefore, the Coalition recommends that the school division include in its performance evaluations a performance measure for administrators on implementation of trauma-sensitive practices in the schools where they work. To be successful, administrators will need training and resources to help them bring about change. The resource guide [Helping Traumatized Children Learn](#) is available free of charge from the Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative, a partnership of the Massachusetts Advocates for Children and Harvard Law School, It includes recommendations on how to create trauma-sensitive schools. <https://massadvocates.org/tlpi/>

RECOMMENDATION FIFTEEN - FOCUS ON TRANSPARENCY

The school division should focus on transparency relating to its use of restraint and seclusion. This requires:

- Eliminating euphemistic language to describe seclusion (such as “quiet room,” “reflection room,” “support room,” “safe room,” and “self-referral”).
- Aligning practices with the 15 Principles established by the US Department of Education in *Restraint and Seclusion: Resource Document* (2012).
- Providing written notification to parents the same day for each restraint and seclusion incident.
- If a restraint or seclusion has been used it should be rigorously and comprehensively documented and reviewed to identify factors leading to the intervention and to develop strategies that can be used to prevent further incidents.
- Inviting community input relating to improvement of internal practices, including the forms being used which drive parental notification and data collection.
- Seeking public comment, to include school board meetings and meetings of the Special Education Advisory Committee and any other school division-appointed groups that are addressing recommendations associated with restraint and seclusion practices in the school division. Being responsive to public input.
- Releasing to the public data associated with restraint and seclusion, consistent with privacy obligations under state and federal law.