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**Preparing Educators to Serve Trauma-Impacted Students through the  
Trauma Skilled Schools Model: A Research Brief**

Developed for Presentation at the 2021 annual meeting of the  
American Educational Research Association

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## **Preparing Educators to Serve Trauma-Impacted Students through the Trauma Skilled Schools Model**

### **Abstract**

Alarming numbers of students have been impacted by trauma in one manner or another. While the issue of trauma-impacted students is receiving more attention, much of the focus has been on awareness of students experiencing trauma. This paper introduces a model to help schools minimize the effects of trauma through development of resilience-building skills and presents results from the Trauma Skilled Readiness Assessment, a measure that is administered before professional development begins and during the training stage prior to full model implementation in a pre/post manner. Results identified increases in awareness of and knowledge about trauma-impacted students as well as progress in the development of educators' resilience-building skills and abilities in all students, particularly those experiencing stress due to trauma.

## **Preparing Educators to Serve Trauma-Impacted Students through the Trauma Skilled Schools Model**

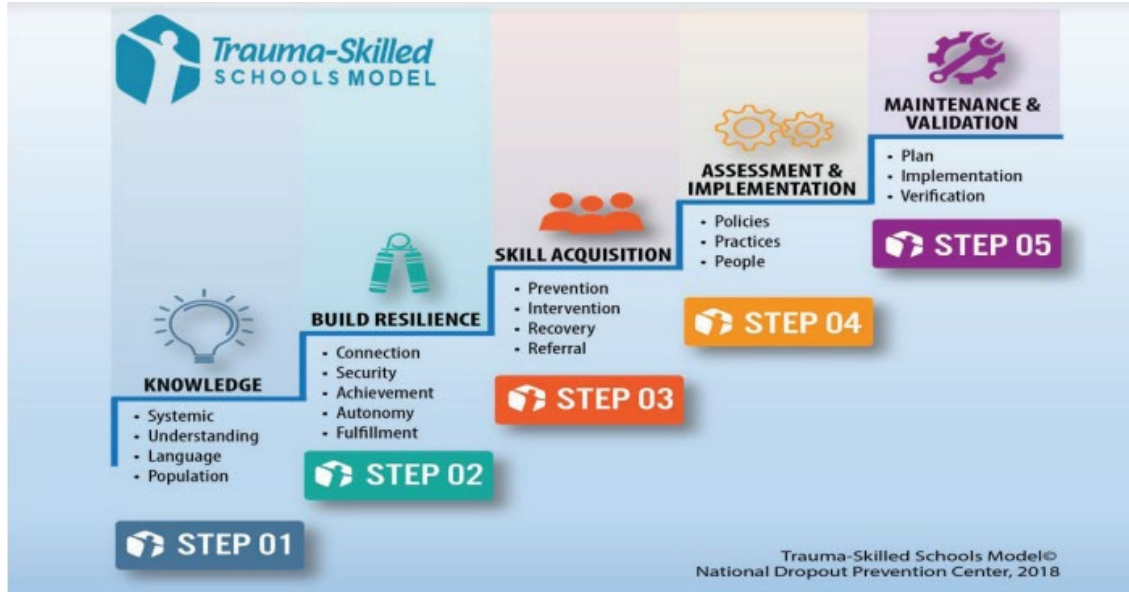
The effects of traumatic experiences and conditions in children have long been recognized and treated by those in the health and medical fields. The number of those affected by stress or trauma are overwhelming: over two-thirds of children surveyed by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention had experienced or witnessed at least one incident of violence within the past year, with half of those surveyed experiencing more than one occurrence of violence and 15% experiencing six or more incidents (Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, & Hamby, 2015). Other adverse conditions such as homelessness, poverty, bullying, loss of a parent, or military deployment of a parent, along with the effects of natural disasters, further add to the population of students impacted by trauma. Though educators understand that childhood trauma can negatively influence academic, social-emotional, and behavioral outcomes in students (Gailer, Addis, & Dunlap, 2018), few in the K-12 environment beyond school counselors and social workers have the knowledge and skills necessary to successfully identify, assess, and respond to trauma-impacted students.

Clearly, our schools are serving large numbers of trauma-impacted students, or youth at-risk of failure – academic and otherwise. The initial reaction in schools is to differentiate instructional strategies to improve academic progress. But while trauma may impact brain function (Aupperle, Melrose, Stein, & Paulus, 2012), and in turn, learning (Tate & Johnson, 2018), trauma-impacted students present new and different challenges beyond those that are met through conventional approaches to education (Gailer et al., 2018). Recognizing the need for alternative methods of reaching these students, educational researchers and practitioners have begun to augment traditional instructional models to include a focus on trauma. From that nexus,

the Trauma-Skilled Schools (TSS) Model was developed, which shifted knowledge and awareness of and sensitivity to trauma and its impacts into actionable steps to be implemented in a systemic manner to improve school, personal, and social outcomes for all students (Gailer et al., 2018) through techniques to support coping and resilience.

The TSS Model is a framework to help schools minimize the effects of stress and trauma on learning, social development, and behavior by adjusting climate, culture, and practice across all areas of school. The TSS Model is not a crisis prevention or intervention program and is not clinical in nature. Rather, the TSS is implemented as a universal or tier 1 support designed to meet the academic and social needs of all students (Goodman, McIntosh, & Bohanon, n.d.) whether they have experienced trauma or not. School personnel become trauma-skilled as they progress through the first three steps of the model: first, they acquire knowledge of the effects of stress and trauma and establish language to promote consistency in implementing the model; next, they learn to build resilience in students through connections, security, achievement, autonomy, and fulfillment; and finally, they acquire skills necessary to prevent traumatic incidents, to appropriately intervene during traumatic incidents, to support recovery from such incidents, and to properly refer students to internal or external services when needed (Gailer et al., 2018). The final two steps of the model are on-going: implementation, maintenance, and evaluation of services to ensure fidelity and assess the model's impact (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. *The Trauma-Skilled Schools Model.*



Because the TSS Model requires a culture-shift, it is important that a school or district assess its readiness to implement such change. Though there are a few measures in existence that focus on teaching trauma-impacted students (Crosby, Somers, Day, & Baroni, 2016) or on a school's propensity toward trauma sensitivity (Guarino & Chagnon, 2018), none focus on indicators of schoolwide readiness to implement universal change. To meet this need, the developers of the TSS model created the Trauma-Skilled Readiness Assessment (TSRA). The TSRA can be used to measure readiness and identify greatest areas of need in schools as they implement trauma-focused programming, as well as to assess change as schools progress through model implementation.

### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study is to examine the factors and outcomes associated with implementation of the TSSM, including investigating a school's readiness to implement the model and how the model influences faculty and staff ability to serve students experiencing

trauma. Because implementation in our sample is in the early phase, we will not include an examination of student outcomes in this presentation though these are directions for future research. This study will focus on the following research questions: 1) How does implementation of the TSSM influence participants' awareness of and knowledge about students experiencing stress due to trauma; and 2) How does implementation of the TSSM influence the development of skills related to building resilience in students?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Research on stress and trauma indicate considerable potential physical and psychological effects on an individual (Aupperle et al., 2012; Tate & Johnson, 2018). In children, these effects may manifest as difficulty in written or oral communication, recall, and other forms of expression, as well as through disruptive behaviors (van der Kolk, 2015). While trauma has been thought of in the past as a specific, overwhelming event that creates a significant negative reaction, stress and trauma can be classified as any emotional response to adverse experiences that may be experienced, witnessed, encountered, or even perceived (Gailer et al., 2018). Educators are discovering that they need to know less about the source of the trauma and more about how trauma can impact social and academic development. Changes to educational practices and culture should be implemented to meet student needs. In cases where educators are not meeting these needs, courts have intervened: a court in Colorado ruled that the U.S. Bureau of Indian Education provided inadequate educational services for several of its Havasupai Tribe students who the Court found were trauma-impacted due to abuse, exposure to violence, and severe poverty (Renick, 2018).

Trauma is also related to school climate and safety, a link that will likely soon lead to policy and legislative changes that will mandate action on the part of schools to provide services

to help prevent school-based threats by trauma-impacted students (Gailer et al., 2018). This, too, will require changes to school culture to instill procedures that will reduce stress by providing a safe environment while promoting positive school outcomes. This will almost certainly entail changes in practice and perhaps even philosophies to be successful, neither of which are easily accomplished. The developers of the TSS Model recognize these realities but also acknowledge the inherent limitations on what is practical and achievable in a school environment. They opted to resist the desire to identify and individually treat trauma-impacted students and instead concentrated their efforts on establishing processes that would provide schools with collective knowledge, skills, behaviors, and goals to best serve all students, trauma-impacted or not.

### **Methods**

We employed a descriptive research design (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010) to evaluate how initial implementation efforts of the Trauma Skilled Schools Model (TSSM) influenced faculty and staff ability to recognize and serve students experiencing stress related to trauma. The study occurred in a large school district in Florida that is implementing the TSSM in a select elementary school to determine its effectiveness before expanding the model district-wide. Nearly 90% of the school's 520 students identified as students of color, with 94% categorized as low income. Twenty-six percent of the school's population are English Language Learners and almost 25% are students with disabilities. As part of standard model implementation, the Trauma Skilled Readiness Assessment was administered in the participating school before training began in January 2020, with  $n=32$  administrators, counselors, teachers, and instructional staff completing the measure. A follow-up survey was administered in mid-April of 2020 ( $n=27$ ) to determine how the training influenced awareness of and knowledge about trauma-impacted students and how it affected the development of skills related to building resilience.

## Data sources

The Trauma-Skilled Readiness Assessment (TSRA) was developed by members of the TSS Model development team to provide an assessment of perceptions, beliefs, and knowledge of topics related to trauma-impacted students. The TSRA was developed in conjunction with program goals and theory of the TSS Model (Gailer et al., 2018), with items focusing on reasons for implementing the model, readiness of the school or district in terms of current services provided and resources available for trauma-impacted students, current and prior trauma-based training and information provided to staff, ability of staff to promote resilience among students, and staff skill level in regards to serving trauma-impacted students. Responses are recorded through 5-point Likert-style agreement or frequency scales, which allows for calculation of composite scores among the subscales of the measure for examination. A follow-up version was administered to assess change in readiness, awareness, knowledge, and skills during the training and implementation phases of the model. Both versions were administered electronically using a secure web-based surveying software that allowed users to respond anonymously.

## Results

Analysis of responses from the initial and follow-up surveys revealed statistically significant increases in the proportion of faculty and staff who recognized that a majority of their school's students have likely been impacted by trauma in some manner (28% vs 58%,  $\chi^2 = 5.17$ ,  $p = .02$ ), in the proportion of respondents who agreed that they consciously and deliberately act to reduce or minimize confrontation or stress (69% vs 96%,  $\chi^2 = 7.33$ ,  $p = .01$ ), and in the proportion of respondents who agreed that they are able to recognize early signs of student stress and dysfunction (53% vs 82%,  $\chi^2 = 5.26$ ,  $p = .02$ ). There was also a statistically significant increase in the proportion of respondents who indicated that they have observed a colleague

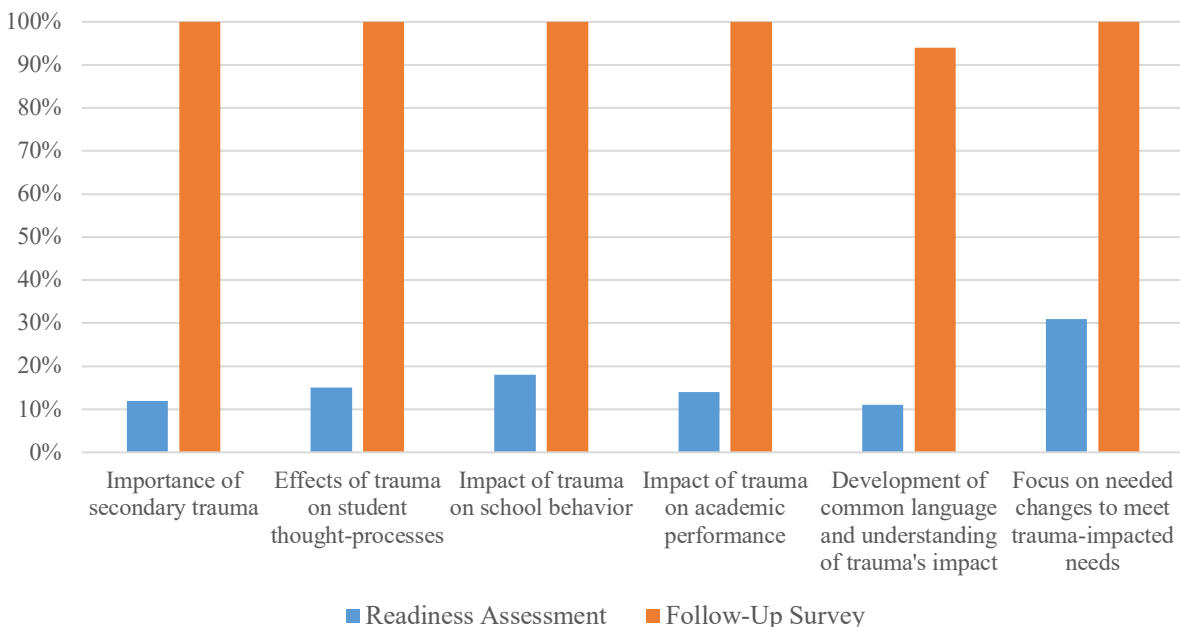


acting in a manner that may exacerbate stress in students (38% vs 67%,  $\chi^2 = 4.99, p = .03$ ).

However, this difference is likely attributable to the increased awareness of trauma-impacted students and improved knowledge regarding actions that may trigger trauma-induced incidents.

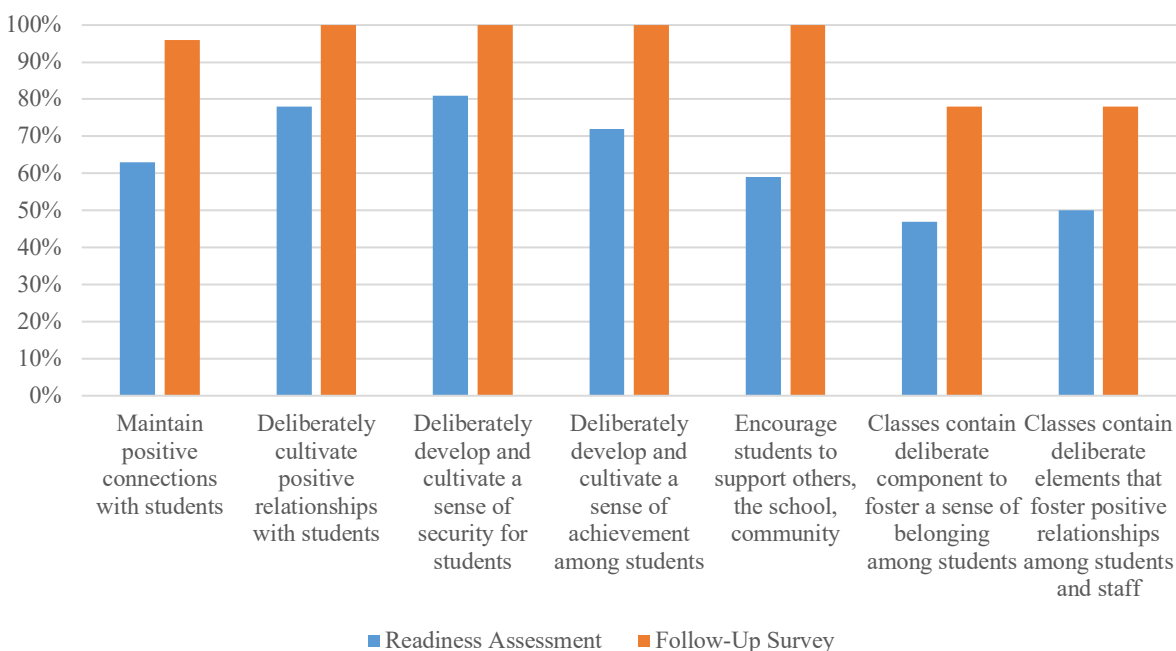
On the Readiness Assessment, less than 50% of respondents indicated that they had received training related to trauma. The percentage of those receiving trauma training increased at follow-up to 67%, with 100% of administrator and counselor respondents, 72% of teacher respondents, and 33% of instructional support staff receiving training. Furthermore, the focus of the training received shifted to the importance of secondary trauma, the impact of trauma on school behavior and academic performance, and the changes in school practices required to meet students' trauma-related needs. Figure 2 illustrates respondents' agreement on the focus of trauma-related training received from the Readiness Assessment to the follow-up point.

Figure 2. *Respondents' Agreement on Focus of Trauma Training.*



Both surveys also assessed respondents' agreement on items related to resilience building among students. These items concentrated on students' connections with their peers and with school staff, and on deliberate actions taken by individuals and the school in general to develop and cultivate a sense of security and belonging. Again, considerable increases in agreement among school staff were observed for each of the seven items related to resilience after training had occurred (Figure 3). These findings are promising as they indicate that a shift in culture may be taking place toward an environment where preventing trauma-induced incidents becomes a schoolwide priority.

Figure 3. *Respondents' Agreement on Actions Taken to Build Resilience*



### Scholarly Significance of the Work

As we learn more about the prevalence of trauma among students at the K-12 level, we realize that schools must move beyond being trauma-informed and trauma-sensitive. The findings here indicate promising, emerging evidence that the Trauma Skilled Schools Model can

affect the desired changes among school personnel to positively impact students who are experiencing stress due to trauma, and for this reason we believe this study is significant. Further, there is clearly a need for a measure to examine faculty and staff awareness of, knowledge about, and ability to serve trauma-impacted students. We believe our findings support the TSRA as a measure that is sensitive to change, even in early phases of model implementation. As the model is expanded, we intend to conduct a series of analyses to establish reliability and validity of the measure to promote its use in the field.

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