

# The Mental Health Equation: Student Safety Through Mental Health Supports

## +++++ INTRODUCTION +++++

Following the traumatic events of Hurricane Harvey and the tragic shooting at Santa Fe High School, it has been hard to ignore the impact that trauma can have on our children and our schools. Governor Greg Abbott, Education Commissioner Michael Morath, and key members of both houses of the legislature have emphasized the importance of mental health supports in schools.

Our Texas schools are filled with students from many backgrounds with a variety of needs. Educators have a wide support system for meeting their students' needs academically. However, they are lacking a support system for meeting the many mental health needs of their students.

The Teach Plus Texas Fellows are a group of 30 diverse professional educators working around the great state of Texas, educating children in many school districts and contexts from suburban, rural, and urban communities. Besides our shared love for educating our scholars, we also share a common narrative of teaching students who have experienced trauma. We as teachers are often the "first responders" to assessing and intervening when a student is having a mental health crisis.

## +++++ THE PROBLEM +++++

Many students enter our school buildings battling trauma. Examples of trauma, the impact of which were measured in an influential study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, include several types of abuse, neglect, and exposure to violence.<sup>1</sup> The study referred to these traumatic experiences as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). In the worst cases, teachers are met with students in immediate mental health crises who are considering hurting themselves or hurting others. According to the Center for Disease Control's 2017 Texas High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey, almost one in eight high school students attempted suicide in 2017—a number that exceeds the national average.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, when those students go without help, the risks of self-harm, substance abuse, suicide, and even the thoughts of doing harm to others increase.

In our experience, when schools are unprepared to address students' mental health needs, student achievement is also impacted. When students have untreated mental health issues, it is harder for them to learn.<sup>3</sup> What's more, they may act out or withdraw, interfering with the learning of other students. Without training, educators may inadvertently exacerbate students' trauma by disciplining students whose behavior is actually a cry for help.

Not only are many teachers and administrators unprepared to identify and respond to students who have experienced trauma, but Texas schools lack sufficient school-based mental health services. The American Counseling Association recommends a ratio of one counselor to every 250 students on campus.<sup>4</sup> Education Commissioner Mike Morath reported in a June 27th, 2018

House Committee Meeting on Public Education that the ratio in Texas is 1 to 500.<sup>5</sup>

Many school counselors also have significant responsibilities outside of providing mental health supports to students—responsibilities such as test administration, lunch duty, and more. Governor Abbott's School Safety Action Plan published on May 30th, 2018 echoes this point. The report calls on schools to give counselors more time to address mental health concerns at their schools. According to the report, "Many counselors employed by Texas schools are licensed in mental and behavioral health, but because of the other responsibilities placed on them, are unable to care for health needs of their students."<sup>6</sup>

*Too much to handle in a 7:00am - 7:00pm schedule and only two hands. Our needs are bigger than I am.* — Elementary School Counselor in San Antonio.

*Mental health has definitely become an increasingly major part of my daily routine in our large high school's health room. We had two students last year that died by suicide, so we are all trying to be more aware and proactive when it comes to mental health. I have definitely seen an uptick in the amount of psychiatric medications that my students are prescribed. I spend a great deal of time dealing with children who are struggling due to a multitude of social problems including issues associated with poverty, physical/emotional/sexual abuse, addiction issues of parents/caregivers, and incarceration of parents/caregivers.*— Nurse and Counseling Services Provider at a high school in Amarillo

## TEACHER SURVEY ON STUDENTS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED TRAUMA

In August and September 2018, Teach Plus conducted a survey of teachers across Texas asking them about their experiences with students who have experienced trauma and their views on what needs to be done. One hundred twenty-three Texas teachers, from schools whose students are in every socioeconomic quartile, responded to the survey.

In an effort to understand what percentage of teachers' classrooms are impacted by trauma, we provided teachers with a list of ACEs included in the CDC study, and asked whether they had any students in the last year who had experienced them. According to research conducted by the CDC, when children experience ACEs, there are significant negative impacts on their

long-term outcomes, including graduation, employment, and income.<sup>7</sup> Ninety-one percent of teachers surveyed indicated that their students have had at least one ACE in the 2017-18 school year.<sup>8</sup> In addition to the ACEs included in the original study, we asked teachers to list any other traumatic experiences their students were facing. Teachers were honest in their responses and reported numerous horrific traumatic experiences their students face and ones that neither teacher or student are equipped to handle. One teacher noted that her student was simultaneously "experiencing the suicide of a parent and being moved to a foster home."<sup>9</sup>— Another teacher mentioned their student was "living in extreme poverty, in the sense of homelessness and hunger."<sup>10</sup> Others mentioned the struggles of deported parents,

being refugees of war, and the after effects of displacement due to natural disasters like

Hurricane Harvey.<sup>11</sup>

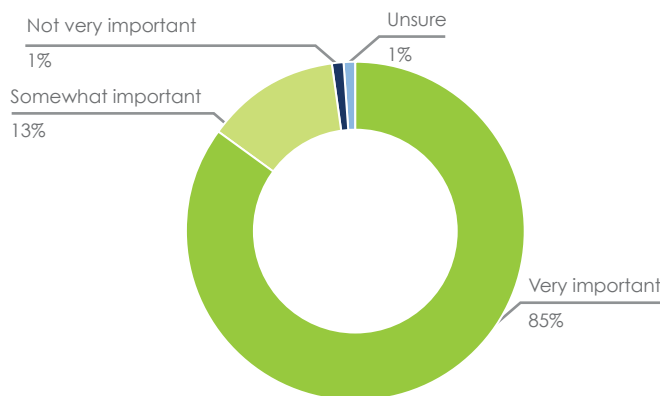
# 91%

of Texas teachers report that at least one of their students had experienced trauma last year.

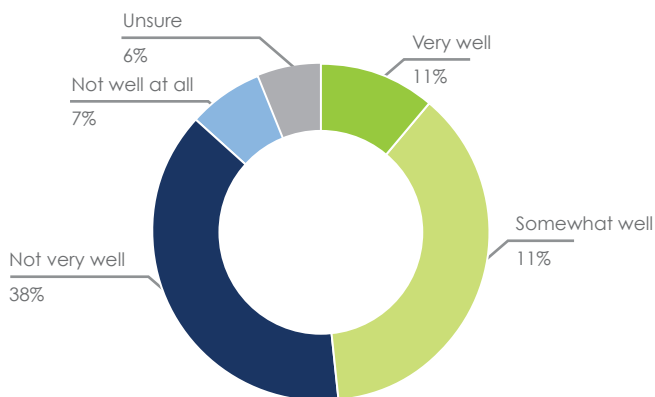
We also surveyed teachers about whether they believe that the presence of students who have experienced trauma translates into a need for teachers to employ trauma-informed instruction strategies. These strategies could include: implementing culturally-appropriate, evidence-based assessments and treatments for traumatic stress and symptoms, providing resources to

children, families, and providers on trauma, its impact, and treatment options, and supporting staff by minimizing and treating secondary traumatic stress, which can lead to burnout.<sup>12</sup> Eighty-five percent of teachers surveyed believe trauma-informed instruction strategies are “very important,” and only one percent called them “not very important.”<sup>13</sup>

How important is it for teachers to be trained in trauma-informed instructional strategies?



Yet 51 percent of respondents said their schools did not meet the definition of a trauma-informed school, and only 11 percent said their schools met the definition “very well.”<sup>14</sup>



In order to support students who have experienced trauma, schools need more than well-trained teachers. They also need counselors with the time to provide mental health services. Counselors should be more available to meet with students who

enter school carrying a recent traumatic experience with them. Freeing counselors of administrative tasks, such as those associated with testing, would yield greater time to meet the demand of our most vulnerable students.

*“Hurricane Harvey’s impact on my students caused a shift in their belief system. For many, it caused a sense of helplessness that not even parents or caregivers could ease. This led students to question their safety even in the presence of those who care about them most. This was something we had to address as teachers when students came back to the classroom. We had to ensure them that they were safe and we would take care of them.”—Teacher, Splendora ISD*

## +++++ RECOMMENDATIONS +++++

- 1 Require districts to train staff in trauma-informed care.**

Trauma impacts students in every school district and a knowledgeable teacher is the first and best way to address the concerns and behaviors of students who enter with Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Every district should have a plan to ensure that students receive services that are informed by an understanding of the impact on trauma on student mental health and academic achievement, and provide the professional development our teachers, administrators, and school resource officers need to meet this growing student population.
- 2 Include trauma-informed instruction training among the components of renewing a teaching certification.**

Teachers should receive at least six hours of trauma-informed instruction training every five years in order to renew their license. This will allow them to effectively teach the large numbers of trauma-impacted students walking into classrooms each year. In order for teachers to maintain their skill set in assisting their student populations struggling with trauma, all teachers should receive six or more hours of trauma-informed instruction upon renewing their teaching certificates.
- 3 Increase mental health counseling resources at Texas public schools.**

The state should provide the funds to allow school districts around the state to hire more counseling staff and school-based mental health providers who have the training required to assist students who are challenged with trauma. The state should also encourage districts to reevaluate the roles and responsibilities of counseling staff so that they have greater flexibility to improve mental health outcomes of their students.

+++++ **CONCLUSION** +++++

Teachers all around the great state of Texas spend their time educating the future leaders and change makers of our society. To make certain we are nurturing well-rounded leaders, we must make mental health a top priority. If we want to increase the academic success of Texas students, we must support their mental health. To fully service our students, we must have trauma-informed educators and available counseling services. The Teach Plus Texas Fellows are calling on state lawmakers to craft legislation to support our three recommendations.

## +++++ ENDNOTES +++++

- <sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Division of Violence Prevention, CDC-Kaiser ACE Study, H.R. Rep. (June 4, 2016). Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/about.html>
- <sup>2</sup> C. (Ed.). (2017). High School YRBS. Retrieved November 30, 2018, from <https://nccd.cdc.gov/youthonline/app/Results.aspx?LID=TX>
- <sup>3</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Division of Violence Prevention, CDC-Kaiser ACE Study, H.R. Rep. (June 4, 2016). Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/about.html>
- <sup>4</sup> ASCA American School Counselor Association. (2018). Press. Retrieved from <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/press> This information is found on the "Press" page of the ASCA (American School Counselor Association) website.
- <sup>5</sup> Texas House of Representatives Committee on Public Education Hearing on School Safety- Infrastructure, Witness Testimony, H.R. 2018 (Tex. June 27, 2018). Witness testimony was delivered by Mike Morath, Commissioner, Texas Education Agency.
- <sup>6</sup> State of Texas Office of the Governor. (2018). School and firearm safety action plan. In G. Abbott (Author), School and firearm safety action plan [PDF]. Retrieved from [https://gov.texas.gov/uploads/files/press/School\\_Safety\\_Action\\_Plan\\_05302018.pdf](https://gov.texas.gov/uploads/files/press/School_Safety_Action_Plan_05302018.pdf). Governor Abbott's report on his School Firearm Safety Action Plan was released on May 30 2018 and was compiled based on information derived from focus groups following the school shooting in Santa Fe, Texas on May 18, 2018.
- <sup>7</sup> Cdc.gov. (1998). About the CDC-Kaiser ACE Study. [online] Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/about.html> [Accessed 30 Nov. 2018].
- <sup>8</sup> Question: "During the 2017-2018 school year, did you teach at least one student who you were aware had experienced at least one type of "Adverse Childhood Experience" or ACE?" Responses (n=123), "Yes" (91.1 percent)," No" (4.9 percent), "Unsure" (4.1 percent).
- <sup>9</sup> Question: "In addition to the ACEs identified earlier, are there other types of childhood trauma that students you taught in the past school year experienced? Please do not include any identifying information in your response." Response: "\*\*Death of a parent \*Suicide of a parent \*Removal from the home in to foster care."
- <sup>10</sup> Question: "In addition to the ACEs identified earlier, are there other types of childhood trauma that students you taught in the past school year experienced? Please do not include any identifying information in your response." Response: "Poverty in the sense of homelessness and hunger."
- <sup>11</sup> Question: "In addition to the ACEs identified earlier, are there other types of childhood trauma that students you taught in the past school year experienced? Please do not include any identifying information in your response."
- <sup>12</sup> McInerney, M., McKlindon, A. (2014, December 2).Unlocking the Door to Learning: Trauma-Informed Classrooms & Transformational Schools. Retrieved December 06, 2018, <https://www.elc-pa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Trauma-Informed-in-Schools-Classrooms-FINAL-December2014-2.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Question: "How important is it for teachers to be trained in trauma-informed instructional strategies?" Response: (n=123), "Very important" (85 percent), "Somewhat important" (13 percent), "Not very important" (1 percent).

<sup>14</sup> Question: "The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) identifies a trauma-informed school as: "A trauma-informed school system (K-12) is one in which all teachers, school administrators, staff, students, families, and community members recognize and respond to the behavioral, emotional, relational, and academic impact of traumatic stress on those within the school system. Addressing the impact of trauma exposure on students and school personnel directly, resisting punitive responses, and providing practical skills and supports to manage traumatic stress reactions are essential for building a positive school climate for students and teachers." How well do you believe your school meets this idea of what a trauma-informed school is?" Responses (n=123): "Very well" (11.4 percent), "Somewhat well" (37.4 percent), "Not very well" (38.2 percent), "Not very well at all" (7.3 percent).

<sup>15</sup> Question: "How important is it for teachers to be trained in trauma-informed instructional strategies?" Response: (n=123), "Very important" (85 percent), "Somewhat important" (13 percent), "Not very important" (1 percent).

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Teach Plus is a national non-profit organization whose mission is to empower excellent, experienced teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that affect their students' success. Teach Plus Texas recruits, selects, and trains demonstrably-effective teachers from across the Lone Star State to share their expertise with policy makers in order to affect positive change for their students.

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