Effectively Integrating School Behavioral Health Frameworks to Promote Student Success

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From multi-tiered system of supports and community schools, to social and emotional learning and restorative justice, there have been a variety of frameworks, approaches, models, and programs promoted to schools to foster the well-being of students. Many of these share similar tenets and ultimately, the same goal: to support the social, emotional, and behavioral health and well-being of students to optimize learning.

This guide is intended to help educators and education leaders understand the main components of the most prominent school behavioral health frameworks and approaches utilized in the District of Columbia (DC) public (DCPS) and public charter schools (DCPCS), as well as best practices associated with the successful integration of two or more frameworks within a school. We focus on frameworks because they are action-oriented approaches that influence the organizational structure, relationships, and pedagogy of the whole school and help direct many school-based activities and decisions (see sidebar for definitions). Although focused on DC, the information can guide other jurisdictions on ways to implement and integrate individual frameworks to better meet school needs.

Inside is a chart that synthesizes some of the existing literature and identifies the main characteristics, implementation considerations, and available resources for the six frameworks most frequently mentioned in interviews

with education and school behavioral health leaders in DC: Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC), Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), Response to Intervention (RTI), Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Restorative Justice, and Trauma-Sensitive Schools. Information is also provided on other social and behavioral programs and approaches, and how the frameworks can be integrated, as well as brief descriptions of two local schools that have successfully integrated key components and practices across two or more frameworks.

Many of these share similar tenets and ultimately, the same goal: to support the social, emotional, and behavioral health and well-being of students to optimize learning.

Defining Framework, Approach, Model, and Program

The differences between these terms are nuanced and frameworks, models, and approaches are frequently used interchangeably. Although there is little consensus on how to use the terms, we offer these definitions to bring clarity to the discussion.

Model

A model is an overarching philosophical representation of how a system functions and describes select components or factors that are related to each other and work together.

Framework

A framework is an organizing structure that delineates the necessary elements within that framework and offers guiding principles to categorize activities offered to reach a desired outcome.

Approach

An approach, like a framework, is a broad strategy but typically prescribes desired actions among the elements of the approach.

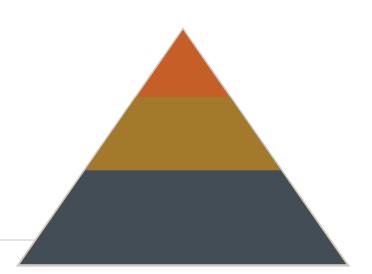
Program

A program involves a specific set of integrated, planned, sequential strategies or activities that are designed to reach a stated goal or objective. A program may involve a manual, curriculum, or other materials to support implementation.



Utilizing Three Tiers of Intervention Strategies

Numerous school-based frameworks use a multi-tiered strategy to help organize and deploy interventions available to support development, engagement, and achievement of all students.





Tier 1

Tier 1 universal supports are available to all students regardless of existing challenges, disabilities, or risk level for mental health problems. Interventions, delivered either school-wide, grade-level or classroom-based, include mental-health promoting activities, programs to reinforce the adoption of social and emotional competencies, and efforts to promote positive school climate and staff well-being.



Tier 2

Tier 2 targeted supports are intended for some students who have been identified, through screenings or other referral processes, as experiencing mild emotional distress or functional impairment. Early intervention services offered as part of this tier include small group counseling, brief or low-intensity interventions, or behavioral contracts.



Tier 3

Tier 3 intensive services and supports are intended for the relatively fewer number of students with diagnosable mental health concerns or who experience significant distress or functional impairment. Individualized treatment interventions as part of this tier include individual, family, or group therapy and typically also comprise students identified with special needs.

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| Description | Main Characteristics | | | |
|---|--|--|--|--|
| Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) | | | | |
| WSCC serves as a holistic school-based model that outlines the necessary components for healthy student growth and development, as well as academic success. WSCC focuses on coordinated, evidence-based practices and policies, evident throughout the school and conducted in partnership with the community, to ensure all students are healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged. | WSCC outlines the 10 essential components of school health that need to be addressed and coordinated: Physical Education & Physical Activity; Nutrition Environment & Services; Health Education; Social & Emotional School Climate; Physical Environment; Health Services; Counseling, Psychological, and Social Services; Employee Wellness; Community Involvement; Family Engagement | | | |
| Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) | | | | |
| MTSS is a framework that informs the delivery of tiered social, emotional, behavioral, and academic interventions. MTSS is used for identifying students who need additional learning and/or behavioral supports and providing them with the required instruction and/or services so that learning and development is maximized for all children. | MTSS organizes student and family supports and services across three-tiered levels of intervention (refer to box) and utilizes screening tools, evidence-based practices, and data-driven decision rules to identify student challenges; assessments to determine the level of support necessary to address recognized challenges; and processes to monitor progress of interventions offered. MTSS ensures that all students can access the service array, including students in both general and special education, and that all students will have exposure to universal mental health supports. ⁷ | | | |
| Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports (PBIS) | | | | |
| PBIS provides a framework for student behavioral supports that uses multiple tiers of intervention to teach behavioral expectations and competencies through evidence-based practices and data-based decision making. | PBIS emphasizes caring relationships and a positive school climate through a focus on behavior and social competencies in students by explicitly teaching behavioral expectations that are well-defined, recognizing and reinforcing positive behavior, and establishing clear consequences for not meeting those expectations. | | | |
| Response to Intervention (RTI) | | | | |
| RTI is a framework to identify and provide interventions to students with learning and behavior needs. The framework uses a multi-tiered strategy to provide differentiated instruction that becomes more intensive and individualized if student progress is inadequate and skills deficits become more evident. | RTI includes universal screening and identification of students who need assistance, delivery of interventions shown effective in addressing learning challenges, ongoing student assessment for progress monitoring, linkage of data to referral and special education eligibility. | | | |
| Restorative Justice | | | | |
| Restorative Justice, also called restorative practices or restorative approaches, is a framework that focuses on building healthy relationships, and establishing non-punitive disciplinary responses centered on resolving conflicts and exhibiting personal and community accountability. | A Restorative Justice whole-school approach teaches social-emotional and conflict resolution skills and creates a process for responding to student misbehavior and conflict through a focus on restoring relationships and reaching appropriate resolutions. Practices include: student-student mediation, staff-student mediation, peace circles, reinstatement conversations, community building circles/conferencing, family group decision making conferences. | | | |
| Trauma-Sensitive School | | | | |
| A school that endorses a trauma-sensitive framework recognizes the impact that traumatic experiences have on an individual and seeks to provide a physically, emotionally, socially, and academically safe, caring and supportive environment to address traumatic symptoms and mitigate their impact on learning. | Trauma Sensitive Schools address students' needs in a holistic manner that takes into account the academic, social, behavioral, physical, and mental health needs of students. | | | |

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Implementation Considerations

Resources

A WSCC team should be identified whose membership represents the components of the model, but the team does not need to be new and can be addressed by expanding an existing school team. WSCC team leaders, or co-leaders, are responsible for leading, organizing, and facilitating WSCC efforts at the school level. Planning for implementation of the WSCC model requires careful consideration of student needs, resources, polices, school climate and culture, accountability measures, administrative support, and community assets and resources.¹ CDC's School Health Index (SHI) is an available measurement tool to assist with the assessment and continuous improvement of the components of WSCC. Buy-in and knowledge of skills for integrating health and academic interventions is needed for school leaders, staff and teachers.

DC: DC Health Education Standards²; OSSE's Putting Standards into Practice: Implementing the Health Education & Physical Education Standards³

National: CDC Healthy Schools⁴; ASCD Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child⁵; The Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child Model: A Guide to Implementation⁶

School administrators are better able to deliver interventions and efficiently utilize school resources by integrating academic and behavior strategies into one coordinated system. As data-driven decision-making and monitoring is central to effective MTSS implementation, the capacity for schools to collect and analyze student-level data is necessary. Consistent and effective teaming, collaboration and information-sharing is needed across programs and between school staff, teachers, families, and school teams. Access to research-based interventions as well as resources and training to ensure high-quality implementation are needed across all three-tiers.

National

- Self-Assessment of MTSS Implementation⁸
- PBIS and MTSS⁹

PBIS encourages collaboration and delineates a process for implementation that includes establishing a multi-disciplinary team of school members that attend a multi-day training; creating a system to provide continuous teacher training and coaching to ensure consistency in implementation; developing a process to monitor, evaluate and modify the system, and to refine discipline policies and procedures as needed; installing a school-wide system of rewards; using evidence-based practices that fit the school's context; and modeling appropriate behavior and creating opportunities for students to practice skills.

DC: Office of the State Superintendent of Education's Positive Behavior Support (PBS) Toolkit (2013)¹⁰; OSSE's Effective Behavior Support Webinar Series¹¹

National: Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, OSEP Technical Assistance Center¹²

There is no single model or universal practice or specific process for implementation. Infrastructure considerations include the need for a leadership team; a data coach; processes for solving problems, using data, and making decisions; and support for intervention fidelity, technology, technical assistance. RTI requires collaboration across school teams and student support personnel and services may be provided by a variety of personnel, including general education teachers, special educators, and other specialists.

DC: OSSE's Effective Behavior Support Webinar Series¹³

National: RTI Action Network¹⁴; Center on Response to Intervention at American Institutes for Research¹⁵

A full-time Restorative Practices Coordinator and a behavior team is recommended

Staff are encouraged to engage in continuous and intensive training to facilitate changes in mindset and language use.

All staff and school leaders must share in the core values of restorative practices and utilize restorative dialogue and practices throughout the school.

DC: OSSE's Restorative Justice Trainings and Resources¹⁶; School Talk/Restorative DC¹⁷

National: International Institute of Restorative Practices¹⁸; Restorative Practices: Fostering Healthy Relationships and Promoting Positive Discipline in Schools, A Guide for Educators.¹⁹; Department of Education: Guiding Principles: A resource guide for improving school climate and Discipline²⁰

Trauma-sensitive schools typically include continuous training and coaching for all staff; reviewing and potentially rewriting policies and procedures; creating a positive and supportive school climate. Strategies, policies, and practices that reduce trauma triggers, especially as it relates to disciplinary practices, is integral to the framework

Students are assisted in acquiring self-regulation and social and emotional skills and are provided opportunities to practice these skills. School leaders and staff must have a shared understanding that it is common to experience trauma and that trauma can impact learning, relationships, and behavior, making trauma-sensitivity necessary in all aspects of the school environment.

DC: Addressing Childhood Trauma in DC Schools²¹; OSSE's webinar on Trauma-Informed Care²²

National: The Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative²³; National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments/Safe Supportive Learning: Trauma-Sensitive Schools Training Package²⁴



Additional Models and Programs

Although the frameworks described in the chart were highlighted in key informant interviews, there were several other programs and processes mentioned that help enhance student social, emotional, and behavioral health that are being implemented across numerous schools in DC. These practices and processes are effective and add value to a school-based strategy that addresses student behavioral health needs; however, they are not considered broad organizing frameworks through which schools can comprehensively address the diverse needs of an entire student population.

School Climate

School climate is a term that reflects the norms, values, relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures of a school. School climate refers to the character of a school and the extent to which the school community maintains an emotionally and physically safe environment, consistent and fair disciplinary policies and practices, appealing and orderly physical surroundings, and respectful, trusting, and caring relationships across the school setting. A positive school climate, where healthy development and learning are fostered, can be achieved through the implementation of a variety of programs, services, and strategies across all of the tiers of intervention.

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) refers to a process often implemented in learning environments to build the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for healthy development. Programs that help improve social and emotional competencies, such as skills associated with understanding and managing emotions, setting and fulfilling

goals, empathizing with others, recognizing and developing positive relationships, and making responsible choices, are often part of a school's Tier 1 strategy. There are numerous evidence-based programs and practices from which schools can choose based on their needs and accessible resources, and resources exist to help educators identify and select effective SEL programs for implementation in their schools. In addition, comparisons of specific skills common across SEL programs may also help educators determine the social and emotional instruction to prioritize.

Community Schools

A Community School represents a partnership among educators, community-based organizations, and families to integrate academic, health, social services, youth, and community development in schools to address student and family needs and facilitate student learning. Community schools help remediate the challenges associated with poor access to needed resources in underserved communities necessary for students to excel. The four pillars of a community school approach include an emphasis on integrated student supports, expanded learning time and opportunities, family and community engagement, and collaborative leadership and practice. In particular, a focus on integrated student supports translates into partnerships with social and behavioral health providers, where school-based "wrap around services" are ideally coordinated by a dedicated professional staff member. Although student well-being is one aim of a community school approach and well-coordinated resources and programs across the multiple tiers of intervention are sure to benefit students' behavioral health, the approach is considered a broader school improvement strategy.

A focus on integrated student supports translates into partnerships with social and behavioral health providers, where school-based "wrap around services" are ideally coordinated by a dedicated professional staff member.



Comparison of Frameworks and Approaches and Implications for Integration

The frameworks described above support student health and well-being, and ultimately their academic success. They provide a systems-oriented approach that encourages a school-wide focus on the coordination of programs, policies, and practices that advance healthy child and youth development. All of the frameworks promote a positive school climate, help direct the actions of the adults, and underscore the importance of teaching social and emotional skills. Although there is some overlap between the frameworks identified, each one articulates a slightly different pathway to student social, emotional, and behavioral health.

The WSCC model describes the multiple components of a safe and healthy school and recommends a broad, coordinated system within which each essential component contributes to an environment conducive to engagement and achievement. Similar to Community Schools, WSCC insists that child, family, school, and community partners collaborate across sectors to support the success of the whole child, with WSCC offering greater specificity about the factors that require recognition and alignment in the school.

MTSS, PBIS, and RTI describe a whole school process for delivering student supports at varying levels of intensity to maximize educational attainment. They are distinct in their origination and emphasis, with PBIS initially designed to support students with behavioral challenges and focused more on behavioral interventions, RTI primarily designed for students with specific learning difficultues and focused more on the delivery of instructional interventions, and MTSS widely considered an umbrella framework that can unite different approaches and interventions and applies to the needs of all students with a combined focus on social-emotional, behavioral, and academic supports. Furthermore, all three incorporate activities that bolster teacher professional development and family and community engagement, with MTSS and PBIS also directly addressing school climate.

Yet, across all three frameworks, education leaders invest not only in a system for delivering a full array of support, but on an infrastructure for early identification and timely referral, collaborative teaming, transparent communication and ethical information sharing, data-driven decision-making, and with evidence-based interventions that are regularly monitored for impact. The multi-tiered process they all utilize facilitates the integration of school teams that can be combined or broadened to include discussions about academics, behavioral, and emotional concerns.

Trauma-Sensitive and Restorative Justice approaches represent a set of school-wide practices that focus on interpersonal interactions grounded in a culture of caring. They utilize a 'trauma lens' evidenced by their appreciation of the factors that affect child development, the focus on the value of engaging in healthy relationships, and the required intentional shifts in how staff and students engage with and understand each other. While there are specific practices associated with either approach, both influence the climate of the school, can be easily incorporated into MTSS, PBIS, and RTI frameworks, and therefore, can exist as complementary interventions within a school.

Building broad buy-in for these frameworks across the school community and using them consistently throughout the building is a common challenge. Strong implementation of any approach also requires school-wide professional development and regular coaching opportunities to ensure reliable application of evidence-based practices. Instituting and maintaining any whole-school framework demands patience and a willingness to remain committed amidst staff departures, changing priorities, and fluctuating student needs.

As the brief school examples exemplify, these whole-school behavioral health frameworks can be integrated to create a blended safety net for the benefit of the entire school community. Considered together, WSCC provides an overarching frame that outlines a healthy, coordinated school community, while MTSS, PBIS or RTI design or direct the infrastructure, or the rooms under the frame, within which restorative and traumasensitive practices, the furniture or fixtures in each room, allow students and staff to flourish.





Case Study 1: Integrating Multiple Frameworks or Approaches

E. L. Haynes Public Charter School

E. L. Haynes Public Charter School is a PK-3 to 12th grade charter school network that serves more than 1,100 students across two campuses in Ward 1 – one in Columbia Heights and one in Petworth. Both campuses have integrated RTI, MTSS, and restorative justice practices. In addition, many staff are engaged in training on specific trauma-sensitive school practices that are being incorporated into the frameworks already in place.



The schools use MTSS and RTI as structural frameworks within which to provide multi-tiered supports to students, and school staff implement a variety of programs within these frameworks to teach and incorporate practices to address behavioral concerns among students. For example, in the elementary school, they use the SEL program Responsive Classroom and teachers receive training on how to use positive behavioral approaches (e.g., rules and expectations are taught, practiced, and modeled, and consequences are fairly administered). In the middle and high school, staff implement restorative practices within the RTI and MTSS framework to teach students how to remedy situations that disrupt any aspect of the school community.

What this looks like in practice:



Tier 1

To ensure all students are provided appropriate positive supports and services, E. L. Haynes has implemented a variety of Tier 1 practices throughout their schools. The school implements the evidence-based SEL program Responsive Classroom in the elementary schools and Restorative Justice practices in the middle and high school. The overall goal of these interventions is to build schoolwide engagement, restore damage done to the community and obtain buy-in from students, staff, families, and the community in order to build trust and a positive school climate so that students are engaged in the classroom.

Staff receives grade level training on resiliency and on using data to monitor progress, and there are school-wide meetings to discuss student safety. Each classroom has a "cool down space" for students to take breaks. At the elementary school, teachers respond to misbehavior in the moment to show students how what they have done and said may be harmful to their community. The immediate response helps students demonstrate accountability and understand how to create solutions. There

Case Study 1: Integrating Multiple Frameworks or Approaches

are also school-wide celebrations for success, an annual Wellness Day to learn about holistic health, all-school Heritage Month programming, and school safety meetings.



Early intervention for students at-risk includes the creation of a BASE program to help students with behavioral difficulties learn life skills and get immediate feedback on their behaviors using an incentive system. To supplement these Tier 2 MTSS activities, teachers are taught ways to keep the student in the classroom or in the school, rather than to suspend or remove them. The staff meets weekly for team meetings to talk about student progress with the interventions. There is also an entire wellness team on each campus comprised of counselors and social workers that students can check in with if they feel the need for additional support. In addition, there are family engagement meetings for families of special education and English Language Learner (ELL) students who may have greater difficulty accessing support.



Intensive intervention for students with more severe needs consists of counseling with therapists, or individualized planning for students who have special education and English Language Learner (ELL) services, as well as general education students who may be having significant difficulties. It also includes outreach to parents of students who are not engaged to discuss additional interventions. Restorative Justice practices are also integrated within this Tier. For example, if a student receiving therapeutic services disrupts a classroom or the school community, the Dean of Culture holds a restorative meeting with the parties involved, their parents and at times the community members affected, so that students can devise a plan to resolve the harm they have done to their school community. School staff meets weekly for team meetings to discuss at-risk students, placement in tiered supports, and required interventions.

Lessons

Leaders at E. L. Haynes recommend school leaders take the time to develop the framework to ensure that the services and supports implemented reflect the current needs of the school community. Furthermore, being deliberate about obtaining buy-in from staff, families, and students is essential so that all stakeholders are engaged, understand their role, and can yield the benefits associated with implementing the whole-school approaches. School leaders should be prepared for the amount of time it takes to reframe attitudes around discipline when implementing restorative justice, an essential component for successful implementation, and that it takes time for positive outcomes to be evident. It was deemed equally important to train ALL staff and conduct consistent check-ins and year-round trainings to ensure consistency of implementation of desired practices. They also recommend schools hire the staff needed to make the approaches sustainable.

At E. L. Haynes, RTI and MTSS provide a framework for how to match students to required supports based on need, as well as thinking about students' needs overall, while the restorative justice model and Responsive Classroom curriculum support a positive discipline model, with strategies that teachers can use to engage students, manage student behaviors, connect with families, maintain high levels of learning, and promote a sense of community in their classes.





Case Study 2: Integrating Multiple Frameworks or Approaches

Van Ness Elementary School

A DCPS school in Ward 5, Van Ness Elementary School serves approximately 270 students in PK-3 to 4th grades. At its opening in 2015, the school prioritized the development of the whole child by focusing on social and emotional learning and using an evidence-based SEL and classroom management program called Conscious Discipline. As the school grew and students with more diverse needs enrolled, they realized the need for additional student supports to make the school experience a safe and productive one for all students.



Therefore, the school developed a single student behavioral health and academic support system. MTSS and RTI provide the structural framework and their integrated three-tiered approach involves practices drawn from a number of different frameworks, including trauma-sensitive school practices and SEL. Furthermore, they elevate the family engagement and physical environment components of the WSCC model to promote a positive school climate for their students and staff.

What this looks like in practice:



Tier 1

Van Ness Elementary implements a school-wide practice they call CARE (Compassion & Assertiveness, Routines, Environment) that relies on principles from Conscious Discipline for developing students' social and emotional learning skills, promoting student-driven learning, and providing trauma sensitivity. The goal of CARE is to create a space where children feel safe, loved, and nurtured so they can focus on learning. Each day starts with a personalized greeting, Breakfast in the Classroom, and a morning meeting. Teachers create a calm, welcoming environment by speaking calmly and assertively. They have consistent routines that are carefully explained and practiced. Classrooms are structured, organized, and welcoming, with subdued colors, air diffusers, natural materials and lighting, plants and pictures of families throughout the room, and a safe place for children to calm down and refocus when needed.

The school also implements Family Circle, their approach to family engagement, which includes a home visit for every family, various forms of ongoing communication like weekly newsletters, frequent texts with positive information and photographs of students learning, and data-driven parent conferencing.

Case Study 2: Integrating Multiple Frameworks or Approaches





Tiers 2 and 3

The school has a structure in place to identify students who would benefit from more intensive interventions. Grade level teams meet weekly to review student data and discuss academic and behavioral supports for students. If a child is not progressing, the teacher will refer the student to their RTI process, which gathers a team to review behavioral and/or academic data and makes recommendations. For behavioral supports, Van Ness Elementary School developed Boost which provides a selection of Tier 2 practices, including a 'check in check out' system, personalized visual schedules, movement break schedules, token boards, lunch bunch groups, and more. The RTI team, which includes the classroom teacher, family members, the psychologist, and other appropriate staff, determines which interventions from Boost should be implemented, with set goals revisited every four weeks.

This system works as follows: if a child struggles with transitions, for example, they will discuss it with their grade level team, try different Tier 1 practices, and collect data. If the student still has difficulties with transitions, the teacher will refer the child to an RTI team. The RTI team may recommend that the teacher create a Boost intervention for the child, such as a personal social story illustrated through a small book or flip cards on a lanyard, that shows him or her what to expect with pictures and words. This may be read to the child before activities begin or before warnings of a transition, so that the child is both supported and taught a needed skill. With this coordinated system in place, concerns about how to proceed or what interventions to put in place are alleviated so that the focus is on helping the child.

Lessons

Leaders from Van Ness Elementary recommend conducting an initial needs assessment to determine what framework and practices make sense for each school community. For Van Ness, this involved conversations with stakeholders, including students, where they reviewed data and gathered feedback on areas of importance. To collect information from students, they used a process called "empathy mapping." The information helped to inform the vision for the school, the desired qualities and characteristics each student should develop by the time they graduate, and the practices that could be used to cultivate those dispositions.

They also learned that it takes time to adequately train teachers so that the adopted practices and philosophy underscored by the belief that child misbehavior reflects a lack of skills that need to be taught, could become second nature. While the teachers have embraced the approach and the philosophy, getting there involved the hard work of understanding their own underlying biases, experiences, and expectations. To facilitate this change in mindset, teachers were afforded time to learn the principles and practices of CARE and Boost and to practice them so they were implemented effectively. To augment and sustain the training, Van Ness Elementary asked school staff to read 1-2 books each year so that the entire school could discuss and implement some of the lessons learned from various experts.

Van Ness has instituted routines and practices to help ensure a nurturing environment so that all students are ready to learn, but they also have an organized, systematic procedure for providing supports for those who learn differently, have suffered trauma, or have other cognitive or mental health issues that could make school challenging. By using the MTSS and RTI frameworks to create the safe environment essential for trauma-informed care, they focus on prevention and are able to proactively help students manage their behaviors and emotions.



Endnotes

| 1 | https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282645613 Using the Whole School Whole Community Whole Child Model Implications for Practice | 13 | https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/documents/ Behavior%20Webinar%20Series%20Module%20III%20 Functionally%20Based%20Behavior%20Support.pdf |
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