


An aerial photograph of a parking lot with several rows of cars. The image is overlaid with a vibrant rainbow gradient that transitions from purple and blue at the top to red and orange at the bottom. The cars are arranged in neat rows, and the overall scene is brightly lit.

A DISTRICTWIDE EFFORT



District directors owe it to students – and their school counselors – to ensure developing trauma-informed schools is a districtwide priority.

BY SAMANTHA HAVILAND, PH.D.

As school counselors, we work to change the school culture when it's needed. We see a holistic approach and meet the needs of all students individually as well as across the school. School counselors are a major player in the development of a trauma-sensitive school system; however, it is important for districts to provide schools and school counselors with the necessary tools to do this important work.

Schools experience a tremendous amount of outside influences that make educating students challenging. From local, national and world events that show up in our hallways to policy influences that may change our daily systems, schools are forever adapting to the needs of their students and families. Denver Public Schools in Denver, Colo., is no different. With almost 70 percent of our students living in poverty, students struggling to cope with racial tensions in the community or intolerant political messages, trauma has a permanent presence in our hallways and classrooms. The education system traditionally is not prepared to help with this. With schools focused on assessments and maintaining a structured environment, school counselors in some schools are not even permitted to have students out of class to work on these issues.

Many building and district leaders aren't aware of the pervasiveness of trauma in our schools. Students show up every day with a wide variety of behaviors appearing to be attention deficit, anger, depression or disengagement. The challenge is that interventions needed for our students vary based on the behavior's root cause. Thus, if the cause isn't appropriately identified, schools may be spinning their wheels trying to address a challenge that isn't actually present.

Trauma can be, but is not necessarily, related to one significant event. Trauma is more related to a student's ability to cope with highly stressful experiences. With our vast access to technology, students witness violence in the community or the news regularly. With our focus on student safety, students regularly experience lockdown drills. With our population living in poverty, homelessness and transience can create inconsistent home and school environments, gaps in learning while transitioning between schools and low social supports.

This constant reminder of vulnerability is stressful to many anyway; however adding hunger, familial conflict, health issues or other potentially stressful situations makes our students even more vulnerable to symptoms of trauma.

The District Role

District leaders are tasked with getting schools and students the support and access they need. In many districts, creating a college-going culture is a major focus, working so all schools ensure their students have access and opportunity. Much like creating a college-going culture, however, all staff, from building maintenance staff to administrators, need to be trained to be trauma-sensitive. At Denver Public Schools, we've been working on developing this message across all schools serving our 92,000 students.

As district personnel, we work to train all staff in all schools on a shared understanding of how trauma affects our students and learning environments. District

staff members focus on giving schools the flexibility to assess students' needs and create trauma-informed practices that fit in their individual schools. When students are affected by trauma, they often feel disconnected to the school community, which has an impact on the school's overall culture. However, it may display itself in different ways in different school buildings. This flexibility model is primary to Denver Public Schools' operations. What works for one school does not always work for another just as what works for one student does not always work for another. Flexibility allows each school administrator and school counseling program to decide what a trauma-informed school looks like for them.

This flexibility is important in implementing genuine and effective systems. District staff can help standardize the minimum level of care as well as provide resources for all schools while helping the individual schools assess their culture and needs. Additionally, we work to support



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collaborative thinking between schools in this area, which can help creativity and allows best practices to emerge. Supporting this expertise is an easy way to get voices in the room, engagement and investment among staff and to allow school counselors from across the district to share resources and programming that's working for them.

School counselors provide training to school staff and set the norm while also preparing teachers to be more patient with students in heated moments. This universal understanding requires administrative support and highly prepared school counselors ready to use their expertise with examples and explanations.

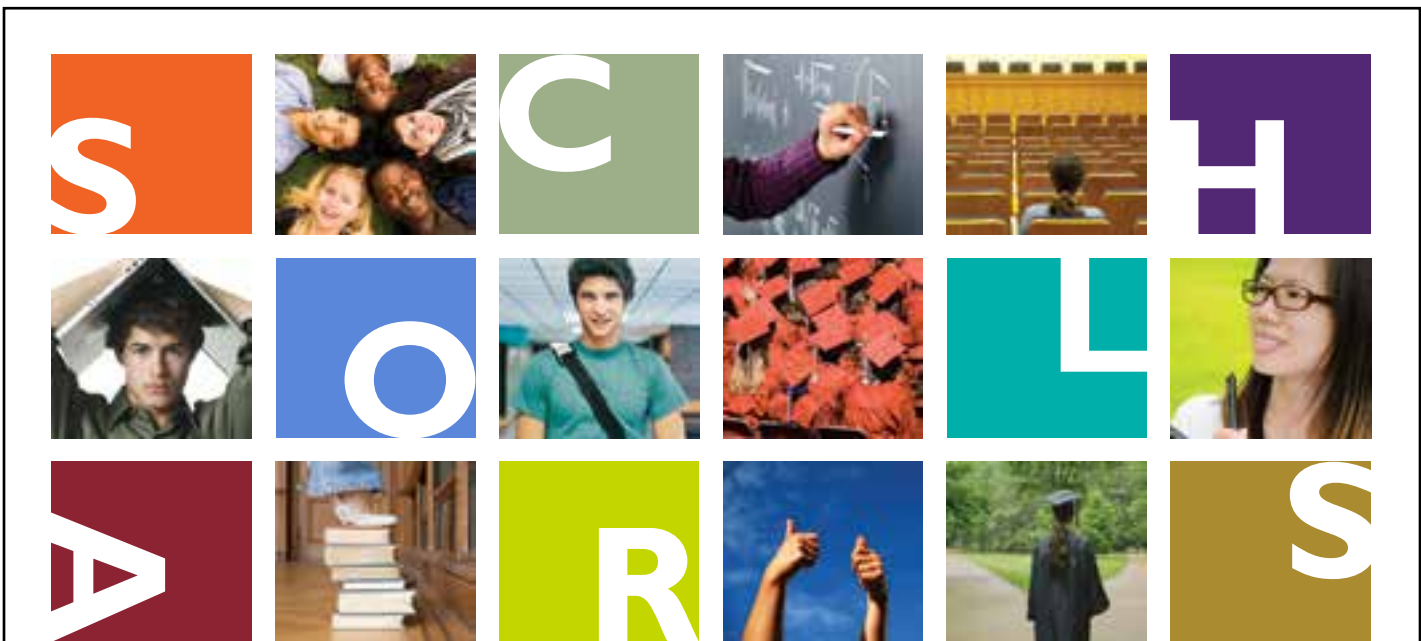
As a district coordinator, I support school counselors in understanding trauma-informed practices as well as give them the resources they need as they prepare the school and support their staff during implementation. This whole-school approach is important; a school culture is negatively affected if staff are quick to discipline students, causing students to disconnect further from their education and the school environment.

Similarly to school culture, staff culture is important to a trauma-informed system. If staff members have a low tolerance for frustration, they are likely to be quicker to get frustrated when students disengage, aren't able to focus or act out

of anger. As a district, it is important to evaluate staff quality of life. If staff satisfaction or evaluations are low, there may be struggles implementing a trauma-sensitive programming.

Ultimately there are a number of things districts can do to evaluate and support their students. Denver Public Schools has worked hard, and is still working, to decrease suspension rates and support restorative justice practices. This patience with students is paramount to supporting positive school culture and reengaging students who feel uninvited to our education systems.

Districts should specifically work to find resources in the community to support traumatized students and their families to increase access to mental health resources. Denver Public Schools works closely with multiple community organizations to bring positive adults as well as much-needed resources into students' lives while also providing convenience to families. Many community resources are



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housed in the school buildings for families and students to access easily.

School counselors are vital in the referral to outside resources for long-term services. Although it is our role to provide immediate intervention, it is outside our role to provide the long-term counseling some students need to overcome trauma. In this work, it may be necessary also for school counselors to help families understand their children's symptoms and need for assistance. One struggle we have yet to solve is access to culturally and linguistically diverse services for our highly diverse student population. We are proud of the varying backgrounds our students and families bring to our school communities and hope to provide resources that engage our families.

Districts can also work to increase access to opportunities in the community for positive and engaging learning experiences. Denver Public Schools has expanded its career-focused education and opportunities for mentoring, work

experience, internships and apprenticeships in career pathways that align with students' career goals. Working to re-engage students who have felt disconnected from their education through positive relationships with adults in the community can help restore students' interest in their education as well as expose them to positive environments. Confidentiality can be a challenge for these systems; however, engaging the parents in these relationships as well can create a caring and comprehensive support system. Supporting student engagement in school requires a strengths-based approach as well as adults who make students excited about their future again. Although this may be a slow process for students who are still learning to cope with the trauma, patience is key. Denver Public Schools students who experience these options graduate at a higher rate than those who might follow a more traditional high school course plan.

Working toward a holistic, trauma-sensitive system is paramount to our students' success. This system is still developing in some of our schools, and we continue to adapt to our students' sudden and unexpected needs.

This emphasis on validating and supporting student trauma has helped us significantly decrease our suspension and dropout rates and increase our graduation rates among all subgroups in recent years. Overall, this means our students are accessing and completing their education at a higher rate, allowing them to reach the successful life we want for our students. 

Samantha Haviland, Ph.D., is the director of counseling for Denver Public Schools in Colorado. She also works as an adjunct professor for the University of Northern Colorado and is on the board for the Colorado School Counselor Association. She can be reached at havilandsl@gmail.com.

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