

New study pushes Pa. to embrace trauma-informed education

By Kaity Kline April 2, 2019



Students at Philadelphia's Parkway Center City Middle College were asked to raise their hands if they were affected by gun violence at an April 2018 forum. (Emma Lee/WHYY)

Research suggests that about half of the county's children experience at least one traumatic event before the age of 17.

These adverse childhood experiences — known as ACES — include experiencing or witnessing violence; living in poverty; or having a parent go to jail.

Even as school districts across the country become more aware of how these traumas can affect learning, there's been little concrete policy on the state or

federal level for how schools should prepare.

A new study from the nonprofit Research for Action highlights “promising models” nationwide and calls on state lawmakers to implement a comprehensive approach in Pennsylvania.

“There are two areas where the research is extremely clear. Childhood trauma is an extremely common experience, and traumatic stress can have a wide range of negative consequences for children,” said Rachel Comly, a senior analyst at Research for Action.

The study recommends that schools provide professional development that reflects the complexity and sensitivity of trauma.

“While a one-hour foundational professional development session is a necessary starting point, it is not sufficient,” said the report.

The report also calls on lawmakers to mandate a statewide plan for creating trauma-informed schools and encourages the creation of a state grant program.

Research for Action highlighted a few examples of how educators across the state are already embracing a greater sensitivity to childhood trauma, noting efforts in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Pottstown.

“Students are better able to relate to one another and to their teachers,” said Pottstown Superintendent Stephen Rodriguez. “We’re giving them skills to get out of potentially negative and disciplinary situations. We have seen a drastic reduction in disciplinary outcomes in both the elementary school and high school. Less detention, less suspension, less time out of class.”

As an example, Rodriguez said his staff works with students to identify their emotions and deal with them in a positive way.

The study touted Massachusetts, Oregon, Washington, and Wisconsin as leaders in trauma-informed education based on robust professional development standards.

In total, 11 states require or encourage trauma-informed practices through state policy.

Last fall, state Sens. Vincent Hughes, D-Philadelphia, and Patrick Browne, R-Lehigh, began a bipartisan push to mandate a trauma-informed system of education throughout Pennsylvania.

In June, the General Assembly passed Act 44, which created a \$60 million school safety fund and called for schools to provide mandatory training that included trauma-informed education. In August, Gov. Tom Wolf's school safety task force report also called for trauma-informed approaches.

The federal government has also made steps to fund trauma-informed methods and passed the [SUPPORT for Patients and Communities Act](#) in October. The law authorizes grants, contracts, and cooperative agreements to increase student access to evidence-based trauma-support services and mental health care.

“I think that work is ongoing, but it's really exciting to see the momentum in many corners of the state,” said Mark Duffy, a senior research associate at Research for Action. “An identification of trauma is a real issue that needs to be addressed in schools and not just clinical settings.”