

Trauma-informed practices support Delaware schools



Staff from **Red Clay Consolidated School District's Warner, Shortlidge and Highlands elementary schools** and **Christina School District's Bancroft Elementary School and Bayard Middle School** attend a Saturday professional learning session on creating trauma-sensitive learning environments (more [pictures](#)).

The use of trauma-informed practices in Delaware classrooms is an idea repeatedly promoted by the state's Compassionate Connections Partnership (CCP). CCP is a multi-year project focused on addressing childhood trauma in five Wilmington city schools. The partnership -- formed in Spring 2017 by Delaware organizations, state agencies and educators -- provides these elementary and middle schools in Wilmington with support and professional development specially geared to families living in the city.

"The overarching goal of CCP is to address childhood trauma as a way to improve student achievement and resilience," said Dorrell Green, director of Delaware's Office of Innovation and Improvement. The Department of Education is a partner in the CCP initiative.

“All behavior is a form of communication. By arming educators with a better understanding of how to support students as they exhibit negative behaviors, students have more opportunities to focus on succeeding in the classroom,” Green said.

Trauma-informed practices provide educators a set of strategies that help trauma survivors rebuild a sense of control and empowerment.

According to Deb Stevens, director of instructional advocacy for the Delaware State Education Association (DSEA) union – also a CCP partner – examples of such strategies include developing creative ways to foster positive teacher and student relationships, incorporating mindfulness and brain breaks into classroom routines, and even creating “calm corners” in the classroom for students to calm down and regulate themselves when they feel out of control.

“Creating classroom rules, routines, and incorporating restorative justice practices instead of punitive forms of discipline are all part of building a respectful classroom community,” Stevens said.

To implement trauma-informed practices in the classroom, Delaware educators have engaged in training this year focused on understanding why childhood trauma – or adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) – is so threatening. ACEs are defined as traumatic experiences in a person’s life occurring before the age of 18 that researchers have concluded can contribute to significant learning and health issues for children and adults. Examples of ACEs include experiencing or witnessing abuse, divorce, substance abuse, incarceration, violence, or the death of a loved one.

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) links ACEs to risky health behaviors, chronic health conditions, low life potential and early death. The CDC also states that as the number of ACEs increases, so do the risks for these damaging outcomes.

Because educators often experience secondary stress when dealing with students impacted by trauma, Delaware's trauma-informed practices training additionally includes a focus on self-care strategies. Educators also receive coaching and support on how to implementing trauma-sensitive strategies throughout their schools.

"Respect, kindness, hope and a sense of community need to be part of the classroom culture in order to provide all students the opportunity to succeed," said Stevens.

About the partnership

The Compassionate Connections Partnership (CCP) includes DSEA, the Delaware Department of Education, the Office of Child Advocate, the University of Delaware Center for Disabilities Studies, Children and Families First, the Red Clay Education Association, the Christina Education Association, the Red Clay Consolidated School District, the Christina School District. Supported by a Great Public Schools grant from the National Education Association, the partners will spend the next three years working with the employees and administrators of these five schools on a project developed to provide targeted support to educators in district priority schools and their students living with childhood trauma. The overarching goal of the project is to develop resilient, engaged and academically successful students by providing them with a safe, stable, and supportive school environment. The essential work of the three-year project will include:

- Training school staff in the science of trauma and the effective use of trauma sensitive strategies with all students;
- Managing and supporting the emotional health and wellness of the school staff; and
- Providing increased student and family access to services and community supports.