

Delaware focuses on trauma-informed practices



School psychologist Ryan Palmer believes that shifting our mindsets to better serve students and communities who have experienced trauma is difficult.

“It is also invigorating and enlightening, and I cannot recommend it enough,” Palmer said.

Palmer, who works at Caesar Rodney School District’s Kent County Intensive Learning Center (ILC) and W.B. Simpson Elementary schools, recently attended one of the Delaware Department of Education training sessions on childhood trauma. He recognizes that mental health awareness is on the rise in Delaware – especially its effects on public education – and is encouraged by this new focus.

“Through understanding the underlying trauma that roots itself in our communities, we not only better understand how to intervene and support our students, but we can start learning how to recognize the systemic, cyclical impact of trauma on the families we work with and the communities we serve,” Palmer said.

Agencies and organizations throughout the country have been looking deeper at the effects of childhood trauma and toxic stress and how it continues to impact so many facets of our lives – from social relationships and problem-solving to mental health, education, community safety and more.

Over the past three years, more than 7,000 Delaware educators have participated in professional development opportunities around trauma, including book studies, workshops, strategic planning and the multi-district Compassionate Schools Teacher Test Lab. So far this year, more than 400 educators have engaged in free Delaware Department of Education (DDOE) training to better understand why adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are so threatening and how they rewire the brain.

“By recognizing ACEs and the effect of childhood trauma on behavior, we can help lessen the impact of trauma that exists for many of our students,” said Secretary of Education Susan Bunting. “Our focus is also on making sure that the systems in place in our classrooms and schools do not create additional trauma but instead help build resilience in children, families and communities.”

Researchers have concluded that ACEs 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.

“All behavior is a form of communication,” said Dorrell Green, Director of Delaware’s Office of Innovation and Improvement. “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.”

The use of trauma-informed practices in Delaware classrooms is an idea repeatedly promoted by Delaware’s Compassionate Schools Learning Collaborative and subsequently the state’s Compassionate Connections Partnership (CCP), of which the department is a member. CCP is a multi-year project focused on addressing childhood trauma in Wilmington city schools.

Delaware's Project LAUNCH and Delaware READ, formerly the Moving the Needle Project, are also providing training on trauma-informed practices to early learning professionals in high-risk and disadvantaged communities, starting in Wilmington. These collaborative projects have brought trainings to community centers, out-of-school networks, and other youth-serving agencies and leaders.

In October, Governor John Carney signed Executive Order No. 24 to make Delaware a [trauma-informed state](#). This order provides direction for the Family Services Cabinet Council to help mitigate the impact of ACEs and build resilience in children, adults and communities. It also directs state agencies that provide services for children and adults to integrate trauma-informed best practices.

DDOE's most-recent trauma-informed training helps attendees understand, recognize and respond to the effects of all types of trauma. It teaches trauma-informed practices, which provide educators a set of strategies that help trauma survivors rebuild a sense of control and empowerment.

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 implement trauma-sensitive strategies throughout their schools.

"Since trauma and toxic stress tend to occur in relationships, they must be healed in relationships. Many of our strategies to build resilience focus on creating safe and supportive school environments where there are strong relationships, high levels of self-regulation, and opportunities to practice responsibility through rigorous problem-solving and restorative practices," said Teri Lawler, former school psychologist and DDOE's education associate for trauma-informed practices and social and emotional learning.

DDOE is the first state agency to invest in a position focused on building robust systems, policies, and practices to mitigate trauma. Lawler works in the department's Office of Innovation and Improvement.

DDOE's December and January trainings were highly rated by those in attendance. Based on the book "Fostering Resilient Learners" by Pete Hall and Kristin Souers, the training allowed attendees to deepen their understanding of key vocabulary and research around childhood trauma and the effect of toxic stress on brain development.

"We believe quite strongly that every teacher, every educator - indeed, everyone who works or is around kids in any capacity - has a strong foundation in trauma-informed practices," Hall said. "This isn't magic, though it's magical. We advocate bringing the art of being HUMAN back to education."

*District and school personnel are invited to register for another opportunity to benefit from a [free one-day training session](#) on childhood trauma on **Friday, Feb. 22 or Saturday, Feb. 23** at Wilmington University's Doberstein Admissions Center. Register for **PDMS course #27808, section #50254** (Feb. 22) or **section #50255** (Feb. 23).*