

Equity, empowerment and behavioral health response planning

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Why use an equity and empowerment lens in behavioral health response planning?

No critical incident is the same and no impacted community is the same. While this plan describes the promising and best practices in behavioral health response planning, these responses can never ultimately be 'one size fits all'. To be truly responsive to a community's unique needs and history responses must be offered within the context of relationships characterized by safety, equity and empowerment.

These relationships are ideally built preventatively, before critical incidents occur, between school staff and the students, families and other school partners who comprise that community. As part of a commitment to culturally responsive practice the contributors to this plan encourage school communities to proactively ask: *How has your family or community experienced healing and resiliency in the past? What are the types of school experiences where you feel the most empowered? Where are places in your school community where you feel you have the most voice and choice? Where in this school building do you feel the safest?*

The contributors to this behavioral health response plan found the application of a race and equity lens to be helpful in organizing and centering this culturally responsive inquiry. They specifically used Multnomah County's Equity and Empowerment Lens (Racial Justice Focus). The thirteen questions presented in this Lens are listed below, and also interspersed into the Plan so that readers can see where and how specific questions might be used in planning. The full toolkit of materials to use this Lens can be found at: <https://multco.us/diversity-equity/equity-and-empowerment-lens>

Finally, while this plan focuses on 'critical incidents', the contributors would like to emphasize that no event occurs in isolation. Trauma is cumulative in its impact. When there is a new critical incident there is history that precedes it and a larger context within which that new incident is understood. That history and context may be shared, or not, by large groups within each school community and will result in big differences in how that event is interpreted or experienced as 'traumatic'.

Beliefs and Commitments:

To summarize the above:

WE BELIEVE that students, families, staff and community members will respond to critical incident differently based on past experiences, culture, race and ethnicity, socio economic status and community affiliation.

As behavioral health responders WE COMMIT to resist a standardized approach and instead:

- Consider historical and community context ;
- Honor multiple perspectives and uniqueness;
- Call upon the strengths of community members in the response: they are the experts in their own healing and resiliency;
- Share control and decision making about a response with those most affected;
- Empower students, families and other community members to choose what they need;
- Provide a healing forum for the community .

Equity and Empowerment Lens Questions:

The Equity and Empowerment Lens (Racial Justice Focus) questions can be used as a tool to engage with, train on or consider the local applications of the Behavioral Health Response Plan. They are listed here, and also interspersed into the plan in specific sections where the contributors found them particularly salient. The wording of these questions has been edited slightly to reflect language more frequently used in school settings:

People:

- Who is positively and negatively affected by this critical incident and how?
- How are students, family and staff differently situated in terms of the barriers to healing and resiliency?
- Consider physical, spiritual, emotional and contextual effects.

Place:

- What kind of positive 'place' are we creating in our response?
- What kind of negative 'place' are we creating in our response?
- How are public resources and investments distributed across our building and district?

Process:

- How are we meaningfully including or excluding people (communities of color) who are affected by this critical incident?
- What policies, processes and social relationships contribute to the exclusion of communities most affected by the inequities?
- Are there empowering processes at every human touchpoint?

Power:

- What are the barriers to doing this equity and racial justice work?
- What are the benefits and burdens that communities may experience with this critical incident?
- Who is accountable?

Definitions:

Race: Race is a social – not biological – construct. We understand the term "race" to mean a racial or ethnic group that is generally recognized in society and often by government. When referring to those groups, we often use the terminology "people of color" or "communities of color" (or a name of the specific racial and/or ethnic group) and "white."

We also understand that racial and ethnic categories differ internationally, and that many of local communities are international communities. In some societies, ethnic, religious and caste groups are oppressed and racialized. These dynamics can occur even when the oppressed group is numerically in the majority. (State of Oregon Chief Education Office, Equity Lens)

Culturally Responsive: Recognize the diverse cultural characteristics of learners as assets. Culturally responsive teaching empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes. (State of Oregon Chief Education Office, Equity Lens)

Community: In this Plan the word community is used broadly to include students, their families, staff members, building neighbors, community partners and anyone else who affiliates in some way with the school or district.

Trauma: Any event, either acute or chronic, that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope due to lack of resources. A trauma may have significant, negative physical and social emotional impacts, and is most likely to be experienced as traumatic when it happens within the context of a relationship or physical place that is perceived to be safe.

Resilience: The ability to respond to a critical incident in ways that strengthen community bonds, resources, and the community's capacity to cope. This should include processes or forums that facilitate empowerment, equity and voice and choice of school community members.