

# R&D ALERT

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*timely knowledge for education and human development professionals*



**SPECIAL ISSUE:** Health, Safety, and Justice



## BRIEFLY

- » About 50 percent of kids in school have experienced some form of trauma.

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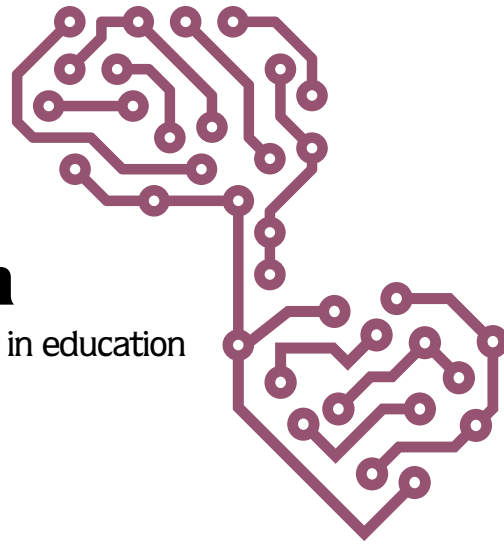
- » If a child's stress-response system is activated by toxic stress or trauma, their brain is less able to engage in problem-solving, focused attention, and self-regulation of emotions and behavior.

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- » To foster a trauma-informed environment that supports learning, educators should create a sense of calm, safety, and predictability for their students.

# Healing Our Children

Insights on trauma-informed practices in education



Toxic stress and trauma have an enormous impact on children's development and learning. Understanding the nuances and nature of trauma can help educators, administrators, and all child-serving adults learn to buffer the effects of adversity on children who have experienced trauma and help them heal and thrive.

To learn more about trauma and trauma-informed practices in the context of education – from early childhood to K–12 – we sat down with three experts at WestEd. We discussed everything from the effects of trauma on brain development and learning, to ways that educators can mitigate and heal the negative impact of trauma on the children they work with, to the types of improvements administrators can see if they foster trauma-informed environments in their schools and districts.

**Q:** To make sure we're all starting from the same understanding, can you define the word trauma for us?

**Julie Kurtz (Co-Director, Trauma-Informed Practices in Early Childhood Education):** We can start with the SAMHSA [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration] definition, which is, "Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being."<sup>1</sup>

1 <https://www.integration.samhsa.gov/clinical-practice/trauma>

**Julie Nicholson (Deputy Director, Center for Child and Family Studies; Co-Director, Trauma-Informed Practices in Early Childhood Education):** For a book we recently published,<sup>2</sup> we adapted the SAMHSA definition to the early childhood context: "Trauma is an actual or perceived danger, which undermines a child's physical or emotional safety, or poses a threat to the safety of the child's parents or caregivers – overwhelming their coping ability, and impacting their functioning and development."

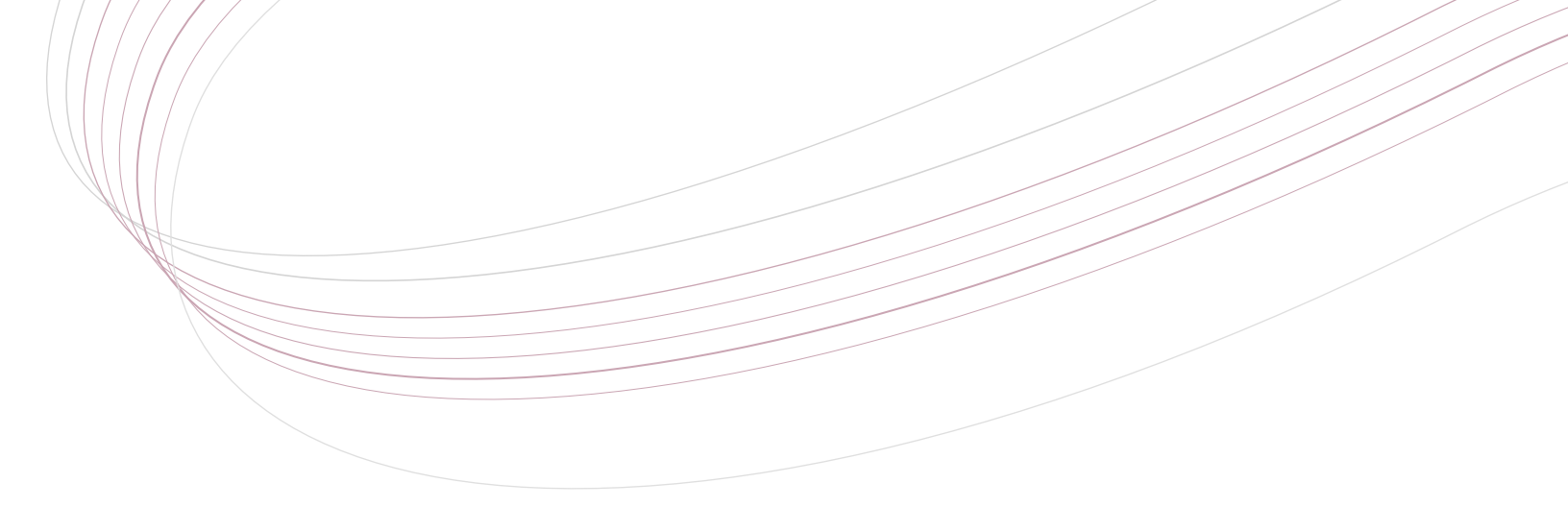
An event becomes traumatic for a young child when it overwhelms his or her nervous system's ability to cope with stress. Traumatic experiences, whether real or perceived, lead children to feel significant levels of helplessness, powerlessness, and intense fear.

**Q:** Do we know how many infants and children are impacted by trauma?

**Sarah Nadiv (Senior State Technical Assistance Specialist):** About 50 percent of kids in school have experienced some form of trauma. When talking about trauma, we often refer to ACEs, which are adverse childhood experiences.

2 Nicholson, J., Perez, L., & Kurtz, J. (2018). *Trauma Informed Practices for Early Childhood Educators: Relationship-Based Approaches that Support Healing and Build Resilience in Young Children*. Routledge.





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The original CDC-Kaiser Permanente ACE study<sup>3</sup> looked back at the histories of people who were having chronic health problems as adults. This study was particularly powerful because it identified a strong relationship between the number of adverse experiences that people have in childhood and their later health outcomes. Children that experience more ACEs, for instance, are more likely to experience health-risk behaviors later, such as smoking, overeating, and promiscuity and thus be at risk for diseases such as diabetes, heart failure, or cancer.

**Julie N:** The original study listed seven ACEs, with three more added later. The original ACEs were physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, household substance abuse, household mental illness, domestic abuse, and incarcerated household member. Three ACEs were added later: parental separation or divorce, physical neglect, and emotional neglect. Recent national data on the prevalence of these ACEs for children ages 1 to 17 show that, for the 10 ACEs, 45 percent of all children in the U.S. have experienced at least one ACE and 1 in 10 has experienced three or more ACEs. Children of different races and ethnicities do not experience ACEs equally. In every region, the prevalence of ACEs is lowest among Asian children and, in most regions, is highest among black children.

The ACE study was revolutionary as it provided evidence about the significant prevalence of adverse experiences in the lives of children and youth across the U.S. It also brought attention to the need to invest in early interventions to prevent the long-term consequences of ACEs.

3 Felitti, V. J., et al. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults. The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 14(4), 245–258.

**Q:** How does trauma affect the brain and its development?

**Julie K:** You can think of the brain in terms of three parts. The *hindbrain* is the part responsible for the “fight, flight, or freeze” response, which is the brain’s primitive, built-in survival reaction when danger is perceived. The *limbic* part of the brain is responsible for your emotions, attachments, and relational connections. And the *pre-frontal cortex* is like the CEO of your brain, responsible for executive functioning skills such as self-regulation, problem-solving, perspective-taking, and focusing attention — it takes until your mid-twenties for the prefrontal cortex to be fully developed.

Trauma and toxic stress prevent optimal development of the brain by changing the neural structure. When you’re a young child with a brain impacted by trauma, you have a higher chance of living in a chronically anxious state. Your brain gets rewired to release these chemical hormones that cause you to scan for danger all the time — so you perceive minor events as dangerous; you interpret things as scary when they’re not. You’re living in the hindbrain, which is that fight, flight, or freeze territory. When you live in that heightened, anxious state throughout the day, you can’t listen, you can’t learn, you can’t focus, you can’t pay attention. You can’t even build relationships. If we don’t heal the effects of trauma in early childhood, it can have a snowball effect.

**Q:** How does trauma affect learning?

**Julie N:** If a child’s stress-response system is activated by toxic stress or a traumatic experience, it immediately cuts off the neural connections to the prefrontal cortex because it wants the body to react faster for survival. Children in that fight, flight, or freeze survival state are

## Teachers have a profound ability to support children that have experienced trauma.

less able to engage in problem-solving, rational thought, focused attention, and self-regulation of their emotions or behavior, as well as less able to verbalize their experience, which are all essential to learning.

**Q:** Are the effects of trauma permanent, or can educators do things to help remedy the effects of trauma?

**Sarah:** The thing that is most impactful in healing trauma — and mitigating the negative effects on the architecture of the brain — is the buffering effect of a caregiver. Teachers have a profound ability to support children that have experienced trauma. And a lot, if not all, of trauma-informed practices are perfect for supporting kids in the classroom and helping them learn even if they haven't experienced trauma.

**Julie K:** When kids are misbehaving, most adults use punitive strategies — criticizing, punishing, threatening, blaming — to try to get kids to quickly behave. They're not looking at it from a lens of teaching long-term strategies or healing a brain in pain from exposure to trauma.

There's something we call "the state of optimal regulation" that we want all kids to be in so they can learn — you don't want them hyper aroused and you don't want them hypo aroused. To achieve that optimal state, children need to feel safe with adults. When adults are calm and regulated, they, in turn, can regulate the internal world of the child. Whatever is going on related to the particular stress in your life, children, especially those who have experienced trauma, pick up on that stress and become more hyper or hypo aroused. So it's very important as an adult educator to create a sense of calm and safety for children. To do that, it's important to foster predictability and routine in the classroom.

**Julie N:** I'd add that the way that a person's emotional state is mirrored by the neuronal system of another person is an unconscious process. So, when you are hurt and I intuitively feel that pain, our neuronal systems are mirroring, but that happens at the subconscious level.

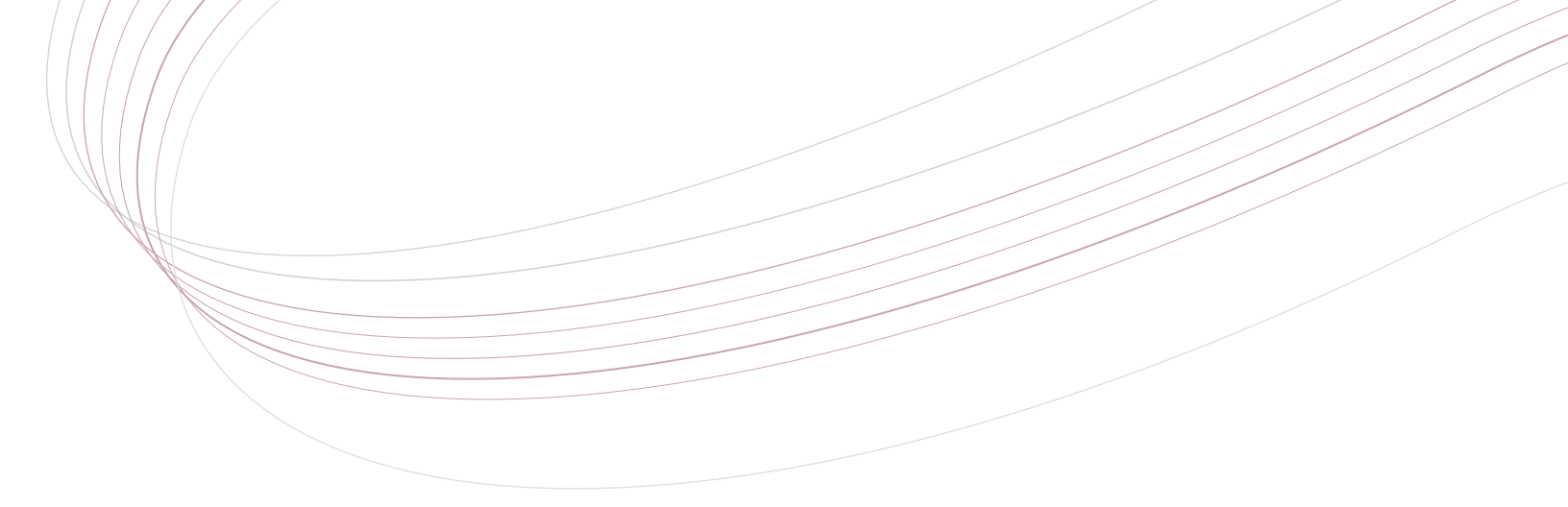
It's important for teachers to be aware of the contagious nature of their mirror neuron system. When there's a distressed child in your classroom, you can follow that child into dysregulation — if they're yelling, you'd react to them by yelling. But if you do that, then the child feels more threatened and their behavior gets more dysregulated as you get more dysregulated alongside them. Or, you can remain calm and non-reactive, and you can use the mirror neuron system to guide the child back to an optimally regulated, calm state. And remember that it's only in that calm state that children have access to everything in their prefrontal cortex, which is critical for learning.

**Q:** In general, should educators know the trauma histories of their students?

**Julie N:** No, we don't need to know the specific trauma histories of the children, and, in fact, we can't — in most cases, we're just not going to have access to that information. However, it is important for educators to understand the neurobiology of trauma, which we've been explaining, and its impact on children's development, behavior, emotional state, and ability to learn. Until you understand that neurobiology, you're not going to understand all the behaviors going on in your classroom and you're not going to know how to de-escalate children and create a safe environment in which they can learn.

It's also important to be able to acknowledge the existence and prevalence of trauma in children's lives. For a lot of reasons, people don't like to talk about trauma in





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general, and especially trauma related to young children. Sometimes this silence comes from the difficulty of thinking about children in pain when we feel we can't reduce that pain. Sometimes our silence stems from our own trauma histories. But part of being trauma-informed is being willing to break that silence and acknowledge every child and youth's lived experience.

There's also the importance of systematic self-care because teaching is such hard work, and building an awareness of trauma and the ability to support students who have experienced trauma requires constant replenishment.

**Q:** Self-care seems particularly important for educators to enable themselves to be calm enough to carry out the co-regulation practices you described. Can you talk a little more about self-care?

**Sarah:** It can be really challenging during the course of a work day to feel like you're able to take care of yourself, but there's a lot of different things that teachers can do, even if it's just as simple as stopping and breathing. We talk a lot in our trainings about the power of pause — it can be very powerful to give yourself a moment to stop and take a deep breath before proceeding.

Then there's all the other good stuff that people can do to take care of themselves — connecting with colleagues and friends, and talking about what's going on that day or that week. I work with some teachers who text each other an inspirational quote at lunch time, and that can help them in moving through the rest of the day.

We also talk about identifying your values and setting goals for yourself, and that can be really important for educators to remind them of what they want for themselves and why they became educators in the first place.

**Q:** How can administrators help implement trauma-informed practices in their schools and districts?

**Julie N:** In order to move their schools or districts toward becoming trauma-informed environments, administrators would first want to make sure that people understand the neurobiology of trauma, which would likely require some training, and that policies and practices take that into account. So, for instance, if you're an administrator in a school with a zero-tolerance policy, you'd want to assess the impact of that sort of punitive approach. And you'd need to examine policies that remove a child from the classroom — in many cases, that child would likely benefit from the buffering, calming effect of an adult, so separating them out wouldn't be a trauma-informed policy. So, administrators could take a neurobiological lens and use it to inform their policies.

And if you're going to acknowledge trauma and move away from that culture of silence, you also have to have a common language to talk about trauma in a way that doesn't stigmatize children and entire communities. Instead, the focus should be on creating environments that support healing and resilience.

**Q:** Can you tell us what it looks like for a school, district, or early learning site to be a "healing organization"?

**Julie N:** The term "healing organization" was coined by a Bay Area program called Trauma Transformed. A healing organization fosters an integrated environment where people aren't siloed in their work. It's collaborative and promotes authenticity. There are intentional spaces for staff to pause — you can't gain awareness without taking time to pause and reflect.

## All of this trauma-informed work is completely connected to supporting children's abilities to learn.

A healing environment would also enable teachers and staff to make meaning of difficult experiences. So that might be through reflective supervision, where you're dialoguing and processing something in the classroom that was difficult, or through a community of practice.

And there's a place for a sense of joy. That may sound silly, but I've been in so many places where just to laugh and actually experience feelings of joy is an outlier, because it's a place where people are just surviving.

**Q:** What would you say to administrators who might be hesitant to invest in developing a trauma-informed, healing environment – because their budget is tight or because they may think there aren't enough quantifiable outcomes to justify this sort of work?

**Sarah:** First, I would tell them that there actually are quantifiable outcomes. In all of the coaching work that we do in schools, we collect data and look at various outcomes. Some of the metrics that administrators may be interested in are job stress and teacher satisfaction: if you have teachers that are less stressed and they like their jobs, then there's going to be less job turnover, which can save money and time.

Also, trauma-informed practices can greatly improve the classroom environment, which has a positive impact on children, teachers, and schools. Trauma-informed practices can also improve individual children's behavior, which, in turn, impacts the child's learning outcomes and the overall classroom environment – and lowering teacher stress and increasing job satisfaction are also tied into that. Another benefit we see through the research is related to the long-term impact of trauma-informed practices. When you have teachers of preschoolers who are using the kinds of strategies we've been discussing,

we see their students get to kindergarten with improved kindergarten-readiness assessment scores.

**Julie N:** When you can stop the pattern of adults being dysregulated and triggering that fight, flight, freeze behavior in children, that can have a big impact – it can lead to fewer kids being sent to the principal's office, and fewer suspensions and expulsions. And when you can disrupt that pattern of exclusionary punishment and actually keep children in classrooms learning, that's an important outcome that speaks directly to principals and superintendents that care about learning.

Another important consideration if you want children to be able to learn the material and do well on the test is that you need their stress-response systems to be calm and regulated so they won't be in that mode of scanning the environment for danger. When they're doing that, they're not able to attend, listen, or take in any of the needed information. So, all of this trauma-informed work is actually completely connected to supporting children's abilities to learn.



For information about training on trauma-informed practices, contact Julie Kurtz at 925.413.1623 or [jkurtz@wested.org](mailto:jkurtz@wested.org), or visit [WestEd.org/service/trauma-informed-practices-in-early-education](https://WestEd.org/service/trauma-informed-practices-in-early-education).



## BRIEFLY

- » An initiative in Nebraska aims to reach rural communities' most disconnected older youth to help them build a positive future.

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- » The Connected Youth Initiative (CYI) and an evaluation team are generating early lessons about the effort's challenges and opportunities.

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- » CYI's collective-impact framework brings together multiple partners with a shared agenda to improve outcomes for youth and communities.





## THE POWER OF COLLABORATION

### A Collective-Impact Approach to Reach Disconnected Youth

At 18, Jesse was one of countless “unconnected” older youth. He had moved out of foster care with no plans for the future — and a deep distrust of authority. “The way I grew up,” he says, “I had nothing. I had nobody I could depend on.” That changed when Jesse’s caseworker introduced him to Nebraska’s Connected Youth Initiative and he met coaches from multiple local agencies to help him learn life skills.

As of this article’s writing in 2018, it is too soon to know whether the Connected Youth Initiative (CYI) is as successful throughout the state as Jesse says it has been for him. But CYI’s leaders and a WestEd-led evaluation team are generating early lessons about the challenges and opportunities of helping youth like Jesse — those ages 14 through 24, coming from foster care, juvenile detention, or homelessness, without family or other local ties — specifically in rural, low-income settings.

The evaluation is gathering extensive data to assess CYI’s impact and the success of its collective-impact framework, a model that brings together multiple partners focused on improving support systems for rural communities’ most difficult-to-reach populations.

#### WHAT IS THE CONNECTED YOUTH INITIATIVE?

Created by the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation (known as Nebraska Children), CYI is a statewide project to help ensure a productive adult life for youth whose challenging circumstances have brought them to the attention of public support systems. Nebraska Children had been operating a similar youth-support program in urban areas when, in 2015, it received a federal Social Innovation Fund grant to build on successes of the urban work and test its collective-impact model in rural areas.

Serving as an intermediary for the federal grant, Nebraska Children passes along subgrants to six community collaboratives across the state and provides training and technical assistance to the collaboratives, as well as financial oversight to ensure compliance with federal requirements.<sup>1</sup> Nebraska Children and each of the collaboratives are required to match the federal funds dollar-for-dollar, in part to ensure that sustainability planning is integral to implementation from the onset.

To improve outcomes for older youth, each collaborative brings together local agencies that provide a variety of support services. “All types of service providers and state agencies are coming together to address older-youth needs in each community,” says Sara Riffel, Associate Vice President of CYI. “In one of our collaboratives, people around the table might include providers from

<sup>1</sup> CYI is a 2015 Social Innovation Fund (SIF) project funded in part by the Corporation for National and Community Service. Using public and private resources to find and grow community-based nonprofits with evidence of results, SIF intermediaries received funding to award subgrants that focus on overcoming challenges in economic opportunity, healthy futures, and youth development. Although CNCS made its last SIF intermediary awards in fiscal year 2016, SIF intermediaries continue to administer their subgrant programs until their federal funding is exhausted.





[The] collective-impact approach allows young people to build more of a long-term connection to the community.

Health and Human Services, juvenile probation, community-based organizations, the local health center, faith-based organizations, and mental health providers,” she says, adding that “packaging these providers into one coordinated system is unique; we have to build the plane as we fly it.”

Each collaborative determines what array of services to provide. That determination is made with assistance from a locally based coordinator, and state-level CYI staff help ensure that services are aligned with measures that the project’s evaluators are tracking.

WestEd’s Justice and Prevention Research Center has partnered with the Nebraska Center for Justice Research at the University of Nebraska–Omaha to evaluate CYI, gathering and analyzing data on the initiative’s impact on youth and on local support systems. The evaluators also work closely with Nebraska Children to provide formative feedback to help guide CYI leaders in implementing the initiative effectively.

#### THE COLLECTIVE-IMPACT FRAMEWORK

To be eligible for CYI funding, collaboratives agree to adhere to a research-based conceptual framework with multiple components, to maximize the positive impact on their target population.

“The collective-impact framework creates a structure for how multiple entities collaborate with each other around a complex issue,” says Senior Research Associate Trevor Fronius, who is leading WestEd’s evaluation. The framework has five components:

- » a common agenda, or goals, among collaborators;
- » shared measurement systems;
- » coordination of activities;
- » continuous communication among collaborating organizations; and
- » “backbone support,” which Fronius says includes administrative support and overseeing cross-organization coordination.

To implement this framework, each community collaborative puts in place services and programs targeted to their youth’s specific needs and implements core activities such as building youth leadership and teaching financial literacy. Each also designates a “central navigator,” a person (or people) to be responsible for connecting each youth with a tailored range of services from all different providers. Riffel says this navigator is part of how the “collective-impact approach allows young people to build more of a long-term connection to the community, instead of connecting to one provider and then, when that service ends, no longer being connected.”

The central navigator also helps gather local youth data and report that information to the evaluators monthly so that consistent data are gathered across sites. As CYI staff and evaluators identify best practices, professional learning opportunities, and other supports, the navigator disseminates that information to local partners.

“Through CYI, we’ve put into action a collective-impact model that has common elements but also is place-based, meaning it’s locally informed and can look different from community to community. Each collaborative has different partners at the table, different strengths



and challenges, even different interventions. CYI really is about doing what's best for each unique community, but within our greater model," notes Riffel.

### EVALUATING CYI

Impact is being measured in eight domains of well-being:

- » Education
- » Employment
- » Financial well-being
- » Housing
- » Permanence in the community
- » Physical and mental health
- » Self-perceptions of hope and executive functioning
- » Transportation

Participating youth complete surveys that gather data on objective measures, such as whether they have a job or a place to live, and on subjective measures, such as rating how "successful" they consider themselves to be. An initial survey and two follow-up surveys each year assess how they're faring in each domain of well-being. The evaluation team analyzes survey data, comparing two groups: (1) youth who take the initial self-assessment and participate in services; and (2) youth who complete the initial self-assessment but ultimately do not take up services.

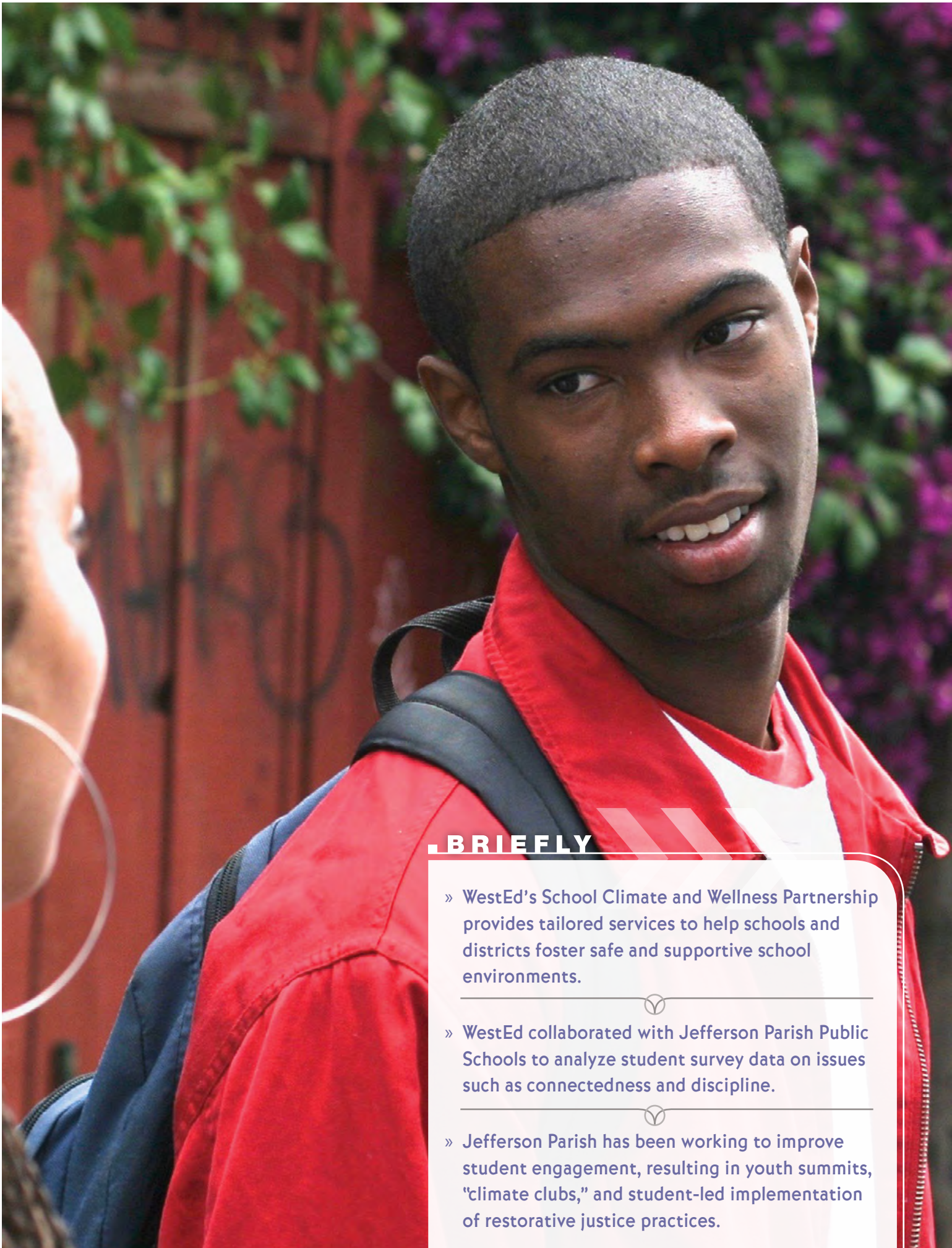
Given both the rural context and the mobility of this youth population, recruitment, retention, and data collection have been challenging, notes Riffel. To meet their goal of reaching a total of 1,200 youth across the collaboratives, local partners are focusing on understanding what motivates unconnected young people to accept

help — such as a financial asset-building program that provides a two-to-one match for the amount of money that youth are able to save. "We found that when you start helping young people buy cars, other young people come out of the woodwork," Riffel says. "So we knew if we got that one program up and running, it would naturally help with recruitment, and it did."

WestEd is also developing a "youth well-being index," a composite scoring system that may be used in other places serving similar young people. "The WestEd/University of Nebraska–Omaha evaluation aims to add to national research on older youth, research that historically hasn't focused on this kind of complex collaboration among local agencies working together on issues following probation, foster care, and homelessness," says Fronius.

The team is also evaluating the collaboratives' adherence to the collective-impact framework. "This is one of the first third-party evaluations CYI has undertaken," says Claire Buddenberg, CYI's Assistant Vice President of Program Evaluation. "We've had to learn how to balance the needs of a rigorous third-party evaluation with the needs of community-driven, community-owned work."

To help strike that balance, evaluators and CYI strive to provide meaningful reports back to participating communities, notes Buddenberg: "It goes beyond just handing people a report and saying, 'Here's what your community said; take it and run.' Instead, we sit with communities and think through how they might maximize the use of their data. It's valuable for communities to see data specific to them and be able to reflect on it."



## » BRIEFLY

» WestEd's School Climate and Wellness Partnership provides tailored services to help schools and districts foster safe and supportive school environments.



» WestEd collaborated with Jefferson Parish Public Schools to analyze student survey data on issues such as connectedness and discipline.



» Jefferson Parish has been working to improve student engagement, resulting in youth summits, "climate clubs," and student-led implementation of restorative justice practices.



## STUDENTS LEAD THE WAY

### Creating a More Positive, Connected School Climate

When the principal at Alfred Bonnabel Magnet Academy High School in Kenner, Louisiana, provided training for teachers in restorative justice practices, the concept didn't initially catch on very well, remembers Erin Valls, who leads school climate efforts for the Jefferson Parish Public School System.

But then students in the school's Climate Club got involved and helped launch the Restorative Center, which works to address student disputes and offending behavior by focusing on repairing harm and restoring relationships, rather than punishing or suspending the students involved. The Center's peer leaders now have a steady flow of requests to mediate disputes between students and teachers and students and their peers. In many cases, these mediations are helping foster new understandings and break down silos among students and faculty.

"When a student gets a glimpse into the psyche of a teacher, it helps them understand that teachers also have struggles," says Cameron Rodriguez, an 11th grader at Bonnabel. "It's not just the student who is going through a hard time."

Involved with implementing restorative practices at the school since he was a freshman, Rodriguez now trains students across the district to lead restorative circles — facilitated meetings in which students and a teacher come together to solve problems and resolve disciplinary issues.

The Restorative Center is just one positive outcome of Jefferson Parish's efforts over the last few years to improve student connectedness across the district. As part of a School Climate Transformation Grant, in 2015 Jefferson Parish began working with WestEd's School

Climate and Wellness Partnership, which provides tailored, research-based services to help schools and districts engage their students and move the needle on fostering safe and supportive school environments. WestEd staff started by helping the district collect and examine student survey data on issues such as connectedness and discipline. WestEd brought to Jefferson Parish its decades of experience administering the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS), the largest statewide survey of resiliency, protective factors, risk behaviors, and school climate in the nation. A crucial part of that survey process is making sure administrators, educators, students, and families at the local level have a chance to review their own data so they can better understand areas of strength and areas that need improvement.

When WestEd brought Jefferson Parish administrators together with students to analyze results of the student surveys, the district realized that, even though it was implementing a system known as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, students were not feeling connected and were not getting a chance to provide input into the process of creating schoolwide expectations.

The survey findings, therefore, helped initiate a strong focus on student engagement in the district. "We want to know what students have to say," Valls says. "They're the ones that can truly create a more positive school climate."



### CREATING SCHOOLS THAT “BEAT THE ODDS”

With the nation focusing more than ever on making sure schools are safe and welcoming places, Jefferson Parish’s efforts demonstrate the importance of listening to what students have to say. A 2013 WestEd study, using CHKS data from 1,700 California middle and high schools, identified 40 schools that were “beating the odds” by consistently performing better than predicted on math and English language arts standardized tests. Those 40 schools had “substantially higher” school climate ratings — scoring in the 82nd percentile — compared to other schools, which were at the 49th percentile, on average.

“Those results suggest that a positive climate can benefit all schools, serving all types of students,” says Jenny Betz, a WestEd School Climate Specialist who has been working closely with Jefferson Parish. “When students feel safe and cared for at school, the academics are better, the health outcomes are better — it benefits everyone.”

With some states including school climate and student engagement data as part of their state plans for the Every Student Succeeds Act, many districts are looking for strategies to actively engage students in improving school climate. In Jefferson Parish, that process began with student representatives from 13 of the districts’ high schools participating in student listening circles, which Betz describes as “a structured way for students to talk about how they feel at their school and what they think could be improved at the school.” Students responded to questions such as, “How do you know adults in your school care about you?” and, “If you woke up tomorrow and your school was perfect, what would you notice?”

The students followed up with a presentation for the district superintendent, and then Valls worked with the schools to hold the district’s first “youth summit.” It was at that initial gathering that students developed the concept of Climate Clubs. A member of each school’s Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports team now supports the student-led clubs, reinforcing the district’s commitment to improving the culture of every school.

Since that first event, two summits have been held each year in Jefferson Parish. The fall event focuses on building leadership skills: the teams from each school spend time outlining their plans for the year, usually focusing on making schools more inclusive. The spring summit operates more like a conference, with local speakers — focusing on topics ranging from gender identity to bullying prevention — invited to present.

Jefferson Parish’s spring 2018 summit was held on March 14, the same day as a national student walkout to honor the victims killed in the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida. Some of the students participated in the walkout during the summit. Discussions, says Valls, focused on reaching out to students who appeared sad or isolated. “Something simple like that is just so powerful,” she says. “It could change a very dangerous situation.”

The summits have also broken down some walls that exist between students in Louisiana’s largest school district.

“This is a huge district, and we have some students from one side of the river and some from the other side,” says Valls, adding that students tend to form perceptions of

We want to know what students have to say — they're the ones that can truly create a more positive school climate.

peers from other schools based on rumors. "You get students from different areas together for events like this, and they end up forming great friendships."

#### STARTING SMALL AND FOCUSED

At Bonnabel, students learn about the Climate Club and Restorative Center during freshman year, in part so the practices stay with them throughout high school but also, notes Valls, because many behavior issues are concentrated in 9th grade, as students are adjusting to the pressures and social issues that come with high school.

"The Restorative Center started small with the leadership of our students," says Erica Swanson, an algebra and geometry teacher who runs the restorative team at Bonnabel. As more students began participating in restorative circles, interest in the approach spread, and now 12 students and four teachers handle the requests for mediation that are dropped in a box outside the Center.

In fact, starting small is a lesson that Swanson says can help other schools interested in implementing restorative practices. The program at Bonnabel began as an after-school club in her classroom. The following year, she was released from a teaching period in order to oversee the restorative circles, and the students gained a spare classroom in which to found the Center. After that, schedules were arranged to allow the student leaders to be assigned to Swanson's free period so they could do the work during class time and also receive credit.

As they took gradual steps, says Swanson, other schools began to pay attention. For instance, John Ehret High, the largest high school in the state, plans to implement

restorative practices in fall 2018. (This article was originally published in summer 2018.)

"The momentum will build around your movement," Swanson advises. "Focus on one or two key goals and make sure your work is centered around them."

Swanson says the school's suspension rate has dropped as the number of disputes settled through the restorative process has increased. After a resolution is reached through the restorative process, says Malik Lucas, an 11th grade peer leader at Bonnabel, a facilitator follows up with the various parties involved about a week later to check whether they are still satisfied with the outcome. "I feel like the school has changed a lot," he says.

Rodriguez adds that he uses the skills he has gained as a facilitator any time he starts to see tempers flare among students: "I'm able to de-escalate a lot of conflicts."

And now, when Valls visits Bonnabel and passes by the discipline office, she has noticed a change. "I used to walk in and see a lot of kids in there," she says. "But the last few times, I haven't seen that. I think that's due in part to the shift toward restorative, rather than punitive, practices."



For more information about WestEd's School Climate and Wellness Partnership, contact Jenny Betz at [schoolclimate@wested.org](mailto:schoolclimate@wested.org) or 510.302.4370.

# WestEd Research, Resources, and Services

Safe and Supportive Schools, Healthy Development, Violence Prevention, Justice

WestEd carries out a range of work aimed at fostering safe, healthy environments that engage young people and support their physical, social, and emotional wellness. From conducting research and evaluation studies, to developing evidence-based resources, to providing technical assistance, our staff help strengthen the capacity of schools, communities, service providers, and others.



## SELECTED RESEARCH AND EVALUATION STUDIES

### Impact Evaluation of the No Bully System

Bullying and harassment can cause lasting harm to students and can negatively impact a school's entire culture. Through one of several grants that WestEd is leading under the NIJ's Comprehensive School Safety Initiative, this study is investigating the impact of the No Bully System, a set of interventions designed to prevent bullying schoolwide. The findings thus far have shown mixed results in the Oakland (CA) elementary schools taking part in the study — the No Bully System was associated with reductions in bullying victimization but was not associated with reductions in bullying perpetration.

Funder: National Institute of Justice (NIJ)

Project dates: 2014–2018

### Healthy U: Promoting Sexual Health Among Juvenile Offenders

WestEd partnered with the Oregon Youth Authority and Efficacy to create a tablet-based app aimed at curbing unplanned teen pregnancy by educating young males, ages 14–19, living in juvenile justice facilities. Through games, interactive scenarios, and short videos, the Healthy U app provides information about puberty, sexual health, sexual consent, and healthy relationships. The vast majority of young men participating in the study reported never having received any formal sexual health education prior to this app.

Healthy U has been serving male youth in Oregon Youth Authority facilities across the state, including rural counties where hiring sexual health educators is often difficult. Thus far, 90 percent said that Healthy U made them more knowledgeable about how to prevent HIV and sexually transmitted diseases.

View an archived webinar (March 2018) about the app and the study's preliminary findings at [WestEd.org/resources/healthy-u-promoting-sexual-health-among-juvenile-offenders](https://www.wested.org/resources/healthy-u-promoting-sexual-health-among-juvenile-offenders).

Funder: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services,  
Office of Adolescent Health | Project dates: 2015–2020





## Evaluation of the Keeping Kids in School Initiative

Chronic school absence and truancy are linked to a wide range of negative childhood and adult outcomes, including low academic achievement, poor health, increased chances of living in poverty, and increased risk of juvenile delinquency. To reduce truancy and prevent juvenile delinquency, Sonoma County (CA) launched Keeping Kids in School (KKIS), a multi-modal initiative that implements best practices in improving attendance, such as high-quality case management services and multi-tiered attendance improvement systems.

WestEd conducted a three-year evaluation of the initiative, which was implemented in 21 schools across eight districts. The preliminary findings showed that students enrolled in KKIS increased their attendance by 6.3 days over the equivalent of one school year, and students in KKIS who also received case management services increased their attendance by 8.5 days. Overall, students, guardians, school administrators, and case managers perceived the KKIS program to improve student and family relationships, increase access to community resources, and support improved student attendance.

Funder: Sonoma County Probation Department  
Project dates: 2015–2017

## Randomized Controlled Trial of a Comprehensive, Research-Based Framework for Implementing School-Based Law Enforcement Programs

School-based police officers are often stationed in schools to help ensure safe and secure learning environments. In this experimental study involving 24 schools across six Texas districts, WestEd, Texas State University, and the Texas State School Safety Center are examining the impact of a comprehensive framework that guides the implementation and monitoring of school policing programs, including training police officers and school staff. The research-based framework will be deployed in half of the schools with the aim of assisting educators and law enforcement officers in successfully integrating law enforcement into an educational environment.

Funder: Texas State University, San Marcos (Prime's funder: National Institute of Justice) | Project dates: 2017–2020

## Evaluation of School-Based Drug and Alcohol Prevention Programming

To prevent drug and alcohol abuse, Montgomery County (PA) is contracting with several private organizations to implement a range of school-based programming, including Second Step, Life Skills, Guiding Good Choices, and Too Good for Drugs. WestEd's evaluation of the multifaceted prevention efforts includes providing comprehensive analysis of and reporting on the evidence-based programs in the county's schools as well as other prevention programming offered throughout the county.

Funder: Montgomery County Office of Drug and Alcohol  
Project dates: 2018–2021

## SELECTED RESOURCES



### Five Misconceptions About School Shootings

Although school shootings receive extensive media coverage, there is a lot of misinformation about the perpetrators, their attacks, and what schools and communities can do to prevent these events. This timely brief takes a look at five common misconceptions about school shootings and their perpetrators.

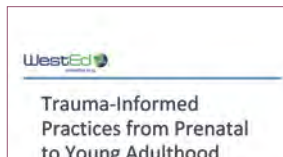
WestEd (2018) | [WestEd.org/resources/five-misconceptions-about-school-shootings](https://www.wested.org/resources/five-misconceptions-about-school-shootings)



### What Do We Know About the Effects of School-Based Law Enforcement on School Safety?

Public school districts and police departments often collaborate to address school-based violence and other threats to the safety and well-being of students, teachers, and staff. As a result of these partnerships, law enforcement officers have become an increasingly common presence in schools around the country. This brief summarizes some of the relevant research about school-based law enforcement and its effects on students and schools.

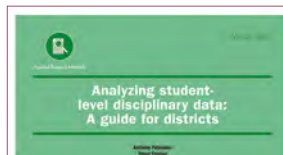
WestEd (2018) | [WestEd.org/resources/effects-of-school-based-law-enforcement-on-school-safety](https://www.wested.org/resources/effects-of-school-based-law-enforcement-on-school-safety)



### Trauma-Informed Practices from Prenatal to Young Adulthood: Voices from the Field

Drawing on interviews with dozens of researchers and practitioners in the fields of early childhood and K-12 education, health, mental health, and social services, this report presents cross-sector insights on trauma-informed practices. The report explores practitioners' approaches to trauma-informed practices, the barriers to implementing these practices, and the conditions and supports needed to effectively and sustainably implement them.

WestEd (2018) | [WestEd.org/resources/trauma-informed-practices](https://www.wested.org/resources/trauma-informed-practices)



### Analyzing Student-Level Disciplinary Data: A Guide for Districts

The relationship of exclusionary discipline to negative outcomes for students, particularly racial/ethnic minority students and students with disabilities, has raised questions about equity in school punishment. This guide provides practical information on how administrators can analyze district disciplinary data, including how to determine whether disciplinary actions are disproportionately applied to certain student subgroups and whether differences exist in student academic outcomes across the types of disciplinary actions that students receive.

REL Northeast & Islands (2017) | [WestEd.org/resources/analyzing-student-level-disciplinary-data](https://www.wested.org/resources/analyzing-student-level-disciplinary-data)



## Restorative Justice in U.S. Schools (Series of four reports)

WestEd (2015, 2016)

Educators are increasingly interested in reducing reliance on exclusionary disciplinary actions, such as expulsion and suspension, which studies have shown increase students' likelihood of dropping out of school and becoming involved in the criminal justice system. In light of these pressing education and social justice issues, WestEd developed a series of reports on restorative justice, an approach used in a growing number of schools to address offending behavior by focusing on repairing harm and restoring relationships, rather than just punishing the perpetrator. The four reports examine why more and more schools are exploring restorative justice, what the research behind it says, and how it's being implemented in school settings.

The suite of reports, developed through funding by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, are available at: [jprc.WestEd.org/project/restorative-justice-practices-in-u-s-schools](http://jprc.WestEd.org/project/restorative-justice-practices-in-u-s-schools)

## SELECTED SERVICES

### School Climate and Wellness Partnership: Working Together to Support Student and Staff Success

Improving school climate and wellness can benefit the entire school community. Through this service, WestEd staff collaborate with preK-12 stakeholders to create a foundation of safety, support, and health — necessary conditions for effective teaching and learning. Partnering schools and districts build student and staff capacity, engage stakeholders, and design and implement a school climate and wellness improvement plan.

[WestEd.org/service/school-climate-wellness-partnership](http://WestEd.org/service/school-climate-wellness-partnership)

### Trauma-Informed Practices in Early Childhood

Based on the most recent research, these professional learning modules are tailored to the needs of the early childhood community, teaching participants about trauma and its impact on young children's learning and development. Participants learn to use strategies that are sensitive to children who may have experienced trauma; ensure that the participants' own organizations support the wellness of their staff and are responsive to the needs of children affected by trauma; and integrate what they learn into the leadership of their organizations.

[WestEd.org/service/trauma-informed-practices-in-early-education](http://WestEd.org/service/trauma-informed-practices-in-early-education)

### California School Climate, Health, and Learning Survey (CaISCHLS) System and Data Workshops

WestEd staff work with schools and districts nationwide to tailor the CaISCHLS System and WestEd's survey data workshops to meet their unique needs. School and district leaders can learn how to collect, interpret, use, and disseminate survey data related to school climate, social-emotional health, and learning; examine their school's/district's strengths and challenges; and compare their data to those of schools/districts with positive climates.

[WestEd.org/service/california-school-climate-health-learning-survey-workshops](http://WestEd.org/service/california-school-climate-health-learning-survey-workshops)

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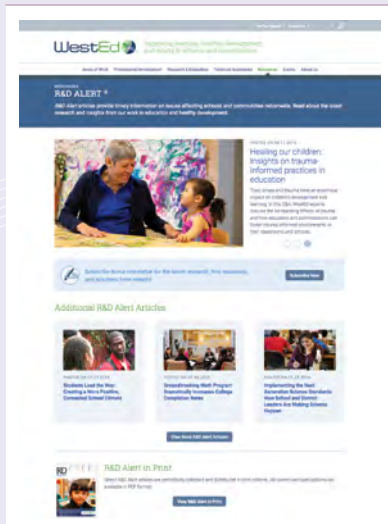
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Nebraska Children and the evaluation team have also provided webinars and other trainings on the collective-impact framework and have provided help in implementing CYI activities with that framework in mind. “We’re also researching the theoretical underpinnings of the initiative’s intervention model,” says Fronius. “How does emphasizing a shared agenda across service providers, for instance, transfer to the implementation of this model and ultimately the outcomes for youth?”

Ultimately, the entire CYI effort aims to promote the power of collaboration to create a web of support for youth like Jesse. “Going a complete ‘180’ and having people who care and want me to succeed was tremendous,” Jesse says, “and then being able to fall back on them if I needed help.” His biggest lesson? “Don’t be afraid to accept help.”



For more information, contact Trevor Fronius at [tfroniu@WestEd.org](mailto:tfroniu@WestEd.org) or 781.481.1134.



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