

# Creating Trauma Sensitive Schools

**Yale-Bridgeport GEAR UP Partnership Project**

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Yale SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

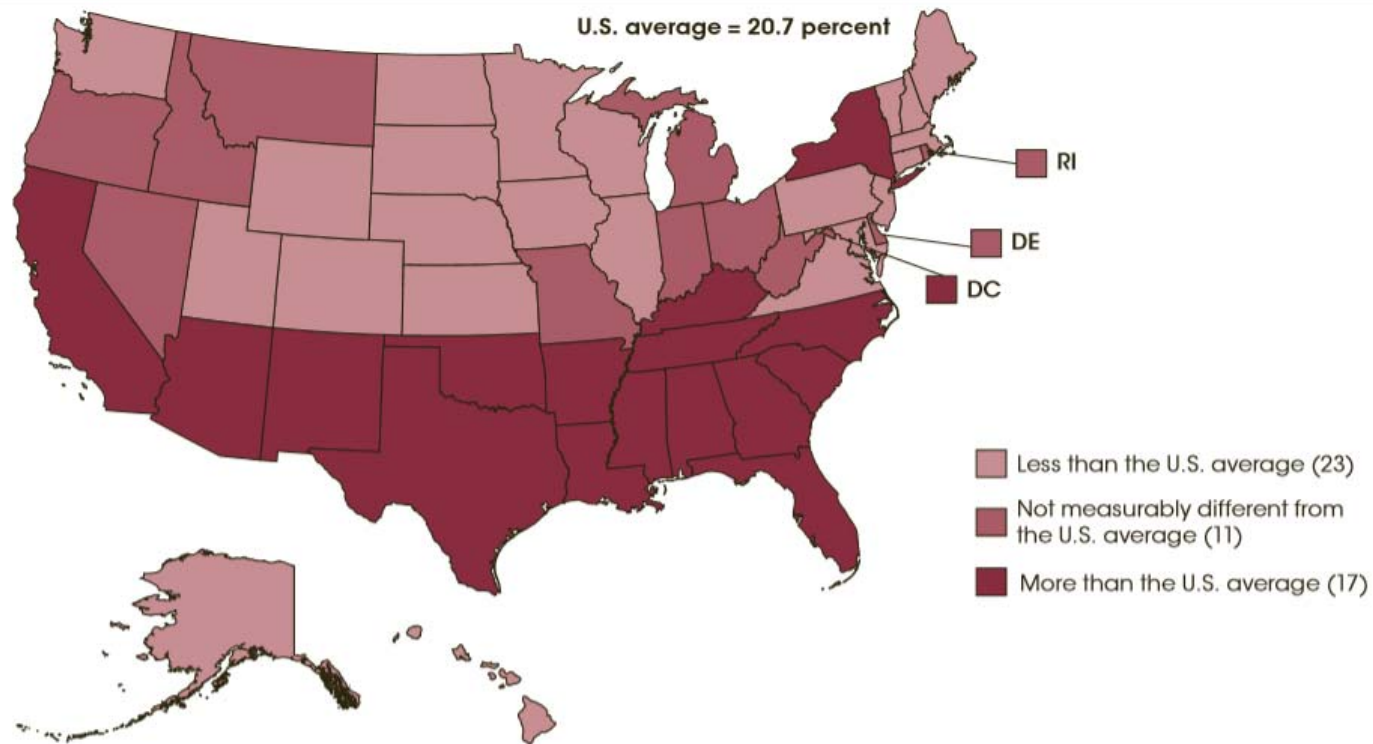


# Session Overview

- Discuss the role poverty and toxic stress has on students' healthy adjustment along cognitive, social-emotional, and behavioral domains of functioning
- Share preliminary findings among a GEAR UP cohort that characterizes students' experience of adverse life events and its relation to academic performance
- Highlight student-centered and school-wide strategies for supporting and connecting with challenging students who may have a history of trauma.

# Families living in Poverty

Figure 2. Percentage of 5- to 17-year-olds in families living in poverty, by state: 2013



NOTE: The measure of child poverty includes all children who are related to the householder by birth, marriage, or adoption (except a child who is the spouse of the householder). The householder is the person (or one of the people) who owns or rents (maintains) the housing unit.  
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS), 2013. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2014*, table 102.40.

# Children Living in Poverty

- **National Average**
  - **21 percent** of children aged 5 to 17 live in poverty
  - Approximately **16 million** children and adolescents
- **Race/Ethnicity**
  - 39% Black
  - 36% American Indian/Alaska Native
  - 32% Hispanic
  - 27% Pacific Islander
  - 21% 2 or more races

# Children Living in Poverty

- **Household Structure**
  - **45 percent** of poor children reside in households headed by Mom
- **Race/Ethnicity ('Mom Only' Household)**
  - 55% American Indian/Alaska Native
  - 52% Black
  - 50% Hispanic
  - 47% Pacific Islander
  - 41% 2 or more Races
  - 36% White

# Adverse Life Experiences

Economic  
Insufficiency

Food  
Insecurity

Housing  
Instability

Neighborhood  
Stress

Domestic  
Violence

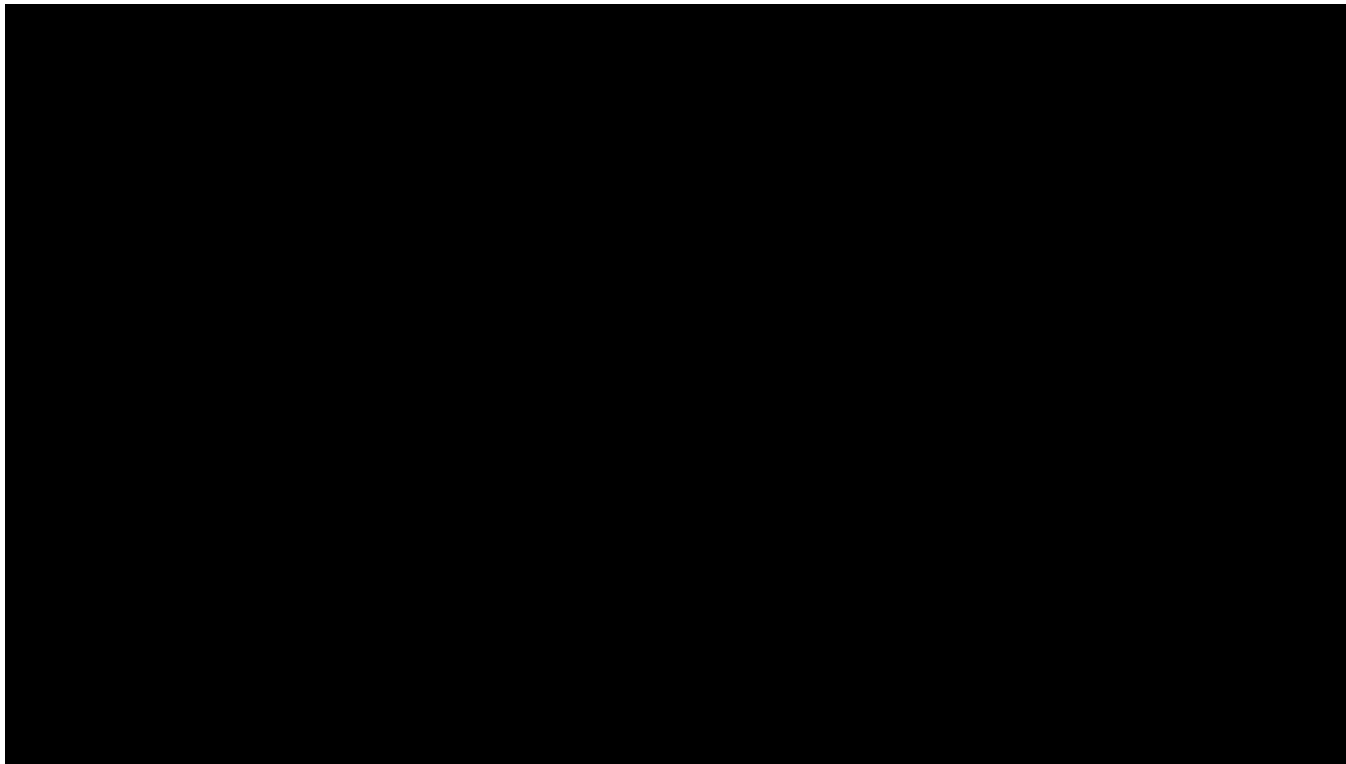
School  
Violence

Sexual Abuse

Natural  
Disasters

Community  
Violence

# Paper Tigers Video Trailer





How do you measure adverse life experiences?  
What is the link between adverse life experiences and health?



# Survey of Adverse Life Experiences

**While you were growing up, during your first 18 years of life:**

1. Did a parent or other adult in the household **often** ...

Swear at you, insult you, put you down, or humiliate you

**OR**

Act in a way that made you afraid that you might be physically hurt?

2. Did a parent or other adult in the household **often** ...

Push, grab, slap, or throw something at you?

**OR**

**Ever** hit you so hard that you had marks or were injured?

## Finding your ACE Score...

### 3. Did an adult or person at least 5 years older than you **ever**...

Touch or fondle you or have you touch their body in a sexual way?

**OR**

Try to or actually have oral, anal, or vaginal sex with you?

### 4. Did you **often** feel that ...

No one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special?

**OR**

Your family didn't look out for each other, feel close to each other, or support each other?

## Finding your ACE Score...

### 5. Did you **often** feel that ...

You didn't have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, and had no one to protect you?

**OR**

Your parents were too drunk or high to take care of you or take you to the doctor if you needed it?

### 6. Were your parents **ever** separated or divorced?

## Finding Your ACE Score...

### 7. Was your mother or stepmother:

**Often** pushed, grabbed, slapped, or had something thrown at her?

**OR**

**Sometimes or often** kicked, bitten, hit with a fist, or hit with something hard?

**OR**

**Ever** repeatedly hit over at least a few minutes or threatened with a gun or knife?

### 8. Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic or who used street drugs?

## Finding Your ACE Score...

9. Was a household member depressed or mentally ill or did a household member attempt suicide?

10. Did a household member go to prison?

## Finding Your ACE Score...

**Now add up your “Yes” answers: \_\_\_\_\_**

**This is your ACE Score**

# ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES (ACEs)

Kaiser Permanente and CDC, 1998

## THE STUDY

- 17,000 mostly white, college-educated, employed adults were screened for 10 prominent childhood traumatic experiences as part of their routine healthcare at Kaiser. Each type of trauma was awarded one point.

## THE RESULTS

- 70% of participants experienced at least one type of trauma.
- ACE scores of 4 or more resulted in four times the risk of emphysema or chronic bronchitis; over four times the likelihood of depression; and 12 times the risk of suicide.
- ACE scores were directly related with early initiation of smoking and sexual activity, adolescent pregnancy, and risk for intimate partner violence.

Trauma and Resilience: An Adolescent Provider Toolkit;  
Adolescent Health Working Group 2013

# Spectrum of Trauma

- **Acute Trauma:** A single time limited event
- **Chronic Trauma:** Multiple traumatic exposures and/or events over extended periods of time
- **Complex Trauma:** Experiences of multiple traumatic events and the impact of exposure to these events (often occurring within the care giving system)
- **Toxic Stress:** Adverse experiences that lead to strong, frequent, or **prolonged** activation of the body's stress response system
- **Secondary/Vicarious Trauma:** Exposure to the trauma of others by providers, family members, partners or friends in close contact with the traumatized individual

Trauma and Resilience: An Adolescent Provider Toolkit;  
Adolescent Health Working Group 2013



# The Impact of Trauma on the Body

- Traumatic Events 'trigger' the body's natural stress response
- Once triggered, we can only respond in two ways:

FIGHT



FLIGHT



# Survival Brain vs Learning Brain

- We all have normal alarm systems in our brain/body that let us know when we are under threat and mobilize us to fight, flee (flight) or freeze in the face of a threat.
- When youth experience continuous threats/trauma, the brain/body is put into a chronic state of fear, activating the “survival brain” (mid/lower areas of the brain).
- This can create an overactive alarm system in the developing brain. *A youth’s brain/body that develops within the context of trauma can be more easily triggered into survival brain by “trauma reminders” or “triggers” even when there is no actual threat.*

Trauma and Resilience: An Adolescent Provider Toolkit; Adolescent Health Working Group 2013

# Implications of Toxic Stress

- Prolonged exposure to stressful life events interrupts the normal development of neurological functioning that in turn leads to problems in student learning.
- It also affects the development of cardiovascular, metabolic and immune systems that increase the likelihood of long-term medical conditions (e.g., diabetes, hypertension, depression, obesity).

# Trauma Impacted Youth

## Can have difficulty with:

- Managing “big” emotions
- Chronic irritability/anxiety that interferes with problem solving
- Memory
- Empathy
- Expressing concerns/needs in words
- Taking into account the wider context of a situation
- Appreciating how one’s behavior impacts other people
- Working in groups/connecting with others

*The Sanctuary Model: Designing and Implementing Trauma-Informed School Based Programs*, The Sanctuary Institute

# Trauma Triggers

Trauma triggers activate the ‘survival brain”, causing youth to react as though the previous trauma event is happening in ‘here and now’.

- Common triggers:
  - Unpredictability
  - Sensory overload
  - Feeling vulnerable, overwhelmed, or frustrated
  - Confrontation

# Phases of Acting out Behavior

Phase 1:  
Classroom  
Calm

- On Task
- Following Rules
- Initiates Positive Behavior
- Socially Appropriate

Phase 2:  
Classroom  
Triggers

- Conflict
- Provocations
- Pressure
- Frustration

Phase 3:  
Rising Agitation

- Non-Directed/Unfocused
- Off task/On task
- Out of Seat
- Talking with Others

# Phases of Acting Out Behavior...

## Phase 4: Acceleration

- Focused behavior that is provocative, high intensity, and threatening
- Compliance with accompanying inappropriate behavior
- Avoidance and escape
- Verbal Abuse

## Phase 5: De-escalation

- Teacher empathy/proximity
- Pre-arranged signal
- Emphasize student choices in simple language
- Avoid escalation responses like engaging in a power struggle or raising your voice

# Trauma Informed Consequences

- Make an effort **NOT** to exclude student from school.
- Shape behavior by helping youth recognize the impact of their actions on themselves and their community.
- Build youth's capacity to manage strong emotions.
- **Invest great energy, creativity and resources up-front in order to support young people's long-term success.**
- **Take the long view and understand that behavior change is slow and incremental.**



## A Trauma Informed Approach (School)

- Uses the recognition that certain behaviors are related to traumatic experience to drive a new set of practices at school with young people who exhibit these behaviors.
- Shifts from a model that asks, “**What is wrong with you?**” to one that asks, “**What happened to you?**”
- A new question emerges: “How can we shift the school environment and classroom practices to respond more effectively to your needs?”

## School wide efforts aligned with trauma informed care:

- Social, Emotional, & Academic Learning (SEAL)
- Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)
- Restorative Justice
- Mindfulness Practices
- School health or wellness centers
- RULER
  
- Any organized, structured, ongoing and intentional effort that partners with teachers to:
  - Take the extra time to respond to student needs instead of punishing behaviors that are simply symptoms of these needs

# What about Bridgeport?

- How does this phenomena manifest with students with whom we engage in Bridgeport?
  - Anecdotal observations from staff
  - Examination of student service utilization data
  - Data gathered on struggling learners and their academic performance

# Study Aim

- To characterize our GEAR UP cohort along dimensions of risk and protective factors; and
- To determine how risk factors were associated with school performance and engagement in GEAR UP services
- Data are reported on:
  - 2018 cohort; 10<sup>th</sup> grade (2013-2014)

# Study Sample

- Administered mental health survey to 10<sup>th</sup> graders at end of 2014-2105 School Year
  - **Life Events**
  - **Strengths and Difficulties**
  - Responses to Stress
  - Social Behavioral
- Life Events Questionnaire: n=360 (32%)
- Strengths and Difficulties: n=426 (38%)

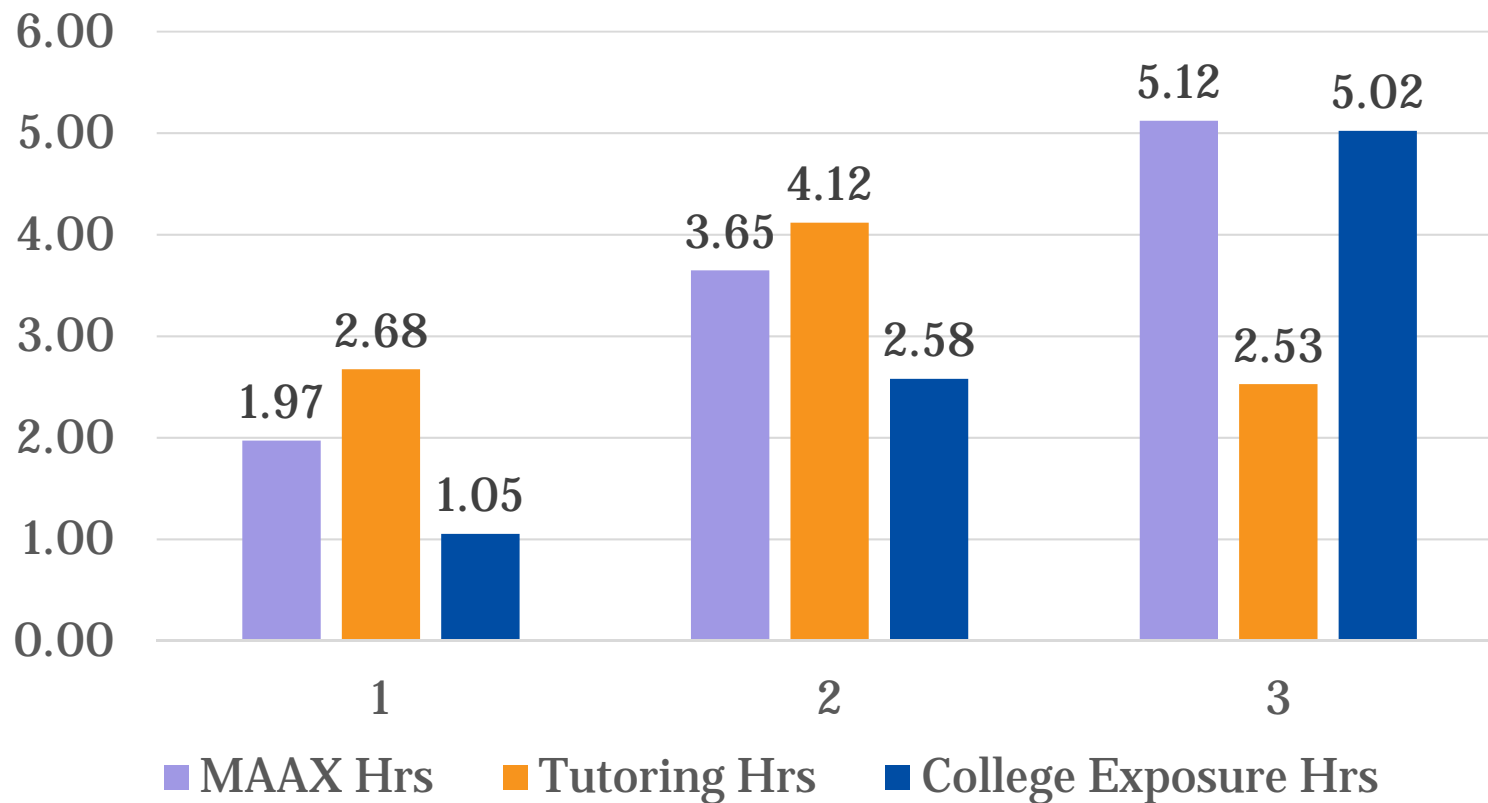
# Risks and Protectors: Associations with Grades

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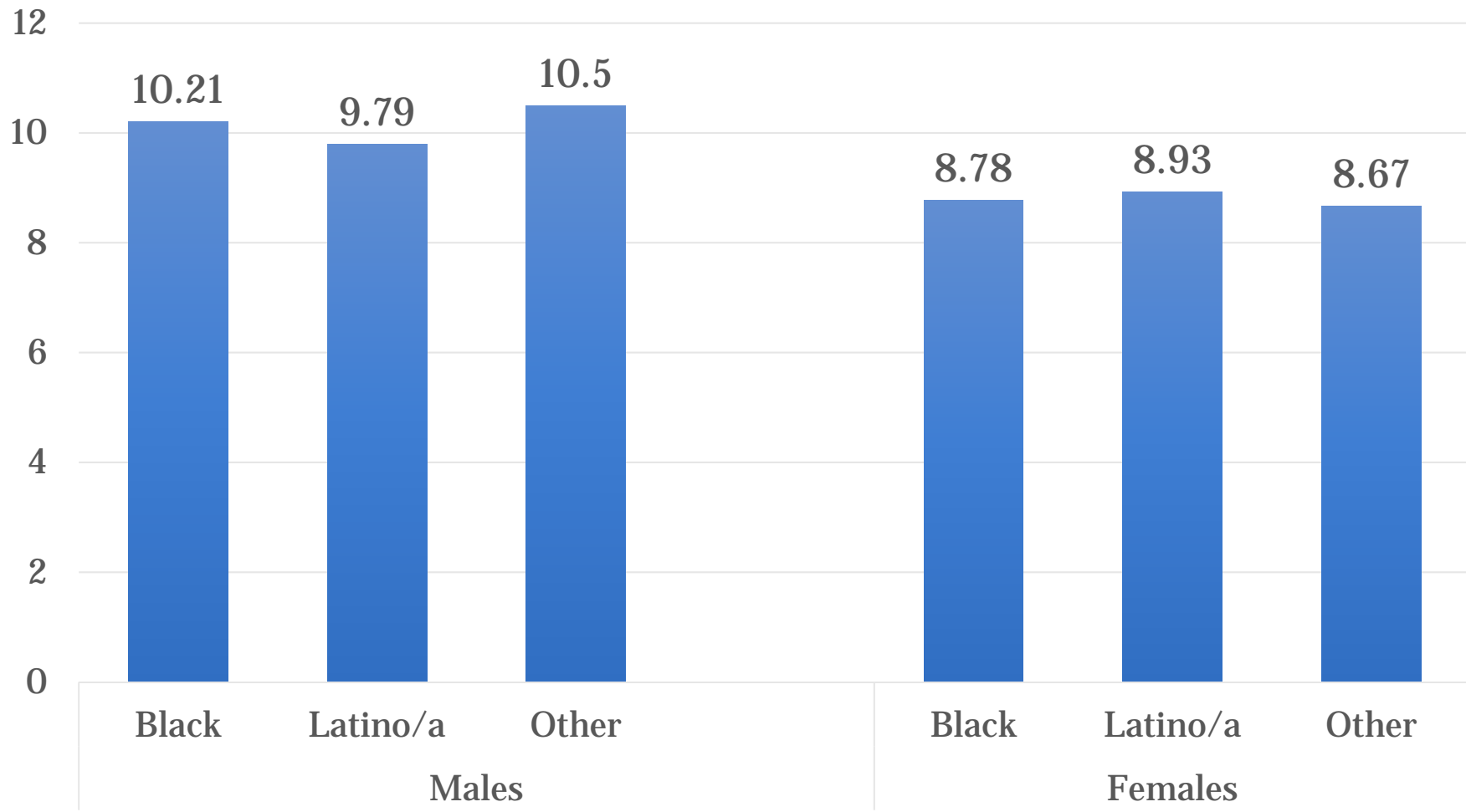
	<b>S1 Core GPA</b>
LEQ Chronic-Negative-Independent Scale	.023
LEQ Chronic-Negative-Nonindependent Scale	-.073
LEQ Discrete Onset-Ambiguous-Independent Scale	-.098
LEQ Discrete Onset-Negative-Independent Scale	-.083
<b>LEQ Discrete Onset-Negative-Nonindependent Scale</b>	<b>-.194<sup>**</sup></b>
<b>LEQ Discrete-Positive-Nonindependent Scale</b>	<b>.159<sup>**</sup></b>
SDQ Emotional Symptoms Scale	.010
<b>SDQ Prosocial Scale</b>	<b>.216<sup>**</sup></b>

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# 10<sup>th</sup> Grade Mean Service Hours by GPA Tertile



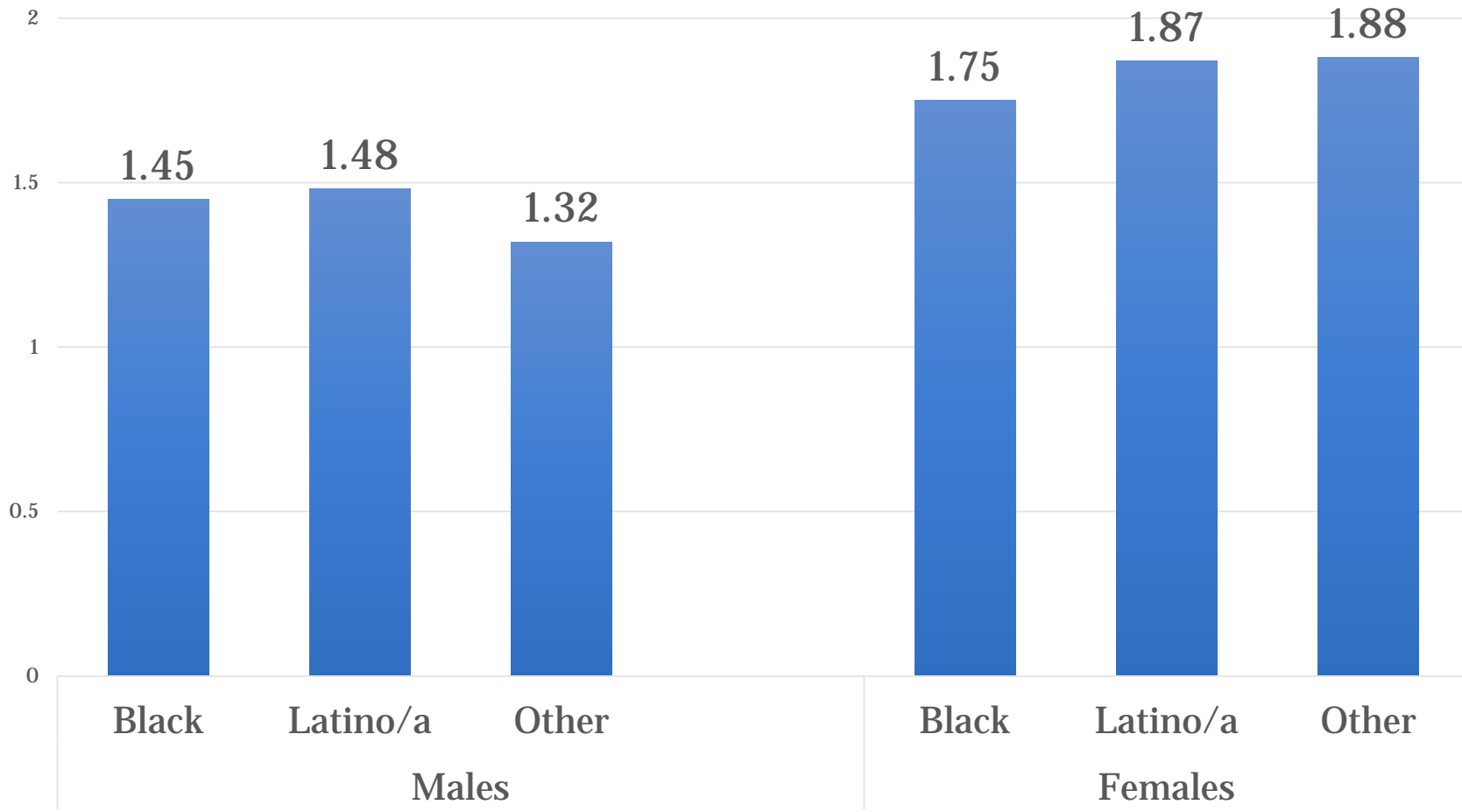
# GEAR UP Service Hours





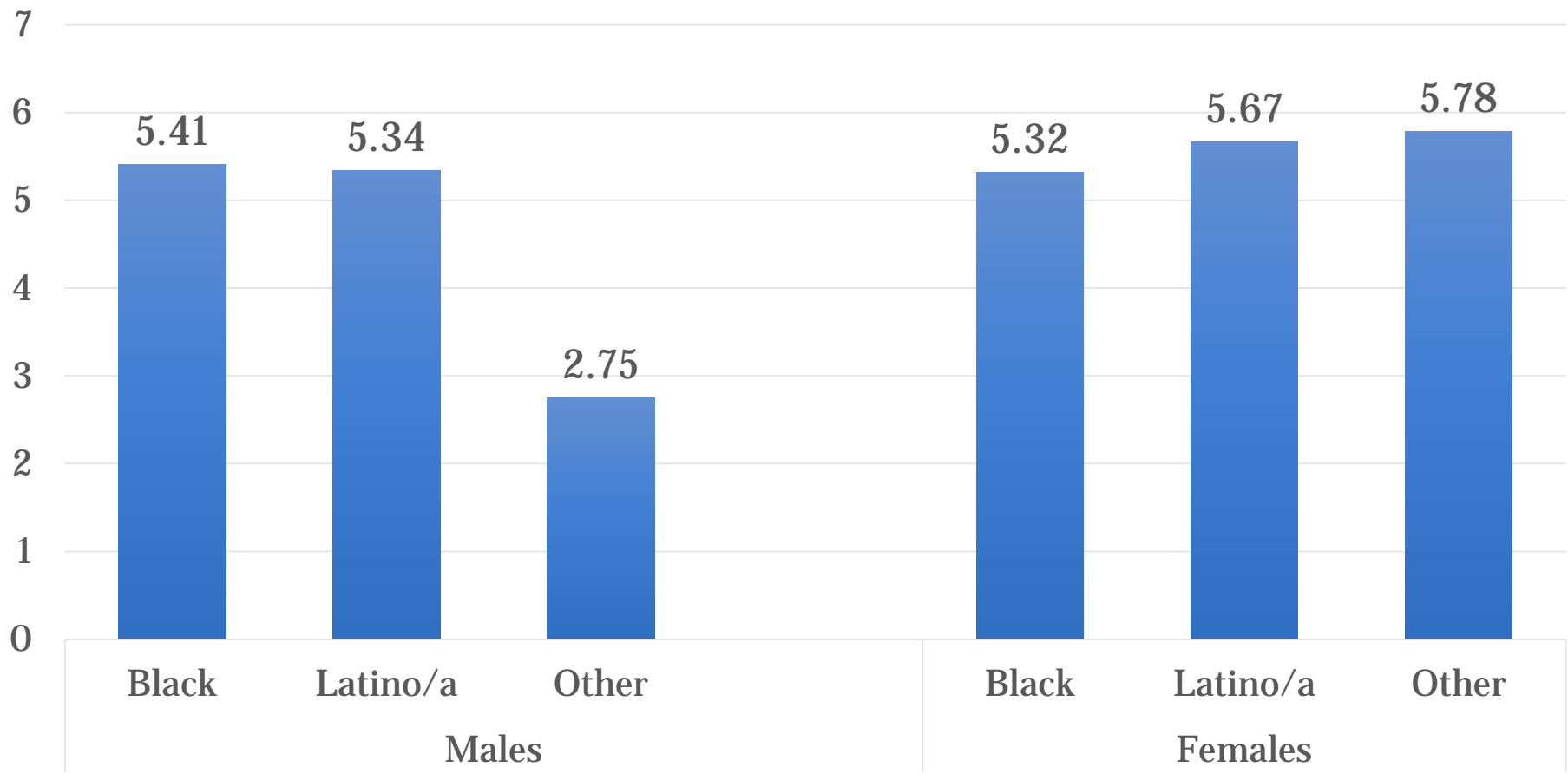
# Emotional Symptoms (SDQ)

- Sample: *I have many fears, I am easily scared.*
- 0=Not true, 1=Somewhat true; 3=Certainly true



# Total Stress

- Number of negative life events
- Sample: *I got into trouble with the law.*



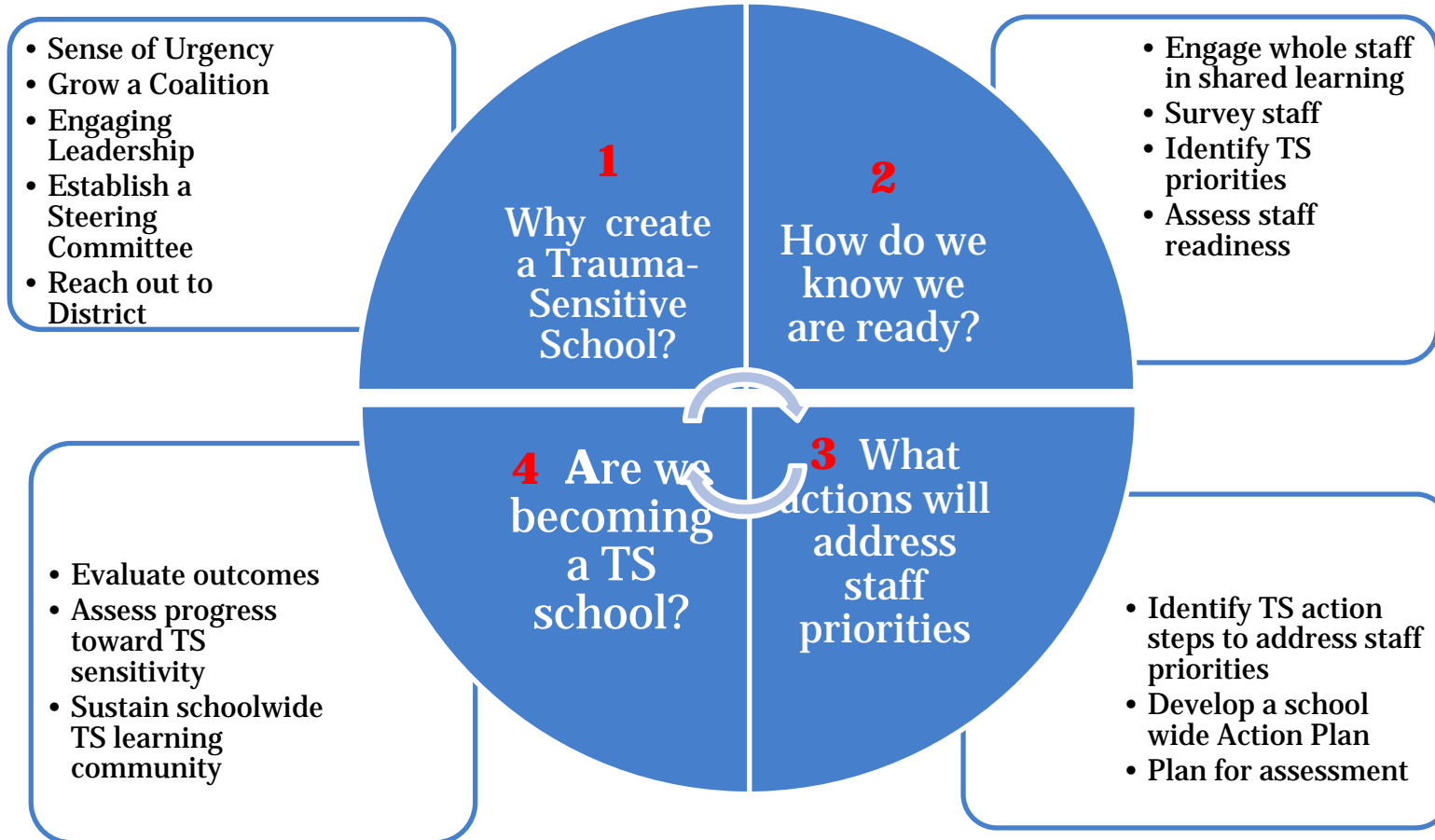
# What do we do?

How do we 'mend' children's overtaxed stress response system?

# Trauma Sensitive School Mini-Survey

- On a scale from 1 to 5, how severe is toxic stress in your school and or community?
- How does your schools respond to trauma exposed students?
- Do you feel your GEAR UP schools are equipped to address the issue of Toxic Stress?
- How many of your GEAR UP schools currently implement trauma informed strategies?

# Envisioning a Trauma Sensitive School



# The Trauma Sensitive School

- The 'ARC' Model:
  - Build secure **A**ttachments between the adolescent and caregiver
  - Enhance self-**R**egulatory capacities; and
  - Increase **C**ompetencies across multiple domains
    - National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN)

# A Schoolwide Approach: The Flexible Framework

The Flexible Framework that has **Six** Essential Elements:

1. Schoolwide Infrastructure and Culture
2. Staff Training
3. Linking with Mental Health Professionals
4. Academic Instruction for Traumatized Children & Youth
5. Nonacademic Strategies; and
6. School Policies, Procedures, and Protocols

MA Advocates for Children & Harvard Law School

# Element 1: Schoolwide Infrastructure & Culture

## A. Building Administrator

- Engage staff in strategic planning
- Identify ways to integrate TS routines into existing school practices

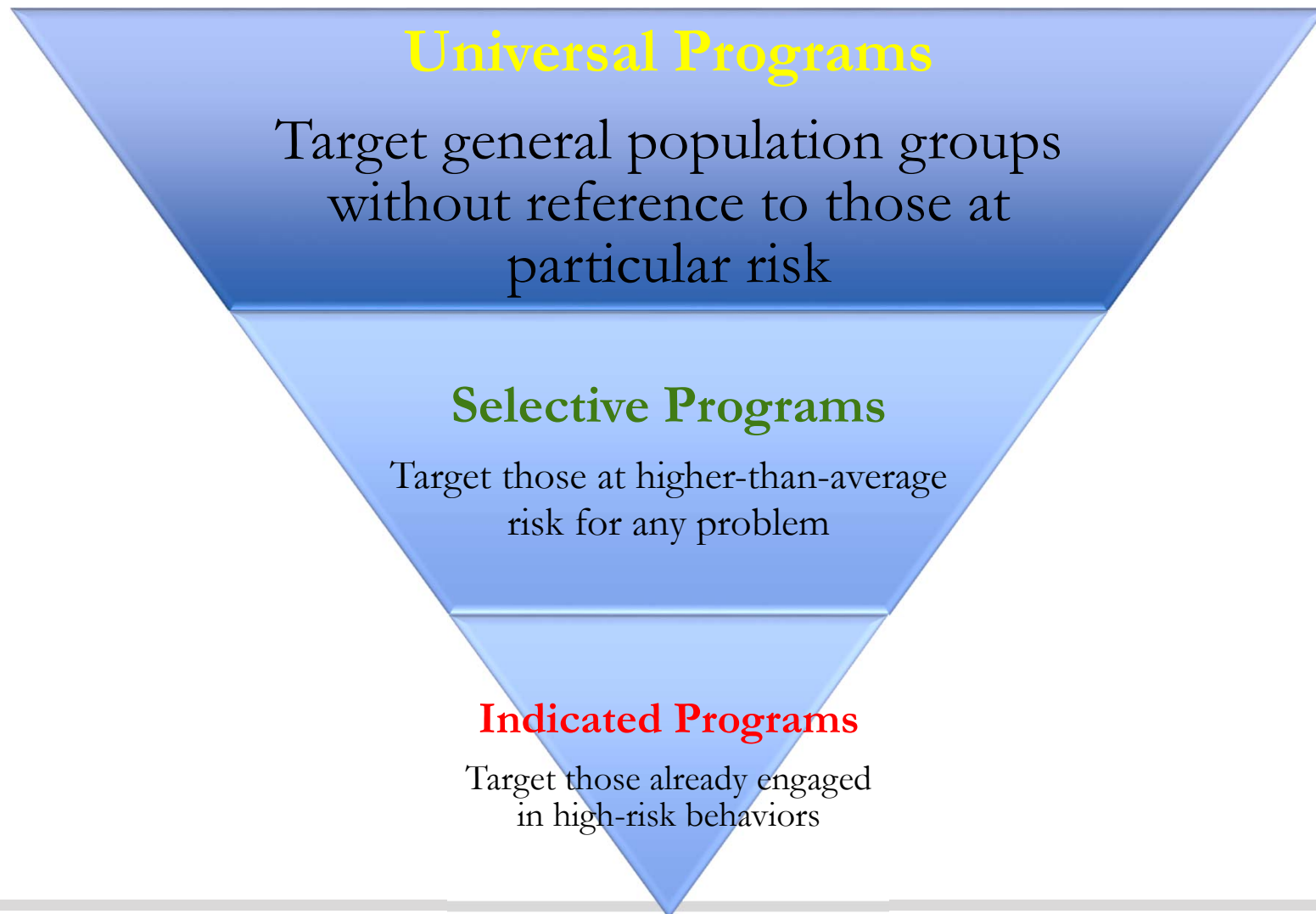
## B. Weave TS Approaches into the Fabric of the School

- Strategic planning
- Assessment of staff training needs
- Confidential Conferencing of trauma exposed youth
- Review school policies with an understanding of trauma
- Develop a community-liaison team
- Ongoing evaluation

## C. Identify and Address Barriers



# The Prevention Pyramid: Levels of Intervention



## Element 2: Staff Training

### A. Partner with Parents and Other Caregivers

- understand (domestic) violence and its effects on development
- understand the legal context
- communication strategies

### B. Supporting Staff

- identify needs that teachers need to assist them in the classroom
- understand the role of the teacher and mental health professional
- build on teachers' competencies and leverage school resources

### C. Teaching Students

- create an environment where students feel safe
- teach students how to regulate emotion
- maintain high expectations for achievement
- build upon students' strengths

## Element 3: Linking with Mental Health Professionals

### A. Clinical Support for School Staff

- Confidential discussions
- Opportunities to reflect
- Learning how to react to traumatized students
- Teaching behavior management techniques
- Role play communication with parents who also may be traumatized

### B. Accessing Mental Health Resources for Families and Students

- Make the referral with the family
- Build relationships with the parent/caregiver
- Build relationships with the mental health provider(s)

## Element 4: Academic Instruction

- A. Overarching Teaching Approaches
  - Islands of competence
  - Predictability and Safety
  - Timing of lessons and activities
  - Transitions without trauma
  - Written plans to address gaps in learning
  - Positive behavioral supports
  
- B. Language-based Teaching Approaches
  - Use multiple ways to present information
  - Process specific information
  - Identify and process feelings

## Element 5: Non-academic Strategies

- A. Build non-academic relationships with students
  - Create opportunities to relate to students authentically
  - Implement programs that support students' development of non-cognitive skills and social-emotional development
  
- B. Extracurricular Activities
  - Encourage students' participation in activities that promote positive youth development (e.g., service learning experiences, clubs, leadership development programs, and athletics)
  
- C. Exposure Experiences
  - Provide opportunities for students to be exposed to people, places, and activities that will allow them to experience life in new ways

# Element 6: School Policies, Procedures, & Protocol

## A. Discipline

- Balance accountability with understanding of traumatic behavior
- Teaching traumatized students the 'rules'
- Minimize disruption of education
- Create uniform rules and consequences
- Model respectful, nonviolent relationships

## B. Communication

- Exercise confidentiality with regard to students and families
- Communicate with families of traumatized children
- Know how to file an abuse and neglect report

## C. Safety Planning

- Disclosing student record information

## Element 6: School Policies, Procedures, & Protocol...

### C. Safety Planning (continued)

- Transfer of student records
- Help families select safe schools
- Support the enforcement of court orders
- Connect families to health care providers
- Connect families to community resources

### D. Collaboration with the Community

- Appoint a school-community liaison
- Connect with legislators, funders, and policy makers

## A Recap of Things to Consider...

- What proportion of our student body is affected by prolonged exposure to toxic stress?
- What type of training does our team need to increase their knowledge, awareness and skills to promote a culture of support for students exposed to trauma?
- What strategies can we employ to promote a culture of sensitivity to trauma exposed youth in our school?
- What community partnerships can we establish to support students living in toxic environments?



# Our Training Model: Social & Emotional Learning

*Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.*



**Source:** Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)

# Essential Components of SEL Programs

- Strong partnerships between parents & teachers
- Safe and orderly school and classroom environments
- Caring relationships between teachers & students
- Engaging teaching approaches
- Maintaining high expectations for academic performance

Collaborative for Academic, Social & Emotional Learning, 2003

# Our Training Model: Social & Emotional Learning

- Recruitment
  - In depth, three part interview process
  - Individuals interested in human services related disciplines (e.g., mental health counseling, social work, psychology)
  - 90 day probation period
  
- Training Strategy
  - Theoretically Driven
  - Didactic
  - Focus on Family Systems & Counseling Techniques (e.g., Motivational Interviewing)
  - Focus on Positive Youth Development & Youth Leadership
  - Reflective
  - Weekly Supervision

# Where to Turn

- Helping Traumatized Children Learn (Vol. 1)
- Creating and Advocating for Trauma Sensitive Schools (Vol. 2)  
written by Massachusetts Advocates for Children (*Trauma & Learning Policy Initiative in collaboration with Harvard Law School*)
- National Geographic: The Science of Stress

# Contact Information

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