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A Trauma-Informed Approach to Education at the Clara B. Ford Academy

The goal of Focus on Michigan Communities publications are to profile child advocacy efforts or best practices in one or more of Michigan's communities to encourage networking and sharing of strategies. This Focus piece highlights the **Clara B. Ford Academy** in Dearborn Heights, Michigan. Clara B. Ford Academy is a strict discipline academy housed on Vista Maria's campus and maintains a trauma-informed approach to education. The Academy serves students in grades 5-12 who are current and past residents of Vista Maria, a residential facility for court-involved females

What is trauma

Trauma results from an individual's experience or multiple experiences that are physically or emotionally harmful. Recent studies have found that trauma experienced by children and youth directly impacts their brain development, resulting in response mechanisms and coping strategies that can potentially lead to long-term harmful effects. These "Adverse Childhood Experiences" (ACEs) can cause such profound physical harm that may materialize in chronic disease, mental illness, behavioral issues, and substance abuse – all of which can have negative effects on a child's academic and life success. Youth involved in the juvenile justice and foster care systems may have more adverse reactions; however, no groups of children and youth are immune to ACEs and their effects.

How trauma impacts education success

School success requires students to concentrate and memorize, organize and comprehend, and self-regulate their behaviors and emotions in the classroom. For youth involved in court-systems, they miss more school than their peers due to increased absences, truancy, suspensions, and expulsions. Additionally, they tend to have lower grade point averages, lower test scores, and graduation rates. Currently, there is a lack of training provided to educators focusing on recognizing and appropriately intervening with students whose challenging behaviors are influenced by prior or current exposure to traumatic experiences. Consequently, teachers have reported being intimidated by the displayed behaviors and ill prepared to understand or intervene, which often leads to power struggles and removal from classrooms. Additionally, schools often misdiagnose and inappropriately discipline youth who have or are experiencing trauma, and utilize limited interventions for challenging classroom behaviors. When students are removed from the educational process through traditional discipline strategies, it negatively impacts their academic performance and it hampers their ability to build constructive relationships with staff and peers, resulting in heightened academic and learning challenges that result from any school absence.

A trauma informed approach to education

Trauma informed practice can be effectively implemented in teaching strategies, discipline practices, policies and procedures, and the school organization. The school culture of the building, including individual classrooms, must encourage a safe learning environment that enhances a student's development of social skills, self-awareness, and emotional and behavioral regulation while simultaneously meeting the student's academic needs. Discipline practices and policies should appropriately address student behavior, and do so with awareness of and sensitivity to the history of trauma. Teachers and school personnel need to understand how trauma impacts behavior displayed at school and learn teaching strategies that encourages relationship building and the de-escalation of emotional triggers. This will allow school personnel to increase relationship building skills, disengage in power struggles and enhance engagement in the classroom.

Schools using a trauma-informed curriculum, recruiting trauma-informed learning facilitators for staff support, and hiring administrators and staff who understand and are sensitive to the impact of ACEs and trauma, are better equipped to prevent students from dropping out of school. In addition to providing school personnel with appropriate training, cross-system communication enhances collaboration between community agencies and schools.

Clara B. Ford Academy's approach to trauma-informed educational practice

Clara B. Ford has a student population of about 125 court-involved female students, 60% involved in the foster care system, and the remaining 40% involved in the juvenile justice system. Students are primarily African American (70%), typically 2-4 years behind academically than their same-aged peers, and 90% have been identified with a history of trauma. Since Clara B. Ford provides the educational services to the residents of Vista Maria, students average 3-6 months in the school. The Academy's focus is on helping students learn the soft skills they will need to be successful in a traditional classroom setting, where they often return when they leave Vista Maria, as well as moving them forward academically.

Clara B. Ford's classes have a low student-to-teacher ratio (15:1) and combine general and special education students in integrated classrooms (a single service delivery system through a modified full inclusion model). School personnel address each student's individual academic and behavioral needs. Student Success Plans are designed to de-escalate behaviors triggered by students' trauma and build the skills they need to remain in school and be academically successful.

The Monarch Room: De-Escalating Trauma-Related Behaviors

Clara B. Ford staff utilize layered interventions to relieve trauma-related behaviors that interrupt learning. If de-escalation within the classroom is not possible, student can elect to either de-escalate in the hallway or go to the Monarch Room. The Monarch Room provides students with a safe, un-isolated space to regulate their emotions through a variety of strategies based on individual need. For example, students can exert energy by riding a stationary bike, talk with trained Monarch room staff, or sit with a weighted blanket until they feel emotionally stable again. These strategies help students gain cognitive awareness as well as better physical regulation of their reactions. The goal is for students to return to class as soon as possible. From these incidents, the school retains information on what triggered the incident and what worked well for that student, so that future incidents can be avoided and de-escalation can happen more quickly.

Though Clara B. Ford receives funding through typical education streams including federal Title I and Title II dollars, the state foundation allowance, special education funding, and others; the administration at Clara B. Ford effectively utilizes community partners, which contributes to its ability to provide a trauma-informed education setting. First and foremost, being within the Vista Maria Campus, Clara B. Ford's and Vista Maria's staff communicate daily about the students so that everyone is aware of any issues that could erupt during the school day. Clara B. Ford is able to utilize para-professionals provided through Vista Maria in the classrooms who may have existing relationships with certain students, and who can then subsequently support teachers in managing and understanding challenging behaviors.

Also, Clara B. Ford personnel partner with community agencies such as universities and mental health agencies to provide staff training to maintain their trauma-informed approach. Professional development opportunities are required two weeks before the start of the school year and three-hours per week during the school year. In addition to these training opportunities, the Clara B. Ford principal has partnered with university personnel to track, document, and evaluate the effectiveness of this trauma-informed approach, especially the use of the Monarch Room, and in terms of retaining students, decreasing suspension/expulsions, preventing dropout, and increasing academic performance. As part of this process, staff and students participate in pre and post focus groups, pre and post surveys, and regular feedback sessions. The data is used to drive instruction and alter interventions.

The impact of Clara B. Ford's approach

Using their evaluation structure, the Academy has implemented a continuous improvement process which helps to identify common issues, challenges, and opportunities for growth. Findings from the evaluation process indicate that over time, the professional staff report less power struggles with students, less frustrations in dealing with displayed student behavior, and less staff turnover. Evaluation data have also shown significant reduction of Post-Traumatic Stress symptomology among their students, increased student's levels of trust, teachers report increased confidence in teaching and interacting with their students.

Policy options to ensure students who have experienced trauma can succeed academically

Support Alternative Educational Options: There are an increasing numbers of students who need more than four years to complete high school and graduate; however, when young people fall behind in credits, there are limited options for credit recovery and a traditional high school setting is not always successful in reengaging them, yet few alternatives exist. This is particularly true for youth who have experienced trauma where a traditional school setting may not be sensitive to their particular challenges and a traditional four year time frame is unrealistic. Michigan must create more flexibility in the use of existing funding mechanisms and incentivize innovative practices in schools that foster opportunities to promote additional time and flexibility toward high school completion.

Increase Support for Trauma-Informed Practice: Improved diagnostics and treatment options must be available so that all students have the capacity to be screened for mental health challenges including trauma, with a priority for students enrolled in schools receiving Title I funding. This should occur at the time of enrollment and annually thereafter to ensure that students are identified early on and able to access the appropriate supports they need to succeed academically. Additionally, individualized learning options must be provided for all students that include recognition of social-emotional challenges

including trauma. These individualized learning options must be sensitive to each student's particular needs and include individualized ways to support students when challenging times arise.

Develop trauma-informed pre-service and professional development trainings: Teachers need to be adequately prepare to work with traumatized children in their classrooms. Universities should be provided grants and incentives to build curriculums and certification programs to adequately prepare pre-service teachers to work in schools with higher enrollments of youth with more challenges, such as those employed in alternative school settings. Teachers, administrators and staff at all levels within schools need professional development training to:

- increase sensitivity to the fact that students may have experienced trauma,
- increase knowledge so that they are able to identify signs of trauma,
- develop the skills and tools needed to appropriately engage with students who have experienced trauma,
- utilize other strategies for developing responsible behavior, rather than suspension, expulsion methods which promote further traumatization, and
- engage in effective cross agency communication when appropriate referral networks for services are needed.

Greater preparation will reduce events of exposure to secondary trauma and lead to reductions in teacher turnover. High teacher turnover disproportionately impacts students enrolled in alternative school environments. Teacher turnover is especially traumatic for adjudicated students, as they have suffered loss in other aspects of their lives (i.e. multiple placements outside of the home and frequent community mobility).

Reform School Discipline Policies: Michigan needs to bring its harsh zero tolerance policy in line with other states and federal standards and give schools greater flexibility to handle challenging student behavior. Current school discipline policy and its disproportionate impact on students who have experienced trauma including youth of color must be reviewed and revised such that suspension and expulsion are reserved only for extreme cases. And, schools must be provided with incentives and options to create discipline alternatives that keep students engaged in their learning while also connecting students to appropriate mental health services.

Support Integrated Student Services: When schools are able to connect students and their families with other community resources, there are more chances to find and address the causes of school absence, behavioral issues and academic problems – be they related to physical and behavioral health issues, unstable housing, bullying or disengagement by parents or students. Integrating student services allows teachers to focus on education while relying on partner experts to address other important health, mental health and basic needs of families and students including those related to trauma.

For more information about Clara B. Ford Academy, contact Dr. Beverly Baroni at (313) 436-0020 or via email at Beverly-Baroni@cbfacademy.com.

If you would like to find out how your community can be profiled for your innovative work in any arena of child, youth and family services, contact Michigan's Children VP for Programs, Michele Corey at (517) 648-5498 or michele@michiganschildren.org.