

BECOMING TRAUMA INFORMED

Taking the First Step to Becoming a Trauma-Informed School

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The National Comprehensive Center

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Addressing the surge in mental health and social and emotional needs of students and staff will be critical in the upcoming years. The increased understanding of the prevalence of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and trauma, and their negative effects on the social, emotional, and academic success of students, has propelled a growing number of schools, districts, and states to explore ways to implement trauma-informed (TI) approaches. With the goal of creating learning environments that are responsive to all students, but especially to the needs of trauma-exposed children and youth, the implementation of TI approaches is getting to be recognized as an effective practice and systems-change strategy toward achieving the goal of educational equity.

This resource brief provides information on the principles and components of TI approaches, as well as guidance for initial steps of implementation for schools, districts, and states, in an effort to improve social, emotional, and academic outcomes for students. Resource links containing more details on TI implementation are provided throughout the brief as well as at the end.

Using a Systems Framework to Implement TI Approaches

Adopting a TI approach requires careful consideration of the systems needed to be put into place to support TI practices, policies, and procedures (Gee et al., 2020). It may be more efficient for schools to begin implementing a few TI practices (TIPs) at the classroom level, and then proceed to formal programs with circumscribed components, to whole-school approaches. Further, this may be an opportune time for schools that have already adopted a MTSS trauma-informed approach to revisit their overarching strategy and plan for how those efforts can be aligned with TI approaches for 2021–22 and beyond.

A multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) is a promising model for integrating TI into existing initiatives such as Response to Intervention [RTI], Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports [PBIS], and other SEL programs. MTSS allows for the prioritization of resources; efficient decision-making; and a focus on prevention through universal supports for all,

THE RUBRIC OF TI APPROACHES

TI practices are discrete procedures that support student safety and regulation and promote connectedness.

TI programs: defined set of activities for in and out of the classroom, with somewhat of an evidence base.

TI classroom is one wherein the principles of safety, regulation, and relationships and connected are integrated into the day-to-day functioning of the classroom.

TI/Trauma Sensitive schools: whole-school approach wherein all aspects such as classroom instruction, policies, organizational culture and school climate have integrated TI principles.

TI policies: Policies that require the activities to align with the principles of TI, such as policies on school discipline, student health, educator training, and school safety.

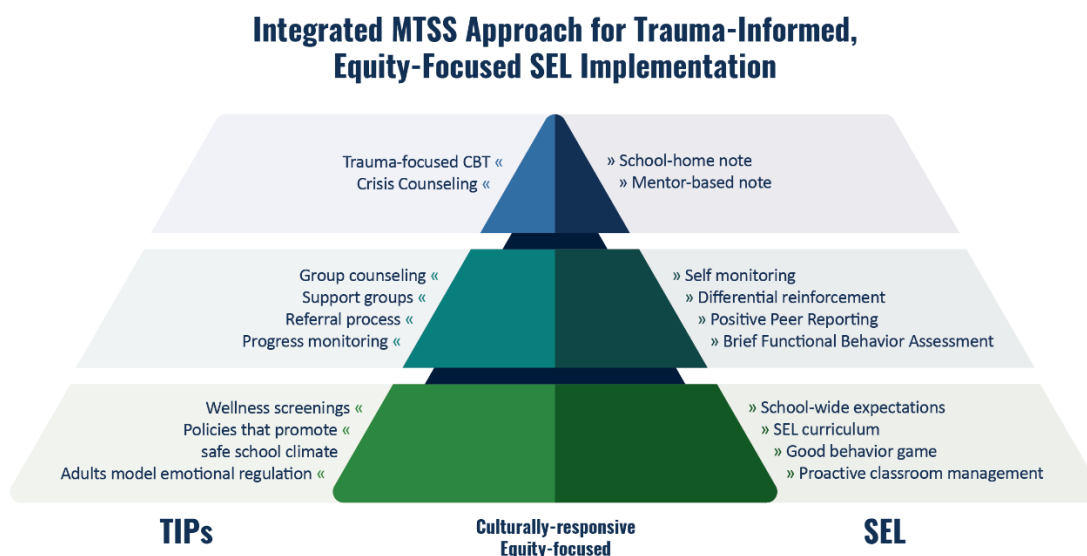
Trauma-specific interventions or TI-focused services: specific interventions designed to treat or address the impact/symptoms of trauma and promote recovery.

TI care: Typically used within service-delivery organizations, refers to the integration of TI principles into the behavioral or healthcare delivery process.

targeted and tailored resources for some, and intensive individualized services for a few students that did not respond to prior intervention (von der Embse et al., 2019).

Although this brief focuses on the implementation of TI approaches at the school, district, and state level, it is critical to integrate other student support initiatives and perspectives and school wide behavioral programming to ensure efficiency and effectiveness to improve student well-being. While TIPs and SEL are commonly thought of as two separate initiatives, they should eventually be integrated and implemented together. TIPs and SEL have many conceptual and practical similarities and unique components that together can help make for more effective systems of student support. TIPs provide safe, predictable, and supportive [context](#) that enables students to focus on their social, emotional, and behavioral skills and an environment where academic instruction can be delivered effectively and efficiently. In addition, these safe and supportive learning environments are not possible unless delivered with an intentional focus on equity and culturally-responsive practices. This integrated framework of TI, SEL, and equity perspective is critical not only in terms of the content of WHAT is implemented but HOW it is implemented, and is applicable across all phases of content programming, implementation, evaluation, and sustainability.

Given the influence of the pandemic, the surge in mental health and socioemotional needs of students and staff requires comprehensive systems and services in schools. TI and SEL strengthen each other; TI helps children feel safe and supported to be able to receive SEL skill development (and academic instruction), and SEL programming addresses social and emotional competencies that promote skill development and regulation that helps all children.



Sources: Chafouleas et al., 2016.



Tier 1 supports include programs seeking to help children develop social, problem-solving, and coping skills targeting all students, regardless of whether or not they have been exposed to trauma or are at-risk (i.e., at the universal level). These strategies/programs are more prevention-based, which would not only reduce the possibility of peer-generated ACEs (e.g., bullying) but also develop awareness and sensitivity about trauma and instill coping skills for all children who may have had varying levels of exposure to toxic stress. Examples of these programs include classroom-based group instruction on socioemotional learning concepts. A strong set of universal practices TI approaches may reduce the need for more intensive interventions (Fondren et al., 2020).

Tier 2 programs seek to intervene for students who are at-risk for trauma exposure or impact and include strategies and interventions that provide psychoeducation about trauma, reinforce social support systems, and strengthen self-regulation skills, as well as some group-based therapy protocols. Examples of these interventions include group-based cognitive behavioral skill building.

Tier 3 programs provide interventions to select students who have experienced significant trauma and/or have been severely affected by it, including facilitating cognitive-behavioral therapy, community-based services, and wrap-around care. Examples of these interventions include more intensive group-based cognitive behavioral therapy or individualized therapy via trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy. Importantly, these three tiers are organized in such a way that students receiving the higher tiers of services also receive programs within the lower tiers (i.e., a student receiving Tier 3 supports also receives supports from Tiers 2 and 1).

The Rubric of Trauma-Informed Approaches

Trauma-informed approach is an umbrella term for several different “levels” of becoming TI that share the core components of having a safe and supportive environment, supporting and teaching emotional and behavioral regulation, and building relationships and connectedness (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014).

A TI approach occurs at the systems level and involves key educational stakeholders to implement TI practices and procedures that are infused into daily practice, program design, policies, systems of student support, and the culture of the school (Cole, Greenberg-O’Brien, and Wallace, 2013; National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], 2017).



A program, organization or system that is trauma-informed realizes the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery; recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system; and responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices, and seeks to actively resist retraumatization.

—the 4 R’s from Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014, p. 9

In this brief, the term “TI approach” is used to denote emergent TI approaches ranging from a few classroom practices to formal programs with circumscribed components, or whole-school approaches that are tailored to the specific context (see Brief #3).

By using the “lens of trauma,” staff, students, and school leaders can understand behavior and be able to better support students by meeting their underlying need, rather than having policies that punish the symptom. This shift from traditional perspective to a “TI perspective” (see Exhibit 1) is essential to change the school culture in order to change policies, procedures, and classroom structure and functioning, and ultimately change outcomes for students.

Exhibit 1. Comparison of traditional vs. TI perspective

Traditional Perspective	TI Perspective
» Students’ challenging behaviors are the result of individual deficits (e.g., what’s wrong with you?).	» Students challenging behaviors may be ways of coping with a traumatic experience(s).
» Focus on changing the individual to “fix” the problem.	» Focus on changing the environment.
» Adults need to uphold authority and control with students and families.	» Adults need to work with students and families.
» Punitive discipline works.	» Positive discipline that is instructional and focuses on teaching and reinforcing prosocial replacement behaviors works.
» Support for students exposed to trauma is provided by counseling professionals.	» Support for students exposed to trauma is the shared responsibility of all staff.

Source: Colorado Department of Education, 2018



TI practices can also be implemented in efforts to mitigate and recover [learning loss](#), including accelerated summer programming, or in [out-of-school-time](#) activities, in-person or [online](#), to promote healthy, resilient educators, learners, and communities and to create more equitable outcomes for students.

Recognizing the Benefits of TI in Schools

Recognizing the critical need to support students and staff in addressing their mental health and social and emotional needs in the current and upcoming years, [schools are adopting](#) universal TI approaches that can potentially benefit all students, in addition to providing supports for those who are at risk. Although large-scale studies of multi-tier prevention and intervention programs are lacking, several reviews have shown that the integration of TI practices within the educational system is feasible, and is associated with reductions in symptoms for children who have experienced or are experiencing trauma (Stratford et al., 2020).

At Tier 1, TI implementation helps not only students who are at-risk for or already demonstrating socio-emotional and behavior problems but also helps their peers to be more empathetic, compassionate, and supportive in interactions with them. Increases in self-regulation can improve academic functioning (Blodgett, 2012) as well as social functioning (Shonkoff et al., 2012). Preliminary data from a demonstration project with a large urban school district showed a significant reduction in suspensions and disciplinary infractions (von der Embse et al., 2019). Positive results were reported for student well-being, achievement, behavior, and engagement as a result of a trauma-informed positive education program (Brunzell, Stoke, & Waters, 2019), with increases in the development of relationships and self-awareness (Roseby and Gascoigne, 2021). Although findings were not consistent across settings (likely due to implementation differences), positive impacts were reported on students' literacy and numeracy achievement, and decreases in suspension rates (Stokes and Turnbull, 2016).

Elementary schools in rural Maine piloted the Trauma-Responsive Equitable Education (TREE) program, which is a whole-school MTSS approach to address trauma and chronic stress at the student, staff, and school organizational level. [Preliminary results](#) in 2019 show ~ 18 percent to 28 percent improved performance on standardized scores in English, language arts, and math; 50 percent decline in chronic absenteeism, especially among students receiving TREE mental health services; and improvement in school climate measures.

At Tier II and III, TI implementation has been associated with significant decreases in depressive symptoms (Ooi et al., 2016), PTSD symptoms and psychopathology (Qouta et al., 2012), and increases in a metric assessing children's feelings of hope with medium to large effect sizes (Berger and Gelkopf, 2009). One of the more common TI programs that has been delivered across a number of ethnically and culturally diverse samples and participation is the Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS; Perry and Daniels, 2016). CBITS is a brief, group-based



intervention designed to be most effective for 10- to 18-year-olds with moderate levels of trauma symptoms, and has been linked to reductions in PTSD, depression, and anxiety symptoms, and improvements in school performance and coping strategies (Goodkind, LaNoue, and Milford, 2010; Morsette et al., 2012; Stein et al., 2003). For students who received targeted intervention within a wider trauma-informed program, positive changes were reported for their school attendance, their ability to learn, time spent in the classroom, their time-on-task in the classroom, and reduced disciplinary incidents (Baroni et al., 2020; Dorado et al., 2016).

“We need to make sure every child has a level playing field. We’re planting seeds. We’re working with the future.”

—A teacher, from Maine¹

Understanding the Critical Components of a TI approach

There are several TI approaches that schools and districts can adapt based on the local context, current and future priorities, and resources.² This brief outlines seven key components of TI approach that need to be implemented for a school to be TI/trauma sensitive.³ As mentioned earlier, the components of a TI approach are best implemented when integrated into an MTSS framework. The timeline and the phases of the implementation will depend on the specific school/district.

Increasing awareness and skill development: The foundation of a TI approach is to increase [awareness](#) about trauma, its impact, and the importance and benefits of TI practices at the school, district, and state level. This foundational knowledge and skills needs to be integrated into routine [professional development](#) opportunities for school staff that includes ongoing learning and coaching to support implementation of TI practices in [classroom](#) interactions, embed TI and SEL in curriculum, and develop both the mindset and skills necessary for interacting with students in trauma-sensitive ways. The professional development should also focus on staff [self-care](#) and fostering their socio-emotional competencies to model adult self-regulation, and provide supports and stress-management resources to educators displaying signs of burnout and/or stress.

¹ Source: Transforming Rural Experience in Education (2019): [Impact Report](#).

² The National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN] outlines [ten core elements](#), the Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative (TLPI) identifies [six core attributes](#), and the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (NCSSLE) have identified [six core components](#) of a TI approach (Guarino and Chagnon, 2018), to name a few.

³ Adapted from Guarino and Willis-Darpoh (2016), from NCTSN (2017), and from resources from the [Wisconsin Department of Education \(2017\)](#).



Creating a safe environment for students and staff: Regulating arousal, emotion, behavior, and attention is a precursor to learning. Student behaviors in the classroom, such as lack of respect for others or acting out, or disengagement, may stem from feeling unsafe. Creating a safe, predictable, and equitable classroom, either [online](#) or in-person, can foster such environments needed to help students and teachers calm their emotions and focus on teaching and learning, such as by creating consistent schedules and predictable classroom routines. Safe environments include not just the classroom but also schoolwide protocols and policies that address bullying, identify threats, harassment, inequity, and other behaviors that compromise the safety to the learning environment.

Connecting to resources on trauma and mental health: Given the expected rise in mental health and socioemotional needs in the upcoming years, providing informational [resources](#) as well as access to trauma-specific interventions for students and staff is essential. This requires that all school-based [screening](#) and assessments consider student-centered ways of assessing the [impact of trauma](#) and plans consider ways to address trauma. Schools that have in-house mental health professionals can provide additional trauma training and can offer clinical support directly to teachers, participate in consultations about individual children, conduct testing and evaluations, and provide trainings and presentations. Schools that do not have in-house support can reach out to community-based behavioral and mental health services, and have local mental health agencies or private practitioners set up tele-mental health services that could even be delivered to students and staff. Students and staff need options for self-referral that reduce stigma. Schools and partners can generate a catalogue of services available at the school and in the community, and disseminate it to staff and families.

Supporting and teaching emotional and behavioral regulation: Social emotional competence involves the development of effective regulatory/coping skills, and are foundational for student success and learning (Hamilton, Doss, and Steiner, 2019). Promoting [emotional regulation](#) and building social emotional competencies (CASEL, 2020) can help students to be resilient and succeed academically. Well-executed, equity-focused SEL practices can help improve some of the same skills that might be underdeveloped in students with ACEs. TI schools need to provide core instruction on self-regulation, including a broader instructional plan that aims to help students understand their stress response systems, and how to regulate their arousal by way of mindfulness practices and self-regulation strategies, and foster healthy emotional expression.

Building relationships and connectedness: TI approach requires actively building and nurturing a school climate that emphasizes healthy relationships [within the school](#) as well as into the extended school community. By incorporating TI learning environments and SEL activities into the classroom, and allowing time for fostering relationships, teachers can help students build the skills they need to form and maintain those healthy relationships. To aid this, professional development opportunities for school personnel should be infused with strategies for understanding the cultural perspectives of students and other staff. The process of building relationships also spans across systems and [community partnerships](#). Schools' outreach to community partners, including local



colleges, clinics, community mental health organizations, [youth-focused groups](#), law enforcement, and other community partners is critical for building cross-systems relationships. Important across all TI components, but especially in this one, is to adopt formal mechanisms for seeking regular input from youth and families by including them on agency boards, advisory groups, and working groups as well as creating partnerships with community members who specialize in working with youth of color and marginalized communities.

Policies and procedures: Existing [policies](#) and procedures need to be reviewed regularly using TI core principles, and then modified when inconsistencies arise to ensure full alignment. In particular, school/district policies need to be reviewed to reduce the unnecessary use of exclusion and referrals to law enforcement/juvenile justice, and promote positive behavior (e.g., PBIS, restorative practices, etc.). Disciplinary procedures should be implemented in an equitable way that eliminates disproportionality in disciplinary practices. School policies need to promote culturally appropriate responses to trauma and encourage staff to recognize differences in individual experiences and responses to trauma, including help-seeking behaviors. Districts can use policy changes as a lever to initiate TI/SEL implementation such as requiring essential teacher preparation programs to address TI, or requiring demonstration of TI awareness and SEL competencies for teacher certification.

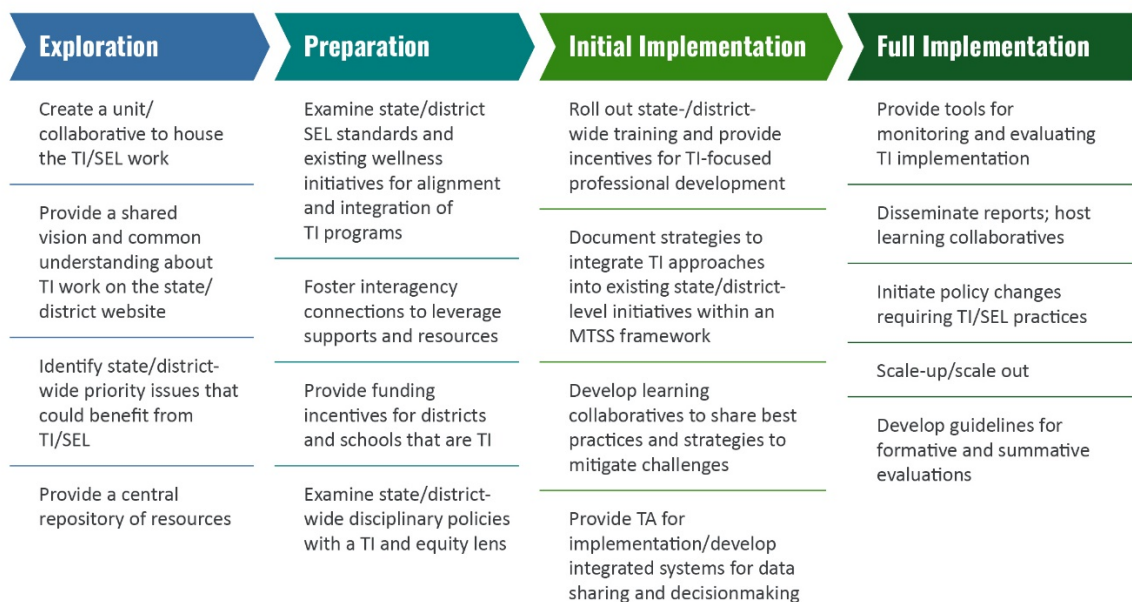
Planning a Phased implementation

Implementing and integrating the core TI components as outlined above can take several years. Schools adopting TI approaches require strategic planning with district/state leaders, school administrators, and other stakeholders with multiple levels of decisions, actions, and mitigations. Planning for efficient and sustainable implementation requires considering long-term implementation in phases. It is advisable to start small with a few TI practices before going on to whole-school TI approaches.

The graphic below shows a heuristic framework for understanding the phased process of implementation at the school and district/state level.



Phases of TI Implementation – Districts/States



The graphic shows a few key strategies that can be undertaken by a school or a district/state for each of the phases. It is possible for a school or district/state to cycle through the four phases more than once and perhaps concurrently at times, as the school itself refines its practices or as new issues arise. In addition, the time it takes to move through each phase will look different for different schools and districts depending on the local context. A more detailed guide on the implementation and steps to be taken to become TI schools or districts can be found [here](#) (National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments [NCSSLE], 2018).

Irrespective of the specific path taken, the eventual goal for schools is to foster supportive learning environments through a whole-school systems change approach. TI/SEL approaches when implemented effectively and integrated into the fabric of the school and community, promote equity, and provide students with the skills they need to be successful.

In conclusion, no matter what path the journey to becoming TI takes, it requires a broader systems-level approach based on a holistic plan and backed by collaborations at the school, district, and state levels. Implementation of a TI approach includes viewing it not as an add-on or equated with mental health but as a range of skills and behaviors related to creating safe and supportive learning environments that are best integrated throughout the school infrastructure and functioning.



Resources

Suggested Resource	Description
Trauma-Informed Practices within a Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports Framework: A Guide for Implementation	Intended for schools that have already adopted a multi-tiered PBIS approach and would like to understand how to integrate trauma-informed approaches within their existing PBIS framework
Creating, Supporting, and Sustaining Trauma-Informed Schools: A System Framework	Outlines 10 core areas of a TI school system and provides guidance to schools and administrators on how to support school staff, create TI learning environments, and address cultural responsiveness
Trauma-Informed SEL Toolkit	Provides resources to explore both TI and SEL, strategies to implement in the classroom, and prompts for reflections aimed at facilitating educator learning and engagement with the material
State Actions to Support Social, Emotional, and Academic Development	Details a list of concrete actions state leaders can take to advance policy solutions that develop, maintain, and strengthen the crucial connections and relationships that are necessary for healing and learning
Trauma-Sensitive Schools Training Package	Provides school and district administrators and staff a roadmap and tools for adopting a school- or districtwide approach to addressing trauma and promoting resilience

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