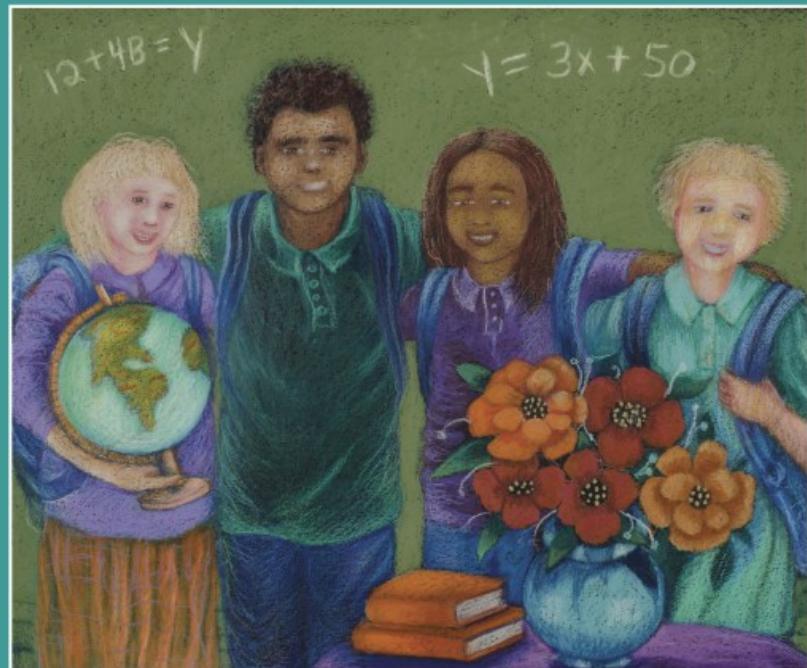


Helping Traumatized Children Learn

2

safe, supportive learning environments that benefit all children

Creating and Advocating for
Trauma-Sensitive Schools



Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative
a partnership of Massachusetts Advocates for Children and Harvard Law School

Book Study Helping Traumatized Children Learn: Volume 2

CREATING AND ADVOCATING FOR
TRAUMA-SENSITIVE SCHOOLS

Helping Traumatized Children Learn

Creating and Advocating for Trauma-Sensitive Schools
Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative, of
Massachusetts Advocates for Children
and Harvard Law School

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Helping Traumatized Children Learn

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The Goal of the Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative is:



To help schools become safe havens for learning: Places where all students, including those who are traumatized, can calm their fears, make positive connections with adults and peers, behave appropriately, and learn at their highest levels.

A Trauma-Sensitive School

- ▶ A trauma-sensitive school is one in which **all students feel safe, welcomed, and supported**, and where addressing trauma's impact on learning on a school-wide basis is at the **center of its educational mission**.

High Rates of Traumatic Experiences

50% of persons surveyed reported living in a home with at least one of the following:

- ▶ **Physical abuse**
- ▶ **Sexual abuse**
- ▶ **Psychological abuse**
- ▶ Witnessing **domestic violence**
- ▶ Living with a parent experiencing:
 - ▶ **mental illness,**
 - ▶ **substance abuse,**
 - ▶ involvement in **criminal behavior.**

The prevalence is further increased by identifying children who:

- ▶ Are chronically **bullied**
- ▶ Live with **homelessness**
- ▶ Live in the proximity of **community violence**
- ▶ Are **refugees** from war-torn countries
- ▶ Are shuttled around **the foster care system**
- ▶ Survive **natural disasters,**
- ▶ Undergo **multiple, invasive medical procedures**
- ▶ Live with a parent **traumatized** by combat

Impacts of Trauma

Traumatic experiences can profoundly impact:

- ▶ **Learning**, specifically memory, language development, and writing.
- ▶ **Behavior**, including perfectionism, withdrawal, aggression, inattention, lack of self-awareness, empathy, and self-regulation, or they might appear lazy, or lacking motivation.
- ▶ **Relationships**, they may not trust that other students or teachers have their best interests at heart.

No two children will be affected by a similar event in exactly the same way. A child's age and temperament, the nature of the experience, and the child's social context all play a role.

Impacts of Trauma

- ▶ All students need attention, not just those directly impacted by a trauma.
- ▶ We do not, will not, and cannot know all of the students who are affected by a traumatic incident.
- ▶ Develop a sense of COMMUNITY for ALL within the school.
- ▶ What is good for students directly affected by trauma will be good for ALL students in the school.

Studies from public health experts, neurobiologists, and psychologists support greater empathy and a shift in perception about the underlying challenges students face at schools. This knowledge informs development of:

The Trauma Lens:

a new lens through which students and their learning, behavior, and relationships can be seen and understood.



Through the Trauma Lens

Through the Trauma Lens we realize:

- ▶ An awareness; a deeper understanding; a shift in perception.
- ▶ Punitive responses often exacerbate the problem and retraumatize the child.
- ▶ Systemic barriers to be acknowledged and addressed.
- ▶ It takes consistent school-wide participation to support a shift-in-culture that sustains trauma-sensitive ways of thinking and acting.

A turning point for many educators has been understanding just how common traumatic experiences are in the lives of children.

Reactive to Proactive

"...we are now proactive, where before we were reactive. We no longer just respond to students' challenges and behaviors punitively."

-Darrel, School Principal

Benefits of Trauma-Sensitive Schools

Students at trauma-sensitive schools benefit from:

- ▶ Greater academic achievement.
- ▶ More time spent on learning.
- ▶ Reduced disciplinary referrals.
- ▶ Improved relationships with peers and adults.
- ▶ More supportive teaching in the classroom.

Moving to Action

Children must feel safe in all parts of the school, not just in one program or with one teacher.



Moving to Action

Moving to action can be difficult:

- ▶ It can be easy to lose patience with the students who need it most.
- ▶ Trauma sensitivity may get lost in competing initiatives.
- ▶ Messages to meet legal and policy requirements can seem overwhelming.
- ▶ An individual teacher is not nearly enough!
- ▶ Focus on small, manageable, achievable, short-term actions
 - ▶ Identify actions that do NOT need outside resources
 - ▶ “Small wins” = a BIG concept

Moving to Action

No single attribute of a trauma-sensitive school can be viewed as an isolated fragment; they are all interrelated, adding up to a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

School-wide trauma-sensitivity requires participation from:

- ▶ Administrators
- ▶ Educators
- ▶ Paraprofessionals
- ▶ Parents
- ▶ Custodians
- ▶ Bus Drivers
- ▶ Lunch Personnel
- ▶ School Volunteers
- ▶ Everyone

Moving to Action

- ▶ A trauma-sensitive school tailors solutions, programs and services that will "fit" the school's unique culture and support priorities identified by its educators.
- ▶ TOOLS – not instructions – are provided to equip schools with the ability to build their own trauma-sensitive approaches to meet the needs of their students and families.

Moving to Action

- ▶ Decide where to start – start small
- ▶ Brainstorm Actions – Look for actions that do NOT need outside resources.
- ▶ Use your creativity
- ▶ Engage your wisdom
- ▶ Refer to your deep knowledge of your school's strengths and challenges
- ▶ Meet in the mornings if possible
- ▶ Be flexible

Chapter 1: A Vision for a Trauma-Sensitive School





In a trauma-sensitive school, educators make the switch from asking “What can I do to fix this child?” to “What can WE do as a community to support all children to help them feel safe and participate fully in our community?”

Trauma-Sensitive Vision Questions

- ▶ Serve as a touchstone or reminder to keep the vision in clear view as schools identify priorities and plan, implement, and evaluate their action plans.
- ▶ Encourage active reflection and thoughtful inquiry on ways to achieve the vision of a trauma-sensitive school.

Trauma-Sensitive Vision Questions

Trauma-Sensitive Vision Questions ask:

- ▶ How will addressing this priority:
 - ▶ deepen our shared understanding of how trauma impacts learning and why a school-wide approach is needed for creating a trauma-sensitive school?
 - ▶ help the school effectively support all students to feel safe— physically, socially, emotionally, and academically?
 - ▶ address students' needs in holistic ways, taking into account their relationships, self-regulation, academic competence, and physical and emotional well-being?

Trauma-Sensitive Vision Questions

Trauma-Sensitive Vision Questions ask:

- ▶ How will addressing this priority:
 - ▶ explicitly connect students to the school community and provide multiple opportunities for students to practice newly developing skills throughout the school?
 - ▶ support staff's capacity to work together as a team with a sense of shared responsibility for every student?
 - ▶ help the school anticipate and adapt to the ever-changing needs of our students and the surrounding community?

Adults in Trauma-Sensitive Schools:

- ▶ Share an understanding of how trauma impacts learning and why a school-wide approach is needed for creating a trauma-sensitive school
- ▶ Support all students to feel safe -physically, socially, emotionally and academically
- ▶ Address students' needs in holistic ways, taking into account their relationships, self-regulation, academic competence, and physical and emotional well-being
- ▶ Explicitly connect students to the school community, providing them with multiple opportunities to practice newly developing skills
- ▶ Embrace teamwork with a sense of a shared responsibility for every student
- ▶ Anticipate and adapt to the ever-changing needs of students and the surrounding community

The Flexible Framework

The Flexible Framework:

- ▶ Anticipates the institutional barriers that might hinder effective implementation.
- ▶ "Covers the bases" to make sure that trauma-sensitivity is infused into each aspect of the school.
- ▶ Avoids a situation in which staff are left wondering why sufficient professional development, connections to mental health services, or policies to cement new approaches into place were not included in an Action Plan.

Flexible Framework Components

While flexibility is key, six components of the Flexible Framework remain constant:

1. Leadership by school and district administrators.

- ▶ What role does school and/or district leadership play in implementation?

2. Professional development and skill building for all staff.

- ▶ What professional development is necessary for implementation?

3. Access to resources and services.

- ▶ What resources, supports or services need to be in place for students, families, and/or staff?

Flexible Framework Components

4. Academic and nonacademic strategies.

- ▶ What classroom strategies – both academically and nonacademic – support implementation?

5. Policies, procedures and protocols.

- ▶ What policies, procedures, or protocols do we need to review, revise and/or develop?

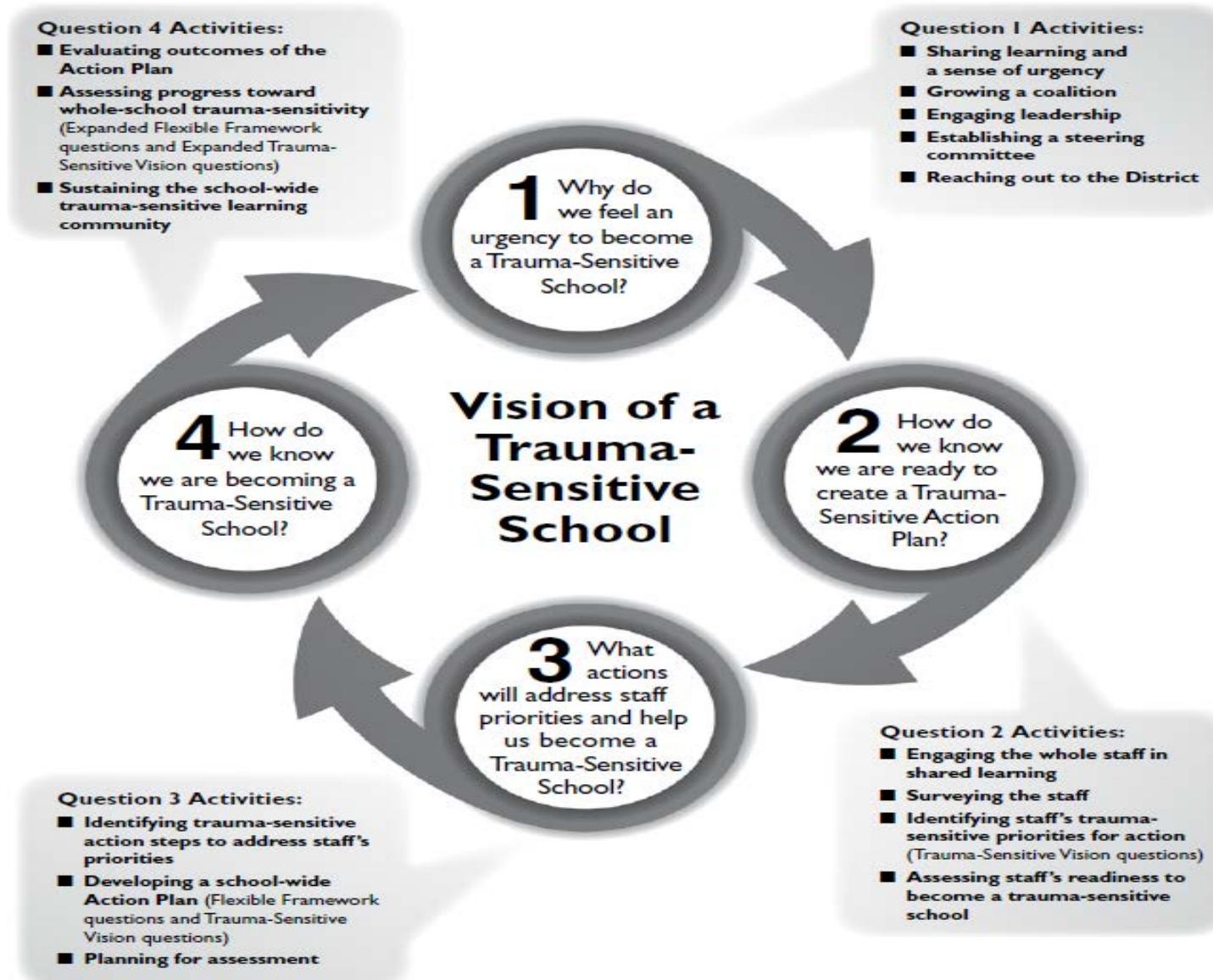
6. Collaboration with families.

- ▶ What do we need to do to ensure that families are active partners in helping with implementation?

Chapter 2: Guide to Creating a Trauma-Sensitive School



Process for Creating a Trauma-Sensitive School



“

Why do we feel an urgency to become
a Trauma-Sensitive School?

”

Question One

Why do we feel an urgency to become a Trauma-Sensitive School?

At this stage:

- ▶ Trauma-sensitivity must be fueled by **a strong sense of motivation**.
 - ▶ *"While not all the children with traumatic histories were struggling, it was clear to me that adversity was a strong predictor of challenges in school and that we could not in good conscience ignore a plan for addressing the role of trauma in our school."*
- The principal of the Roosevelt School, a rural elementary school

Why do we feel an urgency to become a Trauma-Sensitive School?

Students at trauma-sensitive schools benefit from:

- ▶ Greater academic achievement.
- ▶ More time spent on learning.
- ▶ Reduced disciplinary referrals.
- ▶ Improved relationships with peers and adults.
- ▶ More supportive teaching in the classroom.

Question 1- Roadmap

- ▶ Articulating the Urgency.
- ▶ Growing a Coalition.
- ▶ Engage leadership:
 - ▶ The Role of the Principal.
- ▶ The Role of Sounding Boards/Thinking Partners.
- ▶ Establish a Steering Committee:
 - ▶ The Role of the Steering Committee.
- ▶ Reaching out to the District.
- ▶ State Support.

Question 1 – Roadmap

- ▶ **Articulating the Urgency.**

A sense of urgency about trauma sensitivity is the seed for making change. No concrete plan is needed at this stage.

- ▶ **Growing a Coalition Through Shared Learning.**

Sharing and discussing with small groups of like-minded colleagues about the prevalence of traumatic experiences; their impacts on learning; and the need for whole-school approaches can start to build a consensus of trauma-sensitivity is a way to address the school's priorities.

Question 1 – Roadmap

- ▶ **The Role of the Principal.**

Without leadership, short-term goal achievement will not be sustainable nor will it create the change needed throughout the whole school. Ultimately, the principal must give permission for all staff in the school to be part of effecting change.

- ▶ **The Role of Sounding Boards/Thinking Partners.**

“Thinking partner,” to help strategize how to implement whole-school change and of trauma’s impact on learning. Consider questions like:

“How do you think it’s going?”

“Where do you want to take this now?”

Question 1 – Roadmap

- ▶ **The Role of the Steering Committee.**

The steering committee functions much like a work group, closely collaborating with—and on behalf of—the entire school staff; strategizing, continually reporting back, soliciting input, and obtaining approval on planning.

- ▶ **District Support.**

Sustaining culture change involves including and expanding into the educational district, which allows for all to learn and build capacity together.

- ▶ **State Support.**

Can make trauma-sensitive schools a priority, and can put them on the “front burner.”

“

How do we know we are
ready to create a Trauma-
Sensitive Action Plan? ”

Question Two

How do we know we are ready to create a Trauma-Sensitive Action Plan?

► *"We were aware that our students dealt with much adversity - from gunshots to home invasions to homelessness and foster care.... We had high expectations for each student, but we couldn't make gains in academic achievement.... We did everything we could think of, but some missing piece was keeping us from making progress."*

— The principal of the Lincoln School, an urban elementary school

Question 2 – Roadmap

- ▶ Engaging the staff through shared learning.
- ▶ Surveying the staff.
- ▶ Analyzing the survey and “the buzz.”
- ▶ Arriving at priorities though whole school discussions.

Question 2 – Roadmap

► **Extending the Urgency through Shared Learning.**

Provide opportunities for the whole staff to engage in shared learning about the prevalence and impact of trauma and what it means to become a trauma-sensitive school.

► **Surveying the Staff.**

These questions embody the new understanding of whole-school trauma sensitivity:

What are your reactions to the information you have received?

What ideas do you have about weaving trauma-sensitive approaches into the fabric of our school?

What challenges or barriers must we overcome in order to create a trauma-sensitive environment at our school?

Question 2 – Roadmap

► **Analyzing the survey and “the buzz”**

Look for evidence of two core aspects of readiness:

- ▶ Whether a critical mass of school staff appears motivated to embrace the vision of a trauma-sensitive school.
- ▶ Whether there seems to be a consensus about the short-term priorities that the school can address by becoming trauma sensitive.

► **Arriving at priorities through whole school discussions.**

Analyzes the surveys.

Convenes a second school-wide meeting, facilitates discussion among all staff, and identifies themes; reaching consensus on the set of priorities that will guide the action-planning process.

Uses the Trauma-Sensitive Vision questions to guide priorities.

“ What actions will address staff priorities and help us become a Trauma-Sensitive School? ”

Question Three

What actions will address staff priorities and help us become a Trauma-Sensitive School?

At this stage:

- ▶ All staff's thinking, ideas, and conversations get translated into a plan for concrete action.
- ▶ The steering committee determines which priorities identified by staff should be addressed first.
- ▶ The steering committee brainstorms actions that will address each priority.
- ▶ The steering committee uses the Trauma-Sensitive Vision and Flexible Framework questions.
- ▶ The steering committee develops an Action Plan to assess implementation.
- ▶ The Action Plan is presented to the whole staff for feedback.
- ▶ The school is ready to dive in and begin taking action.

Question 3 – Roadmap

- ▶ Deciding Where to Start.
- ▶ Brainstorming Actions.
- ▶ Using the Flexible Framework to Develop an Action Plan.
- ▶ Looking at the Action Plan though the Trauma Lens.
- ▶ Planning for Assessment of the Action Plan.
- ▶ Sharing the Action Plan with the Whole School.

Question 3 – Roadmap

► Deciding Where to Start

Determining one or two most pressing goals, achievable in the short term, to leverage the greatest amount of improvement for students while still ensuring that the staff will feel the satisfaction that comes from seeing short-term, concrete results.

► Brainstorming Actions

Reach consensus on the key actions need to address each of the chosen priorities and determining which actions will accomplish these goals.

Question 3 – Roadmap

► Using the Flexible Framework to Develop an Action Plan.

To ensure that the Action Plan weaves trauma-sensitivity throughout all of the school's core operations, the steering committee should consider:

How can each operation *support* implementation of the action?

How can each operation act as an institutional *barrier* to implementation?

Flexible Framework Questions

- What role does school and/or district leadership play in implementation?
- What professional development is necessary for implementation?
- What resources, supports, or services need to be in place for students, families, and/or staff?
- What classroom strategies—both academic and nonacademic—support implementation?
- What policies, procedures, or protocols do we need to review, revise, and/or develop?
- What do we need to do to ensure that families are active partners in helping with implementation?

Question 3 – Roadmap

- ▶ **Looking at the Action Plan through the Trauma Lens**

After an Action Plan is developed, revisit the Trauma-Sensitive Vision Questions.

- ▶ **Planning for Assessment of the Action Plan**

Think creatively about the kinds of data the school will use to track progress.

- ▶ What quantitative or qualitative measures are available for measuring goals?

- ▶ **Sharing the Action Plan with the Whole School**

Discuss details of the Action Plan when all staff are present and invite questions and feedback.

Clarify or add additional ideas into the plan that the steering committee may not have considered

“ How do we know whether
we are becoming a
trauma-sensitive school? ”

Question Four

Question 4 – Roadmap

- ▶ Maintaining the ongoing, dynamic process.
- ▶ Observable measures of progress.
- ▶ Focusing the assessment process.

Question 4 – Roadmap

At this stage:

- ▶ **Measure the Effectiveness of the Action Plan.**
 - ▶ Discuss ways to assess the broader culture change taking place in the school.
- ▶ **Revisit the Flexible Framework and Trauma-Sensitive Vision questions.**
 - ▶ Analyze and implement staff priorities so a school internalizes characteristics of whole-school trauma-sensitivity.
- ▶ **Observe and Document.**
 - ▶ Culture change will let the staff know that progress is taking place and that this transformation is starting to happen.

Question 4 – Roadmap

- ▶ **Maintaining the ongoing, dynamic process.**
 - ▶ It is crucial that all staff be actively included in the implementation process.
- ▶ **Observable measures of progress.**
 - ▶ Quantitative data: time on learning; academic achievements; school-based measures of student growth; and parent involvement.
 - ▶ Qualitative date: anecdotes as they occur and sharing them at staff meetings, so that individual students and staff can be recognized for their positive contributions.

By sharing both types of outcome data with the staff, the principal and the steering committee can generate momentum and propel the school toward trauma sensitivity by marking the culture change as it happens.

Question 4 – Roadmap

- ▶ **Focusing the assessment process.**
 - ▶ While tracking observable measures of success, it is important to consider three questions:
 - ▶ Are we accomplishing the actions in our Action Plan?
 - ▶ Are our actions addressing the staff's priorities in ways we hypothesized?
 - ▶ Has our Action Plan moved us closer to becoming a trauma-sensitive school?

Moving beyond the First Action Plan

- ▶ The school will know when it is time to consider identifying and addressing new priorities. When that happens, the process begins anew.



Chapter 3:□ Advocating for Trauma-Sensitive Schools



Advocating for Trauma-Sensitive Schools

- ▶ Advocating for laws, policies and funding mechanisms necessary to support trauma-sensitive schools is an indispensable counterpart to educators' efforts.
- ▶ Guide advocacy efforts by:
 - ▶ Starting with urgency.
 - ▶ Building a coalition.
 - ▶ Securing buy-in from leadership.
 - ▶ Generating action plans.
 - ▶ Reviewing outcomes.
 - ▶ Recalibrating efforts.
 - ▶ Cycling through the process again.

Policy Recommendations

- ▶ All levels of government should articulate a clear, strong, coordinated message that trauma-sensitive schools are a priority.
- ▶ Laws, policies, and funding streams should support creation of whole-school Action Plans that are organized according to core school operations.
- ▶ Professional development for educators, administrators, and allied professionals should develop a shared understanding of trauma's impact on learning and build skills in using a whole-school-inquiry basis to create trauma-sensitive schools.

Policy Recommendations

- ▶ Schools and outside agencies should collaborate to ensure services are an integral part of trauma-sensitive whole-school environments and connect students to their school communities.
- ▶ Schools and districts need adequate staffing to perform the administrative functions necessary for effective implementation.
- ▶ Laws and policies should clarify that evidence-based approaches include those that encourage schools to engage in local, staff-driven evaluation.