Creating Trauma-Informed Policies: 4 Choice Points for School and Mental Health Leadership

How might school leadership leverage policies to improve the experience and outcomes for students and those who serve them?

Effective decision making comes from a place of choice and intention. Creating Trauma-Informed Policies: A Practice Guide for School and Mental Health Leadership describes four leadership “choice points” for the creation, development, and implementation of trauma-informed and compassionate school approaches. Consider the following choice points as you develop and implement your trauma-informed policy.

**CHOICE POINT 1:**
**Names & Definitions:** What is the intended outcome of the trauma-informed work? What language reflects your mission and vision? Identify the outcome, name the practice, inform the policy

Be clear and intentional about language. For example, choose how you define and use:
- Trauma
- Trauma-Informed vs. Trauma-Responsive vs. Trauma-Sensitive Schools or Classrooms OR
- Resiliency-Oriented Schools OR
- Compassionate Schools OR
- Healing Centered Engagement

**Choices for leadership include:**
- What values and beliefs are you trying to communicate? What is the outcome of this work?
- Which definitions best fit your vision and mission?
- Is there language your school community would like to use? What language do your partners, funders, or other stakeholders use? How can you ensure alignment?

**CHOICE POINT 2:**
**Platform & Levers:** What is the right policy entry point? Which avenue will allow the policy to carry the most impact? Select the platform(s) for optimal policy change and advocacy

A policy needs a platform. Platforms include large platforms (large federal or state systems) and local platforms (individual community, school, or district). Choose the platform that will most impact practice shift in a sustainable, equitable manner.

**Choices for leadership include:**
- Which platform will maximize the culture shift desired?
- Is it more sustainable to create policy from the top down or bottom up?
- How might leadership from both levels collaborate to create policies that are aligned and mutually informing?

**CHOICE POINT 3:**
**Approach:** Is it most effective and sustaining to add to, amend, align, or drop current policies, or to add new policy? Assess where you are to inform the most effective and efficient approach

Creating trauma-informed school policies doesn’t have to start with drafting new policies.

- ADD policies that reflect a commitment to trauma-informed care and principles to implement it (e.g., policies that ensure professional development, pre- and in-service training).
- DROP policies that are recognized as trauma-uninformed and unnecessary (especially those that retraumatize or use seclusion or restraint).
- AMEND necessary policies that can’t be dropped because they are required; change the provisions or wording to reflect a trauma-informed lens (e.g., human resources policies).
- ADAPT trauma-informed legislation that exists in another system (juvenile justice, mental health) and re-tool it for school systems and environments.
- ALIGN trauma-informed policy and practices already in place (e.g., crisis response, expulsion and exclusion, school climate, or socio-emotional health policies).

**Choices for leadership include:**
- What policies and procedures are in place for crisis readiness, response, and recovery procedures that are co-constructed by school community members; written and accessible; and iteratively examined for accuracy?
- What role does the school board play in this process?
- Are there other systems from which you might adapt policy or legislation?
- What is your process for identifying and aligning current policy?

**CHOICE POINT 4:**
**Match Process to Product:** How might the process of developing the policy embody trauma-informed principles? Mirror a trauma-informed approach in the development of the policy

Trauma-informed policy development is most impactful when the process itself models trauma-informed principles and values. The “how” deeply impacts the “what.”

**Choices for leadership include:**
- How will we collaborate with support staff, teachers across subjects/grades, administrators, parents, classified staff, and union representation?
- How might written policies and procedures include a focus on trauma, safety, and confidentiality?
- How might we require all levels of school systems to have crisis readiness, response, and recovery procedures that are co-constructed by school community members; written and accessible; and iteratively examined for accuracy?
- How do staffing policies demonstrate a commitment to staff training events that are culturally relevant and trauma-informed?
- What policies and procedures are in place for including students and staff in school culture and climate, and instructional planning, governance, policy-making, services, and evaluation?