

Help trauma-affected students succeed with these strategies

Students exposed to violence, abandonment, or hardship or who lack resources may exhibit a trauma-based response to education that negatively affects their learning, said Sam Guzzardi, director of social work for Coney Island Prep, a charter school in Brooklyn, N.Y.

For example, such students often have an “either-or” presentation — they may be overactive or withdrawn, he said. Or they may be unable to see things from another person’s point of view, Guzzardi said.

Furthermore, students affected by trauma might have significant difficulty retaining information despite normal levels of intellectual functioning, said Ivan Haskell, director of social and psychological services at Mastery Charter Schools in Philadelphia. They may have poor social skills and have difficulty trusting staff and peers. You may also see increased anxiety, fear, and “spacing out” among students affected by trauma, he said.

Some charter schools may be tempted to immediately refer trauma-affected students for a special education evaluation. However, Guzzardi said, “If you are serving a student population where students are coming from high stress, high poverty areas, you should operate under the assumption that many children will have been exposed to things that are tough and terrible. Classrooms and teaching practices should be built on those assumptions,” he said.

In such cases, students can benefit from universal trauma-informed interventions, Haskell said. Those who respond well to universal interventions can avoid special ed classification under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

That said, make your charter school “trauma-informed” with these tips:

✓ **Encourage professional development:** Anything can trigger trauma, and we often are not aware of what those triggers may be, Haskell said. Something as simple as a class topic can bring up memories of a traumatic event for a student, he said. Thus, it’s important for all school staff to be aware of what trauma is, how it affects students, and how it can be addressed, Haskell said.

✓ **Bolster relationships between students, teachers:** Fortify relationships between students and their classroom teachers, Guzzardi said. For example, ensure that teachers are accessible outside of the instructional day to give students the sense that they can reach out to the teacher if necessary, he said.

✓ **Work as a team:** “Bringing a sense of team into classroom culture is essential,” Guzzardi said. Students who have been exposed to trauma tend to struggle when

they are under the impression that they are competing with everyone in the classroom, he said. Instead, “they will do much better with a sense that they are working together as one toward a common goal,” he said. So, create whole-class goals that are tracked publicly in a way that all students are contributing, Guzzardi said. For example, “our geometry class this year is doing ‘A race to 100 100s’ where all students are working together to get 100 percent on tests and quizzes,” Guzzardi said.

✓ **Give students sense of control:** Students affected by trauma typically experience strong feelings of fear when they don’t feel in control of a situation, Haskell said. To address this, some Mastery schools are implementing “peace corners,” which are areas of the classroom where students can choose to go if they experience escalating behavior. “It has to be the student’s choice,” Haskell said. If the student is forced to go to that space or perceives it as a punishment, it no longer serves its purpose of giving the student a sense of control, he said.

✓ **Provide alternative tasks:** If a task is too overwhelming for a child, prevent a pull-out intervention by having a lower-demand alternative task that is also learning-based, Guzzardi said. For example, if the student has to read passages and answer questions, and he is too activated to complete the task, have him do a lower demand, easier, and more accessible activity such as simply reading the newspaper. This keeps the student engaged in the classroom and in the work of learning, he said.

✓ **Replace disciplinary hearings:** Mastery has replaced disciplinary hearings with restorative conferences, Haskell said. For instance, if a special education student commits a high-level offense, the conference would involve the principal, assistant principal, student, parents, and special education case manager, Haskell said. The idea is to avoid giving the student the impression: “You are bad and this is why,” he said. Instead, the focus is on the damage done to the community, the student’s relationships with others, and what can be done to rectify the damage, Haskell said.

✓ **Identify adverse childhood experiences to gauge student needs:** Adverse childhood experiences are important to consider when determining whether a trauma-affected student needs intervention, Haskell said. In fact, he said, a study conducted by researchers at Washington State University found that students with three or more adverse childhood experiences were three times more likely to experience academic failure and six times more likely to have severe behavior problems than students with zero adverse childhood experiences. View the study at www.ccyj.org/uploads/2012%20Becca%20Conference%20Materials/ACEs%20Presentation.pdf. ■