

## School Crisis Plan Rationale

Providing students with targeted services and supports that are attuned to their strengths and holistic needs, both in and out of school, can positively affect their learning and experiences at school.

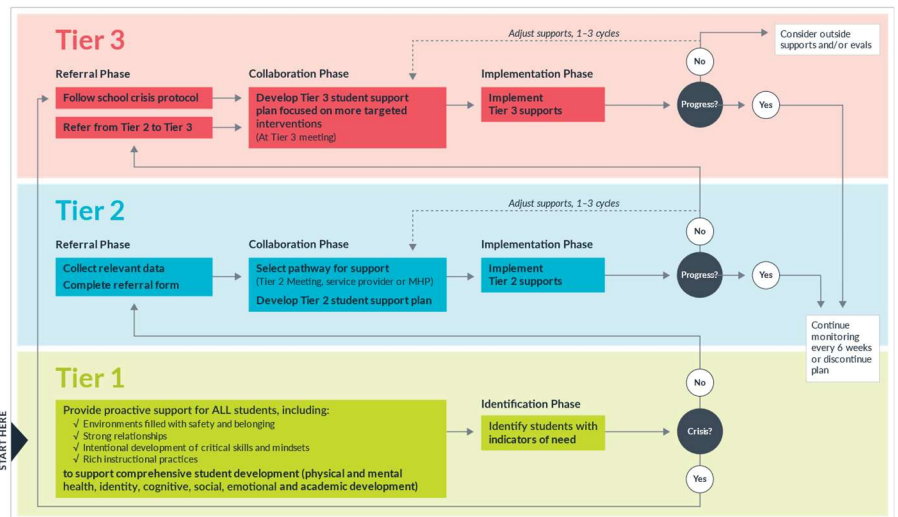
Each year, approximately 35 million children cope with some form of traumatic experience in the United States (Aces Too High, 2018). These experiences can come in the forms of abuse and neglect, exposure to family and/or community violence, lacking basic resources and homelessness, experiencing systemic oppression, discrimination, and more. All of these experiences can have a negative impact on the physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development of a child and affect the physiological development and function of critical brain structures (Perry, 2003). Yet despite this connection between student experience and student performance, many schools have traditionally treated academic needs and social-emotional needs as disciplines that operate in isolation of each other, failing to acknowledge the **integrated** and **holistic** nature of child development.

In support of this concept, the CDC notes that “mental health in childhood reflects the ability to reach developmental and emotional milestones, learn healthy social skills and how to cope when confronted with challenges” (Centers for Disease Control, 2019). The research also makes clear that it is important for schools to utilize an integrated, comprehensive approach to address the complex needs of all students in order to facilitate positive academic outcomes. “As schools develop supportive environments for all children’s learning, they must also be prepared to address individual needs that can create barriers to learning and development” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019, p. 33).

Providing students with targeted services and supports that are attuned to their strengths and holistic needs, both in and out of school, can positively affect their learning and experiences at school (Cantor et al., 2018). Therefore, a multi-tiered approach is recommended, providing both universal and specialized, individualized supports for students and families.

## Tiered Supports

The purpose of tiered supports is to provide a framework for **an adaptive, responsive continuum of integrated supports for all students** which will vary in level of intensity. Tiered support systems are developed and implemented in service of holistic outcomes – social, emotional, motivational, cognitive, academic, and so on – and in service of equity, so that all students can thrive. With that in mind, Tier 1 supports are the foundation, focusing on universal proactive efforts which include (1) environments filled with safety and belonging, (2) strong relationships, (3) intentional development of skills and mindsets, and (4) rich instructional experiences. Given some of the contextual factors identified above, it is necessary to provide additional resources in response to the needs of individuals or groups of students, ultimately benefitting all students. Tier 2 and Tier 3 provide these additional layers of support when universal practices are not enough to meet an individual student’s needs.



Even with a tiered support system in place, it can be easy to inadvertently place blame on students for failing to meet expectations. However, the science of learning and development tells us that there are reasons behind the academic, social,

emotional, and motivational challenges that students present. Instead of asking why a student isn't motivated, or what is "wrong" with them, we can ask instead: **How can we create an equitable school environment that acknowledges the unique strengths of each child while providing integrated supports that are adaptable to their individual needs?**

We begin to answer this question by designing a system that:

- **Recognizes and supports the needs of ALL children.** Children have strengths and challenges that are based on the ongoing interaction between their biology and experiences. As such, all children will need fluctuating levels of support throughout their academic career.
- **Provides supports in an integrated way.** Children are complex and influenced by context (i.e. environments, experiences, and relationships), so the approach to addressing their needs must be comprehensively addressed in a holistic and integrated manner. Schools are one of the best-suited places to provide this kind of support, as they are comprised of a diverse set of adults with varying disciplines who can work together.
- **Requires strong collaboration among all adults in a student's context.** Students bring with them the assets of culture and community, along with the difficulties and challenges they face outside of school. Many of those difficulties are complex in nature and will require support from a diverse set of resources to ensure quality and responsiveness to students and families.
- **Operates with an understanding of the impact of trauma and adversity on learning and development.** The ability to effectively address the needs of students is contingent on first developing a strong understanding about trauma-related challenges and the impact of traumatic experiences on learning.

These key principles lay the groundwork for designing and implementing a tiered support system. However, the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and the continued, often violent, demonstrations of systemic racism compound the existing adversities already faced by students. These two pandemics are examples of collective trauma, as these types of experiences are widespread and have both a psychological and physical impact on individuals, groups, communities, and society.

As stated earlier, Tier 3 services provide intensive supports for individual students with more significant needs or whose needs are not sufficiently met by Tier 2 supports. However, for many students in the current climate, the nature of their trauma(s) may be significant enough that an immediate response is needed. In such situations, students who are in need of crisis level supports at the Tier 1 universal level should be referred directly to Tier 3 for crisis support. This referral pathway within an existing tiered support system is called the crisis component of that system and is intended to serve the urgent needs of students. While for some students, traumatic events are one-time incidents that may have occurred in the past, some traumas are ongoing and/or may have compounded. For example, the systemic racism and violence has resulted in a particularly challenging time for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color). Additionally, because of COVID-19, racial inequities have been more explicitly revealed and, in many ways, reinforced. Schools must be proactive in creating environments that do not re-traumatize students.

## Collective Trauma

Given the scaled nature of collective trauma, we can acknowledge that there are some common ways in which such trauma impacts those affected by it. In the context of schools, collective trauma impacts all staff, students, caregivers, and the surrounding community. Some of these impacts include economic hardship, food insecurity, suicidal ideation, depression, anxiety, lack of housing or change in housing status, physical disability, and even loss of a loved one. For children, collective trauma can be particularly distressing; there may be significant changes to their routine, such as the inability to go to school and engage in other social activities, or they may feel the impact of the stress of their caregivers or friends, especially if they have constant exposure to it in the media. Other symptoms for children can include difficulty focusing, avoidance of work, lack of or increase in appetite, feelings of anger, and they may even demonstrate more disruptive behaviors.

In addition to that, caregivers and school staff alike are reacting similarly as disruptions in their routines and their own personal mental health challenges are compounded with that of children's distress. Consequently, adults may be unable to manage other daily activities such as going to work, cooking, sleeping, and exercising. In addition to the individual contexts of staff members, schools may experience funding cuts, impeding their ability to support students and the school community.

All of these challenges highlight the importance of recognizing and understanding the impact of trauma, working collaboratively, and prioritizing self-care for the adults as they continue to support students and families. It is inevitable that the structure and operation of schools may look and feel far different than before, at least in the beginning stages of recovery. For example, many schools are reopening in either a 100% virtual or a hybrid model of both virtual and in-person classes for students. This has caused schools across the country to grapple with how to meet the holistic needs of students in an extraordinarily different way than it has in the past.



Therefore, proactively designing and implementing a crisis plan that acknowledges the context and complex outcomes of experiencing and recovering from collective trauma is important. Schools should leverage all the key principles for tiered supports mentioned above to lay the groundwork for a crisis plan best suited to leverage the strengths and recognize the unique needs of all children and adults. Turnaround for Children acknowledges that schools must often rely on limited funding and staffing, greatly limiting their ability to act quickly and work collaboratively. Therefore, as schools re-open both virtually and in person, Turnaround offers guidance, tools and resources that will help inform the design and implementation of a crisis plan.

#### These tools include the following:

- **Roles of key staff members** (leadership, student support, teaching staff) from the perspective of student support as school re-opens online or in person
- How to **identify students in need of crisis support**
- Description of the **process for referring students**
- An example of a **referral form used for referring students** for crisis support
- Tools for **talking with families** about their strengths and needs
- Tool for **documenting** and keeping track of the needs and support plans for students
- Tools for **selecting and enhancing a partnership with a mental health agency**

Responding to collective trauma will require an integrated, multi-faceted approach to implementing a crisis plan. Student support staff are uniquely positioned to provide leadership around development and implementation of a school's crisis plan. The impact of trauma can be significant and detrimental to a child's development. However, the science, the above strategies and a holistic and integrated approach can work together to mitigate the impact of trauma and push toward positive, equitable outcomes for the whole school community.