

EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM TRANSFORMING EVERYDAY

TRAUMA

Trauma

Growing awareness reshapes Rochester schools' approach to teaching and supervision of students

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Gerson Garcia had been fighting. It happened during second-grade recess, and had to do with a ball on the playground. He was too angry to talk about it. One of his friends had seen him getting upset and alerted a teacher, who whisked him down the hallway at Enrico Fermi School 17, the skinny 8-year-old squirming in protest all the way. He ended up in the office of school sentry Miguel Rivera and — still not speaking — made a beeline for the trampoline.

When Rivera started working in the district as a sentry, or security officer, in 2008, he didn't have a trampoline in his office, much less a blue-and-white striped teepee or a pop-a-shot basketball setup with two hoops. He was there to enforce the rules, not to run a carnival.

“It used to be so stressful, I'd go home and have to sit in the driveway and decompress before I could deal with my own kids,” he said. “We used to restrain kids and stuff. It didn't work.”

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Enrico Fermi School 17 Principal Caterina Leone-Mannino, left, and a teacher escort second-grader Gerson Garcia to a classroom designed to help students burn off energy and anger and start conflict mediation. Across the district, adults are being asked to fundamentally recast the way they think about the children they teach and supervise.

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As Rivera was talking, Gerson was bouncing. After two or three minutes, his fists unclenched; his jaw softened. Principal Caterina Leone-Mannino waited another minute, then asked: “OK, Gerson, what’s going on?”

Still bouncing, he told her. He wasn’t mad anymore. He was just a boy on a trampoline.

Across the Rochester City School District, adults are being asked to fundamentally recast the way they think about the children they teach and supervise. The new approach, called trauma-informed education, begins with a recognition that many students will not succeed academically

unless their teachers, counselors and administrators give them loving support in calming the harmful effects of violence and poverty.

In Rochester, that means acknowledging that more than 2,000 students are homeless at some point in each school year, and that more than 50 percent live below the poverty line, according to annual ACT Rochester reports and other data sources.

From lack of prenatal care to lead poisoning to parents out of work — children in Rochester face statistically greater challenges than those anywhere else in the region.

That does not mean students face no consequences for wrongdoing. But research has shown that a trauma-informed approach, when properly implemented, can cut down on behavioral problems, boost grades and build children's resilience.

Much of the early research has come from Walla Walla, Washington, where the approach has been implemented to great effect, as documented in the film *Paper Tigers*. Graduation rates, for instance, improved from 44 percent to 78 percent in five years.

In Rochester, some early adopters have begun to see positive effects as well.

“We used to have kids in (the office) all the time because they'd fought with someone,” Leone-Mannino said. “Now we get kids coming in on their own, saying, ‘I need to talk to someone or else I'm going to fight.’ That's a huge change.”

About half the schools in the district have volunteered for intensive training on how to implement trauma-informed and restorative practices, and some have done it better than others. Some staff warn that if the district demands fewer suspensions but don't provide other tools, schools will descend into chaos.

School 17, long a trouble spot, is now a model for the district and one of the best resourced, thanks to partnerships with the Center For Youth, M.K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence and other community agencies. It, too, faced push-back at first, until adults could see the results.

“At first, I felt like they were turning my office into a playground,” Rivera said after Gerson Garcia went back to class, pacified. “But I love it. And I love it because it's effective.”

‘Schools should really be about relationships’

The recent history of the district's move toward trauma-informed care dates to November 2014 and the release of a damning report on the way adults responded to student misbehavior.

Nearly all suspensions were for nonviolent incidents. Black students and those with disabilities received the harshest punishment. Overall, one in five students ages 12-17 was suspended at least once in 2012-13.

The report was troubling, but perhaps worse was the fact that the district had only recently begun compiling such data. It acknowledged in

interviews at the time that its mandated reports to the New York state Education Department were often incomplete or inaccurate.

Rochester was not alone in its punitive approach to discipline. Urban districts across the country promoted zerotolerance policies in the belief that removing disruptive children from the classroom would help the others learn.

According to researchers, that never happened. Not only did suspensions not improve the attendance, grades or behavior of the student in question, but also a 2014 study in the American Sociological Review showed that in schools with high rates of suspensions, even those students who never got in trouble had their grades suffer.

“When you are in a very punitive environment, you’re getting the message that the school is focusing on crime control and behavior control,” the report author, Edward Morris, said. “Schools should really be about relationships.”

At the same time, a wave of neurological and sociological research was strengthening the consensus that exposure to a number of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), such as violence or homelessness, has lasting physiological impacts on children’s brains.

Specifically, traumatized children often have an underdeveloped frontal cortex, where the brain does its high-level decision making, and an overdeveloped fight-or-flight reflex. That combination makes it a monumental challenge to stay composed and on-task in class, setting off a cascade of bad outcomes throughout childhood and adulthood, starting with higher suspension and dropout rates and culminating in decreased life expectancy and a greater likelihood of incarceration.

The district convened a Community Task Force on School Climate and last year adopted a new code of conduct that emphasized restorative practices over punitive ones.

More important than that document, though, was the work the task force and district administrators were doing behind the scenes to sell the new approach to school building leaders.

Beginning in 2015-16, about a dozen RCSD schools, primary and secondary, volunteered their staff for intensive professional development on restorative practices and trauma-informed care. Many schools have also received additional reading teachers, social workers or psychologists.

In 2016-17, that number grew to 24 schools, about half the buildings in the district. Most of those also have “help zones,” where adults are on hand to calm agitated students and get them back to class.

In one such room at Kodak Park School 41, two boys named Aiden and Xavier were having the sort of inscrutable dispute that is common among 6-year-olds.

Aiden may have started the trouble by drinking from a classmate’s drink. That girl’s friend got mad at Aiden, and Xavier tried to come to Aiden’s defense, but Aiden didn’t recognize his offer to help and pushed him away. Something like that.

“How do you feel?” asked Cedric Shellman, who works at School 41’s restorative room through a contract with Center For Youth. Built like an NFL lineman, he waited patiently for the boys to tell their sides of the story.

“Mean,” Aiden answered, eyes on the floor. He looked mean.

“Did you put your hands on him?”

“Not that much.”

Shellman pursed his lips and turned toward Xavier: “Listen to me, man. You were trying to do something good, but he didn’t like it. So next time, just let the teacher know, OK?”

The boys shook hands on a tentative truce, then cemented it by putting together a puzzle on the floor before going back to class.

Gianna Arroyo, a sixth-grader at the school, said an intervention regarding a fight she had with another student was a catalyst to turning her entire mindset around, at school and at home.

“I thought it wasn’t going to get resolved. But they helped us fix it up, and now we’re friends actually,” she said. “It used to be, whenever someone touched me or something, I used to go crazy. Now I just let it go. ... It actually feels good, because I’m keeping my composure.”

At Wilson Magnet High School, assistant principals Denise Quamina and Dave Passero have spearheaded a number of restorative and trauma-informed initiatives, including teaching mindfulness to students in every art class.

In 2016-17, teachers reported significant improvements in behavior, attendance and attention, while suspensions fell by 44 percent; the mindfulness exercises will move to core subject classes next year.

“We just need five minutes, when things get out of control, to do some mindfulness, or some chair yoga, and then get back on track,” Quamina said. “The teachers loved it, and the kids loved it. And now we have the data to prove it.”

‘There’s no program’

Trauma-informed care is neither a curriculum nor a prescribed pedagogy; it is a lens for educators. It’s also not easy to figure the cost.

“People ask me, ‘What program do you have?’ and I tell them, ‘You’re the program,’ ” said Ruth Turner, the district’s executive director of student support services. “And that’s good when you run out of money, because it doesn’t cost much.”

By its nature, the concept is difficult to capture in a single budget line, but that doesn’t mean it comes free. If the district does not pay for social workers or help zone staff, good intentions will not be enough to succeed.

For example, if there are no adults trained in restorative circles — or if those adults have no time in their daily schedules for impromptu events — then students don't get the attention they need, while teachers and administrators grow frustrated at their lack of options.

While some schools have embraced the concept and seen benefits, others have been wary. It would not be the first time the district announced a new model but neglected to support it properly.

When the new code of conduct was first announced, both the teachers and administrators unions expressed concern about implementation.

“The code alludes to resources, i.e. ‘Intensive Support Staff ...’ that are simply not available at schools,” the Administrators and Supervisors Association of Rochester said in a statement. “For authors and advocates to think that anything will change because of the adoption of a new code is at the very best naïve.”

The 2017-18 district budget does include funding for a number of additional related positions, including an additional 17 counselors and social workers. Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams has promised to overhaul professional development for teachers to focus more on relationship building, at the heart of trauma-informed care.

Jim Caswell taught last school year at School 12 after several years at Wilson Magnet High School. While Wilson has several administrators committed to trauma-informed care, School 12 has seen more resistance, he said.

“Building leadership (at School 12) says we want to focus on restorative justice, but teachers can't just give up a whole period to do a conference with a student,” he said. “You don't have counselors, you don't have free time in teachers' schedules to do it, and what happens is teachers lose faith.

“You literally see people roll their eyes. Because teachers start to think ‘restorative’ means we'll just talk about it and kids won't have any consequences for their behavior. And that's not what it's supposed to be.”

Complicating matters is the fact that several schools that bought into traumainformed care saw their suspension rates shoot up in 2015-16 as they re-established behavioral expectations.

School 17, for example, saw suspensions go up 53 percent in 2015-16 before falling in 2016-17.

Changing the culture at East High School was a major goal for the University of Rochester team when it took over in 2015-16. Suspensions fell from 2,500 to 900 in the first year, and dropped again significantly in 2016-17.

“It takes so much grit to engage with kids and not just kick them out,” said Margaret Donlon, an instructional coach at East. “(Trauma-informed practices) need to be integrated into every level of decision-making, from both leadership and teachers.”

Even when students do get suspended, it looks different in a restorative model.

This spring, for instance, School 17 second-graders Kenyatta Johnson and Jada Chelsea Bernard received a oneday in-school suspension after fighting each other twice in art class. A teacher worked with both of them to stay up-todate on their work, and they met with Center For Youth intervention specialist Qawan Bollar to put their differences aside.

“I am sorry,” Jada started — then she paused for the talking stick, a necessity in restorative practices — “I am sorry for being mean and hitting you.”

“I am sorry I was mean to you two times in art class,” Kenyatta answered. “And I’m sorry I rolled my eyes at you, because it wasn’t nice.”

Trauma-informed care is not a final solution for the city’s educational ills; the trauma to which it responds is the problem that must be tackled.

Still, Bollar said: “We can’t just keep sending these kids out into the world without any way to solve their problems. We have to teach them another way.”

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Center For Youth intervention specialist Qawan Bollar talks with second-grader Jada Chelsea Bernard as they work on conflict resolution in the restorative peace room at School 17 in Rochester. Jada holds a talking stick, a necessity in restorative practices.

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Spero Michailidis, a youth educator with the M.K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence, holds a conflict meeting with sixth-grader Amaria Brown in his room at School 17, long a trouble spot but now a model for the district and one of the best resourced, thanks to partnerships.

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