



Center for Safe & Resilient
Schools and Workplaces

Safety, Resilience, and Success

A Practical Guide to a Trauma-Responsive
MTSS for District Leaders



Trauma is not the exception in today’s schools. It’s part of the norm. Across the country, schools and districts are grappling with an epidemic of stress, trauma and adversity that affects our classrooms and school communities. These events alter the way students learn, behave, and relate to others. Until we account for this fact in schools, we cannot optimize learning.

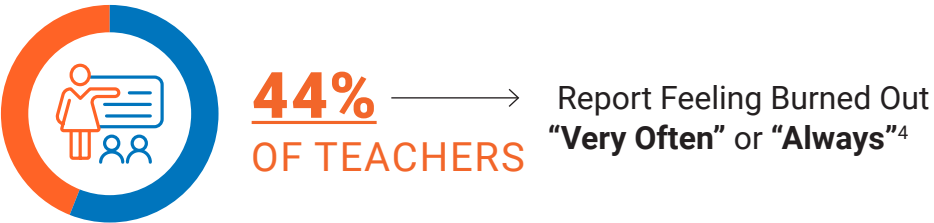
The numbers are telling. Each year, approximately [1 in 7 children](#)¹ in the U.S. are exposed to adverse or potentially traumatic experiences. By the time they turn 16, **two thirds of students will have experienced at least one traumatic event**, which have a [demonstrated negative impact on academic functioning](#).²

Youth Trauma Rates



Teachers, school mental health professionals, administrators, and support staff often share the invisible weight of the trauma epidemic. Faced with students’ social-emotional challenges, dysregulated behaviors, and academic struggles, they feel immense pressure to address increasingly complex needs without appropriate training or support.

This can lead to a host of negative consequences including [secondary trauma](#)³, a phenomenon in which exposure to others’ trauma creates stress responses in the helper. The impact ripples outward, **contributing to chronic staff burnout, compassion fatigue, high turnover rates, and costly inefficiencies at the district level**, which threatens the stability and continuity of our educational systems.

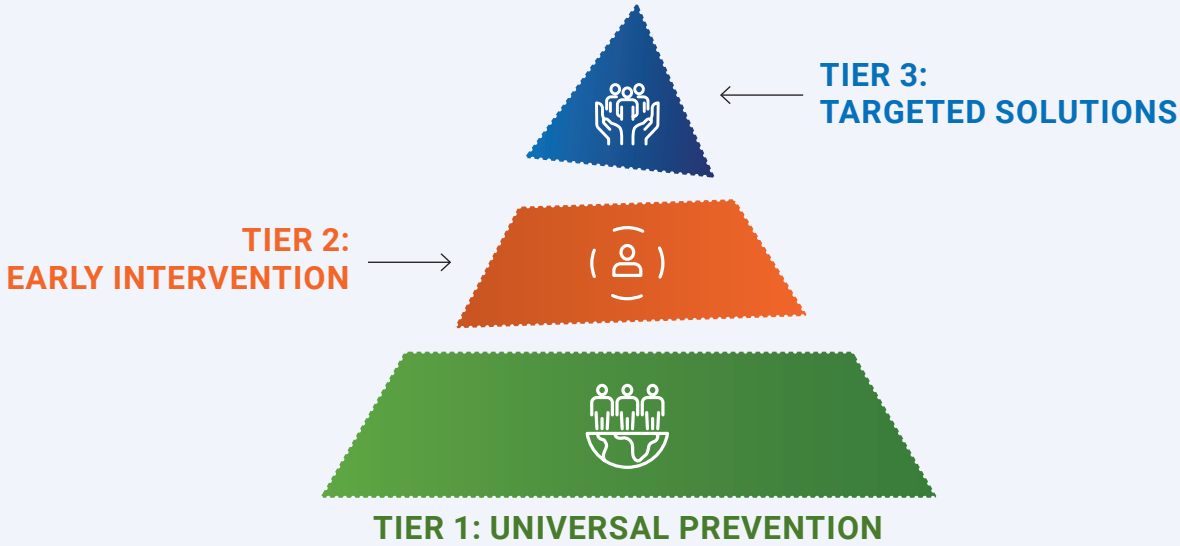


Recent years have only amplified these challenges. Public school communities across the country experience violence at a rate of nearly [30 incidents per 1,000 enrolled students](#).⁵ Educators are watching the consequences play out in real time—lower academic performance, disruptions to learning such as school lockdowns, absenteeism, and disconnection from learning at both the student and teacher level.

The Solution: Trauma-Responsive MTSS

The systemic and complex challenges associated with childhood traumatic stress require a broader systemic approach. A Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) offers a useful framework. At its best, MTSS is designed to provide layered support for all students’ academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs. However, in many districts, the academic component of MTSS dominates, while the equally critical social-emotional and behavioral components remain underdeveloped.

This imbalance leaves trauma-impacted students, and the educators who serve them, without the scaffolding they need to succeed.



It’s time for leaders to broaden their MTSS framework and recognize that trauma interventions work synergistically within MTSS: school safety and trauma-responsive practices improve student well-being and reduce behavioral problems, which work to further academic performance.

The [Center for Safe & Resilient Schools and Workplaces](#) (The Center) has developed a clear, evidence-based framework to help districts bring trauma-responsive principles to life within MTSS. This guide offers actionable strategies, practical tools, and real-world insights from two districts that have already made measurable progress in this work.

Whether you’re a superintendent, principal, counselor, or classroom teacher, this guide will equip you to create a trauma-responsive MTSS that fosters safety, connection, and deep learning for every member of your school community.

The Center Roadmap

Educators are not new to the idea of trauma-responsive practice. Since the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) introduced its widely known “**Four R’s**” framework—Realize, Recognize, Respond, and Resist Retraumatization—the concept of trauma-informed schools has gained traction in professional development, policy, and discourse. But despite broad awareness, many educators are left wondering, **How do we actually do this? How do we translate these concepts into policies, practices, and behaviors?**



The Center believes that a trauma-responsive MTSS⁶ is the most effective way to realize the vision of a trauma-responsive school. The MTSS model is already familiar to most educators, and it provides a flexible and comprehensive structure for addressing the full range of student needs. When infused with evidence-based trauma-responsive practices and policies, it becomes a powerful asset to enhance resilience, safety, and improved academic performance.



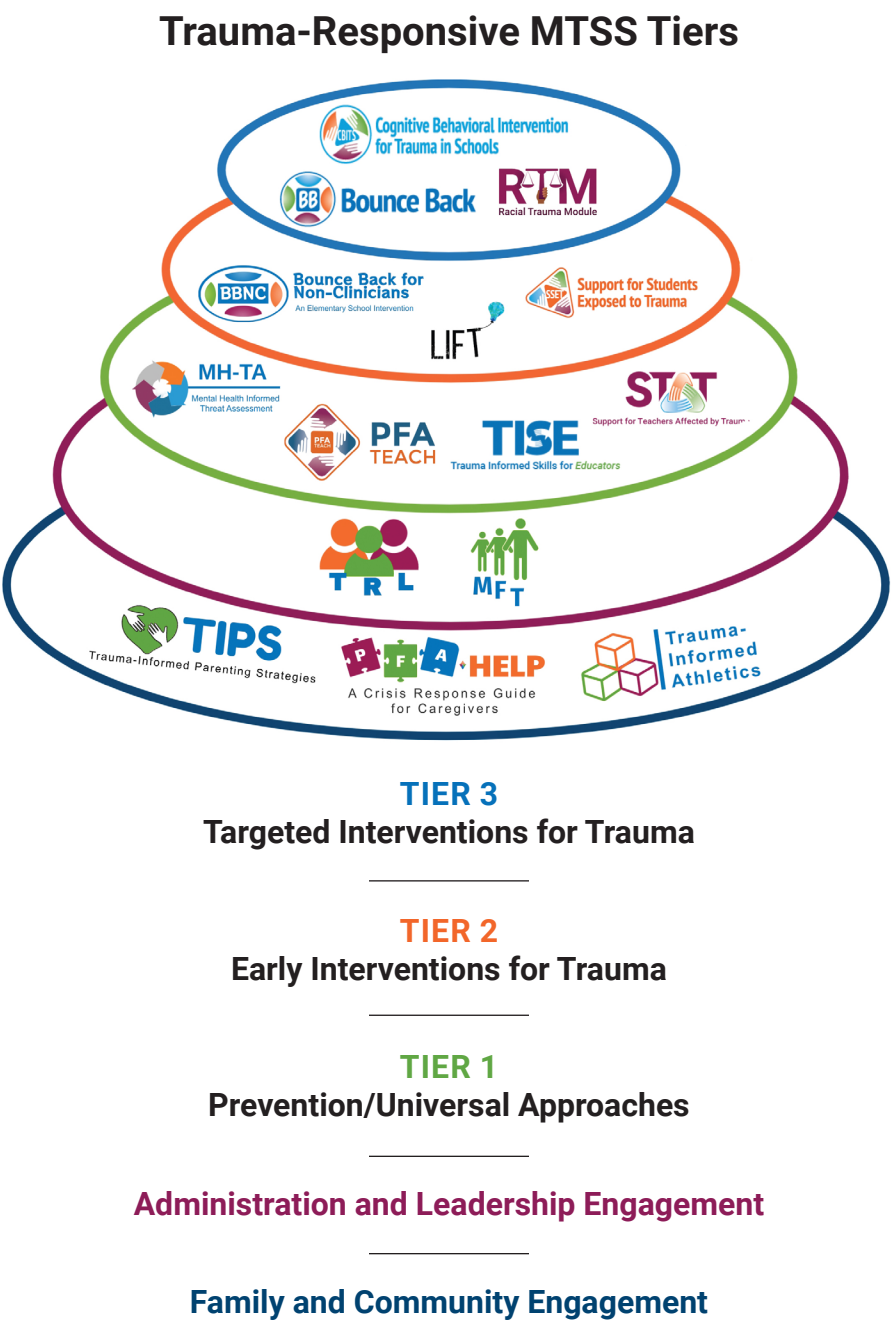
We know a trauma-responsive MTSS is a strong protective factor against the effects of trauma. We should be hopeful about our path forward. But the vision and blueprint for this shift need to come as soon as possible, and they need to come from state-level education leaders and school district leaders.”



VIVIEN VILLAVERDE
Co-founder, Center for Safe & Resilient Schools and Workplaces

Beginning in 1997, members of The Center partnered with RAND Health researchers to develop and test the effectiveness of a school-based trauma-focused intervention in the first randomized clinical trial of its kind^{7,8,9}, the results of which, now, decades later, continue to guide the field at large. Since then, The Center’s years of study and collaboration with schools have led to the development of additional interventions and curricula to expand the impact of school-based trauma-informed practices.

The Center team has seen firsthand what works and what doesn’t. It has become clear that embedding trauma-responsive practices into the fabric of an MTSS improves utilization and sustainability, and ultimately drives change¹⁰.



A Tiered Approach That Reaches Everyone

The Center’s training programs and resources support every level of the MTSS framework:



Tier 3: Intensive Supports for a Few

- **Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS):** The Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS) is a skill-based, group intervention that is aimed at relieving symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, and general anxiety among middle and high school students exposed to trauma. Children are provided with normalizing education about common reactions to stress and trauma, and learn skills such as relaxation, how to challenge and replace upsetting thoughts, and social problem solving. Children also work on processing traumatic memories and grief in both individual and group settings.
- **Bounce Back:** Like CBITS, Bounce Back is a skill-based, group intervention that is aimed at relieving symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression among children exposed to trauma. Bounce Back, however, is designed to be developmentally appropriate for elementary-aged students. Children are provided with normalizing education about common reactions to stress and trauma and learn skills such as feelings identification, relaxation, helpful thinking, scheduling positive activities, building social support, and problem solving. Children also work on processing traumatic memories and grief in individual sessions with their group leader.



Tier 2: Targeted Supports for Some

- **Non-Clinical Bounce Back:** Non-clinical Bounce Back (NCBB) is an adapted version of the full Bounce Back curriculum for implementation by non-mental health providers such as school counselors without a clinical background. Children are provided with education about common reactions to stress and trauma and learn skills such as feelings identification, relaxation, helpful thinking, scheduling positive activities, building social support, and problem solving.

- **Support for Students Exposed to Trauma (SSET):** Support for Students Exposed to Trauma (SSET) is a skill-based, group intervention that is aimed at relieving symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, and general anxiety among children exposed to trauma. Children are provided with normalizing education about common reactions to stress and trauma, and learn skills such as relaxation, how to challenge and replace upsetting thoughts, and social problem solving. While SSET shares many of the features of CBITS, sections are modified so that it can be delivered by school staff who may not have mental health training.
- **Life Improvement for Teens(LIFT):** LIFT is a direct-to-student trauma-focused social emotional learning curriculum designed to teach teens important skills needed to manage stress from potentially traumatic events and/or adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). It engages students in compelling activities that assess their stress levels and teach them a variety of problem-solving skills and coping strategies to help them build resilience, regulate their emotions, and move forward.



Tier 1: Universal Supports for All

- **Trauma-Informed Skills for Educators (TISE):** A foundational training that equips all school staff with knowledge about the impact of trauma on learning and behavior, and strategies to create supportive classroom environments. The training addresses the neurobiological effects of trauma on students and describes how trauma can impact student functioning and well-being. TISE moves beyond most “Trauma 101” courses by providing educators with concrete trauma-informed skills and strategies such as fostering a trauma-sensitive classroom climate, providing effective emotional support, de-escalating disruptive incidents, and fostering trauma responsiveness throughout the school community.
- **Psychological First Aid for Teachers and Educators (PFA-TEACH):** This course equips educators with the skills to provide immediate psychological support to students following a crisis. The course includes modules, materials, activities, and resources designed to be implemented in school settings.
- **Support for Teachers Affected by Trauma (STAT):** This course is tailored for preK–12 educators and focuses on understanding and mitigating the effects of secondary traumatic stress with practical self-care strategies.



Leadership

- **Trauma-Responsive Leadership (TRL):** A leadership development program aimed at school administrators and leaders. It focuses on building capacity to implement and sustain trauma-responsive practices within schools by aligning policies, procedures, and school culture with trauma-responsive principles. Designed for school and district leaders, this program emphasizes the importance of modeling trauma-responsive approaches, creating psychologically safe environments, and leading systemic change to foster resilience and well-being within the school community. Additionally, it prepares leaders to guide school communities through both small-scale disruptions and large-scale crises, emphasizing stability, clarity, and connection during times of challenge.
- **Moving Forward Together (MFT):** This training offers a comprehensive toolkit and actionable strategies for navigating trauma recovery following school violence, with a detailed exploration of trauma-informed communication, psychological first aid, and situational and holistic support. Participants will learn practical strategies to support the school community, equip faculty and staff with training, and foster collaboration to effectively guide students, families, and other key stakeholders toward resilience.



Family and School Community

- **Trauma Informed Parenting Strategies: Building Childhood Resilience through Caregiver Support (TIPS):** a multi-session curriculum designed to support caregivers in building resilience in their children while managing their own stress and burnout. Caregivers learn strategies for co-regulation, establishing routines, and fostering “relational wealth” to promote safety, autonomy, and connection.

These programs go beyond surface-level training. They are embedded into daily practice, aligned with existing district priorities, and delivered through ongoing coaching and technical assistance.

Trauma-Responsive Leadership: A Must for Sustainable Change

At the heart of The Center’s model is a simple truth: **Trauma-responsive schools require trauma-responsive leaders. The Center emphasizes leadership development as a cornerstone of its work, offering school and district leaders targeted support so they can achieve the following goals:**

- Model trauma-informed mindsets in decision-making and communication.
- Build psychologically safe environments for staff and students.
- Align policies, schedules, and resource allocation with trauma-responsive values.
- Lead systemic change with transparency, flexibility, and compassion.

Without this leadership commitment, even the best tools and training can fail. But with it, districts are positioned for lasting success.





CASE STUDY

Jersey City Public Schools:
Building a Trauma Responsive District

Jersey City Public Schools (JCPS), New Jersey’s second-largest school district, has embarked on a transformative journey to become a trauma-responsive educational system. Under the direction of Superintendent Dr. Norma Fernandez, **JCPS has integrated the Center’s framework to address the multifaceted impacts of trauma on students and staff, with a heavy emphasis on leadership training¹¹.**


45
BUILDINGS


40
COUNSELORS


26,647
STUDENTS



64% OF THE STUDENT POPULATION
ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED

Strategic Initiatives Implemented



1. District Needs Assessment

Before diving in, JCPS completed a needs assessment to identify the most pressing problems, possible complications, personnel involved, and other factors that would become important later.



2. Leadership Training

JCPS created school climate leadership teams for each school. They became leaders in their own buildings and completed a year-long trauma-responsive leadership curriculum. This was intended to equip them with the knowledge and skills necessary to implement and sustain beneficial practices across all schools, and to support all other staff members in their individual initiatives.

The district also divided school administrators into cohorts and provided them with a three-day training on principles of trauma-responsive leadership, fortifying the top-down effect they saw was necessary for a large-scale shift in school culture.



3. Trauma-Responsive Code of Conduct

Recognizing the need for a disciplinary approach that reflects an understanding of trauma’s effects on behavior, JCPS revised its Student Code of Conduct. The updated code emphasizes restorative practices for social-emotional well-being, aiming to foster a supportive environment that prioritizes student resilience and accountability.



4. The Center’s Tiered Training Program

Across JCPS, staff members from teachers to lunchroom workers participated in the Center’s suite of training programs tailored to each MTSS tier

- **Tier 1**
 - » On-demand TISE training for all staff members
 - » Live TISE Training for school climate teams
 - » TISE coaching for school climate teams
- **Tier 2 & 3**
 - » CBITS and Bounce Back training for district mental health providers

Leadership Perspective

As the trauma-responsive MTSS becomes a fixture of JCPS culture, Dr. Fernandez is encouraged by early results and excited to see further data.



This approach is producing very promising results—it's improving both student well-being and academic engagement across all our schools."



DR. NORMA FERNANDEZ
Superintendent, Jersey City Public Schools



Challenges Faced



Achieving Buy-In

Before diving in, JCPS completed a needs assessment to identify the most pressing problems, possible complications, personnel involved, and other factors that would become important later.

Starting with leadership, who would then be able to sustain the initiative regardless of funding changes, the district prioritized intensive training and coaching. These sessions established the rationale for a trauma-responsive MTSS and provided actionable skills for creating a more trauma-responsive school climate options, and coaching.



Scale of Change

As a large district, JCPS necessarily grappled with major logistical, budgetary, and analytic challenges related to the sheer number of students and staff members involved. These led the district to break implementation into a multi-year phased approach, working with 15 schools at a time.

Outcomes and Impact

Observations from the district show the following benefits. These statistics are all the more striking considering that studies of other approaches, such as increasing law enforcement presence in schools, have not demonstrated a similar impact:



Reduced Referrals and Interventions

The district has reduced behavioral incidents by **564 CASES SINCE 2022-23 — A 34% DECREASE.**



Enhanced Student Well-being

Staff members report greater student **WELL-BEING AND RESILIENCE.**



Student Engagement

Teachers report positive trends in **STUDENT ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION.**



CASE STUDY

Kern County Alternative Education: Embedding Trauma-Responsive Practices Across All Tiers

The Alternative Education department within Kern County Superintendent of Schools in Bakersfield, CA, serves students who are missing credits, often because of prior suspensions or expulsions, or who require additional support not available in a traditional academic setting. Several years ago, facing low student attendance rates and high levels of staff stress and burnout, **Principal of Court and Community Schools Salvador Arias led Kern County through a comprehensive initiative to integrate trauma-responsive practices within their existing educational framework.**



5

COURT
SCHOOLS



6

YEAR-ROUND
COMMUNITY SCHOOLS



K-12

GRADES



HIGH LEVELS OF TRAUMA
AMONG STUDENTS

Strategic Initiatives Implemented



1. Presentation on Psychological First Aid

With staff struggling to cope with heightened stress in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, Kern County enlisted The Center's CEO Dr. Marleen Wong to provide a psychological first aid presentation over Zoom. That talk set the stage for further change by giving staff members a chance to share their struggles and demonstrating the power of trauma-responsive practices.



2. Live TISE Training for Educators:

Later, all Kern County educators participated in live sessions of the Trauma-Informed Schools for Educators program. These sessions provided foundational knowledge on the effects of trauma and equipped teachers with strategies to create supportive and responsive classroom environments.



3. TISE Coaching for MTSS Teams:

Beyond initial training, MTSS teams received ongoing monthly coaching from The Center to reinforce trauma-responsive practices. This ensured that the principles learned during TISE sessions were effectively integrated into daily school operations and decision-making.



4. CBITS Training for Mental Health Staff:

For students requiring additional support, staff were trained in the Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools program. This evidence-based intervention addresses the needs of students exposed to trauma, informing staff about coping strategies and support mechanisms.

Leadership Perspective

Superintendent Salvador Arias emphasized how The Center’s model fit into initiatives the school was already pursuing:



We were already doing a lot with the MTSS framework, and with so many of our students affected by trauma, it was critical that we expand that framework to include trauma best practices.”



SALVADOR ARIAS
Principal, Court and Community Schools



A Key Challenge



Addressing Staff Concerns

Kern County Alternative Education includes Juvenile Court Schools, which exclusively serve incarcerated youth. The culture at those sites, in particular, centered on punitive measures like referrals and suspensions, and staff were worried that the trauma-responsive MTSS would take away the tools they had found effective in the past.

Outcomes and Impact

Data collection is ongoing, but preliminary observations indicate:



Reduced Suspensions:

Total suspensions dropped **11.6%** from the 2022-2023 school year to the 2023-2024 school year.



Increased Family Engagement:

The quantity and quality of proactive school-parent communication and support increased.



Greater Collaboration:

Principal-educator collaboration and teamwork in programming changes and development improved over the year.



Increased Student Retention:

The number of students able to stay in their high school increased as the number of those needing to return to the alternative/continuation school system decreased.



Enhanced Teacher Confidence:

Educators report increased confidence in addressing trauma-related behaviors and fostering supportive classroom environments.



Improved Student Engagement:

Students exhibit higher levels of engagement and participation, which is attributed to the supportive and understanding school climate.



Strengthened Support Systems:

The integration of trauma-informed practices has led to more cohesive support systems, ensuring that students receive timely and appropriate interventions.

What Now?



A truly effective MTSS model does not treat trauma as a peripheral concern. It integrates trauma-responsive strategies into every tier of support. In that environment, every adult who comes in contact with students has the training to adhere to trauma best practices.”



VIVIEN VILLAVERDE
Co-founder, Center for Safe & Resilient Schools and Workplaces

With educators’ lists of priorities already overflowing, addressing trauma effectively should not mean creating all-new systems. Rather, it should mean **infusing care, connection, and responsiveness into the structures that already exist**. When MTSS is implemented through a trauma-responsive lens, it becomes a stronger foundation for improved learning.

As seen in Jersey City and Kern County, real change is possible when district leaders make trauma-responsive work a central mission. These districts didn’t know everything when they started—the important thing is that they did start. And with The Center’s support, they adopted a framework that is now reshaping what safety, connection, and academic success look like in their schools.

Next Steps

1. Explore our training programs and implementation support to identify immediate opportunities for trauma-responsive improvements:

- Tier 1
 - » [Trauma-Informed Skills for Educators](#)
 - » [Psychological First Aid-TEACH](#)
 - » [Support for Teachers Affected by Trauma](#)
- Tier 2
 - » [Bounce Back](#)
 - » [Support for Students Exposed to Trauma](#)
 - » [Life Improvement For Teens](#)

- Leadership
 - » Trauma-Responsive Leadership
 - » Moving Forward Together
- Family and School Community
 - » Trauma-Informed Parenting Strategies

2. [Schedule a Consultation](#) with us to assess your district’s current MTSS structure.
3. Share this guide with your leadership team.

Despite the trauma all around us, together we can create schools where every student is able to learn at their best and carry that growth into adulthood.

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