

Public School Forum of North Carolina Report on Education Opportunity

In October 2015, the Public School Forum embarked on its sixteenth biennial “study group,” continuing the organization’s practice of bringing together leaders from education, business, government, and academia to distill collective knowledge on major, timely education issues. [...]

Ten years ago, Study Group XI offered a response to the state supreme court’s seminal ruling in *Leandro v. State*, which defined the state’s constitutional obligation to provide every North Carolina child with an “opportunity to obtain a sound basic education.” The resulting publication, *Responding to the Leandro Ruling*, grounded the lofty constitutional guarantee in the realities of the day. The state was in the midst of a struggle to attract and retain the best and the brightest to teaching and school leadership, and labored under a school funding system that arguably gave these education professionals too few resources to do their jobs.

Fast forward to today: North Carolina faces even more acute teacher and school leader shortages, and school funding has been depleted by the economic downturn and years of dwindling investment in public education. Although these crises loom large, with Study Group XVI we decided to step back from the factors cited in *Leandro* to develop an even broader perspective on the case’s core question: *What would it take to give every child in North Carolina the opportunity to receive a sound basic education?* [...]

To focus our efforts, we divided the Study Group into three committees, each examining one of the three “levers” we have identified to expand educational opportunity. In doing so, we did not intend to suggest that other topics, such as the *Leandro* factors, are not important. In fact, many of these topics are interwoven into our discussion of our three chosen levers, and some—including teacher and school leader recruitment and retention, and school finance—have been the explicit focus of several other recent Forum study groups)

Each committee met several times over a five-month period, from December 2015 through April 2016, reviewing the literature on their topic and meeting with subject-matter experts and practitioners to better understand the current state of the field on the topic, and to generate practical recommendations.

This week’s Advocacy Update includes the recommendations from the first committee :

Committee on Trauma & Learning

Through meetings with experts and review of relevant resources, Committee members realized that many educators are not aware of the profound effects trauma and stress have on the brain—an understanding that is critical for responding to students’ behaviors and emotions. While educators have a strong appreciation of the importance of forming relationships with students, helping them develop a deeper knowledge of ACEs and their potential impact on brain chemistry can help create a sense of urgency around implementing trauma-sensitive practices. This heightened awareness can change their perspectives on (and increase their empathy for) their most challenged students, and can help them support these students in building skills rather than punishing them and exacerbating negative spirals.

Recommendation 1 : Maximize impact of opportunities under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to support practices that recognize the impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) on learning.

Section 4108 of the Every Student Succeeds Act requires every district that receives funds under Title I, Part A to use a portion of its funds to foster safe and supportive school environments. Options for meeting this requirement include programs, services, supports, and staff development based on evidence-based, trauma-informed practices, and training for school personnel in effective and trauma-informed practices in classroom management. District officials should strongly consider the inclusion of these options as part of a comprehensive approach to meeting the needs of their most vulnerable students. Other education-focused organizations may

have roles to play in preparing guidance for districts about how to maximize the impact of these activities. Field leaders in other states—including the Compassionate Schools Initiative in Washington state and the Massachusetts Trauma & Learning Policy Initiative, as well as North Carolina pioneer Buncombe County Schools—can serve as sources of model programs and materials, as well as thought partners in new program design.

In addition, under Sections 2102 and 2103 of the Act (Title II, Part A), states may use federal funds provided through formula grants for supporting effective instruction to carry out in-service training for school staff to help them understand when and how to refer students affected by ACEs for appropriate treatment and intervention services. Permissible uses for these funds also include a variety of options that support education professionals in recognizing and addressing the specific needs of vulnerable students.

These sections of the federal law place identifying and addressing childhood trauma and other variables linked to poverty alongside policy options for recruiting and retaining effective teachers and school leaders, maximizing the impact of early childhood education, using data to improve student achievement, and serving students with disabilities. This inclusion parallels the recommendations of the Equity and Excellence Commission's report, signaling that children's experiences with poverty have taken their place alongside other significant variables impacting student achievement in the federal education policy framework.

Finally, maximizing the opportunity under ESSA to address the impact of adverse childhood experiences on student learning will require thoughtful development of North Carolina's state ESSA plan, which the Department of Public Instruction is now crafting and will submit by March 2017. Each state is required to develop its own plan to comply with the new federal law and address issues including school accountability, student assessment, support for struggling schools, and other issues. Expanded state authority in this new era in federal policy, and the focus on the whole child within the federal legislation, make this the perfect moment to intentionally address the issue of childhood trauma in development and implementation of a comprehensive state plan. The other recommendations below provide options for state policy and programmatic interventions that can help teachers and other school-based professionals recognize and respond to the behavioral manifestations of trauma and other impacts of ACEs on learning.

Recommendation 2 : Design “on-ramps” for educators to increase awareness of ACEs, their impact on learning, and appropriate interventions.

Deep understanding of this topic is a new phenomenon, steeped in recent neuroscience research and a young body of evidence on effective school-based practices and high-impact partnerships between schools and other child-serving professionals and institutions. As a result, DPI, districts, and external partners should design and offer trainings and conferences like the 2015 Adverse Childhood Experience Southeastern Summit in Asheville. These opportunities allow education professionals to become well-versed in the relevant research, discuss the impact of that research on teaching and learning, and collaborate to develop strategies to improve their responses to ACEs in their schools.

School systems might utilize badges or other credentials for the completion of training in this area, and might even open the trainings to other categories of professionals likely to interact with vulnerable students (e.g., juvenile defenders, nurses, judges, and law enforcement). Training might be differentiated based on teachers' levels of awareness or experience with ACEs. Statewide or regional events would be an excellent way to share experiences and resources across systems in this new and rapidly evolving area. DPI, consortia of districts, or external partners could create resource databases or clearinghouses for information about ACEs and their impact on student learning. Finally, these groups should also work closely with the state's teacher and school leader preparation programs to influence their training of future education professionals. Educator training should include a concerted focus on the impact of poverty-linked variables and ACEs on learning, along with effective strategies at the state, district, school, and classroom levels to mitigate ACEs impact and support student success.

Recommendation 3 : Implement and evaluate pilot programs, and share data and related resources.

Districts should consider creating pilot programs to transform the culture at high-need schools to help them become trauma sensitive, potentially utilizing the whole-school, inquiry-based process and related tools contained in the resource, *Creating and Advocating for Trauma-Sensitive Schools*. Such programs offer excellent opportunities for integrated approaches through partnership between schools and health care providers, law enforcement, and other institutions that together can better understand and address the impacts of ACEs on students.

Because the process of implementing such a program and related partnerships can be a time-consuming endeavor with associated planning and implementation costs (materials, teacher stipends, etc.), schools and external partners should seek state, district, or private funding to support pilot programs. Districts and funders looking at potential pilot sites should consider the readiness of school-based professionals and partners to undertake such a process. Pilot programs should involve researchers in their design and all stages of implementation to capture key data that can guide improvement and support program replication or expansion, if successful. All pilot programs should be driven by and involve significant buy-in from school-based actors, supported by coaches or other partners to support learning and planning around trauma-sensitive approaches. This approach is preferable to programs that merely regard schools as physical sites for outside actors' service provision. Only with the intimate involvement of teachers and school leaders can schools become strong partners in the identification of ACEs, timely referral for appropriate services, and productive responses within educational settings.

Recommendation 4 : Create statewide policy to guide schools' work addressing the impacts of ACEs on learning.

Oregon House Bill 4002 (2016) and Massachusetts House Bill 4376 (2014) are models for statewide frameworks addressing the impact of ACEs on student learning. The Oregon bill establishes a pilot program to use trauma-informed practices in schools, utilizing national models and coordinating school-based resources (school health centers, nurses, counselors, and administrators) with the efforts of coordinated-care organizations, public health, nonprofits, the justice system, businesses, and parents. The bill authorizes \$500,000 for the state's three-year pilot, which will be overseen by "trauma specialists" in schools and bolstered by a strong research model in place from the beginning to evaluate the pilot and help the state apply lessons learned in the future. The Massachusetts policy requires the development of a statewide Safe and Supportive Schools Framework; provides a self-assessment tool to help schools create action plans; and encourages schools to incorporate action plans into their school improvement plans. Massachusetts also funded a grant program (\$200,000) to support pilot programs as models for creating safe and supportive schools. Finally, the law creates a commission to assist with statewide implementation of the framework and make recommendations for additional legislation.

We recommend the creation of a Task Force to examine these state laws and other, similar policies, and to consult with appropriate national experts, to determine an appropriate suite of state policy interventions for consideration by the General Assembly, the State Board of Education, DPI, and local boards of education and district officials. The Task Force should publish its recommendations to encourage the development of state and local policy that supports the movement toward creating trauma-sensitive schools across the state. The Task Force should also recommend sources of funding for this work, including state funding but also appropriate private foundations in education, health care, and other sectors who might support programmatic and policy interventions on this subject.

To carry these recommendations forward, the Public School Forum recently formulated the **North Carolina Safe and Supportive Schools Initiative**, a partnership of the Forum and six North Carolina LEAs (Asheville City Schools, Rowan-Salisbury Schools, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools,

Edgecombe County Schools, and Elizabeth City-Pasquotank Public Schools). The Initiative will utilize two action strategies: 1) **educator training** to increase understanding of adverse childhood experiences, the potential trauma response in children, and the resulting impacts on student learning and behavior, and to introduce short- and long-term interventions that can restore students' sense of safety and agency, and 2) **structured pilot programs** in partner LEAs to create inclusive learning environments that build student resiliency as an alternative to removing students from classrooms.

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