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KIDS COUNT in Delaware “Data to Action” Series: *January 2022* *Educational Involvement & Achievement*

INTRODUCTION

This brief was written based on a webinar hosted by KIDS COUNT in Delaware supported by Highmark Health. The webinar featured a data presentation from Delaware’s Department of Education.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, trauma-informed practices in educational settings were a topic of discussion, but the experience of the past two years has made taking action to support needs of all students and staff of paramount importance. Starting in March 2020, pandemic health precautions kept school buildings closed; learning moved to a virtual format. Being home for approximately a year had students who were in dangerous environments, stuck. These students lost connections with peers and teachers alike, although there were other resources available. Upon return to in-person educational settings, students, teachers,

and other staff are navigating the continuing trauma of a multi-year pandemic. Traditionally, educators are part of a student’s adult support network. Today, they support students with the added layer of stress due to personal trauma. According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, pre COVID-19 data showed high rates of secondary traumatic stress (STS). STS is the emotional toll that someone faces after listening and supporting someone who has been through trauma. Teachers across the state have not only had to manage their own trauma that came with the COVID-19 pandemic, but many returned to schools in supportive roles that turned to STS. Two years into the pandemic we see educators that participated in the national STS project have all reported experiencing secondary traumatic stress that came from the pandemic.



Educational Involvement & Achievement

TRAUMA INFORMED APPROACHES

The COVID-19 pandemic brought varied challenges to students, teachers, and other school staff across the state. New technology, ever changing logistics, and underlying concerns of community health had to be navigated. In one study, educators reported emotional exhaustion, discouragement, guilt, insomnia, sadness and worry as a result of the shift to remote learning and all the challenges that came with it. Researchers noted, “Education is more than a profession—it is a commitment to the next generation, but often at an educator’s own peril.”¹

Decades of research on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) link adverse experiences when young to risky behavior and poor health outcomes as adults. While COVID-19 has not officially been classified for research purposes as an ACE, the pandemic has been its own type of trauma.

For students who had already been living with ACEs, the pandemic compounded difficulties they faced. Health precautions such as closed school buildings and social distancing guidance kept students at home, disconnected from supportive peer and adult networks in an especially trying time.

Students returned to school not knowing how to communicate the pain and difficulty that they had just experienced. When students returned to school,

administration had to plan to deal with this schoolwide issue. This meant adding more mental health resources and support for students and teachers alike.

In addition to school district action, work is occurring at the state level to bolster supports for students. In the FY 2022 General Assembly, legislators have discussed legislation that would add mental health resources for all Delaware middle schools.² According to the National Institute of Mental Health, one in five youth are affected by a mental health disorder. Additionally, 50% of lifetime mental illnesses begin by age 14. Untreated mental illness leads to negative outcomes including increased risk of dropout, homelessness, substance abuse, other chronic illnesses, incarceration, and possibly suicide.³

Another bill legislators took up this year suggests Delaware developing a program that gives medical coverage to all children, including those who are undocumented.⁴ This coverage would add supports for students to help better their mental health, especially in these unprecedented times.

The state is working to combat all of the challenges that came with the pandemic. The programs and initiatives are what will help better the lives of students. Teachers are being educated in ACEs to better understand students and what they are going through. Now more than ever, trauma-informed school environment is important and vital to a child’s life.

“It is really fascinating to see this emphasis on the trauma that teachers and staff also experienced during the pandemic—that is a lens that we do not always see, but it has tremendous implications. How can we ask our typical authority figures to guide students through COVID-19 when this is their first pandemic, too? Even as we have returned to in-person instruction this year, many of my teachers with young children have had to miss school due to classroom exposures. In a virtual landscape, teachers must be parents, IT staff, and counselors, all in one.”

- Ella Trembanis,

*Student Representative on KIDS COUNT in Delaware Board &
Featured Panelist on Educational Involvement & Achievement webinar*

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RESTORATIVE JUSTICE AS A TRAUMA INFORMED APPROACH

The trauma that students have experienced plays a role in how they perform and act in the classroom. Schools across the state have taken into consideration the hardships that all students have gone through and are changing the way they deal with discipline.

One example detailed during the Data to Action webinar is Brandywine School District, which has implemented a new Code of Conduct. Via this new guidance, Brandywine anticipates having 1,000 less suspensions in the 2021-2022 school year than they did pre-pandemic in the 2018-2019 school year.

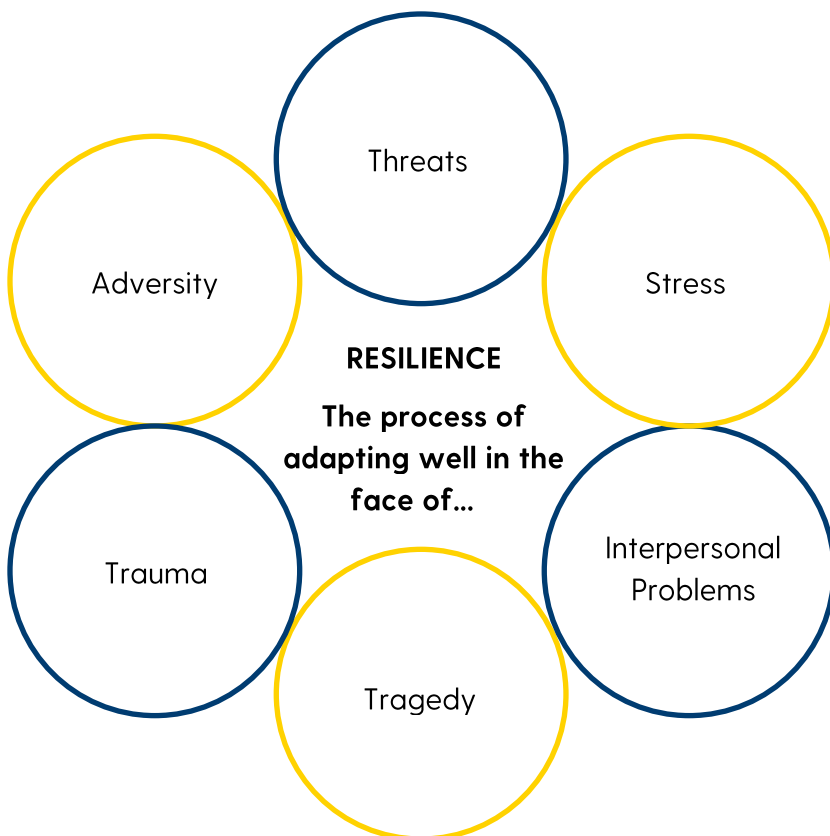
The district has implemented techniques such as restorative circles and delivery of social-emotional learning as both classroom-based and student-driven experiences which are intended to build resilience. The interactive supports which include

games, readings and videos include lessons on mental health, self-awareness, communication, sexting, college prep, and more.⁵

This type of work of restorative justice as a trauma informed approach to discipline which is occurring in schools and districts across the state mirrors a national trend which seeks to reduce out-of-school suspensions by turning discipline issues into learning opportunities.

“Students returned to school not knowing how to communicate the pain and difficulty they had just experienced. The result? Students act out in ways we do not always understand when they have experienced difficult life events.”

*- Brian Moore,
Delaware Department of Education Appointee on
KIDS COUNT in Delaware Board &
Featured Panelist on Educational Involvement &
Achievement webinar*



Students across Delaware have had to develop resilience during the pandemic. The American Psychological Association defines resilience as the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress – such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems or workplace and financial stressors. The term refers to how one copes, manages emotions and seeks support in challenging times.⁶ The pandemic has put a pause on students' ability to grow as people and find their place in this world. In order to rise from these problems, schools have been working to implement more times throughout the day for students to be “mindful” and teach resilience in the classroom and beyond. This includes extracurricular activities which allow students to socialize and network.

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BUILDING BLOCKS TO EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

Across Delaware, some students got back to school in a hybrid or in-person format in spring 2021. Many students did not move from their virtual connection until the fall semester of 2021. This disconnection from the physical aspects of in-person learning has impacted student experience and maturity.

Kindergarten and other young students have been impacted disproportionately. Delaware's early grades saw the largest enrollment declines in fall 2020. According to data from the Delaware Department of Education, the 2019/2020 school year had 8,988 students enrolled in public Kindergarten whereas Kindergarten enrollment for the 2020/2021 school year dropped to 8,491 students. This is notable because in their early years in school, children learn foundational reading and math concepts and important socio-emotional skills that will last them throughout their educational journey.

Even when young students were enrolled, schools struggled to teach foundational skills in a virtual setting. In one study, analysis showed “the impact of the pandemic on K-12 student learning was significant, leaving students on average five months behind in mathematics and four months behind in reading by the end of the school year.”⁷

These building blocks to educational success have been stifled for older children as well. Students across all age groups are a year and a half behind intellectually, socially, and emotionally. According to webinar panelist and Superintendent of New Castle County Vocational-Technical School District, Dr. Joseph Jones, “We had to use a more restorative approach because of behavior that was immature... a lot of it isn't behavior that is aggressive or endangering other students. This is ‘acting up,’ kids being loud in the hall, not quieting down.” Dr. Jones further

explained, “there were ninth graders that spent a whole year virtually, that never spent foot in a district that they were never a part of. We had to spend an enormous amount of time building that level of care and connection. And then once we established that relationship, that's where the restorative practices are coming in now to help them understand ‘we don't do that.’”

Across the state, mirroring what was occurring nationally, students had to learn to adjust and get back on track for their age group. Therefore, resources and help available to students were necessary.

COMMUNITY SUPPORTS TO SCHOOLS

Resources for students come in many forms including partnerships with community-based nonprofit organizations.



One such partnership—with the Strive organization—was featured on the Data to Action webinar.

As we know, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused children to fall behind and not feel like themselves. This pandemic has been hard on everyone and many feel like it will never end which causes a sense of defeat. Strive works with students in Delaware to teach them to keep pushing for what they want and develop their character to be the best version of themselves and leaders in the community.

Leaders within Strive believe that how a person leads matters. This value is embraced in dedication to spreading the power of character-driven leadership. Strive partners with young people and adults to develop character leaders and to build unique, conscious cultures, with enhanced focus on reaching under-served communities.⁸

Educational Involvement & Achievement

Strive is based on seven values: know myself, fill tanks, brush it off and grow, be fair and honest, choose laughter, stick with it, find the best in yourself so you can inspire the best in those around you.⁹

In order to heal from collective trauma, programs like this are crucial to motivate and encourage students to find the end of the tunnel. They work to teach students character-driven leadership. Because students are being taught that they will be leaders in the community than it will make them take action and believe in themselves and push through any problems they may be having.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has left many holes in the life of students. Ella, a featured panelist on this Data to Action webinar and student representative to the KIDS COUNT in Delaware Board, shared the drawbacks that virtual learning had socially, situated within the complex arena of re-entering an in-person learning environment.

Resources, including statewide initiatives, district and school level strategies, as well as partnerships with local community programs will all help to support student success. The state of Delaware continues to work to improve educational opportunities and experiences for students. Programs like Strive bolster that work.

Mental health, trauma, trauma informed approaches, and resilience have taken center stage for educators. Professionals are working to integrate programs into school and extracurricular activities. While there are numerous dimensions of health that need to be addressed after the pandemic, mental health must be prioritized in recovery efforts. Fostering positive outcomes in mental health and reducing the negative connotation that often comes with it is important,

requiring discussion within and across all parts of a child's life, school and community. Towards that end trauma informed approaches to building protective factors will help children continue to build resilience, allowing them to overcome challenges.

“COVID-19 was completely disastrous socially. This fall, many students were unprecedentedly enthusiastic to get back in the classroom and to finally see their friends, play sports, and join clubs. Where that experience of community has rebounded, it has been a breath of fresh air. Unfortunately, that recovery is still in process. Virtual learning conditioned us to being blank squares on Zoom meetings, leaving many still reticent to speak up. Extracurriculars are as vital as ever, but students seem to be increasingly opting out..”

*- Ella Trembanis,
Student Representative on KIDS COUNT in
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Achievement webinar*

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KIDS COUNT is a national and state-by-state effort of the Annie E. Casey Foundation to track the well-being of children in the United States. KIDS COUNT in Delaware, a project of the University of Delaware Center for Community Research & Service, is a collaborative effort of over forty organizations to enrich local and state discussion concerning ways to secure better lives for all children by providing policy makers and citizens with benchmarks of child well-being.

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