

Trauma-Informed, Resilience-Oriented Schools

Guiding Questions: Parents and Families

The trauma-informed, resilience-oriented approach to school culture is built on the core principles of safety, trustworthiness, student voice and empowerment, collaboration, peer support, and inclusion and engagement. A trauma-informed, resilience-oriented school creates a culture and climate that reflect all of the principles in every interaction with parents and the community.

The following questions can be used to generate conversations about the culture and climate of a specific school for parents and families. The questions can be used in open discussions, surveys, or on committees that target specific areas of need in the school. The intent is for this document to be a “bank of questions” that can be used across a variety of situations.

These questions can and should be adapted to fit a specific situation or school. Additionally, there exist opportunities to request examples or evidence for specific answers given in response to many of the questions.

1. Safety

Ensuring physical, academic, social, behavioral and emotional safety in the school community

Guiding Questions:

- To what extent do the activities and settings in the school ensure the physical and emotional safety of families and community members?
- How can settings be modified to ensure this safety more effectively and consistently?

Specific Questions:

- Consider physical and emotional safety when answering each of these questions. This requires the team to have a common understanding of emotional safety.

Building and Grounds:

- How safe is the area around the outside of the school building?
- How safe are areas within the building—hallways, restrooms, locker rooms, cafeterias, offices, meeting rooms?
- Are entrances to the buildings monitored continually while families and community members are entering and exiting the building?
- Are doors locked or open?

Adapted from Black, P. (2021). Parents and Families Trauma-informed Resilience-oriented Principles Accompanying Questions. Trauma Sensitive Education, LLC.

Adapted for educational organizations from Fallot, Roger D, Ph.D. and Harris, Maxine, Ph.D. Creating Cultures of Trauma-Informed Care (CCTIRO): A Self-Assessment and Planning Protocol. Community Connection, July 2009.

- Are sidewalks and parking areas always well-lit?
- Are the buildings and grounds well-lit for families and community members coming in after school hours?
- Who is present to ensure safety after hours? Are security personnel present?
- When a parent, family member, or community member arrives, are directions to the main office clear?
- Are directions to specific locations within the school visible and universally understood?
- What signs and other visual materials are there? Are they welcoming? Clear? Legible? In universal language or the primary languages of the community?
- How would you describe the reception and waiting areas, classrooms, etc? Are they inviting and welcoming to all who enter?
- Are restrooms easily accessible? Are there signs indicating their location?
- Are family and community members welcomed in a respectful and engaging way?
- Are the needs of LGBTQ family and community members considered regarding all environments, including bathrooms, in the school?

Engaging with Parents and Families:

- When connecting with families, is there sensitivity to potentially unsafe situations (e.g., domestic violence, unstable housing)?
- Are parents and families involved in their own student’s educational planning and school-wide initiative planning?
- When families join planning sessions for their students or school-wide initiatives, are they welcomed and considered equal and engaged members of the group?

2. Trustworthiness

Maximizing trustworthiness through task clarity, consistency, and interpersonal boundaries between individuals, groups, and all members of the school community

Guiding Questions:

- To what extent do the school’s activities and settings maximize trustworthiness by making the tasks involved clear, ensuring consistency in practice, and maintaining boundaries that are appropriate to the program?
- How can supports be modified to ensure that tasks and boundaries are established and maintained clearly and appropriately?
- How can the school maximize honesty and transparency?

Specific Questions:

- Does the teacher or other adult provide parents and families with clear information about academic work, social functions, and all other supports provided within the school including goals, expectations, and procedures?
- Do the staff understand the difficulties that parents and families impacted by trauma have in building relationships?

- How does the school ensure that relationships between staff and parents and families are professional? How are appropriate boundaries maintained?
- Is the school clear with parents and families about roles and accomplishing multiple tasks (e.g., by support staff and in student case management)?
- How does the school communicate to parents and families about their reasonable expectations of students regarding behavior, completion of schoolwork, and the variances that can occur?
- How is student and family confusion avoided?
- Is communication ongoing, positive, and clear between school professionals and students and their families?
- Are students and families involved in the development of their academic learning plans, Individual Educational Plans, 504 Plans, health and safety plans, social and emotional regulation plans, and behavior plans?
- Does parent and family feedback allow them to indicate that they feel respected and safe with specific teachers, student support staff, or administrators?

3. Student Voice and Empowerment

Maximizing student and family input, choice, and control

Guiding Questions:

- To what extent do the school's activities and settings maximize student, parent, and family experiences of choice and control?
- How can learning and social experiences be modified to ensure that students and their families' experiences of choice and engagement are maximized?

Specific Questions:

- Do students and families with lived experience have significant advisory voice in the planning and evaluation of school safety processes and practices?
- In academics and other school activities, how are each student's strengths, potential, skills, and growth recognized and acknowledged?
- Does the program communicate to parents and families a sense of realistic optimism about the capacity of students to reach their goals?
- Are all parents and families encouraged and supported to participate in all school activities?
- Does the program foster the involvement of students and families with lived experience in key roles wherever possible (in planning, implementation, or evaluation of services)?
- For each contact, how can the student or family member feel validated and affirmed? How can each contact or service be focused on skill development or enhancement?
- Does each contact aim at two endpoints whenever possible: (1) accomplishing the given task and (2) skill-building on the part of the student?
- How much choice does each student along with their parents or families have over how they will engage in learning? This includes when, where, and with whom the learning is provided (time of day or week, classroom vs. home).
- Do the parents or families choose how to communicate with a teacher, student support staff, or administrators (by phone or text, in person, one-on-one, virtually, in a small group)?

- Does the school build in small choices that make a difference to students and families (When would you like me to call? Is this the best number for you? Is there some other way you would like me to reach you or would you prefer to get in touch with me?)
- How much control do the student, family, and parents have over starting and stopping support (both overall service involvement and specific times)?
- Are all parents and families informed about the choices and options in the process and demonstration of learning? Is there a check for understanding about those choices and options?
- Do parents and families get the message that they must “prove” themselves in order to “earn” a relationship with a trusted staff member? Or do they get the message that they are accepted for who they are despite their level of engagement and understanding of the school culture and system?
- Does the teacher communicate to the parents and family that classroom procedures and activities are predetermined and not open to discussion?
- Will students receive negative consequences for difficult interactions with parents and families?

4. Collaboration

Facilitating collaboration and sharing power

Guiding Questions:

- To what extent do the school’s activities and settings maximize collaboration and sharing of power between parent, families, their students, and the school?
- How can activities be modified to ensure that collaboration and power-sharing are maximized?

Specific Questions:

- Do parents and families have a significant role in planning and reviewing their students’ supports, academic plan, and personal goals? How is this built into the school’s activities?
- Do educators communicate respect for the parent and families’ life experiences and history?
- In individual student planning, goal setting, and the development of priorities, are parent and family preferences given consideration and weight?
- Does the school cultivate a model of doing “with” rather than “to” or “for” students, staff, and families?
- Does the school and its providers communicate a conviction that the student and their family is the ultimate expert on their own experience?
- Do support staff and case managers identify tasks they can both work on with parents and families simultaneously (e.g., information-gathering)?

5. Peer Support

Providing help and support to each other, for both students and staff

Guiding Questions:

- To what extent do the school's activities and settings maximize a student's access to support from peers?
- How can activities be modified to ensure that collaboration and power-sharing are maximized?

Specific Questions:

- Do parents and families have access to peer support programs?
- Are peer mentoring programs facilitated by staff or community agency personnel trained in peer-to-peer support?
- Are family or parent peers or mentors trained in the areas of communication and helping skills?
- Do trained peer helpers provide families with resources and support their connection to those resources?
- Are trained peer helpers available to assist families and parents new to a school or district?
- Are trained peers involved with a family or parent when there is a difficulty in communication between school staff and the family?
- Are all parents and families provided with opportunities to learn parenting, social and emotional skills and other important skills within the school-community?

6. Inclusion and Engagement

Practicing inclusion, seeking to prevent discrimination, and celebrating the unique aspects of our school community

Guiding Questions:

- To what extent do the school's activities and settings prioritize inclusion and engagement for all parents and families and their students regardless of their country of origin, race, ethnic background, economic standing, disability, gender identification, language, religion, or other pieces of their identity?
- How can school activities and services be modified to ensure that all parents and families have access, are included, and receive fair and equal treatment?

Specific Questions:

- Do all families and parents have access to all the resources and supports needed for their children to achieve success in their schoolwork and activities?
- Are all documents available in the primary languages of all families?
- Do all families and their students have access to the equipment they need to participate in instruction, whether it is virtual or face-to-face?
- Are students and their families involved in decision-making processes regarding their educational programming including decisions about the time of meetings, programming and personnel involved in an individual's educational programming?

- Are programs such as restorative practices, Conscious Discipline, Collaborative Problem Solving or trauma-informed Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports explained to all students and families?
- Do families and their students receive information about meetings, programs, changes in schedules and individuals involved in their education in a timely fashion?
- Are they given time to consider options and make meaningful decisions?
- Are policies, protocols and processes responsive to the racial, ethnic, and cultural needs of individuals served? Do they recognize and address historical and community-based trauma?
- Do staff use appropriate language when speaking to or writing about students and speaking to their parents and families based on their gender identification, race, ethnic background, country or origin, economic standing, disability, religion or other important components of their identity?