

## SECTION 2

# Universal Trauma-Informed, Resilience-Oriented Schools Practices and Processes

Everyone benefits from a trauma-informed, resilience-oriented school community culture, regardless of their histories and experiences. It is not always obvious which students, staff, or community members have been impacted by toxic stress and trauma. Implementing trauma-informed, resilience-oriented adaptations at the universal level ensures that everyone in the school can experience a basic level of support. Section 3 – Tier II and III Supports describes how to build systems of supports for those with a higher level of need. The Universal or Tier I level along with Tier II and III assessments, instruction, and supports make up a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). In the Federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) MTSS is defined as “a comprehensive continuum of evidence-based, systemic practices to support a rapid response to students’ needs, with regular observation to facilitate data-based instructional decision making.”<sup>1</sup> Universal approaches help schools foster safe environments, focus on building relationships throughout the school community, integrate resilience-building classroom strategies, and provide meaningful support for teachers and staff.<sup>2</sup> These resilience-building efforts may improve the school community’s response to a crisis because of the trust and relationship built in advance. This is a big topic, and so, for ease of reading, we have separated teacher and staff compassion resilience into its own section.



### ACTION STEPS

- » Adapt the physical school environment to foster safety and learning
- » Utilize a trauma-informed, resilience-oriented lens to build relationships
- » Implement resilience-building classroom strategies

### IMPLEMENTATION TOOLS

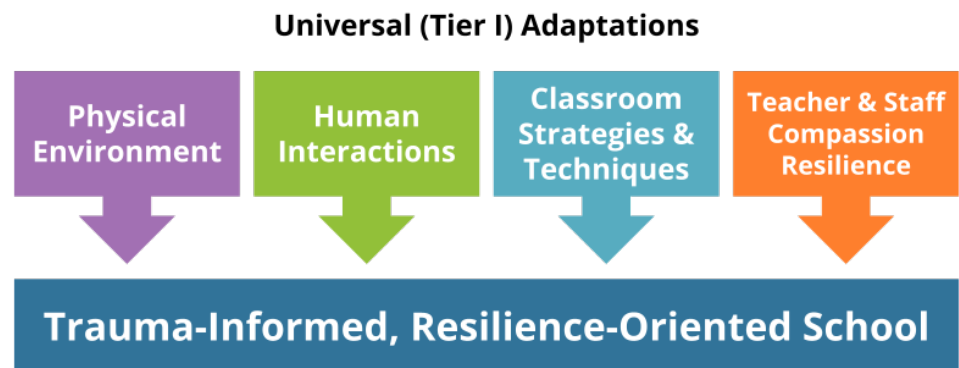
- » [Regulation Strategies Reference Sheet](#)
- » [Sensory Strategies Reference Sheet](#)
- » [Addressing the Use of Trauma-Informed, Resilience-Oriented Schools Principles](#)
- » [Trauma Sensitive Classroom Environment Assessment](#)
- » Universal Trauma-Informed, Resilience-Oriented Practices and Processes Professional Development Training Slide Decks
  - » [Physical Environment](#)
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## Adapt the Physical School Environment to Foster Safety and Learning

Regardless of the setting, safety is the first and foremost consideration. When students feel safe, they are able to focus on building relationships and learning. When they do not feel safe, they spend time in their lower brain, endeavoring to ensure their personal security. Students in this state may withdraw or respond aggressively as they attempt to control what is perceived as threatening.<sup>3</sup> As discussed in Section 1 – Introducing Trauma-Informed, Resilience-Oriented Schools, as a concept, this has several components: physical, emotional, social, behavioral, academic, and moral. First, we will focus on physical safety.

What should be addressed when focusing on physical safety? Any part of the school community, including:

- » School building and administrative buildings
- » Classrooms
- » Hallways and bathrooms
- » Playgrounds
- » School bus, transportation
- » Field trip locations
- » Athletic and arts facilities

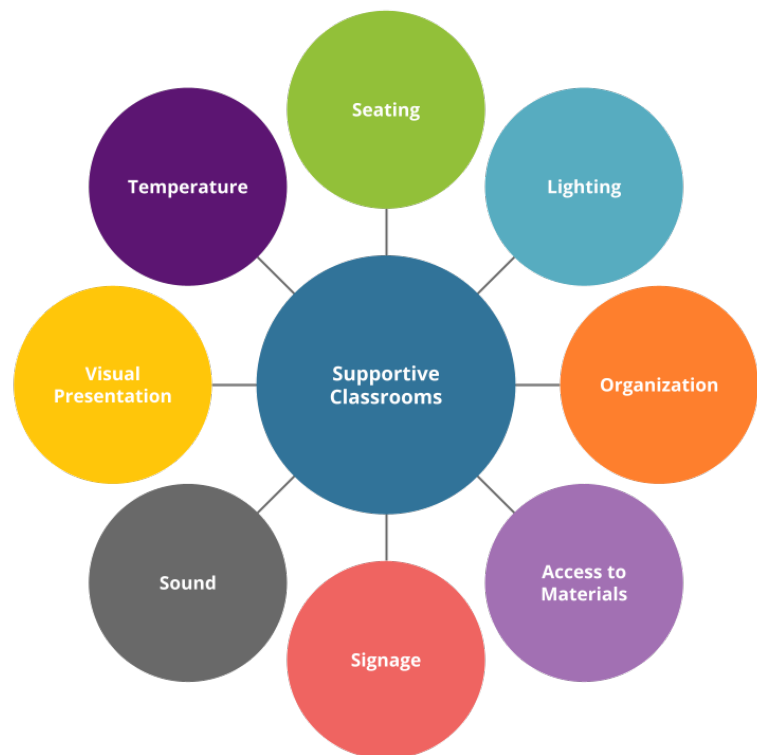


The goal is to create predictable environments that are attentive to transitions and sensory needs. This toolkit narrows in on the classroom, but recommendations shared are applicable to all parts of the school community. Beginning in the classroom focuses our attention on those factors that immediately impact learning.

### Assess Classrooms for Environmental Safety and Optimal Learning

Small changes will make a big difference. Consider how each of the components listed in this diagram may affect an individual student’s ability to focus and learn. Recommendations for creating inclusive, safe classrooms are listed below. This list is not exhaustive, and one activity you can lead with students is to ask them what would make the classroom a better place for them to learn. Consider asking them to complete the Classroom Environment Assessment to anonymously provide feedback. If a student complains or seems irritated by something in the room, talk with them more about this issue and seek to collaborate to resolve it.

#### Environmental Concerns for Supportive Classrooms



- » **Calming tools, kits, and spaces:** Normalize the need to regulate emotions in the classroom with a designated space or calming tools such as stress balls, small slinkies, thinking putty, an expanding ball, and glitter jars to name a few. When students are sent out of the classroom to regulate, it sends the message that regulating emotions is not a normal classroom experience.<sup>4</sup>
- » **Adjust lighting:** Fluorescent lighting and its noise can be harsh for children. Use full-spectrum light bulbs and cover fluorescent lights with curtains.<sup>5</sup>
- » **Signage and visuals:** Use clear and positive signage that is not cluttered. Students should easily understand images and text.
- » **Sound:** Eliminate excess noise in the classroom as much as possible.
- » **Temperature:** Research suggests comfortable classroom temperatures, around 72 °F, lead to optimal performance.<sup>6</sup> If you cannot change the temperature, allow students to wear layers to manage their comfort.

## Integrate Movement into the Classroom

Students at all grade levels benefit from movement throughout the day. This does not necessarily have to be large-scale exercises or a long activity. But, short movement breaks can help students to regulate and reset, giving them more efficient access to the cortex of their brains. Build brain breaks into each day. Brain breaks reduce stress and increase attention.<sup>7</sup> Some activities include stretching as a class, cross-lateral exercises, and moving in patterns. These are great strategies students can take home with them to practice when working on homework as well.

## Utilize a Trauma-Informed, Resilience-Oriented Lens to Build Relationships

At the foundation of a trauma-informed, resilience-oriented school is relationships. It is not necessarily an easy task to form supportive relationships with all students. Some students may be resistant to efforts to connect. This is where a trauma-informed, resilience-oriented lens and our understanding of brain development comes in. As babies, we learn to self-soothe and build self-regulation skills through our connections with caregivers. Through the cyclical pattern of expressing a need and having it met, also called attunement, a child learns that people will take care of them. Regulation and relationships are intertwined at this stage of development, and if trauma interrupts this development, the effects may be lifelong. As children grow, this need for attunement does not disappear. In fact, it becomes a critical component of relationship building.<sup>8,9</sup> Youth are very sensitive to the attention they receive when sharing information or seeking assistance from others.



### Alternate Learning Strategy

Videos for understanding changes to the physical environment:

- » [De-escalation Spaces at Pearl-Cohn High School](#) by Edutopia
- » [Peace Corners at Fall-Hamilton Elementary School](#) by Edutopia
- » [A School's Journey Toward Trauma Sensitivity](#) by Trauma Sensitive Schools
- » [Fall-Hamilton Elementary: Transitioning to Trauma-Informed Practices to Support Learning](#) by Edutopia
- » [What Does a Trauma-Sensitive Middle/High School Look Like?](#) by Trauma Sensitive Schools

## KEY TERMS

### Attunement

The cyclical pattern of expressing a need and having it met. This begins in the relationships between an infant and their caregiver and continues as a need throughout the lifespan.

### Regulation

Defined as “the interactions between brain regions that process emotion or sensation and those that play an executive role managing processes in planning.”<sup>32</sup>

### Emotional Self-Regulation

Involves “intentional processes to manage strong and unpleasant feelings.”<sup>33</sup>

When children have been impacted by trauma, the ability to connect and trust with any adult can be significantly compromised. Many times, students who have not had trusted, safe adults in their life withdraw from relationships altogether or participate in bullying, aggressive, or oppositional relationships, making it that much more difficult to connect and build positive relationships.<sup>10</sup>

Fortunately, it is possible to reach even the most distant students through trauma-informed, resilience-oriented strategies. The Developmental Relationships Framework offers an overview of how to develop positive relationships through the eyes of a student:<sup>11</sup>

- » **Express care:** Show me that I matter to you by being trustworthy, paying attention when I speak and valuing what I say, showing you enjoy the time with me, and praising me for my effort even if it does not lead to achievement.
- » **Challenge growth:** By expecting me to do my best and pushing me to keep getting better. Helping me to take responsibility for errors and learn from them.
- » **Provide support:** Guide me through difficult situations and assignments, stand up for me when I need that, and put limits in place that keep me from moving off track.
- » **Share power:** Treat me with respect by treating me seriously and fairly, including me in decisions about my education, working with me to solve problems, and providing new opportunities for me to grow.
- » **Expand possibilities:** Connect me with people and places that broaden my world and open my eyes to new opportunities.<sup>12</sup>

## Seek to Build Safety and Trust with Students

For those who have experienced trauma, a sense of safety and trust is compromised. It will take time to build trust with students, and teachers and staff may have to prove to students that they are worthy of that fragile trust when adults in the past have broken it. Dr. Brene Brown offers a definition of trust using the acronym, BRAVING, that can help educators understand the components that must exist before a student is willing to build a relationship.<sup>13</sup>

- » **B** – Boundaries: I trust you if you are clear about your boundaries and you respect mine.
- » **R** – Reliability: I trust you if you do what you say you are going to do over and over again.
- » **A** – Accountability: When I make a mistake, I am willing to own it, apologize, and make amends.
- » **V** – Vault: What is shared will be held in confidence.
- » **I** – Integrity: Courage over comfort, right over easy, and practicing values, not just professing them.
- » **N** – Nonjudgment: I can fall apart, be in struggle and not be judged. Must be able to ask for help.
- » **G** – Generosity: I assume the most generous thing about the other person and do not assume the worst about what they are doing.<sup>14</sup>

Educators can show reliability and integrity through how they make and keep a promise. Student-adult relationships and connections will grow stronger when the adult only makes promises they can keep. The table below shows common promises educators try to make and better ways to show support that they can actually deliver.

Promises Teachers Can't Keep	Promises Teachers Can Keep
This won't ever happen to you again.	There are a lot of people who want to help you. I will always care about you.
I can fix this.	I am here to help you. It is my job.
You don't have to worry anymore.	This is not your fault. What has happened to you is not fair and I am sorry you have to deal with this.
I won't let you down.	You don't have to cope with this alone.
It will be okay.	It sounds like there are some really hard things going on that you wish would stop.

Similarly, adults and teachers reinforce trust when they have clear boundaries. A boundary is saying what is okay and what is not okay for you, and the other person in the relationship needs to honor those lines. Teachers and staff can help students to understand their own boundaries through modeling. Brittany Williamson, a mental health counselor at Florida Children's Institute in Jacksonville, provides several methods of using modeling to teach boundaries.

- » **Empathy checks** can happen throughout the day when one student offends another verbally or by taking something away. The teacher intervenes to ask the student, "How do you think you would feel if Aaron took your calculator when you needed it? What could you do differently next time?" These questions help a student gain perspective and start to think about boundaries with other students.
- » **Role play/discussions** during social and emotional learning or morning meetings helps students to see another's perspective and get outside of their immediate need.

- » **Demonstrating clear boundaries** is modeled by showing respect for every student, making only promises that can be kept, and showing consistency in actions.
- » **Reflecting on incidents and how they felt** helps students understand what they will say yes to and what they will say no to. In this way students begin to develop their own boundaries based on their experiences and feelings.<sup>15</sup>

Come up with common agreements about how they will interact with each other in the school. This shared expectation feeds into the A of “BRAVING”: Accountability. When expectations are clear, it is possible to know when a boundary has been crossed and begin a process of making amends.

Finally, educators must endeavor to hone their empathy skills. A key step is listening to understand, not to reply. When someone is sharing their concerns, create the space for them to talk without fear of judgment, and reserve your response until you have heard them. Showing empathy in this way helps students to feel they have been heard and acknowledged, and then can look for ways to improve their situation with your support. Adults should not seek to solve students’ problems for them, but rather, they should provide the tools, skills, and strategies to move forward. Remember that actions speak louder than words, as the adage goes. Be sure to monitor your body language, gestures, and tone of voice when providing support to not undercut your supportive messages.

Seek to empower students, even when they do not reach expectations. Students experiencing trauma and toxic stress expect to hear that they are not good enough and have once again failed. A teacher in a trauma-informed, resilience-oriented classroom will identify the specific behavior or skill needing some work and offer clear guidance on how it can be strengthened through practice.

### **Focus on Regulation when Things Get Difficult**

So, what do you do when you feel a student is difficult or distant? How do you prioritize a relationship when things are frustrating? It all comes back to regulation. No matter how strong relationships are, some students impacted by trauma and toxic stress will struggle to stay regulated. It is important to remember that a dysregulated adult cannot regulate a child. When a student acts in a way that shows dysregulation, the adult must take the lead and first mind their own thoughts and action. All it takes is one moment of breath to make the difference. When a student has done something disrespectful or harmful, adults should pause before responding. In that moment, the adult’s brain can take time to process what is happening and respond productively. When the adult is regulated, they are ready to respond. They should use a calm voice with a clear directive that makes sense to the student. Once the incident is over and the student has become regulated again, only then can the adult have a conversation with the student to help them identify other ways to express their concerns and needs.

In this way, adults can serve as a “relationship coach” for the students. Many students come to school lacking skills to initiate and sustain a conversation, let alone a relationship. When the teacher is present with students as they are learning, they can model behaviors and prompt conversations to coach the development of positive connections.

## Implement Resilience-Building Classroom Strategies

To build on the burgeoning trust within a physically safe environment, teachers can implement specific strategies within the classroom, whether in-person or virtual, to support students to stay regulated, build resilience, and, ultimately, effectively participate in learning. A key component is to understand and promote social and emotional learning (SEL): “the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.”<sup>16</sup> Research has shown that SEL is appropriate to teach in schools and will effectively lead to improved student outcomes, academically, socially, and emotionally.<sup>17</sup> Many school districts have already begun implementing an SEL curriculum, and this integrates well into the trauma-informed, resilience-oriented schools framework. These models are complementary; implementation of one supports implementation of the other. However, SEL implementation cannot replace school-wide trauma-informed, resilience-oriented schools approaches.

### Foster a Positive Classroom Culture

A positive classroom culture provides a safe space for all students to learn. It builds on the expanded definition of safety discussion in Section 1 – Introducing Trauma and Trauma-Informed, Resilience-Oriented Schools. In this environment, students are all given access to learning and know that their efforts are valued. A central feature of a positive classroom culture is predictability and routines. Students who have experienced trauma are on the lookout for threats to their safety. When a teacher builds predictability and routine into the classroom environment, that student can better regulate, know what to expect, and feel emotionally and psychologically safer. It is not always possible to set routines or prevent change. Whenever possible, notify students in advance of any changes to the status quo. All activities should be structured in a predictable and emotionally safe way.

- » Avoid calling on students when they have not been given an opportunity to prepare to present.
- » Seek to keep difficult situations private.
- » Reduce shaming and blaming by eliminating public methods of noting performance, such as clip charts.
- » Use multiple modalities of instruction to meet students’ different learning styles: visual, auditory, kinesthetic.

#### KEY TERM

### Social and emotional learning (SEL)

“the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.”<sup>34</sup>

#### Alternate Learning Strategy

Videos for understanding more about SEL from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL):

- » [What is Social and Emotional Learning?](#)
- » [The Impact of Social and Emotional Learning](#)



## Inclusion and Engagement Action Steps

Culturally responsive instruction is an important approach to promote positive classroom culture and reach students who may seem distant or disengaged. Aligned with trauma-informed, resilience-oriented schools principles, culturally responsive instruction is all about building relationships, but it takes a specific focus on building relationship with students' families and communities. Use the VABB method to promote culturally responsive instruction:<sup>35</sup>

- » V – Validate the student and their culture.
- » A – Affirm them in a positive way.
- » B – Build connections between school and home, including language and culture, through instructional strategies and activities.
- » B – Bridge any gaps by providing opportunities for students to learn, utilize, and share their cultural backgrounds.

At the start of the school year or term, set positive norms around learning for the whole class to practice. Consider these norms as a starting point:

- » **Everyone can learn to the highest level.** Students can learn processes and tackle even the most difficult problems with support. Teachers acknowledge students' work, effort, and learning rather than the results. This strategy applies to all areas of learning from math problems to discerning meaning in a difficult task to transferring social science information into a pro or con debate argument. Praise is given for the actual effort and not the end result by saying things like, "Look how much you have completed," or, "You have really made clear the author's purpose in writing."
- » **Mistakes are valuable.** Mistakes are opportunities for learning and growth. Present mistakes for everyone to learn from each other such as a math problem with an error for the group to find. While working on the problem the students are acknowledged for finding new ideas and good strategies.
- » **Questions are really important.** Asking questions is linked to high achievement.<sup>18</sup> If the teacher does not have the answer to a question, they or the class seek to find the answer.
- » **Learning is about creativity and making sense, not memorizing.** Visualize patterns, create solutions, discuss and critique your findings. Help students focus on understanding a problem and not finishing the work quickly. This is the skill that can always be applied to the next level of math they tackle.
- » **Learning is about connecting and communicating.** Make connections between all subjects and topics demonstrating where the ideas and skills will show up in real life and in their other classes. Teaching integrated curriculum is helpful to ensure that reading and writing skills are embedded in every academic subject and do not stand alone for 40 minutes a day.
- » **Class is about learning, not performing.** Focus on growth, effort, and taking time to learn. Grades and tests are secondary to growth.
- » **Depth is more important than speed.** It is a common myth that being a good learner means students act quickly. We no longer need students to work fast, but rather, take time to think deeply, connect methods, reason, and justifications. Processing through the difficult math problem creates a learning mindset that no problem is beyond my grasp. A valuable skill for any career path.<sup>19</sup>



## Facilitate Calm Environments and Co-Regulation

One of the most challenging skills for a student to learn is how to regulate their own behavior, emotions, and physical being. This is especially true for students impacted by trauma and toxic stress. Fortunately, this is something teachers can model and support students to develop by facilitating calm environments and co-regulation. It begins by understanding how the brain functions. This image helps us understand the main three areas of the brain.

1. The lower part of the brain is sometimes called the “survival” brain. It functions primarily to help us survive and stay safe. This part of our brain asks, “Am I safe?”<sup>20</sup>
2. The middle part of the brain is our “relational” brain. It is focused on our relationships and emotions. This part of our brain asks, “Am I loved?”<sup>21</sup>
3. The upper part of the brain is the locus of cognition. Its functions are thinking, learning, planning, and remembering. This part of our brain asks, “Can I learn?”<sup>22</sup>

## Three Areas of the Brain

**Cognition:** Thinking, learning, planning, remembering.  
"Can I learn?"



**Relational:**  
Emotional state.  
"Am I loved?"

**Survival:** Sensory processing and integration.  
"Am I safe?"

Source: Bailey, B. (n.d.). The Conscious Discipline Brain State Model. <https://consciousdiscipline.com/methodology/brain-state-model/>

### Alternate Learning Strategy

Videos for understanding emotions, regulation, and the brain:

- » [Why Do We Lose Control of Our Emotions?](#) by Kids Want to Know
- » [Brain & Amygdala Hand Model](#) by EmpowerU Education Building Resilience
- » [Fight Flight Freeze – Anxiety Explained for Teens](#) by Anxiety Canada
- » [State-Dependent Brain Functioning](#) by Dr. Bruce Perry and the Neurosequential Network
- » [Emotional Contagion](#) by Dr. Bruce Perry and the Neurosequential Network
- » [Regulate, Relate, Reason](#) by Dr. Bruce Perry and the Neurosequential Network

Ideally, students would mostly be using the upper part of their brain while in class. However, due to current or past experiences of trauma and toxic stress, students’ relational and survival parts of their brain may take over and get in the way of cognition. When activated or dysregulated, a student’s brain will focus on survival first. This prompts the “fight, flight, or freeze response,” causing students to act out, run away, or withdraw altogether. If a student is exhibiting this behavior, teachers can identify that they are not in a place to learn and must return to a state of calm and regulation in order to allow the upper part of the student’s brain to dominate. Fortunately, there are strategies teachers can use to engage a student when they are in this state.

First, it is important to remember the power of calm. Remaining regulated in the classroom is the single most important strategy a teacher can implement. There is always a power differential between people that is communicated through their interactions. Adults, especially the teacher in a classroom, are at the top of the power differential, meaning they dictate the level of anxiety and panic in the classroom through their interactions with students. Dr. Bruce Perry calls this relational contagion.<sup>23</sup> When a teacher is dysregulated, it can cause a ripple effect through the classroom, changing the students' emotional state and overall well being. The opposite is true as well; when teachers decrease the power differential through positive cues like smiling, using a calm tone, and managing their physical presence, students will feel less threatened and more able to access the cognitive part of their brain. Teachers and other adults are then able to co-regulate with the student with a calm voice, soothing touch, or steady presence. There is no fear, anger, or frustration to mirror.

Second, when a student moves into that fight, flight, or freeze response, seek to co-regulate with the student. Teachers can do this using Dr. Bruce Perry's memorable approach, "Regulate, Relate, Reason."<sup>24</sup> This approach is tied back to our understanding of the three main parts of the brain: survival, relational, cognition. Recall that when a student perceives a threat, their survival brain takes over. Learning is extremely difficult in this state. The more anxious or threatened a student feels, the less rational they become and the further into that survival state they move. A teacher's role is to monitor both their personal brain state and those of their students. As students start to show signs of dysregulation, change your educational strategies from **reason** (when an individual reflects, learns, remembers, articulates, and self-regulates their emotions), down to **relate** (connecting with the child), and even down to **regulate** (helping an individual control and calm their flight/fight/freeze response).<sup>25</sup> Start by listening more. Begin to use calming strategies, such as brain breaks, a mindful minute, or prompt the student to use the calming kits or spaces you developed in the classroom. A list of various sensory strategies to support in moments like this are provided in the Sensory Strategies Reference Sheet. These are only a few examples of actions teachers can take to practice co-regulation with students.

When the student is back to a state of calm, consider talking with them about what strategies work best for them for the next time this might happen. That is also a great opportunity to help them start to identify what caused them to be dysregulated in the first place and seek to minimize those experiences in the classroom. It is critical to note that you will not be able to have this conversation with the student until they have regulated. If they are operating from their survival brain, they are not in a place to reason, and, despite your intentions, teachers may even aggravate the situation if they do not seek to co-regulate first.

As mentioned before, predictability and clear expectations can help create calm classrooms. Take the brain states into account when making lessons plans to ensure the stress related to a given lesson is predictable, moderate, and controlled. Having small moments of manageable stress gives students an opportunity to build their resilience skills and grow to handling increasingly difficult work. Be sure to build breaks in throughout the class period and day.

## Support Students to Build Skills for Regulation

In addition to supporting students through co-regulation, teachers and other adults can actually help students build lifelong skills for emotional and behavioral regulation. This toolkit will highlight a few approaches that many schools around the country have already started to integrate with great success.

One approach is to help students learn about regulation and how to identify it in themselves and others. There are several models that teach emotions with words to describe them. The emotions are linked to words such as happy, sad, discouraged, and angry, as well as the way those feelings present themselves physically in the body. This work is intimately tied to teaching social and emotional learning (SEL)<sup>26</sup> discussed previously in this section.

### *Mindfulness*

One extremely effective strategy to help students learn how to calm their brain is mindfulness. This is both a regulatory and cognitive strategy. It requires students to focus enough to relax their muscles before they begin to relax their brain.<sup>27</sup> This can be used as a universal strategy built into the daily routine. Alternatively, it can be used with specific students when they are struggling to focus, stay on task, or remain calm. It is estimated that five minutes of mindfulness practice at a difficult time in the classroom will give the teacher back 20 minutes of calm learning time.

### *Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS)*

The research on the impressive success of collaborative problem solving (CPS)<sup>28</sup> means this approach cannot be ignored. This model understands brain states and recognizes that students benefit from understanding why they are struggling in the first place. As the creators say, “kids with challenging behavior are already trying hard. They don’t lack the will to behave well. They lack the skills to behave well.”<sup>29</sup> CPS focuses on building those skills in partnership with the student when a conflict or a challenge arises. Adults trained in CPS learn the three components of the approach:

1. Empathize: Clarify the child’s concern and perspective.
2. Share the adult’s concern.
3. Collaborate: Brainstorm, assess, and choose a solution that addresses both sets of concerns.<sup>30</sup>

While it seems simple, this approach can teach communication, attention, emotion and self-regulation, cognitive flexibility, and social thinking skills. It also builds positive relationships between the adult and student in stark contrast to traditional discipline and punitive practices. Research shows schools that integrate CPS into their practices experience 73% reduction in oppositional behaviors during school, 25% reduction in school office referrals, and reduced stress among 60% of teachers.<sup>31</sup>

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