

The Center for Fostering Success

# Best Practice, Best Fit

Webinar Series

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Discovery Driven Solutions Related  
to Educational Attainment for  
Students from Foster Care



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# Trauma-Informed Teaching: Exploring the Perceptions of Court-Involved Youth



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**School of Social Work**



# Webinar Objectives


- ▶ Discuss the impact of trauma on the educational well-being of court-involved students
  - ▶ Provide youth perceptions of student behavior and school climate before and after implementation of trauma-informed school practices
  - ▶ Highlight the importance of trauma-informed practices and training in school settings
  - ▶ Provide implications and strategies for working with students in foster care
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# Background

- Foster youth often have histories of experiencing previous trauma, impacting their development in multiple areas:
  - Emotional and behavioral development
  - Social
  - Physical
  - Academic

(Cook et al., 2005)





# Background: Definition of Trauma

- ▶ *Trauma*- Inability of an individual to respond in a healthy way to acute or chronic stress (Wolpow et al., 2009)
- ▶ *Complex trauma*- Exposure to multiple or chronic and prolonged developmentally adverse traumatic events
  - ▶ Youth in foster care demonstrate high levels of complex trauma (Greeson et al., 2011) and have PTSD rates 20% higher than same-age peers
  - ▶ Over 21% of foster care alumni have PTSD, a rate higher than that of war veterans (Pecora et al., 2005)



# Background: Impact of Trauma on Educational Well-Being


- ▶ Achieving school success requires the ability to:
  - ▶ Concentrate and memorize
  - ▶ Organize and comprehend
  - ▶ Self-regulate behaviors
- ▶ Trauma can hinder these functions, and also impedes a child's ability to:
  - ▶ Communicate
  - ▶ Form positive peer and adult relationships
  - ▶ Establish appropriate boundaries
  - ▶ Cognitively processing information

(Wolpow et al., 2009)

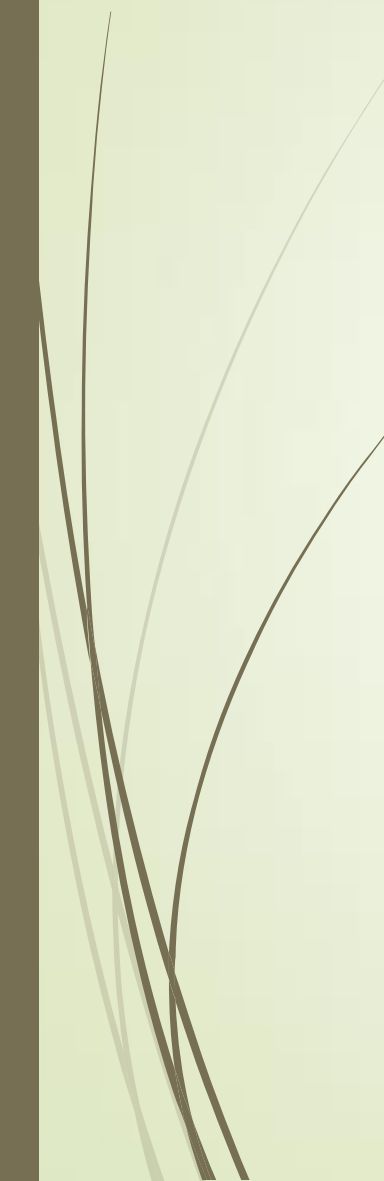


# Background: Impact of Trauma on Educational Well-Being cont.

- ▶ These students are/have:
  - ▶ Less likely to do their homework
  - ▶ Lower scores on standardized achievement tests
  - ▶ More than twice as likely to fail a grade
  - ▶ Assigned to special education services with greater frequency
  - ▶ Higher discipline referral rates, school suspensions, and expulsions than non-court involved youth
  - ▶ Lower GPAs
  - ▶ Higher school absences
  - ▶ Lower HS graduation rates, IQ, and self-esteem



# Background: Becoming Trauma-Informed

- Administrative support
  - Collaboration and support from school officials and management company
  - Networking & using resources
  - Hiring mental health-trained paraprofessionals
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# Research Aim

- To explore student perspectives on:
  - Behaviors that court-involved youth see displayed in the school setting
  - Childhood experiences that may impact these behaviors
  - Ways that school staff can improve the learning environment

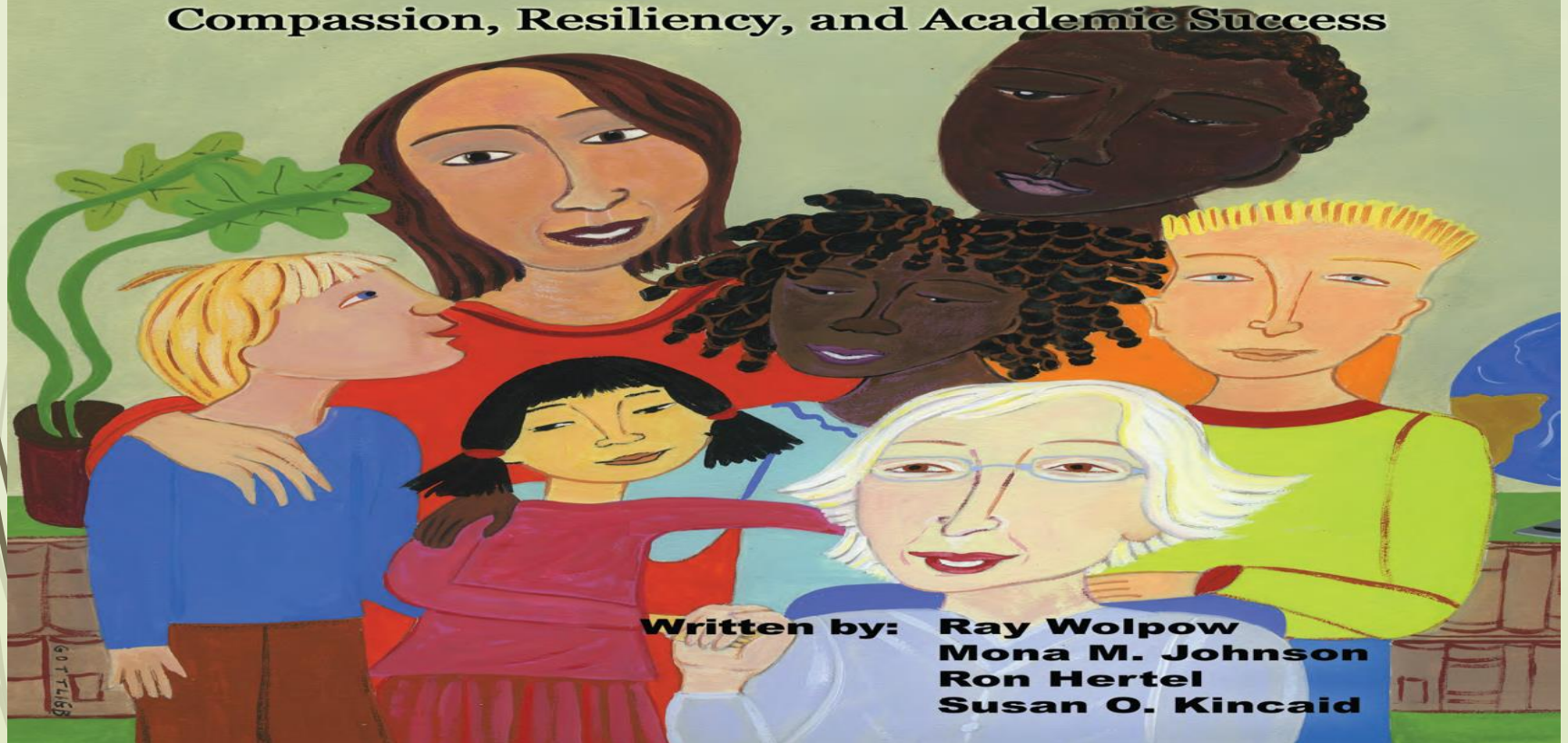


# Methods: Intervention

- Curriculum
  - Integrated approach: *The Heart of Learning and Teaching: Compassion, Resiliency, and Academic Success (HTL)*
- Observations- classrooms and on school grounds
- Individual coaching sessions
- Monarch Room
- Administration debriefing with:
  - Trainer
  - Staff
  - WSU team
  - Students

# Methods: Intervention Cont.


## **The Heart of Learning and Teaching:** Compassion, Resiliency, and Academic Success



**Written by: Ray Wolpow  
Mona M. Johnson  
Ron Hertel  
Susan O. Kincaid**




# Methods: Data Collection

- ▶ Focus groups were conducted with students before and after the trauma-informed teaching intervention, asking:
    - ▶ What student behaviors do students observe in the school setting?
    - ▶ What childhood experiences do students feel may impact these behaviors?
    - ▶ What ways do students feel that teachers can improve the learning environment?
  - ▶ Focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for themes
- 



# Methods: Sample

- ▶ 184 students enrolled at Clara B. Ford Academy (CBF) between September 2012 and June 2013
    - ▶ Female, court-involved students with a history of abuse and neglect and placed in residential treatment at Vista Maria
      - ▶ Approximately 90% of the youth residents have a mental health diagnosis
      - ▶ The racial make-up is primarily youth of color
  - ▶ 39 students were randomly selected to participate in focus groups
- 



# Methods: Sample

	Study Sample	
	Frequency	Percentage
Total	39	100
Race		
White	9	23
African American	27	69
Other	3	8
Grade Level		
9 <sup>th</sup> Grade	7	18
10 <sup>th</sup> Grade	18	46
11 <sup>th</sup> Grade	8	21
12 <sup>th</sup> Grade	6	15



# Key Findings

Theme	N	%
Observed student behaviors		
1. Anger emotions	15	38.5
2. Aggressive actions	12	30.8
Causes of student behaviors		
3. Environmental influences	13	33.3
4. Triggers	9	23.1
Student suggestions		
5. Encourage respect of others	12	30.8
6. Improve behavior management to enhance student engagement	10	25.6
Other		
7. Monarch room as support	6	15.4



# Key Findings cont.

## Theme #1- Observed Student Behaviors: Anger Emotions

*“Like the kids, they come to school mad and it completely ruins your day cause they take their anger out on you.”*

*“You already got the anger and the frustration and the stress and the pressure that build up inside you...”*

## Theme #2- Observed Student Behaviors: Anger Actions

*“It don’t even depend on who the person is—it’s just that the one person says something out the way—you automatically get mad and you wanna just attack them.”*





# Key Findings cont.

## Theme #3- Causes of Student Behaviors: Environmental Influences

“...hanging out with the wrong people and they made it seem like it was ok to drop out and find a job instead of going to college and getting a career...they made it seem like it was ok to flip money, they made it seem like it was ok to sell drugs and stuff like that...”

“...other people [students] have attitudes and it kind of combines with your attitude, cause you're in the classroom full of kids that got attitudes, so it's even worse...it's like, well I'm going to make my attitude more bigger than everybody else's and then you start acting out and everything.”

## Theme #4- Causes of Student Behaviors: Triggers

*“We were in social studies class one day and we were listening to songs to help us write a poem and just listening to this one verse brought back everything and I just put my head down on my desk and bawled my eyes out.”*



# Key Findings cont.

## Theme #5- Student Suggestions: Encourage Respect of Others

*“just treat the kids with respect, help them when they need help, and basically that’s it.”*

## Theme #6- Student Suggestions: Improve Behavior Management to Enhance Student Engagement

*“I think it’s more about just having consistency because there’s some kids that will try to bend the rules...some of the teachers don’t know how to handle that...or they don’t want to handle it, or they just let [the student] do their own thing so [the teacher] can get through with class”*




# Key Findings cont.

## Theme #7- Other: Monarch Room as Support

*"...if you're having troubles in class or you just need somewhere to calm down or someone to talk to, or you need somewhere you can use your coping skills you can go there. There's a staff who sits in there, Ms. X, and I talk to her frequently because I have a trust built up with her...you can just go in there, sit....remove yourself from the situation so you can think clearly without, you know, the people in your face or like feeling like you're crowded in."*




# Implications

- ▶ Survival reactions directly complicate learning and classroom climates
  - ▶ Students are not able to communicate their sense of fear and doom with words, instead they do so through behavioral outbursts and class disruptions
  - ▶ School personnel should receive training on psychological trauma as a part of their general professional development
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# Implications cont.

- ▶ Consider using a trauma-informed training curriculum
  - ▶ Prepare and recruit trauma-informed learning facilitators
  - ▶ Hire administrators and staff with mental health training
- 



# Implications cont.

- Maintain safety, supportive connections, and management of emotions
  - Adopt attachment-driven interventions
    - Influences student behavior and school attachment
    - Develops student feelings of safety
  - Reconsider school suspension practices
- 



# Strategies for Practice

- Professional Development
  - Emphasize strong youth-adult relationships
  - Develop and share skills and strategies
  - Identify outside resources and supports
- Classroom-Based Academic Strategies
  - Creating a safe learning environment
  - Social skills development
  - Self-awareness and self-regulation
  - Use of varied academic teaching strategies



# Strategies for Practice cont.

- ▶ Review Policies, Procedures, & Protocols
  - ▶ Discipline policy of the school and standards of behavior
  - ▶ Communication
  - ▶ Compliance
  - ▶ Collaboration with the community





# Resources

- Treatment and Trauma-Informed Care

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/responding/trauma.cfm>

- Collaboration with Schools

[https://www.childwelfare.gov/management/practice\\_improvement/collaboration/schools.cfm](https://www.childwelfare.gov/management/practice_improvement/collaboration/schools.cfm)

- Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative (Helping Traumatized Children Learn)

<http://traumasensitiveschools.org/>

- The Heart of Learning and Teaching (digital text)

<https://www.k12.wa.us/compassionateschools/pubdocs/TheHeartofLearningandTeaching.pdf>

- *Supporting Brain Development in Traumatized Children and Youth (text)*

- *Understanding the Effects of Maltreatment on the Brain (text)*

- *What is Child Welfare? A Guide for Educators (text)*

# Contact Information



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# Discussion/Questions



Thank you for attending!

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- If you have a research study that you are interested in presenting via this series, please contact Dr. Yvonne Unrau, Director of the Center for Fostering Success at [Yvonne.Unrau@wmich.edu](mailto:Yvonne.Unrau@wmich.edu) with your ideas.



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