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### **‘Critical Questions’ Series February 2012**

## **What is Social Emotional Learning for Academic Success?**

“Focusing on academics while struggling with trauma is like trying to play chess in a hurricane” (Wolpow, Johnson, Hertel, and Kincaid, 2011). Students in the classroom today are coming to school with more and more complex needs. The drop out rate continues to be a major concern in communities across the nation. One in five students are living in conditions that expose them to trauma that has a direct impact on their probability of graduating from high school. Research shows that trauma has a significant impact on brain development and it is now known that survival trumps new learning. How do we find time in our high stakes assessment focused classrooms to meet the social emotional needs of our students? We must find the time because social emotional learning is the primary marker for academic success and graduation.

Complex Trauma has a dramatic impact on the academic success of students. The definition of Complex Trauma can best be described as the experience of multiple or chronic/prolonged, developmentally adverse traumatic events, most often of a personal nature (sexual or physical abuse, family violence, war, community violence) and early life onset (WSU Area Health Education Center, 2007). With ever-shrinking funding for early childhood agencies, schools are faced with the challenge of meeting the increasing diverse needs of students. Only one in ten children with a diagnosed mental health disorder ever get treatment. Only 50% of CPS referrals are investigated while less than 1/3 of those referrals receive any services. Meanwhile, all of these students are coming to school each day.

Several studies have taken place over the past several years that provide some very shocking information. In a study of middle school students in Philadelphia, Johns Hopkins University (2009) found a direct correlation of the following:

If a student is:

- Failing math or reading
- Developing an attendance problem
- Developing a behavior problem

Then:

- That student has only a 25% chance of graduating from high school.

This is an alarming statistic! From this study, if we know this about our kids at an early age, we must do something different so that we can change their path in order to help them be successful. In a similar study, Washington State University Area Health Education Center did an Incidence and Prevalence Study in 2010. Classroom teachers were surveyed on a random sampling of 2100 students in ten elementary schools around Spokane County. Five schools were Title I schools while five schools were not. In this study, it was discovered that one in 5 students have been exposed to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE’s). That translates to a conservative figure of 15,000 students in Spokane County. The study showed that there was a direct correlation in the number of ACE’s and

the increased risk of academic failure, severe attendance problems, severe behavior problems, and frequent health problems. Nationally, there are roughly 30% of children who experience complex trauma. In poverty areas, this exceeds 50%. Interestingly, our state's drop out rate hovers at about 30% or 309,000 students per year.

The impact of complex trauma on brain development is significant. Researchers used to believe that the brain only developed until about age three. However, new research has shown that the brain continues to develop into young adulthood and that it depends on rich relationships and mastery of emotional responses. When children experience trauma, their brain often can only function at the very basic level of fight or flight. There is often a lack of ability to get to the reasoning or emotions part of the brain. Therefore, their ability to learn becomes hindered by the trauma that has taken over their brain functions. Persistent stress is epidemic in children and places brain development at risk. This can be as high as 30% in the general population and 85% in marginalized populations. If we address this in early childhood and K-12 systems, we have a better chance of improving childhood development and system success. Many students who have survived these early experiences and become resilient, point to teachers as being the reason for their success (Blodget, Harrington, et al, 2010).

In our high-stakes academic world, schools have been pressed to show results. This pressure has often come at the expense of addressing the social emotional needs of children. It is too often stated by teachers that they don't feel they have time to spend on relationships anymore because there are too many academic demands. Dealing with the social emotional needs of students can often be viewed as "something else on the plate". I firmly believe that social emotional learning IS the plate on which everything else should be placed. In the absence of a firm foundation in social emotional learning and relationships, academic success becomes an unattainable goal. The role of social emotional learning has a big impact on the focus of high-stakes testing. We may not be able to control how we feel, but we can learn to choose how we act. In his book, Mark Katz (1997) states,

Looking through the trauma-sensitive lens... Not realizing that children exposed to inescapable, overwhelming stress may act out their pain, that they may misbehave, not listen to us, or seek our attention in all the wrong ways, can lead us to punish these children for their misbehavior... if only we knew what happened last night, or this morning before she got to school, we would be shielding the same child we're now reprimanding.

Resiliency must be the goal for our many students who are functioning in a world of trauma. Resiliency buffers the effects of trauma. As educators, we must shift our thinking from "what is wrong" to "what is right" with a child. This is a shift from a deficit model to a strength model. Teachers must find ways to always empower students and never dis-empower them. We must educate our children with unconditional, positive regard in a safe and caring environment. All students deserve an environment where high expectations are coupled with high support and where consistent routines are the norm. It is our imperative that we help calm the hurricane in order to guide our students to success.

#### IMPORTANT POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Keep the focus on the educational mission
- Build meaningful relationships
  - Foundation to support learning and mastery
  - Engagement to parents
- Create safety and predictability
- Promote skill development from where students are
- Accountability as an essential survival skill

- Meaning-making (reasoning and problem-solving)
- Development of universal trauma sensitive social emotional learning standards

References:

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