



Washington State Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

“The Practitioner’s Best Friend”
www.wsascd.org

‘Critical Questions’ Series

August 2017

Why is attending the Trauma Informed Practice Summit by Kirsten Souers Valuable?

As Principal of an all kindergarten school (averaging over 500 “little ones”), our vision statement reads “Sun Valley Elementary....The Foundation for Success!” This not only means academically, but emotionally and socially as well. Don’t we all want to believe that every one of our students is capable of succeeding in all aspects, no matter what grade level? At Sunnyside School District, we are “Learning Today for a Brighter Tomorrow!” I like to think this not only connects to our students but what about professional learning for our staff? Students today are facing more trauma and adverse childhood experiences than ever before and a new understanding is imperative to their success.

This past June, I had the opportunity to attend the “*Trauma Informed Practice Summit*” featuring *Kristin Souers, Mental Health Consultant*. As we start the new school year, we have already identified students with behaviors coming forward and we anticipate new behaviors that we have never seen before, either from returning students or students new to our building.

As mentioned at the summit, trauma is related to exceptional experiences. It does not only pertain to one event, but can encompass powerful and/or dangerous events over time that can *overwhelm the child’s capacity to cope and learn*. We know that some of our students come to us experiencing the loss of a family member or witnessing a tragic death, and we also have those students who come to us on a daily basis wondering if there will be food on the table or a place to sleep for the night. Some wonder if their parent is going to jail for the second and third time, and when they will see their mom or dad again. It wasn’t far into my educational career, I realized that even these five year olds have seen or experienced situations that I have never seen in my lifetime. My heart breaks for them.

Unfortunately, the numbers continue to rise for students of all age groups with these types of experiences that develop into physical, mental or emotional needs. Severe behaviors are escalating. How can we help them? How can I team with my staff and deepen our understanding of the prevalence of childhood and adolescence trauma and the effect it has on their ability to learn? How can I support my staff and move them to have a heart of compassion and understanding for that “one student” while struggling to continue to provide a safe and learning environment for the other 20 plus students in the classroom? I can tell you that attending the “*Trauma Informed Practice Summit*” was extremely valuable.

Attending the summit, Kristen provided strategies and ideas to create and empower a culture and learning environment that supports all of our students and those with specific behavior needs. Information was delivered regarding the lack of brain development from exposure to continued stress and/or experiencing trauma.

Learning about students who “flip their lids” opened our eyes to new understanding of being ready or not ready to learn. And, we learned, how we ourselves set the tone for the day...what is the message we relate to “those children”, the ones who are struggling and we are having difficulty with?

When I returned home from the summit, fortuitously I had mail that tied to my new learning and reinforced my already held beliefs about having compassion for ALL children. My mail contained a statement quoted by Lady Bird Johnson that said, “Children are likely to live up to what you believe in them.” I thought to myself, do we value or de-value our students when they walk through the front door of our building or through the front door

of our classrooms...the door that might be their only “safe” place? Am I accepting or do I give up on them leaving them feel even more deflated than when they walked through that door? We have ample opportunities to provide students to view and experience situations differently, in a more trusting and positive way. It is up to us.

As I sat there amongst a team of counselors, administrators, teachers and community partners, I couldn't help but take this further to reflecting not only on the students in my building, but what about my staff? This subject of trauma is one that can also affect our colleagues and employees, giving us insight for those that can be difficult to work with. As we strive to achieve a positive and successful environment for everyone, educating ourselves about trauma and exceptional experiences can be one of our greatest professional learning's. I am grateful that this fall our district is providing training for all staff on the effects of trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences. We all know in our hearts that there is always something behind the behavior. You can learn from Kristen the power of de-escalation, ways to be pro-active, and ways to connect and support your students (yes and even staff!) and give them a caring, safe and comfortable arena so the learning can take place. As we embark on this new learning and understanding together, let us help our students who experience the darker moments to enjoy a brighter tomorrow!

Kirsten Souers will be providing Trauma Informed Practice Summit, October 27, 2017 at Whitworth University in Spokane, Washington.

Submitted By:
Jeri Paulakis, Principal
Sun Valley Elementary/Sunnyside School District
Jeri.paulakis@sunnysideschools.org