

# SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONAL PREVENTION

## working with schools and youth-serving organizations



Schools and youth-serving organizations are spaces where children and adolescents learn, grow, and develop into healthy and happy young adults. Professionals and caring adults working in these spaces may not have consistent and accurate training in sexual violence intervention and prevention, leaving them less equipped to do their job to the best of their ability. This research document will offer promising practices for professionals in the sexual violence prevention movement who are interested in strengthening partnerships with educators and youth-serving professionals.

### FOSTERING SAFE SPACES FOR YOUTH

School and community professionals working with youth are committed to supporting healthy development and safe environments for learning and socializing. These goals can sometimes collide with individual student's traumatic experiences, larger social norms, and bullying behaviors. For example, a national school climate survey found that 57.6% of students who identify as LGBTQ felt unsafe at school because of homophobia or bias and, as a result, missed days of school and isolated from others.<sup>1</sup> Another survey found 67% of young women in school reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and 21% reported experiencing sexual violence at some point during their lives.<sup>2</sup> These dynamics may make it difficult for students to concentrate on academics, feel comfortable at school or in community spaces, and have a difficult time responding to stress.

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of students who *identify as LGBTQ* felt unsafe at school because of bias and *missed school as a result.*

Trauma – or an incident or series of incidents that overwhelm our coping mechanisms – can have a tremendous impact on physiology and brain functioning, particularly in youth.<sup>3</sup> Professionals are best serving youth when they take a trauma-informed approach. A trauma-informed climate is one that promotes and celebrates diversity, proactively addresses bullying, and considers the experiences of all students.<sup>4</sup> **When climate is assessed and any issues are addressed, organizations and institutions support their larger mission of education, healthy development, and safety for young people.**



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## SUPPORTING THOUGHTFUL PRACTICE

Professionals in schools and youth-serving organizations do not always have the training and support necessary to respond to disclosures of violence or trauma. This is why a team approach is crucial for effective practice. Sexual violence programs and victim service organizations can serve as experts and resources for educators and professionals working with youth.

Training and technical assistance offer thoughtful and individualized support to organizations and professionals wanting to grow their practice. Ongoing education in the following topics will support trauma-informed practice and policies:

- **Understanding trauma and adverse experiences.** The complexity of trauma and trauma responses can interrupt development and inhibit healthy responses to stress. Learning about these processes can enhance professionals' abilities to create safety in classrooms and group settings, as well as convey to young people adults seek to take a holistic approach.<sup>5</sup>

- **Mandated reporting of child abuse.** State laws identify mandated reporters and outline steps to report suspected or reported child abuse. This guidance is part of a national "safety net" for children – one that seeks to find resources for families and stop abuse from escalating. Educating professionals and adults about these goals and responsibilities will help de-mystify the process and help them envision themselves as part of a larger movement to protect young people.
- **Policies that promote safety and equity.** Policies offer a type of compass to practice – a set of principles that inform culture and acquaint new employees with the culture of a school or organization. Do these policies promote gender equity? Equity in all forms? Is there clarity in procedures? Are procedures consistently carried out? Helping organizations assess policies and practices offers tangible projects to motivate dedicate professionals and leaders.

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## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A., Giga, N. M., Villenas, C. & Danischewski, D. J. (2016). *The 2015 National School Climate Survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth in our nation's schools*. New York: GLSEN. Retrieved from <https://www.glsen.org/article/2015-national-school-climate-survey>
- <sup>2</sup> Chaundhry, N. & Tucker, J. (2017). *Let Her Learn: Stopping School Pushout - Overview and Key Findings*. Washington, DC: National Women's Law Center. Retrieved from <https://nwlrc.org/resources/stopping-school-pushout-overview-and-key-findings/>
- <sup>3</sup> Treatment & Services Adaptation Center. (n.d.). "What is a Trauma-Informed School?" Retrieved from <https://traumaawareschools.org/traumainschools>
- <sup>4</sup> National Center on Safe supporting Learning Environments. (2017). *A Safe Place to Learn: Prevent, intercede, respond to sexual harassment of K-12 students*. Retrieved from <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/safe-place-to-learn-k12>
- <sup>5</sup> Chaundhry & Tucker.

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The New Jersey Coalition Against Sexual Assault (NJCASA) is the statewide organization representing 21 county-based rape crisis centers and Rutgers University's Office for Violence Prevention and Victim Assistance. NJCASA elevates the voice of survivors and service providers through advocacy, training, and support for efforts to create safer communities for all women, men and children.

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