

Community Roadmap to Bring Healing-Centered Schools to the Bronx

A PROJECT OF THE HEALING-CENTERED SCHOOLS WORKING GROUP



Authored by the Healing-Centered Schools Working Group, a coalition of parents, students, advocates, educators, and mental health providers working to bring healing-centered practices to all Bronx schools.

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A Message from the Healing-Centered Schools Working Group

We are a coalition of Bronx parents, students, educators, mental health providers, and advocates who believe that every school-based interaction with students and parents/caregivers should be healing-centered. We have witnessed the impact of trauma on our communities and our students' ability to learn, and we have seen how our students suffer when schools lack the tools to respond to trauma. We believe that a healing-centered approach to learning will make Bronx schools safer and more supportive environments for all students, not just those who have been impacted by trauma. We thank you for taking the time to read our Community Roadmap to Bring Healing-Centered Schools to the Bronx. We hope it will be a useful tool for you to advance educational equity in your own corner of the Bronx.

If you have any questions about the materials included in this document, or would like support advocating for healing-centered practices in your school, you can reach us at (917) 661-4529 or bxhealingcenteredschools@lsnyc.org.

Executive Summary

Bronx students are more likely than almost any other students to experience childhood trauma and its detrimental impacts on learning. One in four children in classrooms nationwide has been exposed to some form of childhood trauma, and children who live below the poverty level are more likely to experience three or more adverse childhood experiences.¹ Because the Bronx has one of the highest rates of childhood poverty in the country, our students face disproportionately high levels of childhood trauma. Students experience childhood trauma in their communities, in their homes, in their personal relationships, and in the institutions with which they interact. In addition to the long history of trauma that impacts Bronx students, our students and families are now grappling with the trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic and national attention to police killings of and state-sanctioned violence against Black people. These traumatic experiences, rooted in systemic oppression, impact brain functioning, development, self-regulation skills, the ability to form healthy relationships, and students' ability to learn. In the long term, these experiences can impact students' educational outcomes, employment stability, physical health, and criminal justice involvement.

For some students, schools are safe havens. For many other students, schools are sites of trauma and re-traumatization. Bronx students and parents/caregivers report that punitive responses to behavior, including police intervention, frequent suspensions, and calls to EMS; school-based racial trauma and other forms of discrimination; school or classroom dynamics that replicate the dynamics of past trauma; and staff responses that minimize or neglect students' academic and social emotional needs often exacerbate existing trauma or lead to new trauma.

The Healing-Centered Schools Working Group believes that schools should be sites of healing, not trauma or re-traumatization. When Bronx schools are not equipped to understand trauma and its impacts, staff are more likely to create traumatizing and re-traumatizing dynamics that make it difficult for students to learn, form relationships, and succeed in life. But schools that build a culture of healing can reverse the effects of trauma, boost academic engagement, and promote social emotional well-being.

Healing-Centered Schools are the Solution

The Healing-Centered Schools Working Group believes that Bronx schools can address trauma and trauma's impact on learning by adopted a healing-centered framework for education. A healing-centered school is one that takes affirmative steps to ensure that all students, staff, and parents/caregivers feel safe, supported, and seen — a necessary ingredient

¹ "Downs, B., & Manning, J. B., *Understanding How Trauma Affects Students*. Scholastic (n.d.). Retrieved June 17, 2020, from <http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/articles/18-19/understanding-how-trauma-affects-students/>; *Adverse Childhood Experiences*. Child Trends (2019). Retrieved June 17, 2020, from <https://www.childtrends.org/indicators/adverse-experiences>.

for learning and for a strong school community. When our students are given the space to heal, to learn, and to exist in community with one another, they are able to grow their strengths and build a foundation for success.

Healing-centered educational practices have been proven to produce positive outcomes for students' social emotional well-being, staff wellness, parent/caregiver trust, and school culture. The Healing-Centered Schools Working Group studied many schools and school districts that adopted these practices, including the Schenectady City School District (SCSD).² SCSD adopted a citywide trauma-sensitive program that involved greater funding for social workers, adoption of mindfulness spaces and practices, and whole-scale changes to their discipline and safety systems. As part of their changes to safety and discipline, SCSD removed all school resource officers from their schools, hired respected community members to provide support and de-escalation in the event of student conflict, and adopted a suspension diversion program that connects students to long-term mental health resources. Four years after implementing these changes, SCSD has seen one-third fewer conflicts between students, a reduced dropout rate, and a reduction in the amount of missed instructional time caused by to suspensions.

Key Recommendations for Creating Healing-Centered Schools

This Roadmap offers a menu of changes that schools can make to become more supportive and healing-centered. These recommendations were compiled through research by and discussions with Bronx students, parents/caregivers, educators, advocates, and service providers. Key recommendations include:

- Steps you can take to remove punitive, criminalizing school structures that undermine healing including School Safety Agents, metal detectors, and criminalizing language;
- Best practices to advance anti-racism and equity through Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education (CRSE), including anti-bias trainings, restorative justice practices, and steps to center student and family voice in decision-making;
- Individual healing-centered responses to behavior, including best practices for empathetically re-directing students who engage in disruptive behavior, strategies to help staff understand the roots of challenging behavior, and preventive strategies that staff can use to reduce disruptive behavior, promote students' social emotional well-being, and create an atmosphere that supports learning;
- School-wide and district-wide healing-centered responses to behavior, including recommendations for adopting a suspension diversion program;

² Healing-Centered Schools Working Group Visit to Schenectady City School District (November 2019) (notes on file with Working Group).

- Specific practices schools can use to amplify student voice and promote staff wellness;
- Targeted strategies to support students with specific needs related to bullying, behavioral crises, or housing instability; and
- Best practices for cultivating healing-centered school-based partnerships, including partnerships with mental health clinics and Students in Temporary Housing staff.

Best Practices for Whole-School Transformation

This Roadmap also offers best practices for launching the whole-school transformational change that is necessary to create a healing-centered environment. It will provide you with advice for facilitating early conversations, strategies to build buy-in, and best practices for implementation, ongoing assessment, and continued growth. Bronx students, parents/caregivers, and educators can all make use of these strategies to advance change. Here are the key elements of whole-school change featured in this Roadmap:

- Build support among all members of the school community. Principals, Superintendents, and the Executive Superintendent can provide support by ensuring schools have time to complete necessary changes, promoting healing-centered messaging, and facilitating access to resources. Staff, students, and parents/caregivers should contribute their voice to the Healing-Centered Plan, support implementation, and help build buy-in.
- Form a Transformation Team, a team comprised of members from all aspects of the school community, to start conversations about the healing-centered transformation, assess your school community's needs, formulate a Healing-Centered Plan in collaboration with the school community, and implement and assess that plan.
- Transformation Team should collaborate with School Leadership Teams and school communities to assess how school practices and culture are advancing or undermining the seven Healing-Centered Principles. One principle says, "All students, families, and staff should feel physically, psychologically, and emotionally safe in our schools."
- Educate all staff members about trauma, its impact on learning and behavior, the importance of student safety and well-being, and healing-centered practices that will help staff support student safety and well-being. Community education should also be made available to students and parents/caregivers.

We Need Healing-Centered Education Now

For decades, countless Bronx students have attended schools that punished or neglected their trauma-related needs. Our students' social emotional well-being and academic outcomes have suffered as a result. School staff and parents/caregivers have experienced

vicarious trauma as they struggled to provide support in an educational environment that too often inflicts harm. As we confront two pandemics, the COVID-19 crisis and the anti-Black racism that has plagued this country from its earliest foundations, we are called to dismantle structures of harm in our schools and create spaces where students can heal and learn.

This roadmap provides a tool to help you begin conversations in your school or district about healing-centered education. Whether you're a Bronx parent/caregiver, a student, a staff member, a school administrator, or an executive within the Department of Education, this Roadmap will provide you with examples of healing-centered practices, research to support those practices, and the tools to initiate and sustain change.