

A smooth, rounded, blue-grey stone sits in the center of a sand mandala. The mandala is composed of concentric circles of sand, with a larger circle surrounding the stone and several smaller circles below it. The sand is a light tan color.

WANTED: TEACHERS

Recruiting and hiring appropriate teacher candidates to serve in a trauma-impacted school

By John F. Eller and Sheila A. Eller

WHO KNOW
TRAUMA

The estimates vary, but some sources say that up to 1 in 4 children have been affected by multiple traumatic experiences before they reach school age. Much has been written about the impact of trauma since the initial adverse childhood experiences study conducted in the 1990s by Kaiser Permanente and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which found that the adverse effects of early childhood trauma lasted far beyond childhood.

School principals see the impact of trauma in children's learning and behavior. We see the effect of trauma in students who "shut down" and disconnect, students who suddenly lash out, students who are apathetic, and students who are confrontational when interacting with peers and adults. With this variety of reactions, it's hard for teachers to predict the behaviors of students day to day, much less provide a solid environment for them and their emotional safety.

Principals of schools affected by outside trauma have a particularly difficult task in recruiting and selecting the teachers they need to make a positive impact. There are effective strategies principals can use to ensure that students will be successful, however, and while these strategies focus on trauma-impacted schools, they can help ensure success in multiple school settings.

Classroom Strategies to Serve Students

Because students might come from stressful, unstable, and unsafe environments, teachers must implement a set of strategies to help students experience a stable, predictable, and safe setting. Here are some of the strategies they can use to establish and reinforce this environment:

Build relationships. Since most of the traumas students experience are related to maltreatment or neglect, teachers need to focus on developing sound, stable, and appropriate relationships with their students. Showing students they care, getting to know what interests them, greeting them as they enter the classroom, and practicing other relationship-building skills are crucial.

Design a calm, structured classroom environment. In addition to developing a relationship base, teachers should also focus on designing and implementing a calm, predictable, and stable classroom. Establish routines for conducting class, turning in assignments, transitions, and other functions to help



RELATIONSHIPS PROMOTE RESILIENCE

"Teachers hoping to form positive relationships with students exhibiting ... compulsive behaviors require above-average self-monitoring skills.

These skills allow teachers to maintain objectivity as they simultaneously monitor their own internal state while observing what's going on in the environment. This objectivity improves all aspects of teaching but is indispensable when de-escalating children's behavior.

"By staying calm in a moment of crisis, teachers show children that they are neither frightened nor surprised by strong feelings. This support increases children's ability to tolerate uncomfortable feelings and eventually to become more adept at controlling them. Within this context, redirection becomes an opportunity to strengthen relationships and build children's inner strengths."
— Susan E. Craig, "The Trauma-Sensitive Teacher"



students know what will happen in a step-by-step manner.

Stay calm under pressure. Students experiencing trauma sometimes exhibit unpredictable fight, flight, or freeze behaviors, so teachers need to be able to stay calm and collected. They need to be able to emotionally disconnect from the situation temporarily and try to understand what is happening before reacting. This "temporary suspension of opinion" will give students the space they may need to become calm enough to work through the situation.

Maintain objectivity. Related to the temporary suspension of opinion is the ability to maintain objectivity when working with student reactions to traumatic situations. Teachers must try to avoid taking behaviors personally and seek to understand the best strategy to help the student.

Reaching out to provide comfort. Students want to know you are there to help, not to try to "fix" their problem. When reaching out, provide an environment in which they can talk if they wish to do so. Accepting students as they are and letting them know you are there if they need you goes a long way toward building a caring relationship.

In each school, other unique skills and competencies are required. You'll want to assess your situation and identify the skills required in your school to help make teachers and their students successful.

Teacher Competencies and Skills

As you work to recruit teachers to work in your school, it's crucial to keep the skills needed for success in a trauma-informed school and classroom in mind. In our 2009 book *Working With and Evaluating Difficult School Employees*, we outline several competencies to consider when developing teachers. Consider the following in recruiting and selecting teachers for hire:

Surface competencies. Surface competencies are the teacher skills and abilities that are teachable or learnable. Examples include lesson planning, setting up classroom procedures, and organizing the physical structure of the classroom. These and other observable surface competencies can be taught or developed in teachers.

Base competencies. Base competencies focus on attitudes, beliefs, values, and other personal processes. Examples include the beliefs that all children have value and can

learn, that building relationships is important, that you must try to understand a situation before judging it, and that you must accept children as they are before trying to change them. Base competencies develop over time and include many of the skills needed to work with students experiencing trauma.

Assessing Candidates for Your School

As we recruit and select teachers to work in trauma-impacted schools, we must assess their skill sets to see whether they possess the necessary base competencies needed to work in such schools. While no strategy is 100 percent perfect, here are some ideas to help you as you recruit and select teachers to work in trauma-sensitive environments:

State the skills and competencies needed in your job description and posting. By letting potential candidates know what skills are needed in your school, you'll help them self-select positions that match their skill sets. Frame the necessary skills in a positive manner so that the position remains attractive, and consider including the resources and support the school will provide as an incentive to consider the position.

Review written applications for evidence of needed competencies. Most districts have some form of written application procedure, and many include situational questions requiring a written response. Carefully review the answers to these questions to assess the level of alignment between the candidate and the needs of your position.

Reach out to candidates with a brief phone interview. Once you have narrowed the applicant pool down to the people you wish to consider for the position, set up a phone call to conduct mini-interviews with the candidates. Ask applicants to share examples of situations they have faced similar to what might happen at your school. As candidates describe how they handled these events, listen for alignment with your needs. Those in alignment can go on to an in-person interview.

Design multiple assessment opportunities for the on-site interview. In preparing for live or in-person interviews, consider going beyond the traditional interview. This is your chance to assess whether or not the candidate possesses the competencies needed to be successful in multiple settings. Consider having them talk with the department or grade level

of the position, meet with a small group of parents, or conduct a teaching segment with a group of students. Use structured response interview instruments to ask all candidates the same questions.

Ask questions about attitudes and describable behaviors in checking references. Once candidates have completed an in-person interview, you'll have an opportunity to check their references. Go beyond the common questions and pose a few situational questions to see what the person providing the reference has observed in the candidate; many will share positive, supportive information if you ask for it. Consider focusing on the references who have direct knowledge of the candidate, rather than on the district HR staff.

Support new hires as they acclimate.

Once you have made the decision to hire a candidate, schedule a short meeting to discuss their skills, how they match the needs of the position, and your plans to help them develop the skills needed to be successful at your school. This should be the first part of a larger teacher induction plan that allows new teachers to work with mentors and coaches, set professional learning goals, and get professional development support.

Upfront Investment Is Beneficial

The strategies and ideas outlined here may seem time-consuming in light of all the duties you need to perform on a daily basis. But since recruitment is one of the most important responsibilities you have, the time you spend to ensure the best fit for each position will come back to you when student success increases, behavior issues decrease, and teachers are competent and happy in their jobs.

With great teachers in high demand, you want to provide them with the support they need in order to be successful in your school. And if you provide new teachers with meaningful support, you'll also be able to build an environment in which students experiencing trauma can get the support they need to be successful. **P**

John F. Eller, a former principal, is a professor of educational leadership at St. Cloud State University and is president of Eller and Associates, which provides support to education leaders.

Sheila A. Eller is principal of Highview Middle School in New Brighton, Minnesota.