



LEADERSHIP IN TRAUMA-SENSITIVE SCHOOLS

Right-Now Steps and Future Actions for School Leaders



By Jen Alexander

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Dear Reader,

I'm Jen Alexander—a licensed educator, trauma expert, and the author of *Building Trauma-Sensitive Schools*, *Supporting Students and Staff After COVID-19*, and the *Quick Guides for Building Trauma-Sensitive Schools* series. If you're an educational leader, I'm here to help you with one of your most urgent priorities: **creating a safe, trauma-sensitive school community where every member is ready for teaching and learning.**

You and your school community are likely experiencing the aftereffects of adversity right now. Educators are burning out and quitting in large numbers. Concerns about youth and adult health (including mental health), behavior, attendance, and capacity for teaching and learning are at crisis levels.

**Simply put: Kids aren't okay.
Educators aren't okay, either.**

At the same time, students and educators are showing up and demonstrating great passion and grace. That means **we have the power to move from where we are to where we wish to be**—ensuring our school environments are safe, supportive, and healing-centered.

In *Building Trauma-Sensitive Schools*, I wrote that educators need to be well to do this work well. But when conditions prevent us from being well, then what? It's far from simple, and I believe **we must start with truth**. Let's be honest with ourselves and one another about the real challenges we face so we can come together to feel, deal, and heal. Then we can work together to realize change that's good for all of us.

In this guide, I'll expand on these ideas and give you some strategies you can use as you create trauma-sensitive learning environments in your community. You'll learn practical suggestions for *right-now actions* as well as some important considerations for the future.

Let's get started together!

—Jen Alexander



Addressing Trauma Through Leadership

School communities have always encountered big stress; this can include stress that originates outside of school but can also arise from harm that occurs on campus. These experiences don't just affect youth—they impact adults too. Currently, there are continued, realistic fears about violence (and other harms like racism and microaggressions) on and off school grounds, disasters, waves of ongoing change related to instruction and socialization in the aftermath of COVID-19, conflict related to curriculum, staffing stress, and of course, ongoing grief and insecurities about meeting basic needs. The pandemic has exacerbated existing systemic problems within education (and beyond), and these factors are growing threats to your students' well-being and capacity for learning.

As an educational leader, you probably have many questions that keep you up at night. How do we reckon with the truth of where we are in education without losing hope? How do we stand up for change without giving up on our profession? What does it mean to build a trauma-sensitive school when the need is so great and teams are already at or beyond capacity? And how do we take good care of ourselves and one another throughout this important work?

Answers to these questions will take hard work, strong leadership, and lots of good care and collaboration. We'll take some first steps together in the pages of this guide. Read on for:

- ▶ **Trauma-Sensitive Leadership: Six Things to Keep in Mind**
- ▶ **Right-Now Trauma-Sensitive Actions**
- ▶ **Future Steps for Trauma-Sensitive Teams**



Trauma-Sensitive Leadership: Six Things to Keep in Mind

As you make progress toward building a trauma-sensitive learning community that meets everyone's needs, here are six overarching guidelines to keep in mind:



Be willing to challenge and change current practices. Much of this work is about how we, as educators and educational leaders, engage in thoughtful, intentional, and collective change regarding our beliefs and actions. It involves listening to youth, really listening to them, as well as thinking critically about what we've typically done in the past as it relates to attendance, instruction, discipline, and school policy.



Maintain high expectations. When folks say, "These kids have been through so much, so we need to put academics aside to support students emotionally and socially," respond with, "That's a common misunderstanding." We can and must have high expectations for learning and behavior while we're supporting all youth and adults. This requires *nurture and challenge plus a whole lot of boundaries*. You'll need to learn how to be both *tender and strong* within relationships, and how to embrace both *structure and flexibility*. If it sounds messy, that's because it is! But as I like to say, *messy and worth it!*



Don't dig for information about anyone's trauma history. You don't need to know a person's trauma history to make a difference in their lives. In fact, searching for this information with students or staff is potentially harmful and thus inappropriate. Instead, your group will need to learn more about trauma so that educators can anticipate the needs of one another and their students while actively collaborating with youth to create a healing-centered environment.



Know that your job isn't to rescue anyone. Your students and staff members already bring a tons of strengths to your school communities. Many of them have been through a lot, too. They need understanding, support, and action in connection *with them* (not things done *to* or *for* them) to stop harm and responsively address their needs. They don't need rescuing or any other approach that diminishes their power; this is a common misconception, especially for white educators. (To learn more about this, read "Interrupting the Weaponization of Trauma-Informed Practice: '...Who Were You Really Doing the "Saving" for?'" by Goldin, Duane, and Khasnabis.) Healing is all about empowerment, so be ready to constantly highlight the strengths and brilliance in individuals and groups. There's much to learn from one another!



Center student agency and genuine empowerment. Trauma takes control away, and any trauma-sensitive approach must help every person in your school community realize, deepen, and actualize their power. This requires that adults stop trying to have all the answers or seek strategies in hopes of a magic fix. Instead, we need to understand how children actually experience their worlds, not just how we think they do, and honor students' creative ideas for learning, growing, and healing. Youth can and should actively help lead healing-centered school transformation. How? Start by listening, deeply listening, to people—your staff, your students, and your families. Listening and learning are what must drive our actions and advocacy for change. It will take practice to get there, and that practice is much of the work.



Take good care of yourself and your people. The stress that you and your educators are experiencing right now is significant. You and your teams need understanding, support, and practical resources that directly link to the truths of where things are. As I've always said to kids (and about kids), "We can deal with the truth together. It's deception that really messes us up." This requires not only creatively addressing faculty needs locally, but also advocating fiercely for systems-level change.

Right-Now Trauma-Sensitive Actions

So how can you get started with the vital work of creating a trauma-sensitive school community? You and your team can start by brainstorming priorities together, implementing steps that strengthen safety, and keeping everyone's feelings and needs at the forefront.

Brainstorm Priorities Together

While not everyone is traumatized and certainly not in the same ways or to the same degree, the effects of trauma are all over the place in our schools. We cannot punish or reward people out of their body's stress responses. Understanding this will go a long way—but the question then becomes, "What do we do instead?"

The only way to get to the other side of these difficulties is through it: by feeling, dealing, and healing together. As a school leader, you will have to pace yourself and strategically prioritize your actions, while putting people and relationships first. Try this three-step process with your faculty (and with kids in developmentally appropriate ways):

▶ Step 1: Start with the heading "The truth about school right now is..."

Let folks finish that sentence in groups or have them submit ideas individually so you can compile them. Read the responses together and discuss. You'll likely find that while it brings up uncomfortable realities, there is relief in acknowledging truth out in the open together. There will be good things that surface, too. Own them!

Here's an example of what a list might include:

The truth about school right now is...

1. We don't have enough subs, and it's taking a big toll.
2. Some students are thriving, and some teachers are feeling creative again.
3. The pressure around books and curriculum leaves teachers feeling attacked.

▶ Step 2: Invite folks to finish the sentence starter... "Let's move from ____ to ____."

Have them extend their thinking from where we are to where we want to be. Here's an example:

Let's move from ____ to ____.

1. From reactivity to being intentional.
2. From working in isolation to collaborating.
3. From seeing kids as disrespectful to understanding they're in distress.

▶ Step 3: Use this final sentence starter: "To get there ..."

How will we get to where we want to be? As you conclude the discussion, highlight this sentence starter to get folks thinking about priorities and associated actions. Here's an example:

To get there...

1. We need to listen to one another and to our students.
2. It'll be important to set healthy boundaries and ask for what we need.
3. We must prioritize training about trauma-sensitive schools.



Implement Right-Now Steps That Strengthen Safety

Ms. Jen's four essentials of trauma-sensitive schools are safety, connection, regulation, and learning. Think of these four essentials as directions on your compass, pointing you where to go both in terms of big-picture priorities and in-the-moment decisions. Safety is first for a reason. Start there by taking these actions:

To learn more about how educators use the four essentials to guide their practices, watch Ms. Jen's video ▶
<https://bpub.fyi/4-Essentials>

- ▶ **Reduce harm.** What harms are occurring that you can address right now by way of learning about potential traumas and setting clear expectations? For example, is yelling by educators common in your setting? If so, acknowledge it, discuss what contributes to it, and explain that any yelling at school has the potential to activate trauma responses in students and staff. Work together to brainstorm how to support one another in changing this practice.
- ▶ **Increase genuine connections.** Genuine connections with caring, supportive humans build safety. Increase these wherever possible—even if it's in spontaneous moments! Consider how you can ensure that more caring adults and youth are greeting others before school, during times of transition, and after school. Perhaps a campaign encouraging everyone to put devices down so they can look up, greet others by name, and be fully present is a place to begin! Go further by suggesting a schoolwide conversation starter of the day that adults and youth can use as easy moments for connection (e.g., what animal do you think would have the most interesting perspective on human behavior?).
- ▶ **Shore up your school rhythms, especially around transition times.** Adults and kids need safe, predictable rhythms at school that are both structured (so they're not experiencing chaos repeatedly) but also flexible—we're human and doing the best we can. **Since trauma often comes by way of harmful change, it shouldn't surprise us when surprises and changes of any kind activate trauma responses.** If you dread opening your email when you think there might be news about yet another new difficult change that you'll have to manage with your people, you know what I'm referring to. Identify trouble spots when there's *not enough* predictability, discuss what could be influencing the concerns with both adults and youth (don't leave kids out of these discussions!), and then brainstorm ideas for change. Once you've created a plan, design how to roll it out. Practice and give even more encouragement and feedback than you think is necessary.
- ▶ **Look for ways to reduce stress—even small ones.** Are there curricular, technology-related, or other changes that can be put on hold? Is there anything else you can take off people's plates? If so, do it. Big changes and heavy responsibilities create stress, but so do a lot of smaller, lighter ones. Both can contribute to overwhelm. In fact, competing demands on educators is a top stressor reported by teachers in the U.S. (Hsieh, 2023). Lessen demands on yourself and your teams by pausing change and removing or reprioritizing responsibilities anywhere you can so your energy is focused on supporting your school community through the trauma-sensitive steps your teams choose to prioritize.

Keep Feelings and Needs at the Forefront

Bring discussions about feelings and needs to the forefront in every group and within one-on-one conversations. Questions like, **"What do you feel?"** **"What do you need?"** and **"How can folks here help?"** are key. Involve students in these conversations and listen carefully to their answers. Invite students to share their experiences and advocate for their needs rather than just trying to solve kids' problems through random action. (If folks don't know what they need, then ask, **"What would make things worse?"** Then discuss how the opposite of that may be what they need.) For example, a response like, "What makes things worse is adults telling us what to do all the time," likely signals a need for more agency and choice.



For more tips, sign up for my free newsletter at MsJenAlexander.com.

Right away, you'll receive a free downloadable poster of those three powerful questions to use with your people. This is a great way to ground your communication in trauma-sensitivity!

Future Steps For Trauma-Sensitive Teams

Now that you have some tools that can help you get started right now on your journey of building a trauma-sensitive school community, what should we consider as we look into the future and continue this work? Here are some future steps to focus on as you progress toward systems-level change:

1

Take inventory of current human and program strengths that already contribute to safety, connection, regulation, and learning. Consider both preventive and responsive efforts!

2

Identify people on your team who can help lead this work. Think of folks who have knowledge already but also those who will be excited to learn more and lead. Decide how and when your leadership group will meet in an ongoing fashion. This can be a new team you identify, or you may decide to use a leadership team you already have in place.

3

Evaluate existing resources that address basic needs; bring support to school staff, youth, or families; reduce barriers; engage folks in healthy ways; nourish strengths; and contribute to thriving communities. These culturally rich examples can be people-driven or rooted in the nature and landscape of where you are. There is talent and potential in your community already—start by naming it!

4

Plan dedicated time for professional development for all certified and non-certified staff. Consider additional training for your trauma-sensitive leaders and the mental health professionals who work on campus. Your trauma-informed MTSS framework should provide a system of care that responds to the varied needs of all learners and staff. This is a journey more than a destination; be realistic and intentional about your pace. (See the sidebar for a list of training components and priorities to consider.)

5

Be a leader who is an active participant. Share openly and honestly, ask good questions, collaborate with folks, own your mistakes, and adapt as best you can—right alongside your staff, students, and families. Your engagement and leadership in this work is key.

Training Components for Trauma-Sensitive Schools

- Professional development on topics such as trauma-sensitive dos and don'ts, how to prevent challenging behavior, trauma-sensitive discipline, understanding trauma-sensitive SEL curricula, developmental trauma, and trauma-informed behavior support
- Focused support for school leaders as you set goals, remove barriers, and monitor progress
- Deeper dives on a trauma-informed MTSS framework that address the complex needs of all learners and educators, including those who need more than core alone
- Specific training for mental health professionals on your team
- Individualized support and coaching along the way
- Seminars for family caregivers or other community members (as desired)



Free video download! Defining Trauma

Get a brief introduction to trauma in schools with this free video excerpt from Ms. Jen's virtual course on Becoming a Trauma-Sensitive Educator. ▶ <https://bpub.fyi/Define-Trauma>

Closing Words of Wisdom

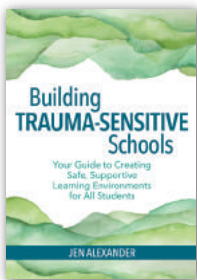
In his poem *Layers*, Stanley Kunitz reminds us that the human condition is one that includes good stuff and so much hard stuff, too. The journey matters more than the destination, yet it only happens as we move toward where we're headed. Kunitz writes, "I turn, I turn, exulting somewhat, with my will intact to go wherever I need to go, and every stone on the road precious to me."

This work is precious, leaders, and it's an honor to partner with you in it. The last lines of the poem say this: "No doubt... I am not done with my changes." You and your people aren't done changing either—neither am I. **Let's change for the better—together!**

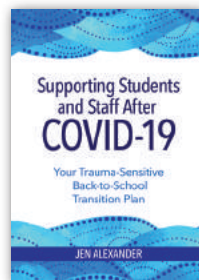
Next Steps Toward Change ▶ Visit <https://bpub.fyi/MsJen> to:



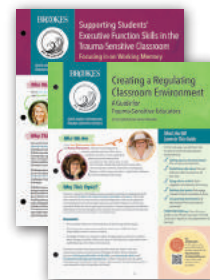
Explore resources on trauma-sensitive schools



Complete framework for building a safe, supportive school environment in PreK-Grade 12



Ebook of strategies and lessons for compassionate, intentional, trauma-sensitive teaching



Laminated quick guides with practical, instantly useful tips for trauma-sensitive educators



Access training options

Book a seminar on Building Trauma-Sensitive Schools, take an on-demand virtual course, or ask me to tailor on-site professional development for your school, district, or organization.



Set up a free consultation

Your fellow leaders, support professionals, licensed staff members, and non-certified staff will need different things, and my team can support you all! Book a consultation at MsJenAlexander.com, and see how we can create a plan that will lead to manageable, sustainable change.



Let's work together to improve well-being for everyone in your community, increase attendance, decrease behavior challenges, and ensure big learning gains for each learner—every single one!

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