

# Building Resilience and a Trauma-Informed School with the NC Center for Resilience & Learning



NORTH CAROLINA CENTER FOR  
**RESILIENCE  
& LEARNING**  
PUBLIC SCHOOL FORUM OF NC

## A Case Study on Baskerville Elementary School

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### Introduction

Baskerville Elementary is a public school located in Rocky Mount, NC, which is in a small city setting. Taking a piece of their name “Baskerville,” the school has adopted the nickname “The Ville” to affectionately refer to their school as a village. Their Mission Statement includes the impact they desire their village to have: “The Ville” is the village that makes a difference for you and for me today and forever.” Former principal of five years, Roderick L. Tillery Sr., wanted to be certain that the school branding represented what he and the school stood for to their students and community.

“We needed something we could remember and understand what we were remembering,” said Mr. Tillery. “Baskerville has a family feel; a family connection. Our students feel welcomed here. We truly are the village that makes a difference today and forever. In a survey, I once asked my staff members how they would describe our school and all except two staff members used the term *family* in how they described the school atmosphere.”

Baskerville’s mascot is the bulldog. In alignment with family, the bulldogs carry particular areas of “pride” which are stated in their Bulldog P.R.I.D.E. acronym.



Baskerville’s mascot, the Bulldog

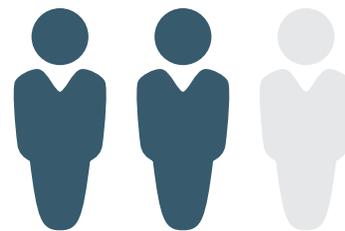
### **Bulldog P.R.I.D.E.**

- P**ersonal Excellence
- R**espect and Friendship
- I**nspiration
- D**etermination and Courage
- E**quality

### Adverse Childhood Experiences

Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0-17 years). Examples include: experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect; and growing up in a household with substance use problems, mental health problems, or instability due to parental separation or household members being incarcerated. ACEs are linked to chronic health problems, mental illness, and substance use problems in adolescence and adulthood. ACEs can also negatively impact education and job opportunities.<sup>1</sup>

### ACEs Statistics



**By self-report, nearly 2/3rds of adults report experiencing a significant Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) before the age of 18, and more than 1 in 5 adults report experiencing 3 or more ACEs.<sup>2</sup>**

# School At-a-Glance



**24**

Classroom Teachers<sup>3</sup>



**80.2%**

of students are economically disadvantaged<sup>3</sup>



**>90%**

of students receive free and reduced lunch<sup>4</sup>



**314**

K-5 students<sup>6</sup>

More than One Race

1%

Pacific Islander

<1%

Black

93%

Hispanic

3%

White

2%

Demographics<sup>5</sup>

Within the K-5 population at Baskerville, there are many students being raised by grandparents and many of the working parents live below the poverty line. “Talk about Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) the decks are stacked against them. I know because I lived in that area,” said Tillery. Mr. Tillery firmly believes the adults want to support their children; it just becomes a challenge when the adults have challenges themselves. Many families have ongoing struggles in which teacher understanding and support is essential to ensure overall student success.

Mr. Tillery shared, “We often see struggles with ideals or investment not because parents don’t care but often because there is a greater need to provide for their family. We’ve also seen situations where some of the family can’t understand the curriculum or content that comes home from the teachers. Many parents struggle because of the level of education the family has - and we believe our families care deeply. There are so many factors to consider in this area - which is why a trauma-informed lens is crucial.”

Baskerville is a school rooted in the community that surrounds it, and unfortunately due to natural disasters, there has been and continues to be various extremes of hardship in this area. Between economic struggles, violence and natural disasters, the families continue to face challenges. Each time a hurricane has come through over the past years, it’s caused the Tar River to overflow and flood these areas which filter directly into the Baskerville school area. Specifically, in the 2017/18 school year Baskerville had a lower student population because the neighboring apartment complex had been wiped out by the hurricane aftermath.

*“Natural disasters caused us to rethink some things and now Covid has also played a role in enrollment and how we view things. There seems to be an “ebb and flow” and fluctuations that greatly impact our school. Sometimes the fluctuation comes because people are trying to better themselves; families might move away for better opportunities. I can relate personally to this because I once lived in the community and moved to better myself. Other times, the fluctuations look very different. Being a previous resident of the community deepens my investment here and my desire to see and be a part of ongoing growth and positive change.”*

*-Roderick L. Tillery Sr*

With all of the challenges facing the families of the Ville and the greater community at large, Mr. Tillery began to see and acknowledged a need for a deeper dive into social emotional learning (SEL) implementation and other supports to expand the overall growth and positive change he wanted to see within the school and the community.

## Building a Trauma-Informed School

Developing  
a shared  
understanding



Building a  
Resilience  
Team



Planning and  
implementing  
trauma-informed  
strategies



Creating ongoing  
evaluation and  
learning



### Developing a Shared Understanding

“I was as resistant to resilience as I could be,” is how Mr. Tillery described his attitude about implementing and introducing resilience to his staff. He clearly remembers his initial rejection of the NC Center for Resilience and Learning (the Center), a program of the Public School Forum of North Carolina (the Forum) when it was first introduced to him by Elizabeth DeKonty, Director of the Center. He considered the implementation to be “just one more thing.” Mr. Tillery recalls telling himself that his assignment as an administrator was to give his staff what they needed without overwhelming them. Adding “one more thing” felt

overwhelming. He acknowledged that his school needed something to cover SEL and the mental health of their students; however, he was not convinced this was it. Fast forward to today, he says, "I'm a true believer now. I've seen the evidence and the science behind it."

The buy-in for Mr. Tillery was when Chanda Battle, former Program Manager of the Center, came in and led impactful work for Baskerville. "The word coming to me is *trust*. Chanda and Elizabeth created trust between our school staff and the Forum. I'm really big on trust. Once I bought in - my staff trusted me," says Tillery.

Mr. Tillery shared that part of his initial resistance as a principal was that he didn't want anyone telling him what to do. Working with the Forum, he felt like Baskerville's staff had a voice in how the resilience work would be framed for their school.



Former Baskerville principal, Mr. Tillery, who initially led the Resilience & Learning work for the school.

*"There's a difference in those who tell you what has to be done, without being invested in the work and not coming out to do the work. But Elizabeth, Chanda and now you... You coming here today physically - physically listening and being here shows your investment. This is what the Forum does. From day one, the Forum invests their time and wants to craft this work to the needs of Baskerville. Together, we created an action plan based on the true needs of the school. The Forum did not come to us with a view of 'how can we fix the school' and there was not a 'one size fits all' which creates gaps rather than closing gaps."*

*-Roderick L. Tillery Sr*

Mr. Tillery shared he feels this is not a cookie cutter process; it is designed to meet the needs. Tillery also highlighted the importance of modeling what you expect. "The Forum came in and made sure we as educators could truly function. They made sure we were okay first - then we could take care of the children." -Roderick L. Tillery

Finally, Mr. Tillery recalls that the professional development sessions led by the Forum were very strategic, well thought out, and allowed for reflection. Because of this, he and his staff were able to look at things from a big picture lens while honing in on 3 specific goals that were attainable to help move the school forward toward being more resilient and trauma-informed.



## Building a Resilience Team

Once there was clear buy-in, a Resilience Team was built with leaders of the school to take the next step beyond training and awareness and begin to implement trauma-informed change and strategies school-wide. Mr. Tillery began with the school leaders because he felt these individuals could and would model resilience. He also knew of their love for the students they served. The Resilience Team included:

- School counselor
- School nurse
- Exceptional Children's Department chair
- K-2 representative
- 3-5 representative

These individuals not only showed a willingness and desire to serve the school in this capacity but many were already school leaders who modeled resilience. Mrs. Harper is the Instructional Coach and has been there 28 years undergirding the teachers to be mindful of the work they're doing.

It did not take very long for Mr. Tillery to realize that one particular staff member showed an exuberant passion for helping to grow the trauma-informed vision of Baskerville. Their art teacher, Mr. Demetrius Smith, exhibited a fervent passion for students and families. He agreed to serve as the Resilience Team chair.



Mr. Smith, the art teacher, who eventually became the Resilience Team leader.

"Demetrius will not let this fail. His passion is for the children *first*. For him, this work will continue based on the needs of the children. As a principal, I realized I had to get out of the way and let Demetrius lead. I realized how passionate he was and continues to be. He took the lead and took things to a whole different level. His vision will continue to help Baskerville grow." -Roderick L. Tillery Sr.



## Planning and Implementing Trauma-Informed Strategies

Baskerville used some unconventional strategies that would ultimately benefit staff, students and families together: "I took the staff out one day to the community behind Gardner's Barbecue which is walking distance from the school. We took a bus ride then got out and walked door-to-door. One mom came out onto her porch and said, "I can't believe y'all are out here in our neighborhood." Mr. Tillery shared that he was truly out of his comfort zone while walking door-to-door to meet the neighborhood parents and families. While he has a level of control at his school, it's not the same in the community. Yet even with this discomfort, he knew the vulnerability was necessary and would help increase his capacity for trauma-informed learning.

"Too often as middle class educators, we drive into a community where we work that is totally different from where we live, how we live and feel. It's as if we think the students are going to leave all of who they are behind and become like us when they enter the building," says Tillery.

That community visit paired with the support of the Public School Forum's Resilience & Learning team helped mold Baskerville with more compassion, resilience, and empathy; however, more targeted strategies were needed. They worked diligently to develop school-wide strategies to implement in the following areas:

## Staff Wellness

**Tap In-Tap Out:** Mr. Tillery helped to create a culture where it was not only okay for staff to ask for help and ask for a break but it was also acceptable. They created a system in which a teacher could ask for help if they needed a mental break from their classroom. An administrator or available colleague covers the class of the teacher needing the mental break.

**Staff Journals:** Each teacher was given a journal to record reflections based on interactions with students/parents, interactions with teachers/administrators, lesson planning, etc. The opportunity to reflect and share (if desired) helps build resilience and encourages a trauma-informed mindset.

**Staff Lounge:** The school decorated the teachers' lounge with new furniture, a Keurig, and a foot/back massager to support staff wellness.

## Creating Warm Supportive Relationships

**Welcoming/Greeting students (with music, warmth and support) as they enter/leave the building:** The staff put an emphasis on the importance of doing this school-wide to create that added sense of warmth and safety as kids first arrived in the building. One example that teachers used was, "Welcome back, we've missed you, have a great day and remember I believe in you!!!"

**Morning Meeting:** Teachers have morning meetings with their students at the start of each day to check in with how they are feeling about school and/or how things are going at home or anything the students want to share.

**Positive Affirmation Announcement:** Students write positive affirmations about themselves and the principal reads them during morning announcements.

**Restorative Justice Specialist:** The principal added a restorative justice specialist to the staff to help empower students to resolve conflicts on their own or in small peer-mediated groups. This has helped decrease time out of class due to discipline disruptions and has reduced discipline referrals.

**Run Club:** This is a safe space for students to be active, achieve attainable goals, and learn healthy lifestyle habits while chatting (if they choose) with a supportive adult.

## Self-Regulation, Skill Building, and Social-Emotional Learning

**Student Journals:** Students record information about themselves (likes, dislikes), hopes/dreams for the future, and positive affirmations. This has helped students learn how to use self-reflection to



The peace corner set up for students to use in the art room.



Another example of a regulation area for students to use with Legos and other fidgets.

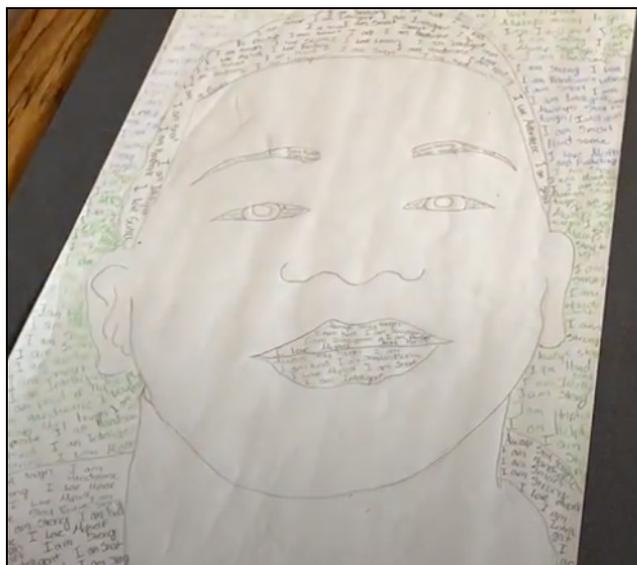
have better self-awareness. Through this practice of journal writing, students are also able to look at their thoughts, feelings, emotions, and actions with newfound interest and curiosity.

**Positive Student Conferences:** Students grade their projects and keep up with their own progress, and the student and teacher discuss their development. This helps empower students to strengthen their self-confidence and see their own growth.

**Peace Corners:** Each classroom has a designated safe space where the student can remove themselves from a stressful situation when they begin to feel dysregulated, find their bearings, and return to their class without incident.

**Self-Regulation Support:** Students are taught the emotional vocabulary to help them better understand and explain their feelings, as well as coping tools (breathing exercises, counting, etc.) to help them manage stress in constructive ways.

**Trauma-Informed Lesson Plans:** Lessons are created and implemented using a trauma-informed lens.



Students using art as a way to express themselves.



### Creating Ongoing Evaluation and Learning

Becoming a trauma-informed school requires a layered approach and in many ways, this approach doesn't have an ending; the process is an ongoing response to the needs of educators and students. This requires monitoring, evaluation, reflection, ongoing communication and ongoing practice.

Ralph Snowden, Assistant Principal at Baskerville, sees ongoing evaluation and learning through professional development as essential to sustainability. Supporting staff to continue their own growth with trauma-informed work will ensure that ongoing learning happens.

Predictability is also a key component within creating trauma-informed learning environments. In December of 2021, many did not predict that Mr. Tillery would transition to a position at the Nash County Schools central office. This has been a major change at Baskerville which adds another layer to sustainability of this work. "We are determined to sustain this work," says Tillery.

"When principals tell me they're overwhelmed or that students are acting out I ask, 'What are you doing to support your teachers? What tools are in place at their disposal? Have you dealt with their ACEs?' Teachers can spiral out of control without support in place; then students often spiral too. The Resilience & Learning Team at the Public School Forum has effective tools. We feel continuous, ongoing use of these tools for staff and students will sustain the work along with ongoing professional development, continued learning with support, and refresher sessions offered." Additionally, the resilience team continues to meet regularly.

# Impact

## The Benefits of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) are Supported by Research

### Social and Emotional Learning Skills<sup>7</sup>

Research strongly supports the implementation of SEL programs and strategies in schools. SEL can be defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) as: *“the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.”*



Improve academic outcomes and behaviors



Are long-term and global



Are a wise financial investment



Improve lifetime outcomes

For EVERY  
**\$1**  
invested in SEL  
Skills

=

Return of  
**\$11**  
in savings from costs not  
incurred for interventions  
later down the road<sup>8</sup>

Baskerville has thoughtfully put in place many trauma-informed and social-emotional learning strategies throughout their school for both staff and students. Mr. Tillery and other staff have described the positive impacts of these strategies that they have seen over the past five years.” When thinking about the influence of having a trauma-informed learning environment, it is important to highlight that not only are individual children affected by traumatic experiences, but other students, the adults on campus, and the school community can be affected by interacting or working with a child who has experienced trauma. Taking a look at the overall impact of this work helps us to recognize the various areas in which staff, students, families, communities, and systems are changing and experiencing growth.

At the end of the 2018-2019 school year, Baskerville’s staff reported the following impacts from having a partnership with the Center for Resilience and Learning:

Changes in staff interactions with students:

- **86% reported changes in their mindset about students or in how they think about the causes of student behavior.** For example, staff members reported now being able to recognize that life experiences and emotional challenges affect both behavior and the way students think, they had a better understanding of students’ mental and emotional development. Additionally, staff members were less likely to take student behavior personally - understanding that reactions may be coming from a deeper issue rather than simply a response to the teacher.

- **95% noticed changes in their relationships with students. Some of the changes they reported:**
  - More patient and compassionate
  - More trust and communication
  - Better able to support calm-down/de-escalation
  - Students began to proactively ask for calm-down opportunity and reflect on their actions, so there was less escalation
  - Listened more to students
  - More awareness of individual differences in learning
  - More flexible in allowing children to express themselves
  - Better respect between students
- **82% noticed changes in their responses to misbehavior such as using strategies to calm down before responding and considering context first.** Staff also reported a shifted view of misbehavior; something to redirect rather than something to punish. Finally, staff were able to see signs of trauma or distress in students that weren't noticed before becoming trauma-informed.

The impact of a trauma-informed learning environment is vast. A trauma-informed school promotes learning about and understanding the whole student, which can increase positive academic outcomes. It also fosters a positive school climate where students feel safe and confident in their ability to learn. Connection is increased with adults and peers in a positive manner.

When asked what he feels has been the greatest benefits to the process of working with us, Mr. Snowden replied with:

*“I feel like I’ve seen the staff give the students the space that they need to grow. The first part of my time here, there were some great results with the kids and in the classrooms. Most importantly, there was an openness to work with kids before we went to the nuclear button. The number of kids who have been referred has gone down as well. Giving students the space and support that they need to grow has been a great benefit for everyone.”*

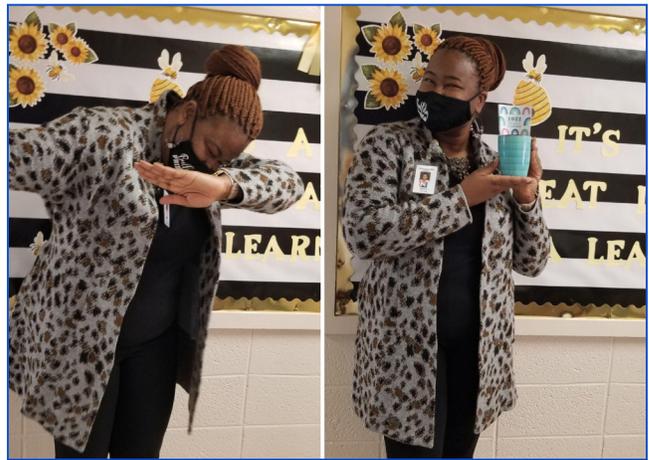
## The Journey Doesn't End Here

While experiencing the multitude of ongoing effects brought on by Covid, Baskerville Elementary attributes a large amount of the positive growth and continuance of a “family culture” to the trauma-informed work they have begun.

“Now as a school, we’re able to self-reflect, be more empathetic, look deeper with office referrals, ask ‘how do we get to the root so that we don’t have ongoing issues?’ We are able to do active listening. We’re able to have some conversations that we hadn’t had before. Our eyes have truly been opened. When we do address ACEs and trauma, we can be so much healthier and not blame others. We have come to grips with where we are in the process. We are in a good place. Just this awareness of resilience, being trauma-informed and the concept around it - Baskerville is now able to address so much of this practice. We are determined to sustain this work with ongoing professional development including (but not limited to) refresher sessions from the Resilience and Learning team.” -Mr. Tillery

From 2017 to November 2021, Mr. Tillery led Baskerville. With a dedicated and supportive staff, Baskerville has successfully implemented trauma-informed practices and resilience. Although there has been some staff turnover since that time, the goal is to continue the beautiful work and progress that has been started. “I still have investment there although I’m no longer the principal. My own children attended school at Baskerville and now my grandchildren attend there, so I need Baskerville to be successful. I’m there every morning dropping my grandchildren off, still supporting teachers and students when I can.” -Mr. Tillery

Mrs. Kimberly Newkirk is now the principal at Baskerville. Mr. Tillery has expressed his excitement for Mrs. Newkirk and what she will be able to do in planning her vision for the school while receiving ongoing support from the NC Center for Resilience and Learning.



Mrs. Newkirk, Baskerville's new principal, already working to focus on staff wellness by giving out small gifts in celebration of Random Acts of Kindness Day.

# Our Recommendations for Schools, Districts, and Policymakers

## Recommendations for policymakers

The NC Center for Resilience and Learning provides the following recommendations to policymakers related to new practices and policies that would help in creating safer and more supportive learning environments for ALL children in the schools across the state of North Carolina. We believe that these recommendations directly correspond with the Leandro Case requirements of ensuring that every child in North Carolina has access to a sound basic education.

**1** Embedding trauma-informed and resilience curriculum as well as culturally responsive teaching training and support into schools of education courses AND into ongoing required professional development requirements for educators in each district that would include regular opportunities for educator learning and reflection with peers.

**2** Increasing the number of student support staff in each school and increasing the budget for these positions - more school counselors, social workers, and nurses.

**3** Funding for every district to have access to school-based mental health services and evidence-based social and emotional learning curriculum. Ideally, this would include a community-based mental health agency partnering with schools to provide mental health services to students during school hours in their building and SEL curriculum that is paid for along with proper training for educators to use and implement the curriculum effectively with students.

**4** Support teacher retention and address concerns with educator burnout by providing more supportive and more accessible mental health services and funding to support the overall well-being of school staff.

**5** Include clear and evidence-based definitions and language in education policies and legislation related to “trauma-informed,” “culturally responsive,” and “safe and supportive learning environments.”

**6** Examine current school policies and revise any exclusionary and inequitable discipline practices to instead focus more on building accountability through relationships, identifying needs and teaching skills, and practicing conflict resolution and repair.

## Recommendations for schools and districts

Based on the work with Baskerville Elementary and other schools and districts across the state for the past five years, the NC Center for Resilience and Learning gives the following recommendations for new schools and districts considering embarking on this trauma-informed journey:

**1** Ensure that school leadership (and district leadership) is invested and has ownership of the resilience efforts, really serving as a champion of the work school-wide.

**2** Develop a Resilience Team that can lead the effort, ideally led by an outside coach who can help structure the process and keep the work on the forefront.

**3** Provide learning opportunities for ALL school staff members to be involved in the process.

**4** Have the Resilience Team set clear goals so that efforts can be focused and narrow down new strategy implementation so that changes can be done with fidelity and consistency, instead of trying to do too many new strategies all at once; use student data and staff input to create goals and set new action plan strategies so that it becomes a whole school movement.

**5** Recognize that this work is a journey and not something that can be done in a few months; it takes time and often multiple school years to see impactful change.

## Endnotes

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