

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 Comfort Elementary School

By: Stacey Craig, Senior Consultant, NC Center for Resilience & Learning

Introduction

Comfort Elementary School is located in a small rural community of that same name in Jones County, in the Coastal Plain region of Eastern NC, just 30 minutes from the North Carolina coast. On its website, Jones County describes itself proudly as “steeped in a farming tradition...[and full of] hardworking, friendly people who care about our neighbors and will welcome you into our communities.”

The name “Comfort” itself originally referred to it being a very small, unincorporated community. In recent years, the school has embarked on a very intentional journey to make itself a “Comfort Zone” for its staff and students, “where everyone feels comfortable enough to learn.” And that’s largely because teachers and staff at Comfort Elementary School are well aware that there are a lot of discomforts burdening their community. There is a high divorce rate among student families, and grandparents or great grandparents frequently serve as the primary caregivers for children. Many families struggle with poverty, drug addiction, and social isolation, living with few resources in single homes down long rural roads. “Everyone seems to be in a survival mode,” says former principal Stella Downs, now the principal of Trenton Elementary School just down the road.

Many of the teachers and staff in this small, Pre-K to 5th grade school, with just one teacher per grade level, have been at Comfort Elementary for 5 years or more. Third grade teacher Mrs. Mykkia Combs remembers how, prior to the 2018-19 school year, teachers were working hard, year after year,

School At-a-Glance



10

Classroom Teachers¹



45.6%

of students are economically disadvantaged¹



>90%

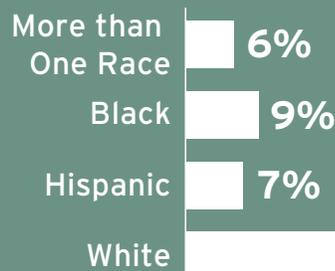
of students receive free and reduced lunch²

Demographics⁴



111

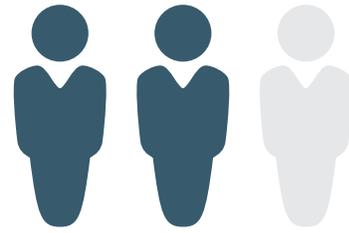
K-5 students³



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.⁵

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.⁶

using every recommended method for increasing academic achievement. District staff commented on the high quality teaching being done there, but while they saw significant improvement, EOG scores were persistently lower than expected. "The staff felt defeated, and we were disappointed," she says. "It had a negative impact on the morale around the school...we weren't happy with where we were and we didn't know what was missing."

Just eleven days into the 2018-19 school year, Jones County was one of the counties in North Carolina most heavily impacted by Hurricane Florence. Two school buildings were destroyed, displacing students. And although Comfort Elementary remained intact, staff and students' homes were devastated and many had to be rescued from the rising waters by boats and helicopters, forced to stay in emergency shelters through the storm and its aftermath. Students missed 25 days of school that year. When Comfort's students and staff returned, they shared their space with peers displaced from Trenton Elementary's flooded building. For months after, many staff and students lived in temporary accommodations while the community rebuilt. Teachers could clearly see that students were affected. They were "sad, sick, angry," says Mrs. Combs. And teachers were asking themselves what they could do to reach the kids, to take their minds off everything and help them reengage in learning.

Then one day Mrs. Downs, as principal at the time, was at a principals' meeting where Elizabeth DeKonty, Director of the NC Center for Resilience and Learning, a program of the Public School Forum of NC, showed the film *Resilience*, a production of KPJR Films. "I could see our students' faces on the screen," says Mrs. Downs. "I was almost shaking by the time it was finished, and literally just saying oh my God, this might be our 'why.'"

Mrs. Downs returned to Comfort and spoke to the staff about the film, and they became eager to see it, too. She contacted Mrs. DeKonty and was able to show the film to her staff. Afterward, Mrs. Combs remembers talking to other teachers about their experience watching the film. "Light bulbs were going off and we had those 'aha' moments like, maybe this is what's happening...we wanted to learn

a lot more.” Teachers were left reflecting on how Adverse Childhood Experiences (known as ACEs) were impacting their students, and were impacting them as adults as well.

Mrs. Downs reached out again to Mrs. DeKonty, and through a Department of Public Instruction School Safety Grant she was able to enroll herself, the school’s counselor and secretary, and all of the school’s core teachers, in the NC Center for Resilience and Learning’s 10-week online introductory course, called “Creating Trauma-Informed Schools” and available through Participate.com, which involved studying content online and attending bi-weekly meetings, facilitated by Stacey Craig, a NC Center for Resilience and Learning Coach, to help them deepen their understanding of the content and how they could apply the new knowledge in their own school community.



School staff attending meeting for online course.

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

That initial 10 week introductory course, in the spring of the 2018-19 school year, allowed a majority of Comfort’s staff to develop a shared understanding of their students, and how to support their engagement in learning, through a trauma-informed lens. Through the course, staff learned about Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and trauma, the brain science behind the stress response system, and resulting impacts on student learning and behavior. They also learned about resilience-building interventions that can improve and restore a sense of safety and agency as a foundation for academic success.



A hallway bulletin board about coping with difficult feelings.

“As [Ms. Craig] was leading us through this training and telling us the ‘why’ our students were not grasping things, or were disengaged or might have been acting out in class, it was just making so much sense. And we were like, why didn’t we see this before,” Mrs. Downs remembers. “[Ms. Craig] started coaching us through how we could learn and be aware of the trauma and then steps we could perhaps take.”

After the course ended, they got permission to use parts of the course content to develop a recorded presentation for the rest of their colleagues, who shared their time with other schools and found it difficult to gather in the same place at the same time. The principal then followed up with those staff to answer questions and support their understanding.



Building a Resilience Team

For Comfort, one of the benefits of being a small school was being able to have all their core teachers, counselor, secretary and administrator complete the course and attend bi-weekly reflection meetings together. By the end of the course and as they were wrapping up the 2018-19 school year, they had already formed a team which could build on their shared understanding to begin assessing their school’s needs and identifying school-wide strategies to address them.

“We knew we needed to make a lot of changes so we can address the social-emotional side of these children while they are here at school,” shared Mrs. Downs. They also knew that they wanted the new trauma-informed understanding they had gained to be reflected in the mission, vision, and beliefs that guided their school. As a team, they gathered around a whiteboard, brainstormed ideas and wording, and rewrote their guiding documents.

The following school year, they identified their PBIS/MTSS Team as the appropriate group to further develop and sustain trauma-informed practices at the school. Their Center Coach, Ms. Craig, attended their monthly meetings, and continued to support them in monitoring, evaluating, improving and integrating their selected trauma-informed practices school-wide.



Planning and Implementing Trauma-Informed Strategies

Even as the 2018-19 school year was coming to an end, the team began identifying and trying out ways to more directly and intentionally address their students’ social-emotional needs at school. They experimented with some smaller strategies like Check-In/Check-Out which they could implement quickly and easily with just a few students. They identified several students who were frequently referred to the office, and assigned a staff member to each child, who began spending a few minutes talking and connecting with them each morning and before dismissal. Mrs. Downs recounts,

“we were amazed at the response we got with just a handful of students that were our biggest discipline problems. Talking to a teacher in the morning and then talking to them in the afternoon, and they stopped coming to the office. For them, to know someone cares about them and will take that time to spend with them...we saw small results right then.”

Excited by their initial success, and now rallied around their new mission and vision statements, the team began to prepare for what school-wide strategies they wanted to implement at the start of the 2019-20 school year. After brainstorming and planning as a team and with the Center Coach, the identified that they wanted to implement morning meetings and calming corners in every classroom.

Morning Meetings

In the fall, every classroom started setting aside 15 minutes directly after morning announcements for their morning meeting time. During this time, students would sit together, and would share and talk with each other. Part of that time was spent using a free Social and Emotional Learning curriculum (SEL) for K-12 called Choose Love, which teaches about core values of compassion, love, gratitude and forgiveness, and poses real-life situations that the class can use to talk about how they would respond and what actions they would take. Using an SEL curriculum like Choose Love meant that teachers didn't have to spend more time developing lesson plans and could still focus their planning time on academics.



Mrs. Downs conducts a morning meeting with students

“At the beginning, I’ll be honest I was a little hesitant...I’m a teacher and there never seems to be enough time...I could be doing grammar or I could be doing vocabulary or something,” reflects Mrs. Combs. But now, she says, “I love our morning meetings...they allowed me to make connections with my students that without them, I probably would not have made. My students felt comfortable. They knew they had a safe place where they could sit and share their thoughts and their ideas or just talk, and nobody was going to judge them...and some of them just needed to talk.”

In addition to the Choose Love curriculum, some teachers would incorporate other quick lessons into their morning meetings such as videos from Class Dojo on growth mindset or other topics, as well as trying out yoga poses and different ways of calming down. These daily talks and activities allowed students to become more aware of how they were feeling and how they could calm down and refocus when they needed to. Mrs. Combs explains,

“We weren’t telling students how to solve specific problems. We were giving them tools and resources to use - that when life throws a problem at you, these are some things that you could do.”

During one of the school’s parent nights, each grade made a presentation for their parents about what they had been learning during their morning meeting SEL time. Different grades had different strategies to share, from “brave breaths” (diaphragmatic breathing), to changing discouraging thoughts into positive affirmations. Some parents shared that they had seen their students begin using these same strategies at home.

Over time, teachers started to hear their students use what they had learned and discussed in morning meeting time to communicate more effectively and solve problems more positively with each other. Teachers reported seeing this social and emotional growth positively impact academics, as students were working more effectively in groups. Instead of yelling at each other as they had early in the year, they started approaching problems and disagreements with more clear, assertive, and collaborative language. Teachers reported even hearing from surprised parents that their students were communicating more positively with their siblings at home.

Donna Higgins, former 5th grade teacher and now current principal of Comfort, believes that one of the most important effects of morning meetings was that students began opening up more with each other and with her. She saw the ways that it was deepening her relationships with her students, and that they felt more comfortable coming to her when they had a problem or concern they couldn’t solve on their own. This made it easier to learn what was bothering kids, and easier to help them.

Looking back, former Principal Downs recognizes the impact that a shift in mindset had on deepening relationships beyond what staff had achieved before:

“We were building the relationships, at the same time we were still a bit judgmental of the children, and still wondering what’s wrong with them instead of what’s happened to them. And then when we realized that they were responding to things that were out of their control, and it was just a natural way for them to respond to it, then it was like how can we move them in the direction they need to go to get them to their comfort zone so that they can move forward as an individual.”

Calming Corners

The second key strategy Comfort implemented in every classroom were calming corners. All classrooms got bean bags and sensory manipulatives which they put in a quiet area of the room. They explained to their students what the calming corners were for, and practiced the ways they could use the tools available to calm down when they were having trouble focusing or keeping control over their behavior due to worry, anger, or other challenging feelings. Each calming corner had a 5 minute sand timer which students could flip to help them and their teacher keep track of the time they could take a break before rejoining



A calming corner

the class. Staff made sure that these corners were never spoken of as punishments and were always presented as an option for all students who needed a break to calm down so they could reengage in learning. By encouraging all of their students to use this calming corner when they needed to, students who struggled more with self-control and positive behavior felt less stigma in using these spaces. And while initially teachers felt concern that students might overuse and misuse the calming corners, teachers consistently saw their students using them appropriately and when they needed them.



Creating Ongoing Evaluation and Learning

One of the key aspects of becoming a trauma-informed school is engaging in ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and improvement of practices. Ultimately, being a trauma-informed school is about understanding and responding to the perceptions and needs which underlie even the most difficult of student behaviors.

And because students, their needs and the behaviors which serve to communicate those needs are regularly changing, trauma-informed schools are engaged in a continual effort to assess, understand, and respond to their students' needs, so that they can reach them, and teach them.

At Comfort, their teachers' testimonies, and watching students with frequent discipline referrals no longer being referred to the office, were enough to show that their key strategies of universal morning meetings and calming corners, and their individualized strategy of check-in/check-out, were having the hoped-for effect. They also used the shortened form version of the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA), a social-emotional skills screener for students, to evaluate their students' social and emotional needs and skills every 9 weeks, both to detect needs early and to track progress. The school guidance counselor, Dr. LaShawn Roberson, and outside organizations including Girls Empowerment and Girls on the Run offered social skills groups to students who needed support beyond what their universal strategies could provide. During staff PLC meetings, Comfort also began discussing students and problem-solving around concerns not just in terms of their academics, but considering the child's needs and wellbeing as a whole. Staff began thinking of their trauma-informed strategies in terms of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), which ensured that all of their students received universal supports for building strong relationships and self-regulation skills, and were regularly screened to identify those students who were in need of the additional supports the school had available such as social skills groups and check-in/check-out. During their monthly PBIS/MTSS Meetings, a committee of staff reviewed data, evaluated SEL support strategies across

Impact

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

Social and Emotional Learning Skills⁷

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 road⁸

The trauma-informed strategies of morning meetings and calm-down corners that Comfort selected to implement are different examples of SEL strategies schools may choose to put in place. At the end of the 2020-21 school year, 10 staff members (almost 42% of staff at the school) completed a survey and reported the following impacts from a partnership with the Center for Resilience & Learning:

- **100% said working with the Center for Resilience & Learning helped them make changes in mindset about students or relationships with students. Common themes included:**
 - Looking at what may be the cause of student behaviors and trying to help them work through the situation and find a solution
 - Relating to each student as an individual
 - Actively monitoring and supporting the well-being and mental state of students
 - Having an overall caring and compassionate relationship with students, with an open door policy
- **78% noticed changes in how they think about causes of misbehavior or in their responses to misbehavior. Common themes included:**
 - Looking deeper into what caused the misbehavior
 - Preventing behavior rather than focusing on punishment
 - Seeing students as individuals shaped by their individual circumstances and being curious to know WHY they act and behave as they do
 - Understanding the reason behind the misbehavior is not malicious, but due to social emotional needs and response to trauma

Ms. Dawn Harper, 4th grade teacher, summed up the overall work of the Center by sharing,

“This program has given us resources and tools to educate our students in dealing with situations so that they are more successful with their academics.”

Several teachers and administrators have described the impacts of the resilience-building strategies they put in place:

Morning Meetings:

- Allowed teachers to build deeper relationships with their students
- Provided a reference point and common language in the classroom for teachers to encourage students to use calming and focusing strategies before a test
- Helped students become more aware of their feelings, as well as ways of calming down and refocusing when needed
- Increased the use of more positive language among staff and students which strengthened relationships and cooperation
- Students worked more effectively and efficiently in group work
- Students approached problems more collaboratively and began resolving disagreements in more prosocial ways
- Parents reported students getting along better with siblings at home

Whereas at first teachers feared losing academic time as a result of morning meetings, they soon saw that the opposite was true. Mrs. Downs summarizes it this way:

“Spending 15 minutes in the morning has saved us so much time throughout the day in that children are more engaged, children are more on task, we’re not dealing with discipline issues...the rest of the day is smoother and we can get more done...It’s not a waste of time, it saves us time.”

Calming Corners:

- Implementing as a whole class meant students who struggle with self-regulation felt less stigmatized and more empowered to use available strategies to manage their emotions
- Students communicated more effectively to staff about what they were feeling and what they needed
- Students who struggled to self-regulate due to high stress or other reasons were increasingly able to appropriately and independently use the calming corner to self-regulate
- Some parents reported that their students were using learned self-regulation strategies at home

Kimberly Kammerer, Exceptional Children Teacher at Comfort, says that Comfort has become a place where students know they can be honest with staff and are able to explain “I’ve had a bad day” so that staff are ready to support them, and where they use the calm corner to help them manage their emotions at times when they are struggling. “I think that everything would have been much more chaotic [during Covid] had we not been implementing all of this,” she says.

The Journey Doesn’t End Here

It’s clear from walking through hallways and classrooms, talking with staff, and observing the ways students interact with each other and with adults, that Comfort Elementary has developed a school culture that nurtures deep roots of care, understanding and respect for adults and kids alike. Staff speak with ongoing appreciation about the transformation they have seen in their classrooms since they began understanding more about the ways that stress impacts behavior and learning, and consciously investing in strengthening relationships and building self-regulation skills school-wide. The challenges continue and so does the learning, but now they have a framework of understanding and a foundation of support from which to continue rising together.

In the wake of online and hybrid learning, frequent absences and accumulated missed time continues to impact kids and classrooms. And the gap between current attendance and academic scores on the one hand, and academic expectations from parents and the state on the other, has left teachers pressed in between. “Teacher burnout is real,” says Mrs. Kammerer. She notes there is literally too much work to get done during the work week, which doesn’t leave enough time to recover during the evenings or weekends. “It’s overwhelming,” she says. This over-extension feeds a vicious cycle, where teachers who are over-stressed become sick and need time off, which leaves staff further strained due to a lack of available substitute teachers, and students without the high quality instruction they need to catch up academically.

With their Center Coach, staff are continuing to discuss ways to support teachers and prevent burnout. Mrs. Higgins notes that it can be very hard for teachers not to take students’ test scores personally, and to feel a sense of helplessness and failure in the face of many factors over which they have some influence but no control. Now that staff have many strategies to help them self-regulate and manage stress and anxiety, they are hoping to find ways to appropriately scaffold high expectations for themselves and their students, in the midst of pressures which don’t always seem connected to reality.

Having explored different SEL curricula over the last couple of years, the school is also continuing to refine its use of morning meetings. Mrs. Higgins says that in addition to the growth mindset and personal responsibility offered by Leader In Me, she would like to reintegrate other social and emotional learning tools into the morning meeting discussions, especially to support the explicit teaching and practice of emotion regulation skills.

The hard-working staff, students, and families of Comfort Elementary have no way of knowing what’s around the next corner or what lessons will be learned. But they know that no matter what comes, fostering compassionate connections and open communication with each other, actively incorporating self-regulation practices throughout the day, and maintaining a curious and committed approach to fostering growth, will be what helps them through and helps them thrive.

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 Comfort 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

- 1 North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NC DPI). Retrieved July 13, 2022, from <https://www.dpi.nc.gov/data-reports/school-report-cards>.
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