

# 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 McGee's Crossroads Elementary School

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### Introduction

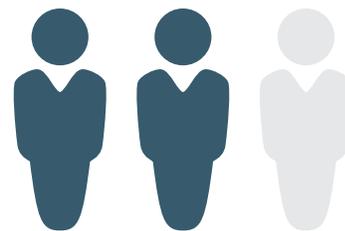
A McGee's Crossroads Elementary School (MCES) student had just returned to the school for her first day back after being transferred to a different school for over a year. As Maddie was meeting with the school counselor to talk about her transition back into the school, she shared excitement and comfort in being inside the building again. On her way out of the counselor's office, she noticed the "Zones of Regulation" feelings check-in sign and made a point to pause, study the poster, and turn to the counselor and share, "I feel green today because I am back at school here." Green is one of the "zones" used in this check-in tool meaning that someone feels happy, excited, positive, calm, and/or focused. This moment with Maddie depicts MCES perfectly; a school that is warm and inviting, a school that cares deeply about its students, a school that kids WANT to be in each day.



### 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



**53**

Classroom Teachers<sup>3</sup>



**44%**

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



**45-50%**

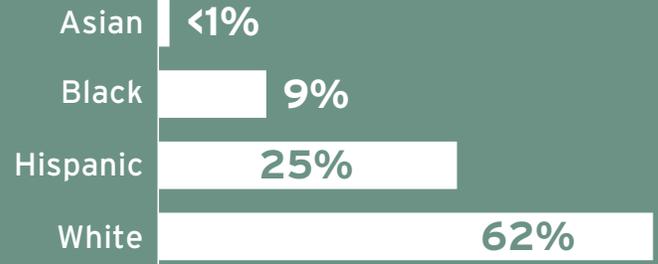
of students receive free and reduced lunch<sup>4</sup>



**748**

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

## Demographics<sup>5</sup>



MCES is a large school serving 748 K-5 students within Johnston County Public Schools located in the town of McGee's Crossroads, a more rural area just 25 minutes east of Raleigh. Anyone who visits the school during morning drop-off or afternoon pick-up time will find a long carpool line with staff using walkie talkies to direct traffic, kids talking to one another and waiting in the front hall, and a row of school staff greeting parents with a smile. Administrators and staff also seem to go above and beyond in creating a fun atmosphere with things like Booster Club challenges that end with the principal being duct-taped to the flagpole. These activities all add to the fun, welcoming community of the school.



Front entrance to McGee's Crossroads Elementary School.



MCES school principal creating fun with her students through a Booster Club challenge.

# Building a Trauma-Informed School



## Developing a Shared Understanding

The NC Center for Resilience and Learning (the Center) began working with Johnston County Public Schools in the 2018-2019 school year. Strong leadership and buy-in with the district level and then the school administrator levels have always been the most critical components for building momentum and seeing success when it comes to this work of creating trauma-informed schools. Between district leadership through the executive director of social and emotional learning **and school-level** leadership through the MCES principal and school counselor, a strong partnership was created quickly with the Center and the work of building resilience was made a top priority early on in 2019.

An initial meeting was held with the principal, school counselor and the Center coach at the start of the 2019-2020 school year to review the commitment and goals of the Center and create a plan to get started. It was evident from this first meeting that the principal and counselor were fully on board and bought into this work and eager to create a safer and more supportive school.

They decided to form a new Resilience Team, a steering committee who would serve as the champions of this work, and then hold their all-staff professional learning opportunity. The principal had several key staff she thought would be interested and make a good fit for a team like this so she invited a small group to meet in mid-September for the first meeting. In that meeting, one of the questions asked was: What issues or challenges do you see the most with your students or in your school as a whole? The team opened up and shared a long list of adversities they know their students are facing as well as the challenges that those present to themselves:

Feeling many kids arrive at school already upset and crying

Many kids they know are in homes where family members are dealing with substance abuse and addiction and are directly exposed

Students who have a family member who is incarcerated

Students facing different types of physical and emotional abuse and neglect at home

Students living across multiple homes with various family members and some kids sharing they do not know which home they will be going home to each day

A handful of students who have recently had a parent or caregiver die and are facing grief

They recognized that more and more students are facing traumatic experiences outside of school resulting in challenging behaviors and bigger emotions for kids in their classroom but they did not feel equipped to be helpful in these situations. In addition to discussing the challenges and the needs, the team was able to close the meeting on a positive note, sharing that their biggest strength was the way their staff and school community as a whole felt like a family. This “family feel” is what created that sense of safety and belonging for students and that was the foundation to building their trauma-informed school.

After this first team meeting, the all-staff training was held one week later. The professional learning started with the principal sharing why she felt this work was important to set the overall tone, and then included watching the “Resilience” documentary followed by a short training around adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), the impact of trauma on the brain, and the stress response system. As staff watched, several shared the “a-ha” moments they were able to have in thinking about some of their own students. Two staff asked afterward how they could join the Resilience Team, sharing this was a passion for them. It was clear the school was ready to move beyond just awareness-building and into action planning and change.



All staff training session



### Building a Resilience Team

Though a small Resilience Team was formed prior to the all-staff film viewing and training, team members were added after expressing interest once hearing more about the focus of this work. The team comprised of the principal, school counselors, one assistant principal, and a teacher from each grade level. When staff have a passion for this and deeply desire to be a part of the team, successful implementation of trauma-informed changes happen more effectively.

Over the next few meetings, the team really began digging into the most common challenges they felt like their staff and students were having as well as considering where some of their gaps were when it came to things like discipline practices, social and emotional learning, and building relationships with students. Their discussion led them to identifying three main areas of urgency to focus on:

**1** Equipping teachers to teach and coach the use of self-regulation and positive coping skills with students consistently

**2** Focusing on supporting staff wellness and self-care

**3** Connecting better and providing stronger support with parents and caregivers

After identifying these areas, the team was eager to think about specific strategies they could begin that would address each one.



## Planning and Implementing Trauma-Informed Strategies

For all of these strategies, training for staff was critical for implementing with fidelity. The Center coach provided training on these strategies in Professional Learning Communities so that smaller teams could process how they would use these tools with their students.

### Staff Wellness

The Resilience Team recognized that they needed to ensure their staff felt healthy physically, mentally, and emotionally in order to best pour into the needs of their students. They put into place three new strategies specifically focused on staff well-being:

**1 Staff wellness lounge:** the team transformed the small staff lounge area by making it more of a staff wellness space where staff could come and take a break and really have a space to relax and use their own self-regulation skills.

**2 Tap-in/Tap-out:** the team formalized a system for staff who needed a break from their classroom to be able to quickly text or call on a colleague who could relieve them for 5 to 10 minutes. The team recognized the importance of not just having a system for this but making sure that staff knew it was encouraged to use it as part of their culture in supporting one another.

**3 Duty-free lunch:** because of the size of their teams, they were able to offer staff duty-free lunch one to two times each week so that staff could rotate and have an extra 30 minutes back for planning and a personal break.



Staff wellness lounge

**Tap in /Tap out Method**  
Teachers can reach out (tap in) to a fellow team member or administrator to be given a needed break (tap out) from their classroom.

It is okay to not be okay! But, let's help each other not stay that way!



Tap in/Tap out Instructions

## ***Warm, supportive relationships***

In talking about relationships, team members felt it was important to focus not just on positive connections with students but also with parents and caregivers.

- 1 Staff-wide challenge to make positive phone calls to parents/caregivers:** so often, teachers only connect with parents or caregivers when there is a problem with their child but the team created a “Five on Five” challenge encouraging staff to make five phone calls or send five emails to parents about something positive with their child on any date that had a “five” in it.

## ***Self-regulation skill-building and social-emotional learning***

- 1 Morning Meetings utilizing Sanford Harmony as a school-wide SEL curriculum:** the school began implementing these for added social emotional learning time but also as community building time at the start of each day. This designated time allowed kids to come together and share and engage with one another in a warm, safe space about things outside of academics. Sanford Harmony is a free SEL curriculum that teachers used as part of this time on specific SEL topics and skills. Teachers reported that they felt this helped kids learn new positive skills that replaced negative behaviors and improved the overall climate in many classrooms.

- 2 Zones of Regulation:** this is an emotion check-in tool to help students identify and articulate how they are feeling. Posters were purchased for every room in the building and the school counselors provided training for staff on how to use this consistently in their rooms.

- 3 Calm-down Corners in each classroom and a school-wide Peace Center:** prior to Covid, calm-down corners were being set-up in each classroom to use as a regulation space for students. Staff received training on how to set-up and introduce the space to their students properly. Additionally, the school created and began using a “peace center” that was a designated room in the library set up like a larger calm-down corner. The goal of this space was to use it for students who needed a bigger break outside of the classroom and instead of writing a discipline referral or sending them to “in-school suspension” (ISS), they would often have the opportunity to go to the Peace Center to calm down and regulate away from other kids. This was a great support for kids with really challenging behaviors, allowing them to stay in school rather than receiving a discipline referral that would cause them to miss larger periods of instructional time.



Calm-down space in a classroom

- 4 Mindfulness moments and other virtual calm-down resources:** during the year of virtual learning with Covid, the counselors shared a wealth of resources that could be used virtually with students on different mindfulness practices, deep-breathing, and other calm-down skills that could be taught and practiced in-person or virtually.



## Creating Ongoing Evaluation and Learning

When MCES embarked on this trauma-informed journey in the fall of 2019, they had no idea that seven months later, a global pandemic would hit and schools would be shut down overnight. The very last in-person Resilience Team meeting prior to Covid was held on March 9, 2020 and the team gathered as they always did every two weeks in the library. There was some conversation around Covid and the possibilities of what was to come, but no one had any idea the magnitude of schools being closed just five days later.

As a result of Covid, staff noted several setbacks with some of their strategies. Things like calm-down corners were not safe to keep using due to fidgets and other items that were shared among kids, for example. They were able to modify some of their practices such as creating small, individual calm-down kits for each student to have at their desks that included little regulation items as well as providing training to equip teachers with a long list of virtual mindfulness tools they could use virtually or in-person with social distancing with students.

Though Covid interrupted the implementation and evaluation process, the school has continued to use Panorama surveys with staff and students to understand things like the sense of belonging that students feel at school and monitor this closely by sharing and discussing with the Resilience Team regularly. They also have continuously tracked discipline referrals and suspensions closely to assess if some of their SEL strategies are positively impacting student behavior. Additionally, administrators are great about checking in with teachers to hear firsthand what is working and what is not as a way to get ongoing qualitative feedback.

## 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>**

The trauma-informed strategies of morning meetings, calm-down corners, and Zones of Regulation that MCES selected to implement are all considered different examples of SEL strategies schools may choose to put in place. Ms. Leonard and Ms. White both agree that they have seen great success with many of these strategies their Resilience Team implemented prior to Covid and even in the last two years during shut-downs and virtual learning.

- Morning Meetings:** These are now being done consistently through the whole school. Ms. White shared, “Staff are forming relationships with kids, and most staff are doing Morning Meetings every day whereas when we first started, it was just a few doing them.”
- Calm-down Corners and the Peace Center:** A number of students who often struggle with regulation learned specific skills and are even able to identify when they are starting to become escalated on their own and excuse themselves to one of these spaces. Ms. White shared, “It is evident that kids have been taught about Calm-down Corners; teachers have clearly taught kids what they are and how to use them and use them appropriately.” The Peace Center has seen similar positive results. Ms. White shared about a few students specifically who used to get dysregulated quickly which would often lead to an escalated situation in the classroom. These same students now can actually recognize when they are starting to get upset and know when and how to excuse themselves to the Peace Center to avoid further behavior challenges leading to a referral or bigger discipline issue.
- Zones of Regulation:** This has helped staff and students alike create a common language around feelings and checking in with one another. Students now talk on a regular basis with this universal language about which “zone” they are in; even very young children have been seen to have the ability to use this tool. This has helped teachers know how and when certain students need extra support and create more safety in the classroom.

In addition to the specific success stories of each individual strategy, the school’s discipline numbers also speak to positive outcomes. Discipline numbers were down significantly in the 2019-2020 school year when the Center began collaborating with MCES.



**Two teachers specifically said they felt like the combination of daily Morning Meetings, use of Calm-down Corners, and the Zones of Regulation in every room have significantly helped students with social skills and self-regulation since coming back to school after Covid closures.**

<i>*Numbers based on 842 students in the 2019-20 school year</i>	<b>2018-19 School Year</b>	<b>2019-20 School Year as of end of the 3rd quarter</b>	<b>2019-20 School Year with predicted data for all 4 quarters with comparison to previous year</b>
<b>Out of School Suspensions</b>	50	16	21 (-29 from previous year; down 58%)
<b>In School Suspensions</b>	17	10	13 (-4 from previous year; down 24%)
<b>Bus Suspensions</b>	56	8	11 (-45 from previous year, down 80%)

Ms. White and Ms. Leonard believe that the partnership with the NC Center for Resilience & Learning has been a major impetus for positive change within their school. Ms. Leonard shared,

*“Being intentional and having a team and a meeting one to two times a month has made a big difference; continuing conscious conversations as a staff has helped in recognizing that social and emotional learning and discipline go hand in hand.”*

Ms. White recognizes that the last three years of resilience work have been a roller coaster but believes that staying the course even when it has felt challenging to keep resilience work at the forefront has paid off in shifting staff mindset and creating a new school culture. She shared,

*“We have come a long way in investing time in kids and not just automatically sending them to the office.”*

This speaks to the culture shift that has been created throughout MCES these last three years. At the end of the 2021-22 school year, 22 staff members completed a survey and the following results were found:

- **84% said working with the Center for Resilience & Learning helped them make changes in mindset about students or relationships with students. Common themes included:**
  - Wondering about potential triggers for student behavior, or recognizing the WHY for their behavior
  - Realizing I don't know everything going on for a student outside of school
  - More aware of how important it is to talk about feelings
  - More focus on growth mindset
  - Realize every family is experiencing life differently, but all have the best interest of their kids in mind
- **74% noticed changes in how they think about causes of misbehavior or in their responses to misbehavior. Common themes included:**
  - Talking with students about ways to cope with feelings and behaviors
  - Understanding better, more patient
  - Trying to keep a positive atmosphere
  - Looked closer at their actions and what they were REALLY saying
  - More aware of the role of trauma
  - Seeing students virtually in their homes helped to better understand home lives

In a focus group with the Resilience Team at the end of the 2019-2020 school year, one team member shared, “Before, when seeing behavior problems, it was about what’s wrong with me as a teacher or wrong with this kid; now I am asking why - where is the behavior coming from? And how should I respond to it? Having those conversations in the forefront has helped teachers think differently about why students behave the way they do and how to respond.”

Ms. Leonard shared that even in the midst of so many barriers and challenges with Covid,

***“the collaboration with the Center for Resilience and Learning has helped our school feel like a different school now than when I first started.”***

## **The Journey Doesn’t End Here**

“We all learned as educators about Maslow’s Hierarchy in school,” said Ms. Leonard, “but now it really seems that most teachers understand that if kids are not in a good place emotionally, they are not going to learn.”

This has been a process but they can look back and see that many of their teachers have a different mindset now three years into this work; their teachers really understand what it means to have a trauma-informed lens.

***“Staff seem to have a better understanding of our role as adults in escalating and de-escalating situations for kids. In the past, some staff would inadvertently escalate something because they thought it was the right thing to do, but now our staff really understand the right way to handle certain behaviors and the right role to have,” said Ms. Leonard.***

MCES has truly embraced the fact that this work never ends. The challenges of Covid-19 and the past two years of constant interruptions to normal school routines will have a lasting impact on students and educators for years to come but the MCES Resilience Team continues to meet regularly and press on even without the Center coach present on a regular basis anymore. The two school counselors took over in leading the team, keeping resilience at the forefront. The team meets once a month now and continues to examine data and refine specific strategies. Coming to the end of year three, MCES is still going strong and knows this work is not something they will stop or feel complacent with anytime soon.

So what does success in this work look like? It looks like educators who aim to build connection and safety before attempting instruction and curriculum. It looks like schools who address the whole child and the social and emotional needs of students in order to help them feel ready to learn. It looks like staff who feel supported and like family with one another. And most of all, it looks like students like Maddie, who come into the school each day saying they feel “in the green zone” just from entering the building and seeing the safe and supportive relationships that surround them.

# 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 MCES 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 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Retrieved July 13, 2022, from <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/index.html>
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- 3 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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- 8 Belfield, C., Bowden, B., Klapp, A., and Levin, H.M. (2015). The economic value of social and emotional learning. *Journal of Benefit-Cost Analysis*, 6(03).