

A Case for Incorporating Trauma-Informed Practices and Content into Educator Preparation Programs in North Carolina

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

Incorporating Trauma-Informed Practices into Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs)

Key Points

- Trauma-informed practices **benefit students** across academic, mental health, and behavioral domains
- Knowledge of SEL **prepares teachers** for success and **reduces burnout**
- Trauma-Informed Training and Interventions Related to K-12 Education are happening, but inconsistently and **often after EPP Completion**
- Integrating curricula on trauma-informed practices into Educator Preparation Programs has both **concrete benefits and logistical challenges**

Introduction

Trauma-informed practices can improve student outcomes and well-being amidst rising mental health challenges in schools. A meta-analysis of global school-based social-emotional learning (SEL) interventions highlighted long-term academic and mental health benefits for students (Durlak et al., 2022). **Alongside improving standardized test scores, SEL builds students' self-awareness, decision-making, and relationship skills** (Durlak et al., 2022; Rosanbalm, 2021).

Interventions can enhance mental and physical well-being by reducing depression, anxiety, aggression, and risky behaviors like drug use (Durlak et al., 2022).

These benefits are needed now more than ever. In the age of social media and its corresponding mental health effects on children (Kang & Barry, 2024), increasing economic hardship (Lee, 2022), and less family time, students often come to school burdened by stress and trauma that impact their learning and behavior.

Since 2017, the number of children with anxiety and depression has nearly doubled, and in 2019, suicide became the leading cause of death for children aged 10-14 years in North Carolina. In 2020, an *unprecedented 67 children in North Carolina died by suicide* (N.C. Child, 2024). With SEL-trained classroom teachers, schools can be critical sites for addressing students' mental health needs in addition to supporting their academic growth (Rosanbalm, 2021).

Recommendations

Pilot Modules in Community Colleges:

Capitalize on the common course catalog of NC community colleges to pilot modules on social-emotional learning and trauma-informed practices.

Standardize Preparation Curricula and Align

Licensing Standards: Mandate explicit trauma-informed and SEL modules within the State Board of Education educator preparation standards.

Embed Continuous Support: Move away from isolated training sessions; instead, establish ongoing coaching, peer networks, and digital repositories for resource sharing.

Formalize Impact Tracking: "Partner with state research institutions to launch randomized controlled trials and quasi-experimental studies of trauma-informed practices in schools to track effects on long-term teacher retention and student academic growth.

Institutionalize Continuing Education: Require structured annual refresher courses on SEL and trauma-informed practices for active school staff. Provide an array of foundational and advanced topics so that schools can select trainings that best align with their priorities, strengths, and needs each year.

Leverage the Business Community: The business community in North Carolina should invest in trauma-informed education programs that strengthen life skills like emotion regulation, problem-solving, and teamwork.

Encourage Philanthropic Funding: Philanthropists and foundations interested in education should encourage grant recipients to embed trauma-informed approaches into their education projects and include funding for rigorous research.

Why Trauma-Informed Practice and Social-Emotional Learning are Important for Teachers Coming into the Profession

1. Students Benefit Across Academic, Mental Health, and Behavioral Domains

The benefits of trauma-informed SEL practices for students extend beyond the classroom.

Students with higher teacher-rated social competence are more likely to graduate, attend college, report better mental health, and retain a job 20 years after graduation (Jones et al., 2015). They are also less likely to get involved with the criminal justice system or depend on public assistance (Jones et al., 2015). A 2009 analysis conducted by the Washington Family Policy Council determined that, between 1998 and 2008, counties implementing trauma-informed strategies within educational and social service systems achieved an estimated \$1.4 billion in savings through measurable reductions in juvenile offending, adolescent births, and school dropout rates (Hughes, 2017). **For every \$1 spent on SEL interventions, society gains at least \$11 worth of benefits** (Belfield, Bowden, Klapp, Levin et al, 2015). Providing future educators with trauma-informed tools increases the likelihood that their students can succeed.

Since 2017, the number of children with anxiety and depression has **nearly doubled**.

Washington counties using trauma-informed care in schools and social services saved **\$1.4 billion in over a decade** due to improved youth outcomes.

In 2019, **suicide** became the **leading cause of death for children 10-14** in NC.



2. Knowledge of SEL Prepares Teachers for Classroom Success and Reduces Burnout

Knowledge of trauma-informed practice and social-emotional learning (SEL) is important for future teachers due to the rigorous demands of the teaching profession, compounded by the needs of their students. To respond to rising mental health needs, teachers are having to find ways to support students' social-emotional well-being before any learning is possible (Lee, 2019). **However, teachers have reported inadequacy of SEL training in both their educator preparation programs and in-service professional development to help them support their students' social-emotional needs** (Lee, 2019).

Student teacher candidates often report that the most common challenges they face when transitioning from their training program to the workforce are classroom management skills and student motivation—challenges frequently related to the underlying stress, trauma, and social-emotional needs of students.

Current and future teachers need training to understand the impacts of stress and trauma on students' developing brains, learning, and behavior. They then need practice and coaching to learn classroom strategies that will mitigate the negative effects of stress while promoting student resilience and academic success.

Teachers' implementation of trauma-informed interventions has been shown to strengthen their ability to:

- address behavioral issues,
 - maintain organized instructional practices,
 - create a positive classroom environment, and
 - foster positive interactions with students,
- even when teachers themselves are experiencing low levels of personal well-being** (Morris et al., 2013; Sandilos et al., 2023).

Educator preparation programs offer an opportunity to proactively provide trauma-informed learning and skills prior to entering the profession. These skills not only set teachers up for success with their students—they also show promise in reducing teacher burnout and retaining teachers in the profession (Oliveira et al., 2021). Despite the recent increases in enrollment and completion in educator preparation programs in the U.S., *the demand for teachers is still far from being met*, as **current teachers are resigning earlier**. Of all workers across industries in the U.S., K-12 teachers experience the highest burnout rate (Marken & Agrawal, 2022; Steiner et al., 2025).

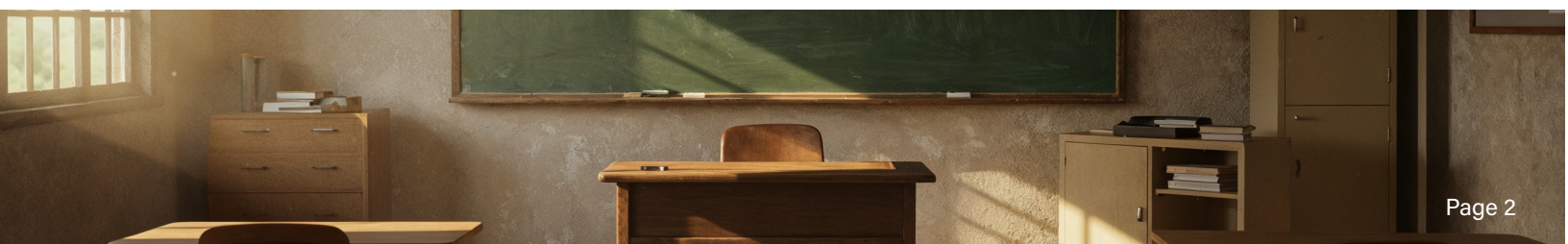
In North Carolina, about **9,107** teachers (10.11% of all teachers) left NC public schools during the 2024-2025 school year—a slight increase from 9.88% in 2023-2024 and above the seven-year average of 8.64% (NCDPI, 2026; NCDPI, 2025).

The most recent NC attrition data show:
Beginning Teachers (<3 years): 14.7% Attrition
Experienced Teachers: 9.34% Attrition

Studies suggest that teachers might be exiting the profession prematurely because they are overwhelmed and unprepared for the field experience (Duke University, 2024). Incorporating SEL and trauma-informed practices into educator preparation programs can more effectively prepare teachers to meet their students' social-emotional needs and protect their own professional well-being.

The Bottom Line:

New teachers are nearly **1.5x more likely** to leave the profession than their experienced peers, often citing being "overwhelmed and unprepared."



3. Trauma-Informed Training and Interventions Related to K-12 Education are Happening, but Inconsistently and often after EPP Completion

Although increased awareness of the benefits of SEL has advanced public and private investments, many programs are reactive or ineffective one-time trainings for educators (Keels et al, 2021). Even when it is provided proactively, professional development for educators traditionally takes the form of didactic workshops lasting anywhere from one hour to one day. Extensive research demonstrates that this approach is ineffective: it does not easily translate into changes in classroom practice and does not take into account adult learning principles (Garet et al., 2001; Yoon et al., 2007). **Multiple well-spaced trainings produce greater learning and retention than do massed presentations of the same total length** (e.g., Sisti, Glass, & Shors, 2007). **Training that is not only well-spaced but also includes practice-focused coaching exponentially increases translation to practice** (Reinke, Herman & Sprick, 2011).

Incorporating SEL into educator preparation programs and practica would capitalize on the benefits of an evidence-based approach to training for sustained effects.

There are several existing programs and models that support trauma-informed practices and SEL for schools, but they tend to target educators already teaching rather than pre-service educators. Private sector organizations such as the Institute for Social and Emotional Learning offer SEL curricula and consulting services to educators in K-12 schools, districts in the U.S., and international audiences (ISEL, 2025). Another organization, Empowering Education, offers comprehensive SEL resources, including lesson plans for pre-K to 12 and a customizable SEL slide deck in English and Spanish, to teachers and administrators already in the profession (Empowering Education, 2025).

Local to NC, the **NC Center for Resilience and Learning**, housed at the Public School Forum of NC, **leads a two-year professional learning model in partnership with schools and districts around the implementation of trauma-informed practices across the state – training and coaching in this model is also provided to educators already in the profession.** A more proactive strategy would be to equip teachers with this knowledge and skill set during their educator preparation programs, where they can learn and practice skills over time with coaching and feedback from veteran educators. As a model for this approach, the **North Carolina Community College System** trains faculty to offer curricula in early childhood care and education (ECCE) through a trauma-informed lens. Within existing courses in the ECCE programs, NC Community Colleges have integrated modules that introduce future ECCE professionals to trauma and its implications for children and their learning. For instance, one of the courses is EDU 153 –Health, Safety and Nutrition—**in which future teachers learn how to recognize child traumatic stress, provide a psychologically safe environment for young children, and help children regulate their emotions.** Modules in sequential courses build upon one another, deepening and applying knowledge over time.

Since 2019, faculty from **36 community colleges across North Carolina have been trained to provide this trauma-informed content** to their ECCE students. Importantly, this training also coaches faculty in using a trauma-informed approach to *teach* the new modules, *ensuring that faculty are prepared to support students in processing the potentially emotional course content* (CCFH, 2021). The common course catalog for the NC Community College System provides a consistent platform, ensuring future ECCE professionals across all NC community colleges are exposed to the same trauma-informed information and approaches.

Through expansion and/or modification of this model, **educator preparation programs in North Carolina have the opportunity to equip future teachers with the tools they need to support students (and reduce burnout) through uniformly integrating SEL coursework and trauma-informed practices.**

4. Integrating Curricula on Trauma-Informed Practices into Educator Preparation Programs has both concrete benefits and logistical challenges:

Summary of benefits:

- a. **Improved student outcomes:** SEL programming in schools strengthens students' learning, behavior, and mental health. These improvements **generate lasting economic and non-economic benefits**, including advanced educational attainment, participation in the workforce, and broader societal economic gains (Durlak et al., 2022; Hughes, 2017; Jones et al., 2015; Rosanbalm, 2021).
- b. **Enhanced classroom management skills:** Equipping future teachers with trauma-informed skills will help them better manage their classrooms, address behavioral issues, and motivate their students (Morris et al., 2013; Sandilos et al., 2023).
- c. **Reduced attrition rate among current and incoming teachers:** Training teacher candidates in trauma-informed approaches can provide them with effective strategies for mitigating the student mental health needs and behavioral challenges that drive early exits from the teaching profession (Duke University, 2024; Lee, 2019; Oliveira et al., 2021).
- d. **Improved responsiveness to diversity in the classroom:** Although half of the students in K-12 public schools are people of color, only 1 in 5 teachers are people of color (Williams, 2023). This increased diversity of the student population in schools requires teachers to be more culturally sensitive, as their students may approach them with problems unfamiliar to them in their own cultural context (Kuykendall, 2019).
- e. **Foundational alignment between SEL and pedagogy:** Incorporating a trauma-informed approach into EPPs can help teachers develop the mindset that SEL is not additional work they do, but a strategy that complements other skills developed in their educator preparation program—and one that is foundational to student success.
- f. **Well-prepared educators and aligned curriculum:** Universal SEL programs, typically more proactive and preventive, have a larger effect on academic outcomes when classroom teachers deliver the SEL curriculum. **When teachers weave this content into other classroom subjects**, such as literature or history, throughout the school day (Rosanbalm, 2021), **they they can simultaneously achieve SEL and academic outcomes among students.**



Summary of Potential Challenges:

- a. **Lack of Common Course Catalog:** In North Carolina, there are currently **89 EPPs**, including public and private colleges and universities, community colleges, school districts, and other providers that offer preparation in a variety of content areas, approved by the North Carolina State Board of Education (NCDPI, 2025). Groups such as the **North Carolina Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (NCACTE)** and the **Association of Teacher Educators** advocate for policies related to teacher training. While these organizations work to strengthen teacher education, there remains misalignment between EPP curricula and common school practices. **The absence of common courses and curricula poses a challenge to ensuring consistency in trauma-informed content delivery across institutions.**

- b. **Measuring and Evaluating Impact:** Measuring the impact of trauma-informed curricula in educator preparation programs in the short-term will be challenging. Even if every teacher candidate received instruction on trauma-informed practice, there is no formal mechanism to evaluate whether the information is being used in classrooms, how well it is implemented, or how well it works. Professional development and coaching partners, such as the NC New Teacher Support Program, could expand their current data-collection practices to evaluate SEL content implementation and effectiveness. Use of **large-scale data**, such as those managed by the North Carolina Education Research Data Center, may be useful for examining population-level effects over time.

- c. **Cost of Developing and Incorporating Trauma-Informed/SEL Curriculum:** Incorporating a trauma-informed approach into EPPs requires financial, personnel, and time investments to redesign and train educators on course content. However, **longitudinal research shows that SEL in schools can save money in the long run.** Deeper research into the long-term outcomes of incorporating material on trauma-informed education into EPPs would represent an additional evaluatory cost to consider.



Next Steps and Recommendations

- ▶ **Pilot trauma-informed models in community colleges:** NC Community Colleges could expand on the trauma-informed course series they have developed for students in early childhood care and education programs, revising content to fit their elementary and secondary education preparation programs. Facilitated by their common course catalog, community colleges are well positioned to pilot new modules for preservice teachers.
- ▶ **Align licensing standards with teacher needs and school practices:** As recommended by the Professional Educator Preparation and Standards Commission, the North Carolina State Board of Education should incorporate additional requirements for trauma-informed curricula and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) into licensing standards. Inclusion in licensing standards will ensure that teachers trained across all EPPs will develop a shared trauma-informed skillset and will align training with mandated practice frameworks.
- ▶ **Create a unified framework of trauma-informed content and embed continuous support:** Faculty from community colleges and public and private educator preparation programs can jointly create trauma-informed EPP modules, outlining the most important information and strategies that a future teacher would need to implement trauma-informed practice. Modules should then be vetted by teachers, administrators, and student support staff in the field. Curricular framework should move away from isolated classroom instruction or one-time training sessions, instead establishing opportunities to practice skills, receive ongoing coaching, and participate in peer networks for skill development and sustainability.
- ▶ **Build formal networks and digital repositories to share best practices:** Educator Preparation Program Administrators who are already incorporating trauma-informed approaches into their educator training curriculum would benefit from formalized networks for sharing their knowledge and lessons with other EPPs to create a shared resource pool. A central, digital repository could house this information.
- ▶ **Institutionalize continuing education:** NC School Districts and the State Board of Education should require an annual SEL/trauma-informed practices refresher training for staff of K-12 schools to ensure current teachers build on the knowledge and skills gained within educator preparation programs. Optional topics could include an array of foundational concepts, universal skills and strategies, and more specialized interventions so that schools can select trainings that best align with their priorities, strengths, and needs each year. Topics could then be integrated into Professional Learning Community discussions across the year to strengthen implementation.
- ▶ **Formalize impact tracking:** Educators should partner with researchers at public and private academic and research institutions in North Carolina to design robust randomized controlled trials and quasi-experimental studies. This research will provide empirical evidence on the effects of trauma-informed content in EPP courses on student outcomes and teacher retention. In addition, annual teacher evaluations could provide insight into trauma-informed practices implementation and barriers.

Next Steps and Recommendations

- ▶ **Leverage the business community:** The business community in North Carolina should invest in EPPs and K-12 education programs that incorporate SEL and trauma-informed approaches into their education practices. The technology-centric future needs workers with critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, communication, and emotion regulation skills for success on the job (Allen & Noam, 2023).
- ▶ **Mobilize philanthropists and foundations:** Funders interested in K-12 education should encourage their grant recipients to embed a trauma-informed approach into their education projects and programs. Grants should also fund research that will provide empirical evidence to inform stakeholders' decisions on incorporating trauma-informed training in educator preparation programs.

By supporting the **incorporation of trauma-informed practices and content into educator preparation programs**, teachers will have the following skills when they enter their classroom:

- ▶ Managing classroom behavior
- ▶ Supporting student regulation
- ▶ Promoting resilience

These skills are foundation to student learning and academic success.



Additional Information About Educator Preparation Programs



5 pathways to becoming a teacher:

1. Traditional, 4-year undergraduate program in a private or public educator preparation program (EPP)
2. Alternative pathways such as a 2-year Teach for America
3. 2 + 2 programs involving partnerships between community colleges and a university
4. Paid teacher residency programs
5. Other alternative licensure programs.

In the past decade, **EPP enrollment in North Carolina has steadily declined for 4-year programs**, while enrollment in non-traditional EPPs has increased. In 2025, **6,329** candidates were pursuing their initial teaching license through a traditional pathway, a 36% decrease from 2021 (NC Educator Preparation Program Dashboards [NC EPP Dashboards], 2025). On the other hand, there was a 41% increase in enrollment in alternative pathways in North Carolina at 10,303 candidates (NC EPP Dashboards, 2025).

300,000 teacher positions are unfilled or held by less-qualified individuals (Patrick, 2023).

No EPPs in North Carolina are required to incorporate instruction on the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) model even though DPI mandates use of the framework in all schools (NCDPI, 2025). Alignment of licensure standards with common educational models and components would better prepare new teachers for the work they will undertake.

Nationally, **alternative pathway programs now enroll a growing share of teacher candidates**, especially non-university-based providers, whose enrollments have increased considerably—by **over 60%** since 2010–11 (Fuller, 2024; Saenz-Armstrong, 2023; Nobel & Ellis, 2025; Patrick, 2023).

State-level policies have **incentivized enrollment** by increasing financial benefits. Maryland (Heubeck, 2023), Colorado (Kipp, McLachlan, Zenzinger, Coram, 2022) and Michigan (MiLeap, 2025) enacted policies for paying student teachers, and Maryland provides trainees in a masters' degree teacher residency program with a \$30,000 annual living stipend.

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