

Connection over Perfection

Creating a Trauma Sensitive School:
A Beloit Case Study

“Start carrying your
own torch.”



STUDENTS SEEMED HAPPY

Brice Gustafson has always worked hard to make his thirdgrade classroom a safe place where kids can learn. “My classroom always had a community circle, and the focus was always on the whole child,” says Gustafson. “Students seemed happy, and parent requests for my room were always heavy.”

So, when Gustafson’s school principal emailed him about a conference in Wausau about Trauma Sensitive Schools, he was skeptical. “I thought, ‘I will give it a try, but I am sure I have heard it all before,’” says Gustafson. He went into the threeday conference with an open mind, believing there must be something he could bring back to his school, Todd Elementary in Beloit, WI.

“The process led to an awareness of the impact of *trauma on students.*”

At the conference, he met Sara Daniel, Vice President of Educational Services at Wellness Care Network, who led the Trauma Sensitive Schools training Sara Daniel is the co-author of DPI’s TSS professional development and the creator of Wellness Care Network’s 7 Essential Ingredients. “I thought it was a one and done training,” he says. “I didn’t know at the initial training that I would be connected to Sara for several years.”

With Daniel’s guidance, Gustafson’s classroom has grown even beyond where it started, and Todd Elementary has since made a commitment to advancing a school climate and culture built on the principles and practices of Trauma Sensitive Schools.

LEARNING THE LANGUAGE OF TRAMA SENSITIVE SCHOOLS

At the beginning, the resources in the training allowed staff to understand that Trauma Sensitive Schools can't be distilled to a simple list of tactics. As Gustafson puts it, "The TSS process wasn't based on activities that you implement right away, such as a time out area or fidgets."

Instead, he describes the experience as "an assessment of the current reality for students of trauma. Instead of looking at what is wrong with these kids that are acting out, the process led to an awareness of the impact of trauma on students."

For Gustafson, this awareness led to some introspection. "I was surprised at how quickly I was willing to look at myself and the way I was making decisions," he says. "It is sort of like waking up one day and being able to speak another language in a matter of a few days."

For Gustafson, the TSS modules provided him with the foundation he needed to return to Beloit and present to the more than fifty staff members he coaches.

“Once you get it you want to apply it and get others to *jump on board.*”

SEEKING CONNECTION OVER PERFECTION

For Gustafson, making change meant being able to reflect on his practice. "If I reacted to my students in a manner that triggered a response from my students, I would then talk to my co-teacher about it," he says. And, Gustafson began to support caregiver capacity. "Taking time to take care of myself allowed for me to be able to take care of others," he says. "Perfect teachers are teachers that admit that they are not perfect, but these teachers take time each day to find ways to connect with their students."

This vulnerability among staff spread to vulnerability with students and the building of relationships. Gustafson says, “I just started saying I was sorry to the students. I started talking openly about my feelings in class, like when I was having a rough day or if I overreacted.” This simple step, he says, became a model for students. Talking about my faults and apologizing for any mistake I make along the way seems to get kids to want to do it too.”

“I started talking openly about my feelings.”

Gustafson has found that like vulnerability, positivity is also infectious between students and staff. He mentions that one staff member, Ms. Fuentes, sometimes plays “walk-in music” for staff as they begin to arrive. “I feel like this picks me up when I come in, and then she is cheery and ready with coffee. And that’s infectious, and it passes on to the kids.”

STUDENTS FEEL THE DIFFERENCE

Students took notice of the changes happening. When Gustafson noticed a child experiencing a high frequency of peer conflict, he observed carefully and saw signs of bullying. “My TSS training allowed me to recognize a need and make a plan,” he says.

The result was a practice he calls “Name, please, behavior.” When issues arise, Gustafson has students say the peer’s name, the word “please,” and the expectation they are asking of their peer. The peer is then expected to say that they understand the expectation, not simply apologize. Through it all, Gustafson says, “My goal is to not get the kids to agree on who was right and who was wrong. All I want to do is to get them to understand each other.”

According to Gustafson, creating this method of open communication is the greatest change he’s implemented within the Trauma Sensitive Schools framework. “If there

was one thing that has made the biggest change in the culture of my room, this is it," says Gustafson.

These small practices have grown into a powerful classroom culture where students support one another. "If I say, 'Sally, please stop talking,' before I even finish my sentence, other students are already saying, 'You can do it, Sally!'"

Changes began to spread beyond Gustafson's classroom. According to Gustafson, the lunch room used to be a place with "no structure or predictable flow." Todd Elementary's staff was challenged to find a way to bring peace to a stress-inducing environment: "kids used to go through the lunch line in an area that echoes and seems to shrink when kids arrive."

Staff adopted an approach informed by Trauma Sensitive Schools. "What did it was introducing the lunch staff to the kids. I told them that this is their workspace. They work all day preparing your food and cleaning your dishes. so while we are in here, we need to respect the staff." Staff established the expectation that students show their respect with "please" and "thank you." "Go to the back of the line for talking" was replaced with a reminder that the lunch line is a "please and thank you zone."

“All I want them to do is understand each other.”

THE PROCESS OF CHANGE

Even with significant improvement over the last few years, Gustafson takes a continuous growth mindset: "The culture in my room and school are not perfect."

While noticing the room to grow, Gustafson also embraces his classroom as a source of pride. His TSS efforts and leadership have led to his becoming a model for other teachers. "Despite imperfections, superintendents have come in and have taken pictures. Leaders talk about my room during PD. New teachers are sent to my room," he says.

Although it can be challenging to continuously implement TSS as teachers come and go, Gustafson is optimistic. “The people I taught along the way have started carrying their own torch,” he says.

Looking back, Gustafson admits, “I went into this training thinking I don’t think I need to change. And yet the change that occurred was the way I think and act.”

**“The change that occurred was
the way I act and think.”**

With an open mind and the passion to educate his colleagues, Gustafson revitalized his own classroom and made ripple effects within his school and district. Gustafson invites teachers curious about TSS to “Enjoy the process of change.” As he puts it, “This is the single most important thing I have done to make a change in my life in and outside of my classroom.”



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