Project 180: Development of Trauma-Informed School Environments

The GHPC COVID Collection

Overview

Beginning in mid-March, as a result of the COVID-19 public health emergency and the shelter-at-home restrictions put in place by the governor's office, educators transitioned to teaching and supporting their students online utilizing virtual platforms. Similarly, trauma-informed CHRIS 180 practitioners* also transitioned to delivering services via telehealth to students receiving mental health services and supports. The following is a synthesis of experiences shared by four educators from four public schools in Metro Atlanta participating in Project 180. The insights in this brief may provide points for considerations as children transition back to in-person or virtual school environments this fall.

Meeting Basic Needs

A student's basic needs must be prioritized before any meaningful learning can occur. Educators often reflected about working with students, and in some cases parents, to ensure students and their families had access to food. Additionally, the pandemic impacted the economic stability of many families, and educators shared that they served as connectors for additional community supports, such as assistance with utilities.

"We were trying to figure out how to get kids fed and how to then just get in touch, find a phone number, and then get them the technology."

"If they don't have these basic needs met, there's not much learning that's going to take place."

* Relying on the core values of creativity, honor, respect, integrity and safety, CHRIS 180 strives to deliver high-quality, trauma-informed behavioral health services and support systems. Project 180, funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, aims to expand access to trauma-informed school environments and evidence-based trauma interventions for youth in Georgia.

CENTER OF EXCELLENCE FOR CHILDREN'S BEHAVIORAL HEALTH
integrating research, policy, and practice

PROJECT 180
CHRIS 180
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Lost Contact with Some Students

After overcoming the initial challenges of getting comfortable with a virtual platform, and ensuring students had access to equipment and technology to support learning, teachers worked hard to engage their students. However, educators voiced concern about the inability to reach some kids. Students with whom educators had no contact were often the ones they were most concerned about, citing high levels of need for support, unhealthy home environments, and residing in communities with historically higher levels of trauma. Additionally, maintaining ongoing support to monitor Individualized Education Program participants and 504 Plans was problematic.

"I think that the students who I knew in the past, who experienced trauma, I think they tapped out."

Balancing Work and Family Life

The full impact of the epidemic affects educators in a variety of ways. A common theme across interviews focused on the challenge of balancing work and family life. Educators were challenged with teaching their students in the midst of supporting their own children and families. Educators experienced loss of family members, concerns about job security, and overall uncertainty as a result of the pandemic. An adjustment of expectations helped to relieve some of the stress and strain.

"It was a lot of giving of myself, it was inviting essentially everybody into my home."

Innovations and Adaptations

Educators adapted and developed innovative strategies to facilitate learning in the virtual environment and supported their students. Examples of innovations include lessons built around storytelling and focusing on social emotional learning.

"I was more concerned about how my kids were doing and how are you able to express how you're feeling during this very vulnerable time. And so I used the opportunity to teach from more of a social-emotional learning lens."

Finding Silver Linings

Even in the midst of difficult days, educators spoke about being optimistic, finding positivity, the importance of highlighting "wins" or successes, and finding resiliency.

"I've been a part of parades, I've been a part of drive-by baby showers. I've been a part of drive-by graduations. I've been a part of drive by teacher appreciation. I've made so many posters and so many signs, and this is giving me an opportunity to reflect on things that I might have taken for granted."

"…that's how communities work. We do things for each other that we want done. You treat people the way you want to be treated. And you err on the side of forgiveness and empathy."

Additional Themes Noted by Educators

Roles beyond teaching
Teachers expressed taking on roles beyond teaching, such as connecting families to resources.

Technology needs
Ensuring student access to technology was a critical first step in transitioning to virtual learning.

Parents
Relationships with parents were key to many success stories during this time.

School and district leadership
Principals and district leaders were praised for their responsiveness to teacher and students needs.

The Value of Attachment, Regulation, and Competency (ARC) Training

Reflecting on their participation in Project 180 trainings and learning about the ARC framework, educators discussed helpful principles that have informed their thinking and teaching. This includes gaining a better understanding of the impacts of trauma and trauma-informed practices related to empathy, secure attachment, caregiver affect management, attunement, effective response, emotion identification, emotion expression, peer support, collaboration, and mutuality.

"I think what's been really helpful…is like naming it...Saying what it is and using 'I' statements… Those forms of communicating emotions [were] very helpful."

"It definitely helped me to take a step back and really see that a lot of the problems in the classroom were not necessarily geared towards something I wasn't doing. It was maybe a part of what the child was seeing, doing, or having to deal with before coming to the classroom. So then, therefore, it allowed me to take a step back and to address it in a different manner."

"It's just very fluid in self-care, in empathy, in thinking about other people, and being aware of their feelings, and walking in their shoes."

"We can't be secure attachment figures and show up for our kids if we're not doing that for our colleagues."

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