



BEYOND BEHAVIOR

A Practical Guide to Understanding Trauma,
Building Resilience, and Supporting Thriving Students

Helping educators move beyond behavior management
and toward understanding, connection, and resilience.

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Thriving Students

EMPOWERED & THRIVING



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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT & CONSULTING

This eBook aims to provide practical, evidence-informed strategies to help educators navigate the complexities of trauma, stress, and adversity in schools while maintaining their well-being. Designed for educators, school counselors, psychologists, social workers, administrators, and support staff.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO TRAUMA AND STRESS IN SCHOOLS

THE LEARNING BRAIN VS. THE SURVIVAL BRAIN

When students feel safe, connected, and regulated, the brain is available for learning.

This is the **Learning Brain**.

Students can:

- ✓ Focus
- ✓ Problem solve
- ✓ Learn new information
- ✓ Build relationships
- ✓ Manage emotions

***“Behavior is the smoke.
The underlying cause is the fire.”***

When students feel threatened, overwhelmed, or unsafe, the brain shifts into protection mode.

This is the **Survival Brain**.

Students may:

- Fight
- Flight
- Freeze
- Fawn

The goal is to improve behavior by understanding and addressing what is causing it.

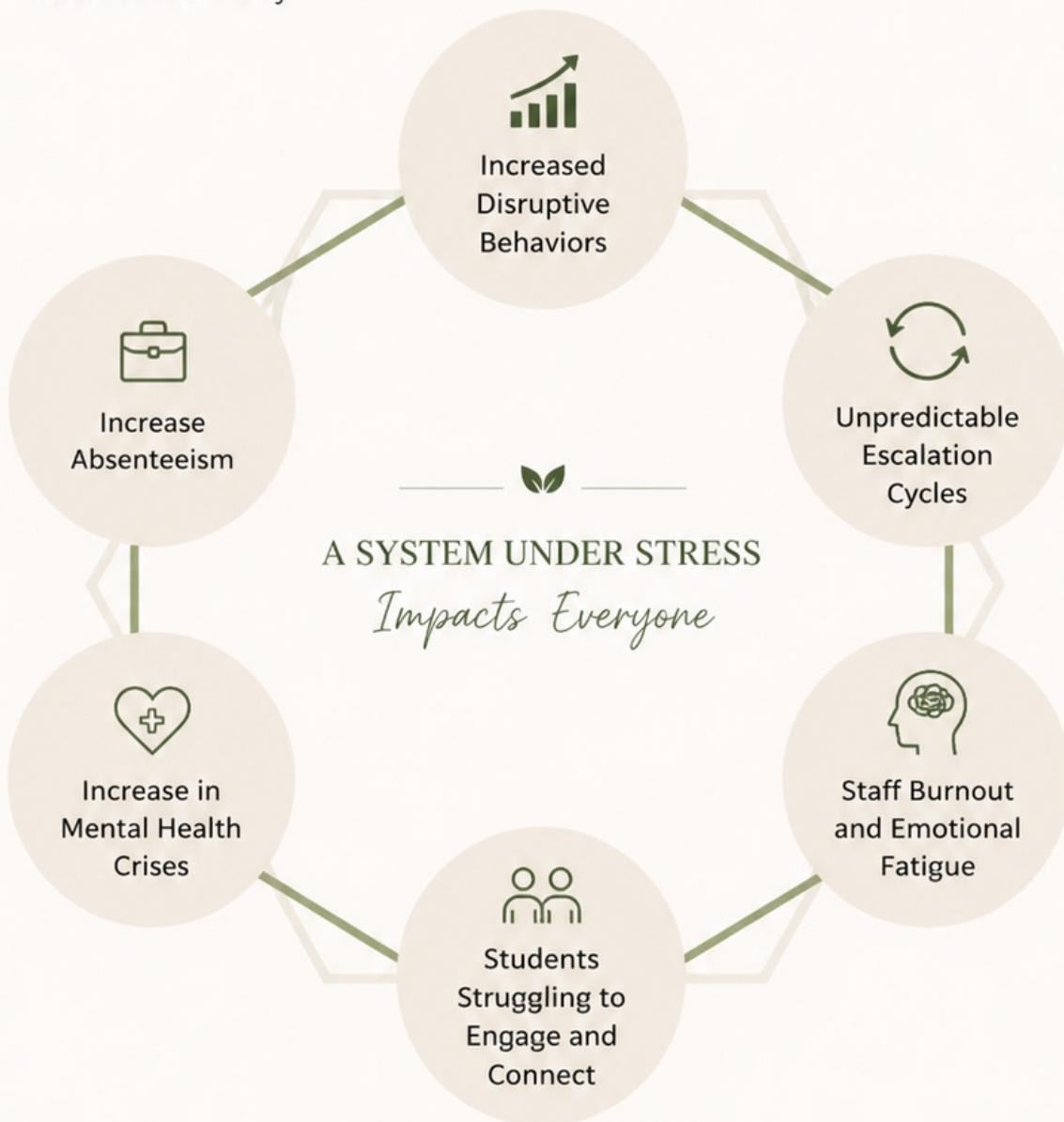




What Schools are *Experiencing*



These are not behavior problems.
These are nervous system responses.
When students feel unsafe, the brain shifts
into survival mode—and learning
becomes secondary.



WHAT TRAUMA CAN LOOK LIKE IN THE CLASSROOM

STUDENTS RARELY WALK INTO OUR CLASSROOMS AND SAY, "I'M STRUGGLING."

INSTEAD, IT OFTEN APPEARS AS:

Academic Signs

- Missing assignments
- Difficulty concentrating
- Declining grades
- Chronic absenteeism

Emotional Signs

- Anxiety
- Irritability
- Emotional outbursts
- Hypervigilance

Behavioral Signs

- Defiance
- Aggression
- Withdrawal
- Perfectionism

Relational Signs

- Difficulty trusting adults
- Peer conflict
- Isolation

**This is not simply a student problem.
It is a nervous system responding to chronic stress.**



BEHAVIOR IS COMMUNICATION

Every behavior serves a purpose.

Instead of asking: "How do I stop this behavior?"

Consider asking: "What is this behavior communicating?"

Possible messages may include:

- "I don't feel safe."
- "I'm overwhelmed."
- "I need connection."
- "I don't know how to ask for help."

RELATIONSHIPS CHANGE OUTCOMES

One caring, consistent adult can significantly influence a student's resilience.

Protective relationships help students:

- Feel safe
- Build trust
- Increase engagement
- Develop self-regulation skills

Connection is not an extra strategy.

Connection is the strategy.



SELF-AWARENESS BEFORE SELF-CARE

One of the most overlooked trauma-informed practices is **Educator Self-Awareness**.

Before we can effectively support students,
we must understand ourselves.

Ask yourself:

- What behaviors trigger me?
- What does stress look like in me?
 - Where do I feel stress in my body?
- How do I respond when frustrated?
- What helps me regulate?

Self-awareness allows us to respond intentionally rather than react emotionally.



FIVE TRAUMA-INFORMED STRATEGIES YOU CAN USE TOMORROW

1. Regulate Before You Educate
2. Connection Before Correction
3. Remove the Audience
4. Offer Choices
5. Be Who YOU Need on Your Worst Day

Small shifts can create meaningful change.



REFLECTION ACTIVITY

Think about one student who challenges you.

Ask yourself:

- What strengths do they possess?
- What stressors may be impacting them?
- What protective factors exist in their life?
- How might my response change if I viewed their behavior differently?



CASE EXAMPLE

A student frequently disrupts class, argues with peers, and struggles to complete assignments.

A traditional approach focuses on consequences.

A trauma-informed approach begins with **curiosity**.

As staff build relationships and learn more about the student's experiences, they discover significant family stress and recent instability.

The intervention shifts from managing behavior to building safety, connection, and support.

The result is improved engagement, stronger relationships, and increased success.

FROM SURVIVING TO THRIVING

Trauma-informed practice is about more than
reducing behavior problems.

It is about creating environments where students can:

- ✓ Feel safe
- ✓ Build resilience
- ✓ Experience belonging
- ✓ Develop confidence
- ✓ Reach their potential

Every interaction matters.

Every relationship matters.

Every student matters.



YOUR NEXT STEP

This guide is intended to provide a starting point.

Creating trauma-informed schools requires more
than awareness.

It requires implementation.

It requires support.

It requires intentional systems and practices.

EmpowerED & Thriving partners with schools and
organizations to help educators move from understanding
trauma to creating thriving learning environments.

Professional Development
Workshops
Consultation
Coaching
School-Based Support

Dr. Abigail Rebeske, EdD, MSW
Helping school communities move from surviving to thriving.



EmpowerED & Thriving

ROOTED IN UNDERSTANDING. GROWING TOGETHER.



LET'S CONNECT



Contact me to discuss which package
would best meet the needs of
your school community.



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Dr. Abigail Rebeske

EDUCATOR. CONSULTANT. PARTNER.



Every partnership begins
with a conversation. 

I look forward to partnering with you
to support students and educators.