



NEW KNOWLEDGE

## Practicing Trauma-Responsive Teaching

# Practicing Trauma-Responsive Teaching

## THE BIG PICTURE

Research has shown that [over 80 percent of inner city youth experience one or more traumatic events in their lives](#). Neurobiological research tells us that such repeated stress causes brain and hormonal changes; it repeatedly puts students in fight-or-flight states that can impede the development of skills needed for healthy interpersonal relations, concentration, and learning.

The current dominant model of addressing trauma is incident-specific — school counselors are only called in after particular, often highly publicized disasters occur. This model fundamentally misunderstands the chronic trauma that children growing up in high-poverty neighborhoods experience. For example, the Chicago neighborhood in which 9-year-old Tyshawn Lee was slain in 2015 [had already experienced 838 violent crimes in the 365 days leading up to his death](#). Too many children who are coping with chronic trauma, and thus struggling in school, are suspended or expelled and get caught in the school-to-prison-pipeline.

On the national and local level, leaders in urban education are beginning to reform the ways they address trauma, to ensure that educational practices reflect the neurobiological research on the effects of chronic trauma. Education leaders are starting to implement teacher training that is trauma responsive — training that prepares teachers for using proactive and restorative, rather than punitive, practices to build the self-regulation skills of students that experience chronic trauma. The aim is to make classrooms that are both educative and therapeutic—spaces that meet students where they are instead of punishing them for struggling with traumatic stress. The goal is to include self-regulation and trauma process activities such as expressive writing into academic instruction to help them work through the stress to arrive at a place where they are ready to learn.

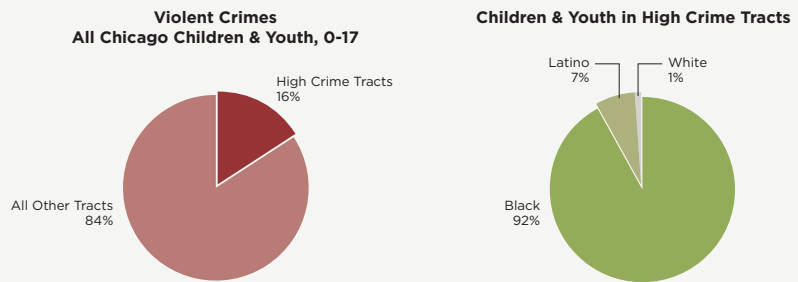


## NEW UEI KNOWLEDGE

The University of Chicago Urban Teacher Education Program (UChicago UTEP) has begun to work with [Dr. Micere Keels](#), an Associate Professor in the University of Chicago's Department of Comparative Human Development, to [integrate trauma-responsive practices into its curriculum](#).

Foremost, Dr. Keels' research about trauma in Chicago underscores the importance of teaching trauma-responsive practices to UChicago UTEP candidates, who teach in Chicago and in districts nationwide after graduating. Dr. Keels found that many students in Chicago - nearly 1 in 6 - live in very high crime census tracts. Also, as the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research reported in ["Discipline Practices](#)

**Nearly 1 in 6 children in Chicago live in high crime census tracts, and 92 percent of the children in these tracts are black. There are schools in some of these areas where over 1,000 violent crimes were reported within a half-mile of the school in 2015. Some of these incidents happen while students are in school or walking to and from school.**

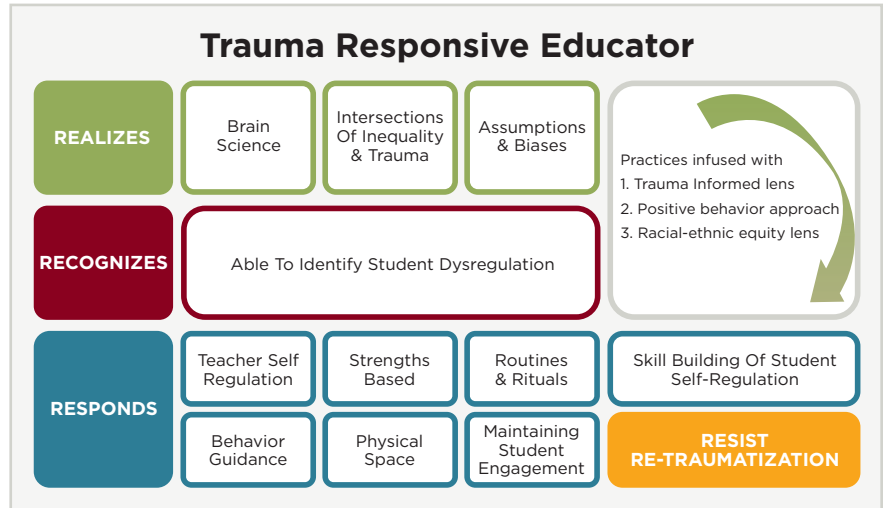


# Practicing Trauma-Responsive Teaching

in Chicago Schools: Trends in the Use of Suspensions and Arrests”, about 40 percent of Chicago Public Schools students feel “not safe” or only “somewhat safe” outside around their school. This, as other research has also shown, means that many students arrive at school in a heightened state of agitation.

Existing research shows that trauma often manifests in the form of aggressive behavior in the classroom, and that teachers can help prevent aggressive behavior by being aware of students’ emotional states and responding with proactive de-escalation classroom management practices. Actions as simple as greeting students at the door and asking them to complete a daily mood chart can help teachers understand and react better to students’ behavior. Last year, UTEP utilized this research to introduce new human development coursework for beginning teachers and training workshops for alumni.

This year, UTEP students [designed trauma-informed schools](#) as part of their coursework. One school model includes school-wide discussions about current events and student-driven interdisciplinary projects. By creating these school models, UTEP’s teachers-in-training more effectively retained what they learned about trauma-informed practices and became prepared to serve youth in high-trauma contexts.



## DEVELOPMENTS TO WATCH

Educators are integrating trauma-informed practices into teacher training and school report efforts in new ways.

Organizations such as [Unconditional Education](#), based in California, have worked with schools to train teachers in trauma responsive instruction. Teachers learn about the effects of trauma on students and examine their own reactions and triggers to students’ behavior. On top of this, though, Unconditional Education, “is interested to know if the focus on creating an *entire school community* focused on safety and care using a trauma-informed lens will make measurable impacts on student learning.”

In Los Angeles, for example, where a reported 80% of students are from low-income families, [“therapeutic schools” are emerging](#). In these schools, school staff facilitate group therapy sessions with parents and caregivers, in which staff members help connect families with health care, legal, and housing resources. The therapeutic schools aim to support the whole community - not just students, but also parents and families who support the students at home.

On the local level, schools such as Tilden Career Academy High School are also incorporating trauma informed practices in their school communities. Tilden created a Care Team in collaboration with external organizations including City Year, Umoja, and Lurie Children’s Hospital. The Care Team’s work aims to address the trauma-induced anxiety that many of Tilden’s students experience and help open up productive pathways to learning for them.

Other schools are integrating formal training on trauma-informed educational practices into their professional development programs. The UChicago Charter School is partnering with Dr. Micere Keels, an Associate Professor in the University of Chicago’s Department of Comparative Human Development and the founding director of the Trauma Responsive Educational Practices (TREP) Project to organize a series of professional development workshops designed to help teachers learn how to recognize and respond to trauma before it manifests in the form of challenging student behaviors. Dr. Keels is leading the UChicago Charter School through a process of

## Practicing Trauma-Responsive Teaching

assessing current disciplinary practices and equipping teachers with an arsenal of techniques for preventing and de-escalating aggressive behavior before it can create classroom conflict and impede student learning.

Ultimately, as the body of research on how trauma can affect student learning grows, an increasing number of schools across the nation are exploring ways to integrate trauma-informed practices into classrooms and broader school communities.

---

To download the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute's full New Knowledge in Public Education Report, visit: <https://www.ueiknowledge.org/newknowledgereport>