

Vernonia's New Caring Culture

School District embraces behavior program to help students, and staff, deal with childhood traumas

By Scott Laird

The Vernonia School District has embarked on a new program that takes into account childhood trauma and the roll it plays in students' daily behavior.

The District is calling the program "Vernonia Caring Culture" but it is based on a now well known and studied process called Trauma Informed Care, which uses multiple approaches to treat people and their behavior issues from a more caring point of view, while recognizing that if someone is struggling, there is a reason behind it.

"Most of us have experienced some type of trauma in our lives, and we know many of our students have, which may be contributing to what we see in our school building," says Peter Weisel, a guidance counselor for high school and middle school students in the Vernonia School District. "We have kids walking in our doors at 8:00 am who are way out of control for no apparent reason. There are reasons but we might not know what they are. This program has increased our awareness about our emotional state as staff, and about learning how to manage those emotional states, and then helping our students manage themselves."

Vernonia staff members have been learning about Trauma Informed Care for the past three years, through training programs, guest speakers, and films. At the heart of the training are Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) which are identified as stressful or traumatic events that happen during childhood and effect people into adulthood. ACEs can include, physical or emotional abuse, neglect, witnessing domestic violence, substance abuse in the home, parental separation or divorce, and a family member suffering from mental illness.

ACEs have been linked to a variety of risk factors for disease and early mortality. They have been shown to cause social, emotional, and cognitive impairment and the adoption of health-risk behaviors including drug and alcohol abuse and suicide.

A landmark study from 1995 to 1997, conducted by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in partnership with Kaiser Permanente with more than 17,000 participants, found that 28% of participants reported physical abuse and 21% reported sexual abuse. Almost 40% from the Kaiser study reported two or more ACEs and 12.5% experienced four or more. The study concluded that ACEs tend to cluster - someone who has experienced some type of childhood trauma is likely to have experienced other types of trauma as well - so many subsequent studies now study the cumulative effect of ACEs instead of looking at the effect of each individually.

Vernonia Superintendent Aaron Miller notes that the Kaiser study involved participants who were enrolled in a health insurance plan, who most likely had jobs, and have advantages in life. "It doesn't say anything about the people who are struggling because they

don't have jobs, that are behind the eight ball because they don't have insurance and they can't take care of their health or themselves," explains Miller. "I think the impacts of the study are far under-represented, just because of the clients that took part in the study. I think the actual implications are much more far reaching and intense."

In fact, Miller adds that scientific studies are now showing that childhood traumatic impacts are starting to be passed down through genetics to successive generations through DNA. "This is not just a social impact, but it's now becoming a physical trait that is passed on," he explains.

Trauma Informed Care training has shown that people often have different types of trauma in their lives, and react to them in different ways. People who have been traumatized need support and compassion. Understanding the impact of trauma is an important first step, and early intervention can be key to reducing the impact of those traumas.

"A caring culture is what we want to have for our students, for our staff, and for our community," says Rachel Wilcoxon, Vice Principal for Discipline for grades K-12, discussing how the Vernonia School District will be implementing these new practices to help with behavior issues. She says Vernonia's school staff are being trained to use understanding and treatment rather than judgement and suspension when dealing with the disciplining of students.

"It really matters little what kind of trauma people are coming to us with, but if we start treating everyone with a more caring culture, we think we'll be successful," says Wilcoxon.

"We're looking at what is going on in our school building from the point of view that, if we're not managing ourselves well, both kids and adults, then there is probably some emotional background to that," says Weisel. "We don't spend a lot of time focused on what the trauma was, but more about how we can learn to regulate ourselves and about how we can respond to kids who may come across as breaking school rules or having disciplinary issues. We're looking at it deeper and finding that these kids are trying to tell us that things are not right in their life through their behavior."

Vice Principal Wilcoxon clarifies a point here. "This does not mean that students will not be disciplined for their behavior," she explains. "It's just coming at it with the awareness and the intent of teaching them to make the right choices the next time. It's not a 'get out of jail free card.'"

Wilcoxon adds that Vernonia and other schools are not the only institutions using these methods to deal with people who may be seen as "acting out." "This is a nationwide shift. Police Departments are using it, hospitals are using it, and so are mental health organizations. They're all getting into this mindset that, what people are coming with is affecting their behavior."

Weisel also wanted to clarify some things about the program. "Everything we're doing, we're borrowing from several different national models and finding what works best for our kids. Nothing in here is religious or spiritual in nature and the community is always

welcome to come in and review the materials we're using."

"We want the community to know that we're not compromising academics in any way," adds Elementary guidance counselor David Spackman. "We're addressing what our students need to reach their full academic potential."

One form of discipline that Wilcoxon and the District are using is some form of restitution as a consequence. "Whatever they have done wrong might have to be repaid in some way that will help them improve their behavior," explains Elementary Vice Principal Michelle Eagleson. "It might take the form of making an apology or working out the issue with the adult, or if they scribble all over the wall then they would have to clean it up. So the consequence relates to the behavior, rather than something like a suspension. And we're seeing results. Some of our kids that were really struggling in the classroom last year are doing so much better this year."

Staff training has been ongoing. An initial core group of administrators and guidance counselors were first trained in the ACEs concept, and that training is now being passed on to the rest of the staff.

Training resources being utilized by staff include several powerful films that have captured the use of Trauma Informed Care in real schools, including the film, *Paper Tigers*, which documents the experiences of six students and the staff at Lincoln High School, an alternative school in Walla Walla, Washington. After first using Trauma Informed Care practices to reinforce the idea that, "a stressed brain can't learn," the school has seen dramatic results, with a 75% reduction in fights in the school and graduation rates have increased five fold.

Another film, *Resilience*, examines the science behind what is called "Toxic Stress," a biological syndrome caused by childhood neglect and abuse, and how it manifests itself in disease, homelessness, addiction, and prison time.

Superintendent Miller, a member of the original training group from Vernonia, says the training the District is implementing has been diverse and focuses on both the science of how the brain works, and the social aspects of relationships, emotions, and coping skills. Staff has traveled to numerous schools who are already using pieces of the program and had a chance to observe and talk with instructors about their outcomes.

"It's really been inspiring and hopeful," says counselor Weisel. "We had a chance to talk with some students at those schools and it really seems like it has been impactful and that it really matters to those communities."

Miller agrees with Weisel. "Those schools are noticing that their attendance rates are rising, test scores are rising, and discipline numbers are decreasing. So the impacts are real."

Weisel says the District will have an opportunity to pick and choose what techniques and methods they think will work the best here in Vernonia, and what students will respond to the best. "Our ultimate outcome, that we are working towards, is better performance in school, whether it's academic or so-

cial," says Weisel.

Wilcoxon says the District isn't using a "canned" program or system as they introduce these new techniques and disciplinary procedures. "This is more of a cultural shift for us," she says.

One tool that is being utilized are called "Fast Passes" which allow a student to step out of the classroom environment for a short period of time, (sometimes just for a few minutes) to regroup, and then return to class and continue learning without causing a major disruption to other students.

Kendra Schlegel is a kindergarten teacher in Vernonia who is starting to implement parts of the program with her students. She is using "Zones of Regulation" which teaches kids about the four different ways their bodies can respond during their day in school, identifying feelings like tired and run down, focused and ready to learn, nervous or excited, and out of control. "They learn to identify which zone they are in and then we talk about how they can regulate themselves and get to where they are ready to learn. We do work with calming breathing, safe ways to move to burn off excited energy, and how to handle frustration with other students. We also use Mind Up, which is a form of meditation, by breathing and focusing."

"One of the biggest shifts for us as instructors in the classroom is that we're looking at behavior as a set of skills," says Schlegel. "Just like if a kid comes in and they don't know how to read, we're going to focus on teaching them to read. If they come in and they can't regulate their emotions, or can't calm down, or can't deal with their frustrations, then those are the skills we need to teach them."

Councilor David Spackman adds that part of the curriculum has students as young as kindergarten beginning to learn the brain science behind these techniques. "They learn and understand what part of their brain is at work or active when they are getting disregulated," says Spackman. "Which part is the thinking part of their brain and can help them get back under control."

"We have five and six year olds that are having to take time to get back under control and they will tell you, 'My amygdala was making choices, and my prefrontal cortex needs to be what is listening,'" says Schlegel.

Miller says that Maslow's Hierarchy, which proposed the theory of needs for human motivation - physiological, safety, belonging and love, esteem, and self-actualization - play a huge role in student learning. "These pieces are critical for us to work on with our kids so they are able to utilize their brains to their full potential, and not be hampered by these trauma inducing events that have happened in their lives and impact them every day. We still have expectations and standards for our kids but we all know they come with some very different backgrounds and some very real skill deficits in academics and behavior. So, it's our job to help them gain and build those skills so they aren't impacted by that trauma nearly as much and so they can be resilient, break that cycle of trauma, and move forward and have a positive life for themselves."