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**THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING AND TRAUMA  
INFORMED CARE ON TEACHER WELL-BEING AND CAPACITY IN THE  
CLASSROOM.**

by

Kathleen Kelley Michalowski

A Dissertation

Submitted to the  
Department of Educational Leadership, Administration, and Research  
College of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirement

For the degree of  
Doctor of Education

at

Rowan University

June 27, 2024

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## **Dedication**

I am deeply thankful to my patient and kind husband, Jeff, and daughters, Meghan and Caitlyn for their unwavering support throughout the completion of this work. I also want to express my gratitude to my father; I am certain that he is watching over me as I strive to become the person he always envisioned. Additionally, I extend my thanks to Dr. Zion and my cohort for their invaluable support in keeping me on track.

## **Abstract**

Kathleen Kelley Michalowski

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING AND TRAUMA INFORMED  
CARE ON TEACHER WELL-BEING AND CAPACITY IN THE CLASSROOM  
2023-2024

Shelley Zion, Ph.D.

Doctorate of Education in Educational Leadership

Educators and students have encountered significant challenges, including illness and loss within their families due to events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Traumatic events, like disasters, can greatly disrupt a community's functioning, resulting in widespread losses that surpass the community's ability to cope. Trauma-informed care (TIC) acknowledges that individuals are likely to have a history of trauma and aims to respond appropriately to minimize the likelihood of further trauma. By implementing trauma-sensitive routines and promoting social-emotional learning (SEL) for both students and educators, we can offer them more opportunities for success and emotional growth. It's important to recognize that educators' well-being is closely connected to student motivation and achievement, teacher retention, and mental health.

As the economy continues to improve, a potential wave of retiring teachers leaving the profession could occur. Each year, K-12 schools face the challenge of filling over 200,000 vacant teaching positions. By exploring educators' viewpoints on the effects of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) on school climate, school leaders can better equip themselves to enhance the school system's capabilities. This research sought to examine the impact of SEL and trauma-informed care on school culture, climate, and teacher retention in the post-pandemic era.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### Background of the Problem

The teaching profession in the United States has an enormous impact on society, molding young minds as members of the community. Over 3.7 million K-12 teachers comprise almost 7% of the college-educated labor force (Newburger & Beckhusen, 2022). Teachers profoundly affect students, shaping their academic, socio-emotional, and life outcomes, as well as contributing to society in a variety of ways (Chetty et al., 2014; Jackson, 2018; Kraft, 2019; Kraft & Lyons, 2022). Despite this impact, many teachers report feeling unhappy, burned out, and frustrated with the state of education (Laird, 2022; Tillman, 2022; Will, 2022). A survey conducted by Merrimack College and the nonpartisan EdWeek Research Center in 2022, which polled over 1,300 teachers, indicated a decline in work and pay satisfaction among educators. The survey found that in 2011, nearly 77% of teachers felt that their community treated them as professionals, but that number decreased to 46% in 2022 (Tillman, 2022). This trend helped lead to a teacher shortage, as many educators left the profession due to job dissatisfaction and low salaries. The pandemic has exacerbated this problem, resulting in the most significant drop in employment in education in recent years. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the number of people employed in public schools fell from almost 8.1 million in March 2020 to 7.3 million in May 2020. According to Tillman (2022), employment has rebounded to 7.7 million, leaving schools with a shortage of around 360,000 positions. The Merrimack survey discovered that just 12% of teachers feel "very satisfied" with their job. This is a significant drop from the previous low of 33% reported

in 1986, per data from the MetLife Survey of the American Teacher. Will (2022) notes that these findings reveal a disheartened and drained workforce.

Furthermore, teachers' job satisfaction is at an all-time low, with only 42% of teachers believing that the stress of their job is worth continuing in the profession, down from 81% in the last 15 years. More than half of teachers stated that they would not recommend a career in teaching to their younger selves. They feel overwhelmed by a constantly increasing workload, particularly with more students requiring greater academic and social-emotional support than ever before (Laird, 2022; Kim et al., 2020 ).

According to Laird (2022), educators often cite student behavior and school climate as critical reasons for leaving the profession. Managing negative classroom behavior can lead to burnout, frustration, and emotional exhaustion for teachers, as well as lower self-efficacy, enthusiasm, and job satisfaction (Kim et al., 2020). Unfortunately, recent staff shortages have increased teacher workloads and decreased the support they receive. Teachers have reported that students are misbehaving or disengaged in class, possibly due to the pandemic's trauma (Will, 2022). The post-pandemic classroom looks very different from classrooms of the past. Educators have faced numerous challenges upon returning to school after the pandemic. The departure of many teachers has resulted in larger class sizes and increased stress for those who remain (Laird, 2022; Will, 2022).

Additionally, negative student behaviors have taken a toll on teacher morale and made it difficult to find qualified staff willing to work in schools, provide extracurricular support, or assist students with exceptional needs students (Charlton et al., 2021; Will, 2022; Laird, 2022). Unfortunately, this trend of teachers leaving their careers has continued for several years, contributing to the shortage of educators (Vox, 2022).

According to the Merrimack College Teacher Survey, nearly half of the teachers surveyed expressed intentions to leave their current jobs and explore other career paths within the next two years (Will, 2022). The PreK-12 job market has experienced a 9.3% decline since the pandemic began, and as of March 2022, it remains at 4% below pre-pandemic levels (Vox, 2022). With a record number of resignations, schools are finding it increasingly challenging to attract and retain top talent (Blanchard & Conley, 2022). Teachers seek deeper purpose and meaning in their careers to adapt to the rapid changes brought on by recent events worldwide (Blanchard & Conley, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic has also had a profound impact on student's mental health and well-being, which has affected their behavior and relationships with teachers. This has led to lower attendance and engagement in school (Will, 2022). Managing negative behavior in the classroom can be stressful for teachers and lead to emotional exhaustion and low job satisfaction (Evans et al., 2015). Social-emotional learning (SEL) has been proposed as a solution to these problems. Research shows that when teachers are stressed, the quality of their instruction and relationships with students suffer. Positive work environments have been shown to improve student performance. While the structural and classroom processes of SEL quality indicators have been widely studied, the social-emotional capacity of teachers has only recently been recognized as an essential factor in quality instruction and school climate (Evans et al., 2015; Will, 2022).

Social-emotional learning (SEL) has emerged as a promising solution for addressing stress and managing student behavior (Evans et al., 2015; Will, 2022). Studies have shown that when teachers are under stress, it negatively impacts the quality of their instruction, classroom management, and student relationships. Schools that foster positive

work environments have better student outcomes (Will, 2022). While there has been significant research on the structural and classroom processes of SEL quality indicators, the importance of teachers' social-emotional capacity as a critical factor in quality instruction and school climate has only recently been recognized (Buettner et al., 2016).

### **Social-Emotional Learning as an Answer**

Several school districts have implemented a solitary social-emotional learning program to equip educators with the necessary skills to address pandemic-induced or childhood-related behavioral issues and foster a positive school culture. With many students returning to school post-pandemic with trauma, teachers must be able to recognize the signs of traumatic stress and cultivate an environment that is conducive to the healing of both affected students and staff (Simonich et al., 2015; NCMW, 2022; Kim et al., 2021). According to recent research, social-emotional learning (SEL) has proven effective in nurturing kindness and reducing negative behaviors among students and educators (Kim et al., 2021). In addition, Trauma-informed care (TIC) and SEL are excellent tools for promoting positive behaviors in schools (NCMW, 2022). Teachers play a crucial role in fostering SEL by building positive relationships with students and gaining specialized knowledge about SEL. Providing training and support to teachers, teacher's aides and other school staff members in SEL could significantly benefit the students they serve (Garcia & Weiss, 2020).

Schools can use various methods to promote positive behavior among students and empower educators to make a meaningful impact in their lives. Integrating SEL and TIC into school curriculums can help teachers better manage stressors and equip students with valuable skills such as emotional regulation, conflict resolution, and empathy (Laird,

2022). In fact, incorporating these techniques into their professional lives may even lead educators to adopt them in their personal lives, reducing burnout and emotional strain (Laird, 2022; Kim et al., 2021).

### **Educator's Response to Stress**

Research suggests that educators in PreK to twelfth-grade schools experience high levels of emotional exhaustion when compared to other professions (Change, 2013). It is crucial to prioritize educator well-being since it is linked to student motivation, achievement, attrition, and capacity. The interaction between teachers and students is a critical element that can impact students' success and educator capacity (Aldrup et al., 2018; Charlton et al., 2021). Positive aspects of their careers, such as job satisfaction, work enthusiasm, and the absence of negative experiences like emotional exhaustion and stress, contribute to educators' occupational well-being and optimal psychological functioning (Aldrup et al., 2018). Educators and researchers increasingly focus on social-emotional learning and trauma-informed care to create positive school environments and promote equitable learning environments where students can thrive (Charlton et al., 2021). The study will seek to understand how SEL and TIC contribute to educators' wellness and longevity in the profession in the schools within the district being studied.

### **Problem Statement**

In the wake of the pandemic, numerous educators have chosen to leave the profession. This departure has resulted in larger class sizes and increased stress for the teachers who have opted to remain in the classroom. These dedicated educators have had to adapt to new policies, procedures, and safety protocols aimed at safeguarding their students, all without sufficient time to process the changes or address their pandemic-

related trauma and personal challenges. In response, many school districts have implemented Social Emotional Learning (SEL) programs to assist teachers and support staff in rebuilding connections with their students and fostering their overall well-being (Laird, 2022). SEL and trauma-informed care (TIC) have a proven track record of fostering better learning outcomes, increased happiness, and greater student confidence (Laird, 2022). Students must be surrounded by supportive, engaging adults who model responsible decision-making, empathy, and conflict-resolution skills (Laird, 2022). Managing a classroom, handling parents, and satisfying school administrators can be stressful for educators. As Laird (2022) notes, educators' actions are as necessary as their words; the students are always watching.

Rather than being separate, social and emotional learning (SEL) should be integrated into the school culture for both students and adults. Systematically incorporating SEL into an established curriculum, as Cohen (2023) suggests, is a practical approach. However, SEL can only be beneficial if it is implemented mindfully within the cultural context and trauma-informed care, as Duane et al. (2021) point out. For instance, asking a student to meditate immediately after rushing to class and receiving detention due to transportation delays shows a disconnect between the school culture and the SEL being taught. Unawareness of students' or colleagues' traumas could unintentionally re-traumatize students, increasing disruption and stress, as Phifer and Hull (2016) warn. Studies show that many educators feel unprepared to teach social and emotional skills, with only one in five reporting feeling well-equipped (Duane et al., 2021). This underscores the importance of schools offering more varied professional development opportunities that can impact the entire school community, including



administrators and staff. Educators who possess strong social and emotional skills are better equipped to build positive relationships with students and manage their behavior while maintaining control of their emotions (Duane et al., 2021). It is important to note, however, that implementing these skills without proper cultural context or trauma-informed care mindfulness can be problematic and may even lead to further stress and disruption for students. Staff members must be aware of the potential traumas experienced by students and colleagues to avoid retraumatizing students and causing further harm. Overall, offering diverse professional development opportunities focusing on SEL and TIC can positively impact the school's culture and the well-being of educators and students (Laird, 2022).

The impact of student behavior and the public perception of teachers can profoundly affect educators' mental well-being. Unfortunately, these issues may go unaddressed by the administration or peers, leaving teachers without the time or support to address the needs of their students. Responding to negative attitudes and behaviors from students can further exacerbate the situation and cause additional stress for educators in the classroom (Near, 2022). Traumatized students and colleagues are familiar to school employees across the United States (Jaycox et al., 2006; Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016). Trauma is a deeply personal experience that can stem from a multitude of different events, including child maltreatment, violence at home, substance abuse, isolation, serious illness, car accidents, and natural disasters like floods and fires (Near, 2022). Blaustein (2013) compares trauma to a vicious and complex virus that can impact nutrition, brain development, cognitive function, physical health, and emotional regulation, much like the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. It is essential to recognize that

individuals from different cultures, races, religions, abilities, genders, sexualities, economic backgrounds, and natural disasters can all have collective experiences of trauma (Near, 2022). Given the pervasive nature of traumatic experiences, school communities must also acknowledge that their colleagues may have faced childhood or adult trauma, such as violence, crime, natural disasters, or a pandemic (Blaustein, 2013; Will, 2022).

Environmental changes, developing protective factors, and practicing the skills learned to manage stress promote resilience in children and adults (Near, 2022). Social Emotional Learning (SEL) programs can support school climate transformation (Glasser, 2022). Administrators need a complete understanding of the concepts and that one program could only impact a portion of the staff, while multiple programs with diverse delivery could impact everyone. Leaders must manage resistance to change and be part of the solution (Craig, 2016). A school administrator sporadically utilizing concepts without proper accountability and rewards for students could destroy a school climate by encouraging negative behavior and undermining the classroom staff (Glasser, 2022).

Further examples of weaponizing may include forcing students to close their eyes, telling a student in crisis to "breathe," or mandating students utilize their mindfulness while being forced to comply with a potentially oppressive behavior (Duane et al., 2021, p. 45). As far back as 1994 Ladson -Billings defined culturally relevant pedagogy as practices that utilize the students' culture to impact knowledge, skills, and attitude; paired with SEL and trauma-informed care (TIC), it is possible to heal and improve responses to stressors (Duane et al., 2021, NEARS, 2022). Strength-based school improvement, part of the many SEL programs, is an alternative to a negative, deficit approach focused on

fixing what is wrong. Instead, the school community demonstrates to school leaders how to achieve their goals by working together to maximize what is right. Clear, evidence-based strategies organized around the continuum of self-reflection and a feedback-focused model with coaching and supervision centered on identifying and nurturing teachers' strengths and helping teachers reach new levels of professional success and satisfaction (Hall & Simereal, 2008).

Suppose educators are constantly faced with behaviors that are not addressed and contribute to stressful environments. In that case, they will continue to leave the profession, activating the flight response to stress and an unhealthy environment. Teachers are leaving the profession because they need to feel adequate to address students' needs and handle overwhelming situations. Providing multiple models that address not only the student trauma but also their trauma could encourage educators to remain in the profession and incorporate intellectual safety where students know their educators accept and affirm their culture and practices (Duane et al., 2021; Vox, 2022; SAMSHA, 2023). This study will seek to understand how SEL and TIC contribute to educators' wellness and longevity in the profession in the schools within the district being studied.

## **Rationale**

There is a need for more literature on the impact of social-emotional learning (SEL) and trauma-informed care (TIC) on educator resilience and teacher retention. Most studies assess student perceptions of teacher interpersonal behaviors and their impact on relationships and behavior instead of teacher perceptions and the impact on their wellness, instruction, and likelihood to continue in the profession. By evaluating educator

perceptions regarding the effects of SEL and TIC on the school climate, school leaders can be better equipped to build capacity within the school system.

A thorough literature review is needed to produce a study on the outcomes of SEL or TIC regarding the retention of educators in K-12 school districts. A few studies have touched on the topic, such as Goodwin-Glick's (2017) study on the impact of TIC professional development on the knowledge of school personnel. However, how it changed their attitude and practice still needs to be addressed. Similarly, Baker et al. (2016) conducted a quantitative study to evaluate the attitudes of certified school employees on TIC implementation, but still need to address practice or wellness.

### **Research Questions**

The study will address the following research questions:

1. Do employees report that their knowledge of SEL and TIC concepts improves due to participating in SEL and TIC professional development and support?
2. Do employees report that their dispositions (empathetic concern, perspective taking, interpersonal relationships) and behaviors improve due to participating in SEL and TIC professional development and support?
3. Do educators perceive that there are significant improvements to their classroom climate due to the professional development experiences with SEL and TIC?
4. Do educators perceive TIC and SEL support in the school contribute to teacher retention?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Transformational learning theory and trauma theory provide the theoretical framework for this study. The former can examine educators' critical self-reflection,

leading to a foundational change in their disposition towards teaching and students. The cognitive-rational approach to transformational learning, shared by Mezirow and Freire, asserts that adult education should lead to empowerment. Both perspectives take a constructivist approach to transformational learning. Teachers must persevere when learning new knowledge and skills, especially in the post-pandemic world, facing challenges such as trauma (Mezirow, 1978; Freire Institute, 2024).

Trauma theory recognizes that adverse outcomes are caused by traumatic harm rather than a lack of character or morality. This understanding constitutes a significant step towards educators overcoming former beliefs and establishing positive relationships with traumatized students. The theory acknowledges that trauma can severely damage the normal development of the brain and body, mainly if it occurs during childhood, and is associated with diminished adult mental and physical health. A biopsychosocial understanding of trauma can help individuals recover and become resilient (Mezirow, 1978; Freire Institute, 2024).

### **Definition of Key Terms**

**Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE):** Abuse, neglect, dysfunctions in the home, exposure to other traumatic stressors during childhood (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023)

**Advanced Trainer** - A Certified SEL Trainer who has completed additional training hours beyond the initial week of training.

**At-risk learners-** often used to describe students or groups of students who are considered to have a higher probability of failing academically or dropping out of school (Education Reform, 2013).

**Bias:** The propensity to believe that some viewpoints, people, or things are better than others, a prejudice resulting in oppression or unjust treatment (Merriam-Webster, 2023).

**Biopsychosocial:** The “biological, psychological, and social aspects in contrast to the 23 strictly biomedical aspects of disease” (Merriam-Webster, 2015).

**CASEL-**The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defined SEL more than two decades ago (CASEL, 2020)

**Certified Trainer** - Refers to any individual who has completed the requirements to become certified as an SEL Trainer. This individual is in active certification status and can conduct SEL training.

**Educator:** Merriam-Webster (2023) defines an educator as school personnel in the field of education, including but not limited to teachers and administrators. For this study, an educator is defined as a classified and certified staff member who may influence a student's education.

**Emotional Intelligence-** means being aware that emotions can drive our behavior and impact people (positively and negatively) and learning how to manage those emotions – both our own and others' – especially when we are under pressure (Goleman,1996),

**Emotional Processes-** a process whereby emotional disturbances are absorbed, and decline to the extent that other experiences and behavior can proceed without disruption” (Rachman, 1980, p. 51).

**Empathy:** The emotional response to another person’s emotions and behaviors; how one interprets their emotional response and perspective-taking; and the conscious decision to utilize empathetic behaviors (Gerdes, Lietz, & Segal, 2011).

**Executive functioning is the capability** to control one's behavior and successfully participate in independent, purposeful, and goal-oriented activities. Executive functions include self-awareness, regulation, motivation, and the ability to plan, organize, and purposefully carry out action (Gabowitz et al., 2008).

**Mindfulness:** Mindfulness is a conscious state of mind in which one is calmly observant and accepting of one's thoughts, feelings, and body (Newberg & Waldman, 2012).

**Mindset:** A person's thinking, attitude, inclination, or opinion (Merriam-Webster, 2023).

**Professional Development** is a continuum of learning and support activities designed to prepare individuals for work and ongoing experiences to enhance this work. These opportunities improve early childhood professionals' knowledge, skills, practices, and dispositions (NAEYC, 2020).

**Relationship Skills-** The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. The ability to communicate clearly, listen well, cooperate with others, resist inappropriate social pressure, negotiate conflict constructively, and seek and offer help when needed (CASEL,2020).

**Resiliency:** Resiliency is an individual's capacity to thrive following adversity (Brendtro & Longhurst, 2005).

**Safety:** Safe environments support physical, psychological, social, and moral safety, facilitated by trusting interpersonal relationships (Bloom & Farragher, 2013).

**Self-awareness** is the ability to accurately recognize one's emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior. It is the ability to accurately assess one's strengths and limitations with a well-grounded sense of confidence, optimism, and a

“growth mindset.” In short, self-awareness is the ability to understand oneself (CASEL, 2020).

**Self-efficacy** is defined as people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that influence events that affect their lives. Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate, and behave. Such beliefs have these diverse effects through four major processes: cognitive, motivational, affective, and selection processes (Bandura, 1994).

**Social Emotional Learning (SEL)**- is the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL,2020).

**Social competence:** Social competence is possessing the social, emotional, and intellectual skills and behaviors needed to succeed as a member of society (HOC, 2020).

**Champion Teams:** Include certified trainers, principals and assistant principals, and school staff identified by the principal. The SEL leadership team and the advisory committee support the Champion teams at each site. Each site schedules meetings based on its individual program structure and creates ideas and activities to implement and infuse SEL throughout its school program.

**Trauma-Informed Care** - Trauma-informed care acknowledges the need to understand a patient's life experiences to deliver effective care. It can improve student engagement, health outcomes, and provider and staff wellness (Hopper, Bassuk, & Olivet, 2010).

**Trigger:** A trigger is an internal reminder of a traumatic event (e.g., memory or thought) or an external reminder of a traumatic event (e.g., sight, smell, sound, taste, or touch)



(Black, 2015). The tone of voice or specific words used by an adult, the scent of perfume, gestures, gender, or race may trigger an emotional response.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

Recent studies show that a growing number of teachers are feeling unhappy, burned out, and frustrated with the current state of education (Laird, 2022; Tillman, 2022; Will, 2022). As a result, many educators are leaving the profession, contributing to a severe teacher shortage. Several factors contribute to this trend, including job dissatisfaction, low salaries, and an ever-increasing workload, particularly as more students require academic and social-emotional support (Will, 2022). Negative student behavior and an unhealthy school climate are among the leading reasons teachers leave their jobs (Laird, 2022). Classroom management, in particular, is a significant source of stress, leading to burnout, low morale, and job dissatisfaction (Kim et al., 2020).

The post-pandemic classroom looks very different, and many educators struggle and need help to adapt. Returning to school after the pandemic has been challenging for many reasons, leading to a mass exodus of teachers. This has resulted in larger class sizes and more stress for those still working with students. The negative behavior of students is also contributing to the mental health of teachers, making it increasingly difficult to find qualified teaching staff willing to work with students with exceptional needs or stay for extracurricular activities and tutoring (Charlton et al., 2021; Will, 2022; Laird, 2022).

#### **Teacher Burnout**

Many school districts have adopted a single social-emotional learning (SEL) program to provide professional development to teachers in accordance with the 2015 Federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). This act mandates the inclusion of social-emotional learning in the curriculum. The goal of the single programs is often to address

the negative behavior resulting from trauma experienced by students during the pandemic or in their childhood and to improve the school climate (SAMSHA, 2023). Many students returned to school traumatized when schools reopened. Social Emotional Learning (SEL) has been the solution to teach students and educators to treat each other kindly and reduce negative behaviors (Kim et al., 2021). Trauma-informed care (TIC) and social-emotional learning (SEL) can provide an excellent introduction to positive behaviors for students and teachers (NCMW, 2022). Teachers can contribute to students' social and emotional learning through their positive relationships with students and their specialized knowledge about SEL. Improving training and support for teachers, teacher's aides and other school staff members in SEL is critical to helping students succeed (Garcia & Weiss, 2020).

Multiple approaches to TIC, SEL, and a positive climate change in schools could contribute to a school environment that promotes favorable behavior for students and helps build capacity with educators to make a difference in students' lives. The following literature review explores teacher burnout, educators leaving the classroom, student behavior, school climate, and how social-emotional learning (SEL) and trauma-informed care (TIC) impact schools. The study aims to situate the role of TIC and SEL in promoting positive behavior and building the capacity of educators to make a difference in students' lives.

According to NCSS (2022), educators' reactions to various attitudes and behaviors exhibited by students, such as poor academic performance, public reprimands, or outright ignoring, can exacerbate student reactions, leading to more stress for educators in the classroom. Negative behavior and the public perception of teachers could be causing a

traumatic response in educators, similar to the trauma endured by students, which may result in a shortened fuse and strained student relationships. With adequate support from the administration or peers, educators may have the opportunity to address their own needs and the needs of their students.

Studies show that disruptive student behavior is a significant predictor of emotional exhaustion in teachers, which negatively affects job satisfaction and can lead to leaving the profession (Douglas et al., 2021). To address these issues, the SEL curriculum can provide alternatives and help teachers heal while improving student behavior. Managing the constant stress of the classroom, handling parents, and satisfying administration takes a lot from educators (SAMSHA, 2023). Trauma can be caused by various events and experienced collectively by people defined by culture, race, religion, ability, gender, sexuality, economic status, and natural disasters. Teacher burnout caused by stress is associated with higher cortisol levels. Building positive teacher-student relationships is crucial to reducing stress and improving well-being. Educators' perception of student behavior is vital to their relationship, and negative patterns and judgments can lead to burnout. Higher levels of teacher burnout are also associated with higher cortisol levels in both students and teachers (Laird, 2022; Douglas et al., 2021; SAMSHA, 2023).

In order to implement TIC and SEL effectively, it is necessary to shift cultural practices that aim to bridge the gap between knowledge and practice. This shift must be grounded in a fundamental change in beliefs and assumptions surrounding student behavior and punitive consequences (Craig, 2016). Improving the overall climate can address the underlying conditions contributing to these issues (Douglas et al., 2021). SEL

can be a crucial tool in connecting student responses to classroom behaviors, ultimately leading to a better quality of education, an improved climate, and a stronger community. Educators must recognize their contribution to student behavior and work towards positive change (Laird, 2022; Douglas et al., 2021; SAMSA, 2023).

### **Building Teacher Capacity**

It has been observed that many teachers are leaving the profession as they feel unsupported in addressing the needs of their students. It is crucial to understand that teachers' emotions play a vital role in the teaching and learning process (Chang, 2013). Therefore, it is essential to provide teachers with the necessary training and intervention approaches to address their students' and their trauma (Reisenbergs & Fefer, 2017). The well-being of teachers is directly related to their students' motivation and achievement, teacher retention, and physical and mental health (Aldrup et al., 2018).

Research has shown that teachers' exhaustion levels are closely linked to disruptive student behavior, leading to negative impacts on job satisfaction and potential departure from the profession (Kim et al., 2020). However, more studies are needed to investigate the relationship between job satisfaction, school climate, and teacher retention rates. With the Department of Education citing a crisis in the teacher shortage, it is more important than ever to ensure that teachers feel valued and productive (Kim et al., 2020).

According to Cineas (2022), teachers face unique stressors, including burnout, increased workload during the pandemic, and demoralization. Additionally, the high prevalence of trauma among students and the lack of trauma-informed care for teachers exacerbate these stress levels. One solution is to equip teachers with strategies to manage classroom behavior challenges and improve school climate (Kim et al., 2020). Chang

(2013) has suggested that habitual patterns in teacher judgments of student behavior can contribute significantly to unpleasant emotions and lead to burnout. However, current literature often overlooks the role of cognitive processing and solutions. To be sustainable, the administration must support school-based mental health interventions and be acceptable to teachers (Hans & Weiss, 2017; Reisenbergs & Fefer, 2017). Several studies have linked teacher efficacy and burnout to indicators and predictors of teacher performance and student achievement (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998; Tsouloupas et al., 2010).

Identifying low teacher efficacy and high burnout predictors is crucial to improving practical instruction and student outcomes (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). Proactive and positive classroom management (Woolfolk, 2007) and strong teacher performance (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001; Wolters & Dougherty, 2007) are positively correlated with these factors. Effective instructional coaching is valuable for facilitating professional learning, strengthening teacher-student relationships, and building a learning community (Hall & Simeral, 2008). Through reflective practices and positive classroom changes, an instructional coach can help teachers improve student learning and overall job satisfaction (Hall & Simeral, 2008).

### **Improving School Climate Through Professional Development**

President Obama's signing of the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act highlighted the importance of expanding educational programming to ensure academic success for all students. Section 4018 of the Act, Activities to Support Safe and Healthy Students, emphasizes the need for evidence-based, high-quality professional development on

trauma-informed practices for all levels of school personnel (114th Congress of the United States of America, 2015). Media coverage of traumatic events, such as school violence and the pandemic, has brought attention to the need for teachers to be equipped to support students dealing with trauma. This issue remains relevant today, especially with the rise of social media and constant news updates (Mader, 2015).

According to Laird (2022), educators must embody social-emotional learning (SEL) to teach it effectively. To truly understand their students and their learning, teachers who interact with students should be introduced to basic information about trauma, its prevalence, and its impact (NCSS, 2021). This includes understanding both their trauma and their students' trauma, as well as what trauma-informed care entails, particularly the disproportionate effects on individuals from underserved groups and people of color. Teachers must be aware of what they and their students are experiencing in the classroom and society (NCSS, 2021). SAMHSA (2023) defines trauma as the long-term adverse effects on an individual's well-being resulting from exposure to either a single event, multiple events, or conditions that produce a solid physical, emotional, or stress response. High levels of teacher stress can lead to chronic emotional exhaustion, threatening the quality of instruction and students' school functioning. This stress can also spread to the classroom, leading to an adverse classroom climate and increased use of punitive strategies when managing challenging behaviors. This, in turn, reinforces student misbehavior and further exacerbates symptoms of teacher stress (Osher et al., 2008).

Implementing evidence-based SEL programs focusing on environmental changes, developing protective factors, and practicing stress-response management skills can promote student and instructional staff resilience (NCSS, 2021). To effectively teach

these concepts, educators must comprehensively understand them. Just as with curriculum, one program may only be effective for some learners, and multiple learning modes are often more effective. School administrators who sporadically incorporate SEL concepts without proper accountability and rewards for students risk undermining the school climate and encouraging negative behavior. While it may be tempting to bribe students with snacks or toys to return to class, rewarding negative behavior only perpetuates it. SEL and TIC should be school-wide initiatives implemented appropriately, with cultural sensitivity and a focus on healing and improving responses to stressors (Duane et al., 2021; NEARS, 2022). A promising way to break the stress cycle is to prepare teachers to manage behavioral challenges in the classroom, which can increase self-efficacy and decrease burnout (Kim et al., 2021). Students can learn to manage stress and develop the skills they need to succeed by utilizing culturally relevant pedagogy in conjunction with SEL and TIC (SAMSHA, 2023).

If the meditation process causes discomfort or dysregulation for someone, the entire class may be negatively affected, outweighing any potential healing benefits. Learning takes place in a communal setting, and harm or trauma experienced by one student can have a ripple effect on others. To promote a safe and inclusive learning environment, it is essential to provide a variety of models that address not only the student's trauma but also the educator's well-being. By incorporating trauma-informed training and mindfulness-based social and emotional learning programs, teachers can better manage stress and improve their overall health and teaching effectiveness. Meiklejohn et al. (2012) highlighted the direct and indirect benefits of integrating mindfulness programs into the standard curriculum. In addition to teaching mindfulness-



based SEL programs directly to students, teachers can reap benefits by practicing and modeling the skills they promote. According to De Carvalho, Pinto, and Marôco's (2017) research, most teachers who implemented such programs scored higher in self-awareness, awareness of their surroundings, and personal accomplishment than in the comparison group. Similarly, Zinsler, Christensen, and Torres (2016) found that teachers in educational settings with SEL programs reported feeling better supported in handling challenging behaviors and experienced higher job satisfaction. These findings suggest that mindfulness-based SEL programs can benefit students and teachers delivering the program (Kim et al., 2021).

The teaching profession sees a significant number of teachers leaving within their first five years, creating a pressing need to understand the factors associated with job satisfaction and retention. Teacher efficacy and burnout have emerged as crucial factors in this regard, especially given the impact of legislative mandates, accountability measures, and behavioral challenges on school climate and student outcomes. These pressures will likely contribute to teacher turnover by affecting teacher efficacy and burnout (Glickman & Tamashiro, 1982; Marvel et al., 2006).

There are also severe consequences for the physical and mental health of teachers who experience high levels of burnout, which can lead to poor performance and negative attitudes toward students (Huberman, 1993). Social and emotional learning (SEL) programs have become increasingly popular to counter these challenges, as they can promote staff retention and improve student outcomes. Teachers who feel well-equipped to handle their job responsibilities are more likely to have high levels of efficacy, less burnout, and better student connections (Schonfeld, 2001; Tatar & Horenczyk, 2003; Pas

et al., 2012). Moreover, staff efficacy tends to improve when principals address school-wide issues and support their staff, such as by developing a consistent system for managing behavioral problems (Pas, 2012).

Despite growing interest in teacher efficacy and burnout, there needs to be more research on the specific teacher and school contextual factors that predict changes in efficacy and burnout over time (Pas et al., 2012). However, recent findings suggest that teacher efficacy and burnout levels tend to increase over time, with evidence suggesting that burnout may increase faster than efficacy. This underscores the importance of implementing measures that enhance teacher efficacy while reducing the incidence of burnout. The critical role of preparedness and stressors in determining efficacy and burnout further emphasizes the need for targeted interventions for educators (Bradshaw et al., 2009). There may be a distinction between preparedness gained from pre-service training versus that acquired through in-service training among teachers with more practical experience (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998).

Programs focused on social and emotional learning (SEL) that encourage strong staff relationships and support may positively affect teacher efficacy and prevent burnout. Interventions that address these factors should be developed and tested to determine their impact on these critical teacher outcomes. According to intervention literature, consultation services like learning communities and coaching have been shown to improve teacher efficacy. For example, a recent study using coaching to provide teachers with evidence-based practices through the Instructional Consultation Teams model saw significant improvements in teachers' efficacy (Vu et al., 2011). Further research must examine the long-term effects of professional development that directly targets teacher

preparedness to work with students who have experienced trauma and other related teacher factors on teacher efficacy, burnout, and student outcomes (Pas et al., 2012).

### **Trauma Informed Care**

According to research by Duane and colleagues (2021), toxic stress resulting from adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and trauma can hinder the development of a learning brain and have lasting impacts on adult brains. Perry (2022) has compared ACEs to the body's natural response to challenging situations, which can trigger fight, flight, or freeze responses (NCMW, 2022). Unfortunately, a significant number of children are subjected to traumatic experiences that impact their overall development and well-being (Douglass et al., 2021). Children who have been exposed to adversity or trauma may struggle with self-regulation and forming healthy attachments, which can lead to disruptive behavior in the classroom (Kim et al., 2021). Many grown-ups can recall an event or period that disturbed their formative years, causing social, emotional, or physical harm. Such an experience can lead to trauma, resulting from the intense stress levels involved (Blaustein, 2013). While certain students may appear to have quickly bounced back from such traumatic incidents, others might continue to face challenges in their daily lives. Some might even become successful leaders, while others may struggle well into adulthood (Blaustein, 2013).

Adults can encourage positive behavior by modeling it, while teachers can establish a stable and nurturing environment that fosters growth and success. Teachers can promote a safe and stable relationship in the classroom by recognizing the importance of providing students with a small amount of compassion. Trauma-informed care (TIC) can also help to create a supportive environment that mitigates the adverse

effects of trauma and promotes resilience and healing (Douglas et al., 2021). Through trauma-informed training, teachers can gain foundational knowledge that enables them to view student misbehavior with a fresh perspective (Kim et al., 2021). Significant harm could come from lacking a critical lens through trauma-informed care to analyze mindfulness interventions in school-based mindfulness practices (Duane et al., 2021). School should be a safe place for students to use their time to prepare for the day rather than being upset about the interactions with the teachers and educators. Positive and negative experiences in childhood have an impact on youth development. Trauma, chronic stress, and ACEs, such as abuse, neglect, loss, and illness, are associated with adverse social, health, and mental outcomes. The more ACEs, the more significant the disruption in youth development (Baez, 2018). Without adequate training, teachers may fail to identify the underlying causes of disruptive behaviors despite the students' attempts to convey distress through these behaviors (Kim et al., 2021).

Recognizing that more than a single day of professional development is needed for TIC to impact learning truly is essential. Instead, ongoing coaching and professional development are necessary to respond to students displaying harmful or inappropriate behavior effectively. Duane (2021) built on SAMHSA's definition of safety by including spiritual and relational safety, and intellectual safety could also be included. In a trauma-informed setting, students feel accepted and affirmed by instructional staff for who they are and what they know (NCMW, 2022).

Unfortunately, the pandemic has caused schools to lose key staff members, which will have long-term impacts on the profession. Chronic emotional exhaustion resulting from staff shortages, increased mental health issues caused by harmful behavior, and

strained relationships all threaten the quality of instruction and student's ability to function in school (Kim et al., 2020). That is why implementing TIC and SEL, with the help of coaches to support educators, is crucial. This approach helps staff understand that students can change the climate in the building, builds capacity with the staff, and entices new instructional staff to join the team. Person-centered teacher attitudes and behaviors, such as empathy, warmth, and the ability to adapt to individual differences, have reduced disruptive behavior (Cornelius-White, 2007). Trauma-informed schools must build staff capacities to positively impact adversity-affected children (Kim et al., 2021).

Research has shown that trauma-informed professional development training can help teachers develop a more sensitive approach towards traumatized students, leading to a classroom environment that is responsive to their needs (Dorado et al., 2016; McIntyre et al., 2019). This type of training encourages teachers to engage in the coregulation of emotions and establish secure teacher-student relationships, which can help with deficient self-regulatory capacities and attachment difficulties (Brunzell et al., 2016). Studies have demonstrated that implementing trauma-informed programs can lead to reduced referrals to the office for disciplinary actions and better defusing of defiant behavior (Dorado et al., 2016; Shamblin et al., 2016). Teachers participating in these programs have reported feeling more confident in de-escalating classroom disturbances and responding to behavioral issues with compassion. Implementing a trauma-informed framework in schools can alleviate teacher burden and reduce student referrals (Kim et al., 2021). However, Chafouleas et al. (2016) suggest that delivering trauma-informed care within a multitiered framework of school-based services is essential to better sustain and obtain buy-in from school staff with diverse interests.

## **Social Emotional Learning**

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) has been the answer for many districts to reconnect with students after the pandemic and repair their sense of well-being (Laird, 2022). A well-established track record of SEL helping students become better learners, happy, and more confident is established (Laird, 2022). Social and emotional competencies have been defined as an individual's ability to recognize and manage their emotions, appreciate the perspective of others, establish pro-social goals, and solve problems (Evans et al., 2015). Complex multi-dimensional approaches of SEL aim to transform the educational climate (Evans et al., 2015). Implementing SEL in a school setting entails enhancing learning opportunities, improving school ethos, and weakening boundaries between students, the school, the community, and parents (Evans et al., 2015). SEL programs can provide teachers with tools to promote these social-emotional capacities (Kim et al., 2021). Educator SEL refers to the competencies adults need to manage stress to create a safe and supportive classroom environment. SEL programs enhance the skills and mindsets required to embody, teach effectively, and model SEL. SEL programs assist educators in becoming coaches for students and improve the overall well-being and emotional state of adults in school settings (Ieva & Beasley, 2022). By participating in SEL, teachers can learn to be genuine with students about their experiences and foster positive relationships (Ieva & Beasley, 2022).

Programs typically include three critical intervention approaches. They often involve systematically teaching skill sets with notable examples that aim to transform the educational context by enhancing learning opportunities, improving school ethos, and weakening the boundaries (Evans et al., 2015). SEL needs to be implemented in terms of

cultural context and trauma-informed care mindfulness. Many teachers set expectations and activities for students without realizing the discomfort of closing their eyes in a crowded room or sharing their feelings. When students are forced to meditate and uncomfortable with the scenario, they could become dysregulated, and their behaviors intensify, starting a cycle of negative behavior (Duane et al., 2021). Students should be surrounded by supportive and engaging adults who consistently model taking responsibility for their choices and actions, showing empathy, and dealing with conflicts (Laird, 2022). It takes a lot to manage the constant stress of managing a classroom, handling parents, and satisfying school administrators. The actions of educators are just as necessary as the words (Laird, 2022). SEL should not be a separate class but integrated into all the activities and interactions during the day. Students are watching how educators interact. In so many schools around the state, students walk through a metal detector and rush to class just to be given detention because the bus is late. Moments later, they are asked to meditate as part of an SEL program. The forced meditation shows a disconnect between the culture of the school and the SEL that is part of the class. Students and teachers must understand that SEL relates to school climate and everyday activities. Studies indicate that educators must grasp SEL; unfortunately, only 1 in 5 teachers report feeling prepared to teach the concepts (Duane et al., 2021).

Diverse professional development offered at schools will impact the school's culture, and administrators and staff must collaborate. SEL could impact educators as much as it affects the students on the receiving end of the curriculum. The effectiveness of this approach has been identified in several reviews of SEL interventions and programs (Evans et al., 2015). Reinbergs and Fefer (2017) identified (SEL) curricula as

an intervention that can augment trauma-informed training. Ortiz and Sibinga (2017) showed that SEL mindfulness interventions can help mitigate behavioral consequences of trauma by enhancing emotional regulation, increasing social skills, and promoting positive classroom behavior. The compatibility of these approaches suggests that SEL supports a trauma-informed framework. Mindfulness-based SEL provides teachers with the skills to respond to disruptive classroom behavior likely related to past trauma (Kim et al., 2021).



## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

A qualitative design was employed to understand better how social-emotional learning (SEL) and trauma-informed care (TIC) impact educators' well-being and longevity in the profession. This study focused on schools within the "East Coast" district and examined the educators' perceptions of SEL and TIC and their impact. The study included a document review of incident reports, focus groups, and individual interviews with instructional staff, child study team members, administrators, and professional development providers.

The first step of the study was to examine incident reports of classroom incidents prior to and after the implementation of social-emotional learning and trauma-informed care professional development. The researcher analyzed classroom incident reports and sorted them to include verbal and physical assaults on students and staff, aggressive acts, and elopements. The number of incidents before and after educators participated in SEL and TIC professional development courses and supports was examined to use as reference points during interviews and focus groups.

Additionally, completed district exit interviews from 2019 until the present were reviewed to understand the reasons for resignations, transfers, and retirements. The data from these documents was coded to identify patterns and develop interview questions. The documents were reviewed to understand the climate better and create questions and discussion points for interviews and focus groups.

A group of 35 educators who work in the "East Coast" special needs school district volunteered to participate in either a focus group or a focus group and individual interview. From this group, 17 volunteered to participate in 1:1 interviews to clarify information from the focus group further. The selection criteria were based on their experience implementing Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) or their attendance at district-wide professional development experiences. All participants were currently employed by the "East Coast" school district. "East Coast" school district is a pseudonym for the district.

### **Description of the Setting**

The "East Coast" school district consists of fourteen schools and seven education programs. These educational institutions are spread across the State and cater to diverse student populations, including those facing academic challenges due to behavioral issues or teenage/adolescent pregnancy and parenthood and underserved and disenfranchised students. The education programs are located in residential behavioral health settings and hospitals across the State, providing specialized care to students in need.

While the schools are situated in urban and suburban settings, most students commute to school from either urban areas or rural areas. The residential programs are part of a broader network that offers students comprehensive behavioral and mental health support. Community provider referrals, the Department of Children and Families, and school referral services facilitate enrollment in these residential programs. The "East Coast" school district is an option for school residents in some of the programs, but some students attend their regular school district if it is within a reasonable distance from the residence. In two of the programs, the students are required to participate in the school

on-site as they are court-mandated to attend and cannot participate in school in a general education setting.

The schools are relatively small, allowing personalized attention to help students overcome at-risk behaviors. The average class size is six students, with a maximum of twelve. Each classroom is staffed with a certified teacher and an aide for additional support, and some classes have multiple aides to manage more intense behaviors.

Each school has an on-site administrator, assistant administrator, child study team case manager, and various related services. In cases where content teachers may not be available in person, virtual instruction is provided. Efforts are made to ensure in-person instruction whenever possible. Virtual team teaching is utilized to ensure students have access to content-certified teachers in all required areas for high school graduation. For example, a qualified math teacher located in the southern part of the state may teach students in the northernmost city, providing specialized content knowledge. In addition, a dedicated teacher who supports students with disabilities is present in the classroom to offer assistance with support and classroom management.

Our sample of educators was drawn from a cohort with a solid background in social-emotional learning (SEL) and trauma-informed care (TIC) professional development and who actively participated in a virtual discussion group. These educators work in one of fourteen schools or three education programs. It's important to note that educators from hospital programs were not eligible for inclusion, as their classes typically involve bedside instruction or a two-to-one classroom ratio, and they do not usually encounter recorded behavior issues. It's worth mentioning that our definition of

"educator" encompasses certified teachers, classroom assistants, child study team members, administrators, and aides who support students.

Educators in the district cater to a diverse student population, which includes teenage parents and those who have faced challenges in traditional school settings, attending alternative programs. The students who require support include those with mental health concerns or who have been placed in out-of-home care. According to the Department of Education's definition, these students are considered at-risk (NJDOE, 2023). Many of them have endured significant trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES). It is not uncommon for these schools to enroll high-achieving students who may need additional support from behavior specialists or childcare providers for their own children.

## **Procedure**

Educators and professional development providers had the opportunity to participate in a personalized face-to-face interview and a virtual focus group. The educators include teachers, counselors, administrators, coaches, trainers, and teaching assistants assigned to at-risk classrooms and participate in the established virtual Professional Learning Community (PLC) through Microsoft Teams. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this PLC was initiated to allow for collaboration among those interested in the district social-emotional learning (SEL) programs and has continued to serve as a platform for this purpose. Teachers and counselors participated in individual interviews, while teaching assistants participated in focus groups. A message was posted to the virtual bulletin board in the PLC group on TEAMS to explain the study's purpose and encourage staff to participate. The message board is available to all 420 employees in the

district; however, typically, those interested in the SEL and TIC are those who read the channel. Additional literature was available as reference points for vocabulary and a refresh of material and goals, if requested by participants. There were no such requests.

Three semi-structured focus groups were conducted, with participants from SEL and TIC professional development experiences and one focus group of school administrators. These meetings gathered the educators' perspectives about their experiences with the SEL coaches and team and their trauma-informed training. Participants were asked thought-provoking questions such as "How has your perspective changed regarding your students as a result of the SEL and trauma-informed training?" and "Have you noticed any changes in your teaching or classroom as a result of implementing the SEL program?" Additionally, educators were asked if they utilize SEL or TIC techniques with staff members or in their personal lives and if they enjoy working with their students. These virtual meetings were held in Microsoft Teams to allow for representation from each school. Each group consisted of six to eight participants and lasted approximately one hour during an in-service day. The focus group of school administrators was in person and took place after an administrative meeting. There were seven participants in the administration focus group. The meeting took place in the all-purpose room of one of the schools. There were a total of 35 total participants in the four focus groups.

In addition, 18 one-on-one interviews were conducted to delve deeper into the topics discussed in the focus groups. These interviews revolved around SEL and TIC and the program's impact on the participants' personal and professional lives (Charlton et al., 2021). The interviews and focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for

patterns of information. The individual interviews clarified essential points arising from the focus groups. They allowed the participants to discuss areas of concern or provide more details than they had during their focus groups.

As previously indicated in this document, pseudonyms were used for each interviewee, district, and school to ensure the participants' privacy. All interviewees signed a release and acknowledgment digitally, which allowed their answers to be used in this study.

### **Data Collection**

In order to improve the organization's capacity with staff, school leaders examined exit interviews conducted with teachers who resigned or retired for patterns and themes. The interviews consist of three questions and have become part of the organization's improvement plan. The Office of Human Resources designed and conducted the interviews during the staff members' final week with the organization. The exit interviews from every staff member who resigned or retired were examined for themes and patterns. Three administrators from a school with the highest number of incidents retired or resigned within three years of recording data. The fourth administrator has been in place for three years. The exit interviews did not report any other significant findings, as staff members did not clarify why they were resigning or retiring in their answers to questions.

Incident reports from 2018 to the present were reviewed to identify steps taken prior to reportable incidents such as assault, elopement, or aggression, taking into account whether educators participated in SEL and TIC professional development and if these techniques were used. This information helped during discussions in focus groups and

informal interviews to prompt participants for information regarding trauma-informed care, social-emotional learning, and the impact on school climate and staff recidivism.

Individual interviews were voluntary and conducted in a neutral setting, either in the educator's classroom or virtually. All identifying information will remain confidential and anonymous, and recordings and transcriptions are stored in Rowan University's Cloud. The data was used to identify patterns and insights from both the focus group and the individual interviews.

### **Current Program**

The district's educators have been actively engaged in various social-emotional learning practices to enhance their skills. Upon employment, all staff members are enrolled in the organization's SEL program, further reinforced with personalized group and individual coaching sessions, as required. The training and Wellness Wednesdays are not optional. All staff are encouraged to participate in various activities and coaching sessions. The students are dismissed early on Wednesdays to provide time for the teachers to collaborate, attend professional development, and attend the coaching sessions.

The SEL Curriculum is a comprehensive training program that equips educators in the district with the necessary tools to create a trauma-informed and resilient school environment. This training focuses on resilience-building, exploring educators' core values and beliefs, and emphasizes understanding how trauma affects children and their school experience. The program provides proactive strategies such as fostering connections, prioritizing social and emotional skills, establishing safety, and promoting play, all of which are designed to create the best possible classroom and school support

for traumatized students and the professionals who serve them. The course offers detailed information and concrete actions that answer the "why" and the "how" of creating a trauma-informed and resilient educational environment (SAMSHA, 2023; Glasser, 2022). The objectives of this program include identifying at least five questions to promote a trauma-informed and resilience-focused mindset when working with students in the school setting, identifying the four main protective factors of resilient youth, discussing universal needs, and providing examples to support each by identifying the three main functions of the deep brain, identifying at least three functions of the outer brain, and describing how trauma impacts the deep and outer brain functions specifically in the school setting (Glasser, 2022).

The program also covers identifying at least five ways in which trauma and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder symptoms may overlap and identifies at least five proactive strategies for every classroom. Ultimately, the SEL Curriculum promotes healing-centered engagement that is culturally responsive and fosters a sense of meaning, self-perception, purpose, and healthy identity (Glasser, 2022).

The SEL training follows a specific format, starting with a certified trainer's initial training session for new staff. This session is mandatory for all district staff within their first year of hire. It covers essential topics such as personal regulation, recognition identification, and practical strategies for resetting oneself into a more positive mindset.

For ongoing training, a certified or advanced trainer offers a refresher course to all staff after they have completed the initial six-hour training. This three-hour session reviews the same topics and delves into methods and techniques used in the classroom.



Additional support is available through trauma training, facilitated by a trained consultant, and offered to all staff. This training covers various topics, including types of trauma, how trauma presents in youth, responses to trauma, brain and trauma, and interventions and strategies. Trauma training is available as needed, lasts 1.5 to 2 hours, and can be provided virtually or in person during professional development or in-service days. Each training session can accommodate up to 100 staff members.

Our organization offers self-regulation skills training for all staff, which a trained consultant facilitates. During the training, participants learn about the importance of self-regulation, seven types of sensory regulations, examples of regulation activities, and the benefits of regulation techniques. This training is held annually for 1.5-2 hours and can be attended in person or virtually. It is typically scheduled during professional development or our annual district retreat. In-person training can accommodate 25-30 staff, while virtual training can host up to 100 participants.

In addition to self-regulation training, the district provides additional support training for all staff. A certified or advanced trainer facilitates this training. It is designed to address strategies and applications based on site needs, individual populations, and school behavior trends. These trainings are scheduled quarterly or when needed, typically lasting between 20 and 60 minutes. They can be attended in-person or virtually at individual schools, and the number of participating staff varies depending on the delivery method. The training can be scheduled during a staff meeting, Wellness Wednesdays, or other designated times determined by the building administrator.

The district provides training and certification opportunities for staff interested in facilitating training. An esteemed consulting firm offers training to the initial group every

three years, and the district leaders and the Star team maintain ongoing communication. Support is offered through email, phone, and virtual meetings for as long as needed. Trainers receive both virtual and in-person support through email and telephone (IENVISION, 2023). A quarterly newsletter is also sent to all trainers via email. Furthermore, a State university maintains an online sharing system called "Canvas," which offers training materials to all trainers and school staff.

Monthly leaders' meetings, lasting about an hour, are facilitated virtually and in person and attended by Advanced Trainers designated as leaders. Additionally, trainer meetings are offered to all trainers and facilitated by leaders, and booster sessions are held monthly, also lasting an hour and provided both virtually and in person.

Both the Champion team meeting and learning community meeting are held bi-monthly, with a duration of 1-2 hours, and are conducted virtually. Additional meetings are also available to guide the staff in implementing SEL techniques and methods supported by the district. The Champion Teams play a vital role in transforming schools into supportive communities that foster growth and excellence in learning. They achieve this by building solid relationships through word of mouth, personal invitations, newsletters, and supervisor designations. The Champion team supports staff members through individual consultations or group meetings upon request. The length and delivery method of the support can vary depending on the individual's needs and preferences.

The coaching process commences with professional development experiences for Teachers in the East Coast district, aimed at further developing their socio-political consciousness, which was introduced with the SEL program. A leader or coach guides learning activities to help Teachers practice ways of orchestrating learning that build their

students' brain power in culturally congruent ways. Educators learn to establish authentic connections with their students, promoting mutual trust and respect. Holding students accountable, behaviorally and academically, is expected of educators, as it is seen as a sign of respect and necessary in relationship building (McCarthy, 2023). Upon completing the training and coaching, Teachers are expected to incorporate brain principles from neuroscience into their teaching, helping dependent learners develop the cognitive routines necessary for higher-order thinking and strengthening their students' resilience.

The scope and sequence of this coaching process begins with an overview of the three levels of culture: understanding one's cultural lens, cultural archetypes, and the science of how the brain learns. This workshop serves as a refresher for educators. The next phase focuses on learning partnerships, emphasizing how self-regulation precedes co-regulation, accountability with the heart (balance of care and push), and the biology of stress (chronic stress manifests in the body just like trauma) (McCarthy, 2023). Finally, information processing is honed, focusing on input, elaboration, and output, tools for independent learning, and Harvard's Project Zero (McCarthy, 2023).

The educators begin with one hour virtually as a large group where they share goals and partnerships, lay the foundation of concepts, and familiarize district staff with using a text set. The activities are designed to grow independent learners and incorporate them into their lessons, building capacity in expectations/skills. The second day is a full day for targeted schools. All participants receive an activity to complete with their students and send feedback. All resources, including feedback forms, are provided to the participants.

Wednesday afternoons are available for professional development and follow-up with training support. The students are dismissed early, and staff is involved in “Wellness Wednesday activities to reinforce the skills and discuss methods. The coaches and leaders are available to go to different sites to conduct “bite-size” professional development in person. Finally, the expectation is to do a lesson with their classes. The coach observes when the lessons are being taught and then debriefs.

### **Analysis**

The interviews were transcribed and coded using deductive methods adapted from Saldana (2016). The researcher used codes to recognize themes and interpret results by reflexively looking at and validating findings (Creswell, 2014). Thematic coding was used to identify and analyze themes in the data. The coding identified themes, recurring patterns, or ideas representing essential aspects of the research (Creswell, 2014). The researcher assumed the participants honestly answered questions based on an accurate memory of knowledge, dispositions, and behaviors prior to the SEL and TIC professional development.

The exit interviews and incident reports were coded to find themes to utilize as data points to discuss further during interviews. The incident reports consisted of teacher and administrative reports from the schools to the central office utilizing a student information system. The district or program names will not be utilized during data collection or reporting.

### **Limitations**

While the study had the potential to provide valuable information for school leaders on the benefits of TIC and SEL professional development, it is essential to note

its limitations. Firstly, the study only collected data from a small special needs school district within the state, meaning the findings may not be generalized to other school districts. Educators were not selected randomly to participate in the study; therefore, selection may be a limiting factor (Creswell, 2014). Internal threats are research procedures, experimental interventions, or participant experiences that negatively impact the researcher's ability to make correct interpretations of the population based on the data (Creswell, 2014). Secondly, the training was specific to the district, and results may vary depending on the nature of professional development (PD) activities in other districts.

This study is the first attempt to measure employee perceptions of change in knowledge, dispositions, and behaviors towards traumatized students and their desire to remain in the profession using interviews and focus groups. It is worth noting that other demographic variables such as race, ethnicity, participant exposure to trauma, or prior training are included in the analysis, but past trauma was difficult to discuss. Self-report retrospective designs are vulnerable to social desirability responses and accuracy, so it's essential to acknowledge that the design may not be the most reliable assessment of knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors (Klatt & Taylor-Powell, 2005).

Participants received notification that their responses would remain anonymous and would be combined with other results to ensure greater accuracy and reduce social desirability bias. The fact that the researcher conducting the study is the chief school administrator for the schools being studied influenced participants to either participate or decline. When educators were asked to complete interviews, they could have been inclined to agree with statements related to trauma-informed care, as they aligned with

the district's mission statement. However, some teachers may have been hesitant to admit to experiencing burnout as they fear potential retaliation from their administrators.

It's important to acknowledge that while focus groups can be useful for exploring experiences, they can also censor dissenting opinions or reinforce established views and behaviors (Kitzinger, 1994). We are also aware that some teachers, especially those who may feel the least productive or most burned-out, may choose not to participate, and we had no way of measuring this information through any other means. Additionally, the schools included in this study were all from a single state and were not a random sample of schools. Given the number of school-level factors examined and the complexity of the modeling, the number of schools participating was relatively small, which limited the number of school-level variables that could be explored. Future studies should include a broader range of teacher constructs.

## **Summary**

The COVID-19 pandemic and other significant global events have brought about profound changes in the lives of educators and students, with some experiencing illness and loss within their immediate families. These events, viewed as traumatic, can be defined as severe disruptions to community functioning, resulting in widespread human, material, economic, or environmental losses that exceed the impacted individuals' ability to cope with their resources. (Mahar et al., 2008; Stafford et al., 2008). The approach of trauma-informed care (TIC) acknowledges that individuals may have experienced trauma and utilizes methods that respond appropriately while minimizing the potential for further traumatization. By recognizing trauma and implementing trauma-sensitive routines and social-emotional learning (SEL) for both educators and students, they can have more

opportunities for academic and emotional growth and success. The well-being of educators is linked to student motivation and achievement, teacher retention, and mental health (Aldrup et al., 2018). With an improving economy, there may be a significant increase in retirements and departures from the teaching profession (Cineas, 2022). The sheer number of vacant teaching positions, over 200,000 annually in K-12 schools (Kraft & Lyon, 2022), limits the ability of most schools and educator preparation programs to be highly selective in their admissions and hiring processes. As the pandemic lingers and new state laws impose restrictions on discussions of sensitive topics in schools, an already prevalent issue has been reignited: the future of the teaching profession. Dissatisfaction and burnout among educators have been on the rise (Diliberti & Schwartz, 2022; Woo et al., 2022), prompting questions about the potential impact on the next generation of college graduates and their decision to pursue teaching careers. This study investigated the links between teacher burnout, capacity, trauma-informed care, and social-emotional learning in the classroom.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Results**

This research investigated the opinions of school personnel regarding professional development programs centered on social-emotional learning (SEL) and trauma-informed care (TIC). It also explored whether staff members experienced benefits based on the frequency of sessions and integration of SEL and TIC training. The forthcoming chapter will summarize descriptive and inferential findings, categorized by focus group and interview inquiry. Descriptive statistics have presented the most common responses to the interview questions (n=35). Additional incident reports were examined to determine the frequency and severity of incidents before and after SEL and TIC professional development programs were implemented in 2019. There was a substantial decrease in reportable incidents within the 13 schools throughout the district, from 483 incidents in 2018 to just 27 in 2023. It must be noted that implementation coincided with COVID-19 and the students were not in person during that time.

#### **Demographic Summary of Participants**

It is essential to provide a breakdown of participant demographics for accurate data interpretation and study significance. In this case, 420 State of NJ employees received invitations to participate in SEL and TIC professional development, consisting of teachers, administrators, child study team members, and support staff who engaged in development experiences together. Of the 420 invitees, 35 actively participated in the interviews and focus groups. There were 25 others who could not participate due to a schedule conflict, and many excluded themselves because they stated they did not



participate in SEL or TIC professional development experiences. The invitation recipients hailed from diverse professional backgrounds, including bus drivers, teachers, custodians, administrators, child study team members, and aides. The participants themselves were a mix of teachers, administrators, child study team members, and aides. The respondents comprised approximately 8% of the total population. The primary focus was on engaging school administrators, teachers, and the child study team, who actively participated in weekly professional development and coaching sessions. As anticipated, the participants included only administrators, teachers, and the child study team. Together, these groups represent 29% of the total population of teachers, child study team members, and administrators.

**Table 1***Demographics*

Demographics	n= 35	% of Total Group
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	5	14%
Female	30	86%
Other	n/a	0%
<b>Number of Years Employed in the District</b>		
0-5	6	17%
6-10	15	43%
11-15	10	29%
16-20	4	11%
<b>Employee Classification</b>		
Teacher	20	57%
Administrator	5	14%

Demographics	n= 35	% of Total Group
<b>Employee Classification</b>		
Child Study Team	6	17%
Support Staff (aide, assistant)	4	11%
<b>Grade Level</b>		
K-8	4	11%
9-12	31	89%
<b>Professional Development Sessions Attended</b>		
Curriculum Introductions and Champion Team	35	100%
Coaching Sessions	20	57%

The majority of respondents were female (n=30), with support staff (n=8) and teachers (n=15) comprising the most prominent groups. Most participants worked in a high school setting (n=31) and attended both the curriculum professional development and coaching sessions (n=35); however, only 57% (n=20) reported attending coaching sessions and were referring to the sessions as wellness or professional development. It should be noted that response rates varied, as one staff member opted to nod or shake their head instead of answering questions during the focus group, and one participant became uncomfortable with answering questions during 1:1 interviews. The responses

indicated agreement or disagreement but did not articulate a verbal response that was recorded in the transcript. The district IRB committee clarified that the researcher should refrain from pushing or making participants uneasy since the researcher is the Chief School Administrator.

### **Focus Group Discussion**

The initial focus group occurred in person after an administrative meeting at one of the schools. The three subsequent focus groups were conducted on Microsoft Teams, a virtual meeting platform. Attendance at the in-person meeting was voluntary, and school administrators had the option to depart for the day or stay and participate in the focus group discussion. Seven of the 12 administrators present chose to remain for the focus group. For the virtual meetings, each participant was requested to join during district professional development days, which were included in the school calendar. Staff had the option to work from home as long as they had registered for training for part of the day. In the second focus group, all four participants had made prior arrangements to attend and had informed their supervisor a week in advance. In the third group, out of twelve participants, ten had notified both the researcher and their supervisor about their intention to participate, while two did not inform anyone. Lastly, in the fourth group, only six out of twelve participants had informed the researcher in advance of their intention to join the group.

It was evident that those who had planned ahead for their involvement were more positive in their responses and demonstrated a clearer understanding of the concepts. Those who had decided to participate at the last minute did not have confidence and awareness of the concepts and their impact on instruction and were not able to articulate

the SEL and TIC concepts or ideas. The link to the focus group was sent via email to those who expressed interest and also posted on the Social Emotional Learning (SEL) team channel in the application, allowing anyone to attend if they needed to participate in a professional development experience that day and had attended SEL and TIC professional development in the past.

All groups were guided through identical questions. However, the nature of the discussions differed depending on the groups' responses and their level of engagement. The first group of administrators openly shared their answers, as did the second group, which comprised of teachers and child study team members. The third and fourth groups demonstrated less involvement, with two individuals frequently steering the conversation in different directions. The final two groups were apprehensive about their answers, and two members of the group were a bit aggressive in their tone.

***Question 1: What Experiences Have You Had Related to Social Emotional Learning and Trauma Informed Care?***

The initial inquiry focused on the staff's experiences with Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and Trauma Informed Care (TIC). During the focus group session, some participants needed clarification on the district's professional development (PD), which includes training on SEL and TIC, which were explicitly mentioned in the PD title of all experiences. Upon further discussion, participants recognized the training, which is mandatory twice a year for all staff and does not include the weekly Wellness Wednesday activities at each school. More than 70% of staff members also mentioned participating in training outside the district or through the Department of Education (DOE). The district's Champion Team, composed of experts, regularly promotes SEL and TIC principles to

support teachers in every school. Providers and trainers confirmed that the staff from the focus group have received extensive training in SEL and TIC and have also been part of coaching experiences. Only about 5% of participants did not recall the training or coaching. Many individuals listed on the attendance sheet for the professional development events claimed they had no memory of attending the district training despite their names being present on the sign-in sheets. A significant portion (56%) mentioned that they acquired knowledge of SEL and TIC from other sources, such as out-of-district training. However, the administrators insisted that the entire faculty had indeed participated in the training and were well-informed about it.

***Question 2: How Did the Professional Development Experiences Impact You as a Teacher?***

The school administration has reported decreased student incidents and positive teacher feedback regarding the district's SEL and TIC professional development. One administrator stated that since the coaching took place, more behaviors are handled at the classroom level and are not escalating beyond correction. One Assistant Principal noted that he is not running all over the building all day and has been able to create positive intervention programs for the students who are succeeding rather than dealing with student discipline.

Teachers have expressed that they are gaining a new perspective and no longer taking student behavior personally. Instead, (77%) have recognized that behavior may be influenced by developmental delays or external factors such as trauma. With this understanding, teachers reported adapting their approach to meet their students' needs better. By utilizing a trauma-informed mindset, teachers reported they have been able to

identify behavior patterns and help students achieve success. However, a minority (33%) of teachers have reported difficulty applying these concepts to their classroom management practices, viewing them as abstract ideas. One participant mentioned that while they were provided with a lot of information, they needed help applying it to their daily instruction. In one focus group, there was extensive conversation about integrating SEL and TIC in a classroom setting with differentiated instruction. Participants expressed uncertainty in modifying the concepts for the multiple levels in the classroom. They stated that they believed the concepts only applied to the special needs population, with support staff providing assistance. It was reported several times that SEL and TIC have taught teachers not to take student behavior personally, as students are not acting out for no reason. Seventy-seven percent of participants reported that after implementing SEL and TIC, the relationships with students effectively managed behaviors and developed more meaningful connections.

***Question 3: How Did the PD Experiences Impact You as a Learner?***

As per the feedback from educators, they possess the skill to assess any situation more comprehensively and adapt their methods when faced with difficulties involving pupils, co-workers, or managers. These skills included daily living activities such as reducing road rage when driving or reducing conflict with a spouse. One participant reported changing their language when talking to their spouse, using “I” statements rather than “you” when sharing their feelings. Another reported being able to diffuse a volatile situation at a concert when two people were escalating their behavior. A third talked about being in the grocery store and intervening with a store employee and customer casually when they heard them beginning to argue over coupons. The participants report

the ability to hone the knack of identifying and focusing on essential issues while channeling their efforts toward achieving their objectives. Moreover, by acknowledging their learning style and past experiences, they report that they can recognize and operate within their constraints. The educators were able to discuss the concepts and how they apply to their classroom instruction in every focus group. More than fifty percent of the participants could not discuss specific terminology, but they had an overall understanding of the concepts.

Fifty-three percent of all participants have reported that they can better understand the organization's broader goals and objectives following professional development. All of the administrators acknowledged a better understanding of the goals and objectives after attending initial workshops and participating in discussions. They also emphasized the importance of focusing on self-care as a crucial aspect of professional development, recognizing the need to present themselves in the best possible manner and model appropriate behavior. Many participants noted that they have learned not to take negative behavior personally and have developed more extraordinary patience in the classroom. Teachers mentioned that they can now “reset” themselves when feeling frustrated with students, administration, or colleagues and have learned to let go of unimportant issues to focus on success. Additionally, by gaining insight into their own learning styles and trauma, they report having a better understanding of their limitations.

***Question 4: What Were the Most Significant Takeaways From the Professional Development?***

The term "reset" was emphasized repeatedly in focus groups, as it allowed students to rectify their actions and prevent further escalation. The participants reported



that this word served as a unifying tool among students, staff, and resource homes, as it was deemed crucial for de-escalation incidents. It sparked a discussion about how the PD was critical to implementing a shared vocabulary to ensure all staff members are equipped to communicate effectively with students during critical situations.

During conversations, the SEL curriculum's familiar vocabulary was brought up repeatedly. It was reported that this curriculum has proven to be immensely helpful in conveying crucial messages during times of crisis, and it ensures that students receive consistent instruction across all classes. Additionally, it was stated in one focus group that the curriculum is a valuable starting point for treatment teams. It is believed to help reduce stress for staff and students by clearly understanding what to expect during emergencies and day-to-day activities. The participants cited examples stating that the expectations being the same in each class helps to support one another when there is a problem. The participants reported that having the same expectations in each class allows more time for instruction and meeting the needs of the students.

An example would be that the students are aware that cell phones are not permitted for recording in school, and this rule applies consistently across the entire school. Similarly, during a recent focus group discussion, a teacher emphasized the importance of maintaining consistency within the school and district-wide. She expressed concern that, with the rise of virtual classrooms, some students needed to adhere to the dress code or were using their phones during video classes. Her colleagues suggested that she address these concerns during coaching sessions and training to ensure that all teachers understand the necessity of upholding student accountability. They repeatedly

expressed the importance of being consistent, so the focus was on instruction rather than behavior correction.

The staff expressed how the curriculum has enabled them to effectively manage challenging situations in various public settings, including concerts, grocery stores, and driving. In all of the focus groups, participants elaborated on the times they had used SEL to diffuse a hostile situation or sway a person to act more appropriately. The participants noted that they have learned to "reset" themselves when feeling anxious in overwhelming crowds. Furthermore, they found that these techniques have equipped them with tools to de-escalate situations when dealing with agitated individuals. One of the most impactful applications has been in traffic, where they remind themselves that everyone has bad days and not to take road rage personally. Educators emphasize that social and emotional learning (SEL) provides individuals with practical techniques to de-escalate various situations and offers a fresh perspective, even in challenging traffic scenarios. A majority of participants expressed and agreed (53%) that these techniques become ingrained in staff members through consistent practice, fostering a positive mindset and become an integral part of their approach to daily life. It was stated that the support from the administration made the mission and vision of providing students with a positive, safe culture more successful than if the teachers tried to implement it alone.

***Question 5: Would You Want to Continue With the Professional Development Experiences, and What Aspects?***

The participants have expressed positive feedback regarding the SEL and TIC professional development sessions. The techniques and skills provided have helped them be more empathetic towards their students. Participants reported that the SEL and TIC

professional development experiences have also encouraged more meaningful ways of holding students accountable rather than resorting to mere punishment. While some staff members have yet to implement the techniques fully, they still appreciate the value of the concepts presented.

Three participants in a particular focus group required assistance locating relevant training and raised their concerns through the forum. Conversely, eighty percent of the remaining participants, who fully embraced the concepts, have experienced enhancements in various areas of their lives, such as stress reduction and managing tense situations. Despite ongoing challenges in the classroom, staff members report they can address these issues more efficiently by holding students accountable and looking ahead.

The feedback from the focus groups was overwhelmingly positive regarding the value of the coaching sessions. There was a clear desire for the concepts and techniques to be demonstrated in an instructional setting, even from those who hadn't participated in the coaching sessions. One participant expressed interest in joining the next cohort. Having students attend the training was considered beneficial rather than integrating it into the curriculum. However, it was noted that one participant in a focus group felt students might not benefit from the training and may not take it seriously. One participant explained how students often mock teachers when using some of the vocabulary in volatile situations. The majority of participants disagreed with this opinion, considering it to be a minority perspective and potentially an outlier. Additionally, it was observed that while there is some resistance to the concepts, many participants have been successful with their own methods for years, suggesting that SEL and TIC are only some of the

successful techniques for building classroom culture. This opinion came primarily from the educators with over twenty years of experience.

The majority of participants in all focus groups (over 80%) emphasized the necessity of additional curriculum professional development to support staff. They also underscored the importance of securing more buy-in, as some teachers work against each other by encouraging student behavior that is not acceptable in other classes or allowing their classes to disrupt the whole school. One teacher explained how the same three kids are running in the halls daily, and their teacher either ignores the behavior or yells down the hall, disrupting the other classes. The teacher often is heard saying, “These kids can’t learn.” and will do nothing to change.

Notably, teachers with 30 years of experience advocated for a more stringent approach to student discipline, while those teachers with fewer years highlighted the importance of showing compassion to students and colleagues. Moreover, it was mentioned that some teachers not fully embracing the curriculum tend to focus excessively on rules and minutiae, overlooking the opportunity to build relationships with students. One participant, a teacher, recommended that coaching should concentrate on classroom management, particularly for new and struggling teachers. The participant noted a need for more emphasis on classroom management or behavior modification in the social-emotional learning (SEL) or trauma-informed care (TIC) professional development sessions, considering it a crucial missing component.

Two participants in both focus groups raised reservations about the specificity of the curriculum training, but they recognized the importance of the debriefing concepts. Their concern was that they did not want trainers or the district to tell them how to teach

a class, only what to teach. They stated that training took away their ability to be creative. This prompted a conversation about the importance of promoting teacher collaboration instead of isolating them in the classroom, a topic that engaged the entire group. The group spoke to the need for consistency of policies and methods so the students knew what to expect in every classroom, but not a change in teaching methods.

***Question 6: Is There Value in Teachers Having the Same Experiences?***

The significance of students encountering consistent vocabulary and concepts across classes was a focal point of several discussions. Across all focus groups, there was unanimous agreement on how this approach has effectively conveyed crucial messages during crises, providing students with much-needed continuity throughout their day. Participants from all three groups highlighted instances in the curriculum where this practice served as a solid foundation for treatment teams, alleviating stress for staff and students during emergencies and daily activities by fostering predictability. It was unanimously acknowledged that this encourages a stable environment with consistent expectations, ultimately enabling students to thrive. The educators believe this serves the majority of the students who go home to chaotic, unorganized lives, not knowing where they will sleep or who will be there. In each group, it was discussed that students exhibit reduced stress levels when they know what to expect and the associated expectations. There was unanimous accord on these concepts, with no dissenting opinions or queries regarding the intentions behind these statements and discussions; every educator agreed that the students needed a consistent environment with verbalized expectations in order to succeed. A large group of teachers (77%) agreed that having clear expectations from administrators would be beneficial for them as well.

***Question 7: Did the Experiences Have an Impact on Your Personal Life as Well as Your Professional Life?***

Attendees shared that they have implemented the principles they learned during the training not only with their children at home but also in their interactions with adults in public. The discussions focused on comments such as, "I've noticed myself becoming more patient with my children." All groups agreed that the de-escalation techniques have proven beneficial in diverse settings, including concerts, grocery stores, and traffic. They highlighted that with consistent practice, these principles become deeply rooted in one's character and manifest in everyday life. Many participants stressed the significance of self-care, acknowledging that prioritizing their well-being is essential for excelling in the classroom. Over 90% of those who found the training effective mentioned that they had integrated the techniques into their daily routines, resulting in a notable transformation in their approach to people in both high-stress situations and routine interactions.

***Question 8: Do You Have Any Other Questions or Feedback About the Social Emotional Learning and Trauma Informed Care Professional Development?***

The focus groups yielded a diverse array of responses to the question, with several common themes arising. However, each group presented unique perspectives. The first group underscored the significance of nurturing relationships in the classroom, emphasizing how these connections can positively impact students and teachers. They shared personal anecdotes to illustrate the pivotal role of relational development in student success and teacher well-being. Additionally, the group highlighted the impact of students' behavior, emphasizing that those who feel connected to their instructors are more likely to be motivated and exhibit improved conduct. Furthermore, participants

stressed the importance of empowering students to take charge of their learning. They underscored the need for educators to prioritize relationship-building over fear-based approaches, illustrating how strong connections with students can enhance their support and success.

The second group delved into district policies and procedures, focusing on the necessity of updating policies to align with technological advancements. The discussion spotlighted the inconsistency of phone usage policies across district schools, leading to confusion for educators working with multiple students in different schools. Participants emphasized the importance of the district addressing this issue and providing uniform guidelines for all schools. While one participant suggested restricting phone usage for students who misuse them, a consensus still needs to be reached on this matter.

Additionally, one participant raised the question of how students would learn to use phones responsibly if they were not permitted to have them and how this might prepare them for future professional settings. They gave the example of teachers in meetings or professional development not listening to the content and later asking questions. It is important to have the same expectations for yourself as you have for your students.

During the discussion, the third group of participants emphasized the importance of addressing everyone's needs through SEL and TIC. Given the district's work with high-risk students, it was suggested that only students who can benefit from the available services should be included and enrolled in the schools. It was also emphasized that schools may only be the right fit for some students, and the focus should be on those who can thrive in that environment. The educators in this focus group suggested that a number of students be placed in other districts or residential placements. One participant objected

to this notion, stating that our students spend a lifetime being shuffled around, and school should be the one place they find a consistent environment to thrive because we, as educators, know better.

The administrators had a variety of opinions. One pointed out that they enjoyed the discussions and collaboration on student issues rather than policy and other administrative matters, and the majority (93%) of the group agreed. One person disagreed, mocking the wellness activities presented by the coaches each week, suggesting they could be reduced to once a week because it became redundant. Another administrator pointed out that the activities should continue if they helped even one person. Many administrators (65%) did not attend the work sessions with faculty, stating it was a time for teachers to collaborate and not wanting to interfere. In comparison, others (30%) supported promoting wellness in the school by attending every activity and utilizing the curriculum and techniques to drive decision-making in their day-to-day activities.

### **Interview Discussion**

After conducting focus group sessions, individual interviews were conducted to gain deeper insights into the participants' social-emotional learning and trauma-informed care experiences. Two of the participants opted for face-to-face interviews, while 15 chose a virtual format, resulting in 17 volunteers. One additional staff member volunteered; however, she was distracted throughout the interview and had an emergency to attend to. All participants had previously participated in district professional development sessions focused on social-emotional learning, trauma-informed care, and one of the focus group discussions. The interviews were scheduled using Microsoft



Teams. Each participant was asked the same thirteen questions. One participant seemed distracted and not fully engaged, often responding with phrases like "I just don't know" or "It does not apply to my classroom." This person left quickly for a family emergency.

***Question 1: Please Tell Me Why You Got Into Teaching and What Your Proudest Moment Was as a Teacher***

The vast majority, over 93%, indicated that their passion for learning and dedication to education were the primary driving forces behind their decision to pursue a career in teaching. Financial gain was not a significant factor in their choice to enter the field of education; instead, they were focused on their commitment to supporting students, finding fulfillment in their work, and their love of learning. The most meaningful aspects of their profession were not tied to monetary rewards but rather to the moments of progress in student learning and the positive influence they could have on their students' lives. Trainers and coaches also shared similar reasons for choosing their profession, highlighting the impact of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) or trauma-informed care (TIC) on their students' daily lives. More than 53% of the respondents expressed their desire to make a meaningful difference in their students' lives. The remaining 7% who did not cite a love for learning as their motivation mentioned that they entered teaching because it seemed like a logical career choice or a familiar occupation.

When speaking about their proudest moments as teachers, more than 77% focused on the success of their students who struggled the most. They recognized that more students succeed with the support of educators, and their job is not just to recite facts and curriculum but to foster that success in the students who need it the most.

***Question 2: Please Tell Me About Your Experience with Social Emotional Learning and Trauma Informed Care***

During interviews with the staff, it was discovered that all participants had undergone comprehensive professional development in social-emotional learning (SEL) and trauma-informed care (TIC), which included their involvement in weekly Wellness Wednesday sessions. However, only 44% of the staff could recall their specific experiences within the district. Additionally, 53% of the staff members shared their experiences prior to joining the district or their experiences with the Department of Education. One interviewee mentioned learning about Dr. Glasser's model in college, specifically targeted at individuals with autism and cognitive impairments. An observation made by over 77% of the interviewees was that SEL and TIC had a positive impact on both student behavior and teachers when recognizing the concepts.

Furthermore, 53% reported that collaboration and professional development had become a valuable way to connect with teachers, often involving actively listening to what is happening in other classrooms over the years. One participant, who is a special education teacher, described their approach to teaching appropriate social and relationship skills to their students through structured lessons and real-time teachable moments. They noted that some students in their cohort have autism and benefit from becoming more self-aware of their behaviors and their impact on others. Other students may exhibit impulsive behaviors due to their ADHD diagnosis, and the teacher has implemented strategies to help reduce those behaviors. Their experiences with trauma have ranged from students who have experienced the loss of a parent or sibling to those who are transitioning without their parent's consent, removed from their homes, and

finally to those who live in unsafe conditions, often resulting in calls to the Division of Protection and Permanency (DCPP).

Only 40% of the respondents discussed district professional development (PD), while 53% mentioned PD outside the district. An additional 10% could not recall attending any SEL or TIC professional development, either within or outside the district. According to attendance sheets and registrations, all interviewees had participated in both SEL and TIC in their schools with a team of trained individuals who were extensively prepared to assist with the cultural shift within their school. One participant mentioned, "I have limited experience with SEL but received training in TIC at a previous job." Their name appeared on a weekly Wellness Wednesday roster, and they volunteered to assist with the weekly activities.

A few participants (3) expressed concerns about feeling supported and mentioned the need for more administrative involvement in professional development sessions. It is important to note that most interviewees demonstrated a clear understanding of SEL and TIC. Many responses mirrored that of a teacher who eagerly shared, "SEL and TIC guide my actions every day at school. I understand that our students come with many different experiences that shape their lives and behavior."

***Question 3: Could You Tell Me How Trauma Impacts Students and Adults?***

The participants expressed a deep understanding of the importance of addressing trauma-informed care (TIC) and social-emotional learning (SEL) for their students. A significant 70% of participants acknowledged the profound impact of trauma on students, with 93% discussing how it affects learning, behaviors, learning loss, and the ability to

process new information. One interviewee remarked, “Trauma can greatly impact our students and adults. It may cause people to be guarded, scared, defensive, and act inappropriately. Our students need us to welcome them, make them feel safe, and help them build trusting relationships with us.”

While recognizing the value of supporting students' healing processes to enhance learning outcomes, a small portion of interviewees, 30%, also emphasized the significance of prioritizing their own wellness to serve their students better. The interviewees revealed that training sessions have highlighted the personal traumas that teachers often carry to work every day, requiring attention and healing for their professional and personal growth. Similarly, acknowledging and addressing student behavior-related trauma is crucial for educators' growth and development. More than 65% of the participants expressed that students can overcome their trauma with empathy, patience, and understanding. Many interviewees shared sentiments similar to those of a teacher who stated, “Trauma greatly impacts students in their learning styles and everyday interactions/tasks. Trauma can have a negative impact on students. It does not define a person; it helps explain how and why the person is the way they are.”

More than 77% of the interviewees could explain the impact trauma has on students. In comparison, more than 53% admitted they did not know what TIC was, nor had they participated in any professional development addressing trauma. More than 70% of those who stated they did not know what TIC was were able to discuss concepts and agreed that the trauma of students in the district impacted their behavior and learning.

***Question 4: How Do You Utilize Empathy to Create Positive and Trusting Relationships?***

During discussions with staff members, it was apparent that over 77% had received social and emotional learning (SEL) and trauma-informed care (TIC) training and were utilizing de-escalation techniques with their students. They emphasized the importance of establishing strong connections with students early on to prevent behaviors from escalating. One teacher mentioned that showing empathy allows students to feel understood and validated, irrespective of whether the teacher has experienced similar trauma. However, about 62% of the interviewees recognized the challenges of working with at-risk students who may exhibit destructive or aggressive behaviors. It was observed that some administrators may condone certain behaviors based on TIC and SEL principles, but teachers believe it's essential for students to understand that such behaviors are unacceptable. When de-escalation techniques are ineffective, trainers recommend using non-verbal cues and providing students with the opportunity to talk or visit a calming room. Ultimately, the primary goal for over half of the participants is to understand and address student trauma in a secure and supportive manner to create a safe space.

***Question 5: When Upset With a Student, What Techniques Do You Use to Diffuse The Situation?***

The interviewees shared the considerable difficulties they have encountered since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many, 53%, mentioned that addressing the diverse needs of every student has been overwhelming, especially while being constantly available compared to other professionals who can work from home. Interviewees

expressed that managing disruptive student behavior can be particularly challenging. To manage these challenges, many participants stated that it is crucial to approach each day with a fresh perspective and avoid dwelling on past negative experiences. Participants stressed the importance of understanding that these incidents are not personal in order to move forward. One interviewee was very sincere in their response, explaining that building a relationship is critical, “ 99% of what I do in a volatile situation is based on what I have done already. I establish a trustful, positive relationship. When an incident occurs, when negative emotions and memories have been triggered, I rely on the established relationship with the student. If a student needs to leave the room or simply reset, I impart to them the knowledge that they are welcome back when they are ready. I strive never to get upset over a student’s behavior, but rather to help the student in that situation.”

Regarding professional development, staff members are encouraged to prioritize their well-being by practicing self-care, such as engaging in breathing exercises and taking necessary breaks. While daily wellness messages and reminders are shared, it has been observed that some staff may prefer a reduced frequency of such communications, such as receiving them once a day as a text instead of through email, as the abundance of daily memes and gifs may be overwhelming for some. A few outliers stated that the wellness messages could have been more productive and could be considered a waste of time. One of the administrators said that constant wellness is too challenging to keep up with, becomes meaningless, and cannot be authentic. The coach and trainer had different perspectives, explaining that the wellness messages may relate to other people on various

levels and that improving one person's day is worth reading various messages and emails because you never know what someone is going through.

***Question 6: What is the Connection Between Your Sense of Well-Being and the Educational Experience You Provide Students?***

More than 77% of the participants expressed that it is often a gratifying experience for educators to witness their students' progress. Overall, the teachers stated that they are dedicated to nurturing an environment where students can thrive and succeed, which is achieved through active listening and ensuring students feel valued. They expressed that it is imperative for staff to be equipped with the necessary tools to understand the significance of cultivating relationships in the classroom, as it can play a pivotal role in addressing behavioral issues. Teachers recognize their own well-being could be a shortcoming, stating:

“My well-being directly impacts the educational experience I can deliver to my students. When I am run down or feeling overwhelmed, I consistently have more outbursts that result in higher levels of disruption to the overall educational experience for all students.”

While not every student will have a dynamic relationship with every teacher, 93% of those interviewed spoke about the importance of establishing strong connections with students. In more than 77% of the interviews, educators consistently emphasized the importance of providing students with opportunities to practice and model these skills in the classroom. The practice includes giving students the chance to write, speak, and present while setting clear expectations and modeling these behaviors. This sentiment

was echoed by teachers, administrators, and support staff alike. One teacher stated, “My sense of well-being is connected to the educational experience I provide in that when I am feeling better about myself, whether it's in my personal life or my professional life, workplace morale plays a role; I feel that I teach more effectively. This [effective teaching] is due to the attitude, vibe, and energy that I give off when I am in a happy place compared to feeling down. When I am excited about my life and like my job, my energy is palpable, and the students benefit from my well-being.” 93% of the interviewees made statements similar to one, “My well-being directly influences the classroom. I may be able to leave a personal issue outside of the classroom, but I can't leave not getting enough sleep in the hallway. Teachers model behavior. If I'm distracted and not showing interest in what we're learning, why should the students be interested?”

***Question 7: What Are the Best Strategies for Encouraging Students to Assert Themselves Constructively?***

The discussion with participants emphasized that in order to identify strengths and model behavior effectively, teachers often provide students with alternative options, encourage their participation, and involve them in class discussions. However, they said that simply asking students why they have yet to complete an assignment or offering to discuss it later may only be effective within an established relationship. Building this relationship involves offering options when discussing assignments and modeling the activities students are expected to use. Teachers emphasized the importance of giving students choices and avoiding imposing a particular approach. They explained that the professional development stressed the value of collaborative group work but also highlighted the need to provide alternatives for those who prefer working alone or in



smaller groups. Ultimately, they feel it is crucial to demonstrate to all students the significance of active participation and engagement in class. Building relationships and allowing student input into the curriculum and assignments was a common theme among those interviewed. More than 53% discussed student voice and participation. Relationships were discussed in over 93% of the interviews. Having a relationship with all the students was deemed important regardless of the content of the class.

***Question 8: How Do You Respond When Students Are Not Engaged in Classroom Activities?***

In our discussion, 93% of the participants emphasized the critical nature of communication. Notably, a participant with 25 years of experience underscored the more significant impact of building relationships over using behavior charts or classroom management strategies. It was reported that the SEL and TIC approach involves effective communication, providing encouragement to students, and knowing when to give them space.

Additionally, 53% of participants highlighted the importance of communication in managing classroom behaviors. Other valuable insights included adapting tasks, supporting students, and employing reset techniques. One participant stressed the significance of wellness techniques for both students and teachers to establish a mutual understanding of classroom expectations. Many interviewees struggled to address the question as they did not recognize that students were not always engaged in classroom activities.

***Question 9: How Do Your Personal Preferences/Biases Affect How You Interact With Your Students?***

It is widely reported among the educators interviewed that they do not harbor biases against their students. Initially, forty percent of teachers interviewed did not perceive having biases toward any of their students. One interviewee stated, “They don't. I have been teaching for a long time, so I can teach anyone who wants to learn. Respect goes a long way, so when it's mutual, all the other stuff is pushed aside.” However, the remaining sixty percent stressed the importance of acknowledging and treating all students equally without acknowledging their specific biases. The same interviewees claimed that it is essential to raise awareness among staff members about their biases to create a safe environment for students. In response to the question, an interviewee stated, “They do, and it is sometimes difficult. I try to be aware and use my training to remain focused on the purpose of teaching and learning.” There were thirty-three percent of interviewees stated that biases may stem from a variety of factors, such as a student's name triggering anxiety due to an experience or racial and gender biases in the classroom. Responses to this issue varied, with thirteen percent of participants citing professional development as beneficial in addressing their biases. Among the thirty-three percent who were conscious of their biases, ninety percent recognized the value of this awareness in moving forward.

One interviewee stated, “They don't; I am here for children; my preferences don't matter till after 4 pm,” referring to their biases. While another stated, “They do on every level. I find that, at times, I am more patient than I should be. I should be holding kids more accountable, but I know they have such a terrible life, and I let things go even

though that will not help in the long run.” The responses varied widely among the interviewees, and they referred not only to racial biases but also cultural and gender bias, stating, “Positively - I personally am biased with affection towards boys, I am a boy mom, and I tend to have higher numbers of boys in my classes. Negatively - background biases are always underlying, abuse by students for example, and can make me wary; it is important for me to be mindful of this when building relationships.” None of the interviewees referenced their own specific racial or cultural biases.

***Question 10: How Did the Professional Development You Attended Help to Make You Feel Supported in the Classroom?***

Nearly half of the participants, forty-six percent, expressed feeling unsupported and disconnected from the information presented, making it challenging to incorporate it into their daily teaching. On the other hand, some staff members reported feeling more confident in delivering content and connecting with students due to the provided professional development. One interviewee stated, "It was refreshing to know that things are valued." Many emphasized the importance of administrators fully engaging and participating in ensuring the success of these training sessions rather than merely making an appearance. Teachers, trainers, and support staff discussed that when administrators demonstrate their investment in the material, it encourages staff to do the same. One interviewee claimed, “Attending PD has not changed how I feel supported. I feel that the interactions that I have had with my teachers and supervisors offer the needed support.” By offering coaching and support, administrators communicate the value they place on their staff, which can help to create a sense of security and support. Participants noted that administrators play a vital role in promoting social and emotional learning (SEL) and

positive outcomes for students and staff. While accountability remains crucial, the approach should be tailored to foster a culture of support and collaboration. Fifty-three percent of participants stated that the professional development was ineffective and did not help them feel supported. In comparison, seven percent said that the training made them feel more isolated.

One participant emphasized that "the classroom can feel isolating for teachers, as they spend most of the day as the sole adult in the room. Professional development (PD) provides valuable opportunities for teachers to collaborate with their peers and ensures that important topics remain on teachers' radar."

***Question 11: We Have Been Talking About the Students; How Did the Professional Development Experiences Help You Make Decisions in the Classroom?***

The participants underscored the vital role of effective communication in handling student-related incidents. They stressed the significance of using consistent language among staff members when interacting with students during tense situations, as it conveys a message of unity. Seventy-three percent acknowledged that professional development had equipped them to de-escalate challenging situations and support students in overcoming difficulties. One interviewee shared, "Attending a professional development session that featured real-life student scenarios allowed me to reconsider my approach based on their trauma. It gave me a broader perspective and made me realize the need to adapt in order to help them succeed." Another highlighted the importance of understanding diverse viewpoints on student behavior and legal implications to manage emotions effectively.

Additionally, thirty-three percent emphasized the significance of exploring alternatives to suspension, focusing on prioritizing decisions that benefit the students and promoting social and emotional learning for a more comprehensive approach to support. One individual noted, "Professional development often offers tried and tested solutions, which boosts teachers' confidence in their implementation." Recognizing both staff and students and their achievements was perceived as a valuable intervention. By anticipating reactions in different scenarios and providing appropriate assistance rather than punishing students, there are more successful outcomes, as indicated by over fifty-three percent of the respondents. Finally, fifty-three percent found professional development valuable in introducing new and effective strategies.

One person interviewed shared their thoughts on the PD experiences, stating, "The experiences made me more aware of legal implications and also the overall lack of support for teachers in my role. I feel fortunate that my administration team makes me feel supported in the decisions I make in the classroom, changing lessons, adjusting schedules, modifying workload, or even teaching in alternative spaces." Another individual mentioned, "Several professional development experiences have opened my eyes to more options for handling different circumstances. This [support] allows me to have a more open mind when a problem arises."

Sixty percent of the interviewees spoke positively about the professional development experiences in the district, referring to learning reflection techniques and being able to see different perspectives. Approximately thirty percent of the interviewees requested additional or different professional development, stating, "The PD experiences help me to understand the general ed curriculum and the goals of the district, but I am left

to make my own decisions in my classroom for the most part. I wish there were better curriculum options for special ed.”

The remaining thirteen percent of those interviewed expressed indifference towards the training and could not comment either way.

***Question 12: How Did the Professional Development and Coaching Help Your Personal Life?***

During interviews, staff members explored various ways to integrate social and emotional learning (SEL) into their personal lives. They discussed seeking support from loved ones, defusing tense public situations, and prioritizing self-care. They emphasized the value of understanding that others face similar challenges to finding comfort in this knowledge. They highlighted how practicing SEL can shape one's character and become a fundamental part of one's identity. Many participants stressed the importance of persisting in trying different approaches to support staff members needing confidence, as these principles foster a secure learning environment for students. A significant number of participants (64%) reported using reset techniques and wellness as coping strategies in challenging situations. One interviewee mentioned the positive impact of incorporating "wellness" time into their professional development day, emphasizing the freedom to dedicate an hour to personal activities. The theme of wellness and recharging was prevalent, as another interviewee expressed the importance of taking time for self-recharge. Furthermore, one participant acknowledged that the professional development experience helped them recognize the importance of alone time to replenish their energy in order to serve others better. Another participant described the PD experiences as immensely helpful in keeping them grounded and balanced.

***Question 13: Is There Anything Else You Would Like to Add or Discuss?***

In the interviews, nine participants shared valuable insights into incorporating Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) in their classrooms. They offered specific examples of how they integrated the concept of "reset" school-wide and consistently used the same terminology. Moreover, one of the trainers highlighted that coaching sessions also functioned as counseling sessions for many staff members, providing them with a space to address challenges in their classrooms and personal lives. These sessions often evolved into opportunities to discuss issues unrelated to teaching or working with students, focusing more on personal traumas. One participant shared that they were excited to have these conversations and talk to adults who cared about the students during the day rather than listen to people complain about what was going wrong. The conversations change the outlook on daily activities to a more positive culture.

**Overall Themes**

The recurring themes from both the focus group and the one-to-one interviews were remarkably similar. The most prevalent topic was the significance of building relationships with students, parents, and peers. Over 86% of the participants emphasized the importance of these relationships. The topic of vocabulary was featured prominently in every interaction, with more than 93% of the participants acknowledging that the vocabulary from professional development experiences significantly contributes to creating a consistent learning environment for students. The term "reset" was mentioned over 101 times during the interviews and focus groups. All participants in both forums cited reasons related to their commitment to education, with none mentioning money or

notoriety for their professional advancement, and almost all specifically highlighting the students as their reasons to enter and stay in the profession. Teachers emphasized that social and emotional learning (SEL) significantly impacted their students throughout the conversations. The child study team discussed the influence of SEL and Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) on the students' daily lives and said that providing students with a voice has made an impact on the school culture.

Teachers reported that some experiences were more effective for them than others. There were varying reports on the coaching experiences. Many staff enjoyed the one-on-one interactions, while others preferred the collaborative nature of the group experiences. Three teachers explained that they enjoyed the experience more with the Department of Education because there was anonymity when seeking guidance for troubles in their classroom without the fear of it appearing on an evaluation.

Trainers recognized that a substantial amount of time has been devoted to listening to teachers' personal trauma unrelated to their students. They also emphasized the importance of healing and moving forward. While many issues and concerns are personal, addressing them is crucial to enable teachers to move forward and effectively work with students. In a similar vein, the trauma associated with student behavior needs to be acknowledged and actively discussed so that teachers can grow and support their students effectively.

There were noticeable variations in outlook among educators with different levels of experience. Novice teachers might have been unfamiliar with the terms "SEL" and "TIC," but they grasped the concepts during discussions. Newly appointed administrators showed great enthusiasm for the support, particularly embracing coaching and team



meetings as effective means of conveying the district's mission and vision. One administrator noted that this sentiment resonated with the discussions held in faculty meetings. In contrast, administrators with over 20 years of experience were less enthusiastic about the curriculum but did recognize that teachers felt more supported through coaching sessions. Educators and administrators with 5-10 years of experience positively viewed the SEL and TIC professional development, considering it a valuable experience for the entire staff.

### **Incident Report Data**

In an examination of the incident reports, it was noted that police involvement decreased dramatically from 2018 to 2019 and again from 2019 to 2020. The district-wide SEL and TIC initiative began in schools in 2019 and continued through 2023. In 2022 and 2023, Wellness Wednesdays were implemented. It is important to note that during COVID, there were no in-person classes from March 2020 until September 2020. Participants returned from COVID stating that the students were worse than they had ever been and the mental health issues had increased exponentially. However, the incident reports do not reflect this.

**Table 2**

*Classroom Incidents*

	2018	2019*	2020**	2021	2022	2023
Police Involvement	120	55	0	2	4	5
Assault on staff	45	22	0	3	5	3
Assault on students	68	41	0	4	3	2
Threatening Students	120	90	2	10	7	10
Physical Control	52	40	0	3	6	4
Threatening Staff	78	61	1	4	2	3
Total Incidents	<b>483</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>27</b>

**Limitations**

On two professional development days, staff members had the option to work from home if they were registered for professional development opportunities or had a plan approved by their supervisor. The staff had the opportunity to choose to participate in focus groups, with one group meeting in the early morning and one in the afternoon, as well as additional 1:1 interviews. Some may have chosen the focus group because they did not take the time to register for other events. The morning group consisted of staff members who were enthusiastic about the concepts of SEL and TIC. They had an in-depth discussion about how these practices had enhanced their teaching methods and how the district could further improve its approach. The last session of the day included a staff member who changed the tone of the focus group by expressing disappointment with the

training and stating that it had no value. As a result, this group contributed less than others. However, several staff members from this group later volunteered to participate in 1:1 interviews. It is worth noting that the administrative focus group took place separately from the instructional staff's, although an administrator was present in the third focus group.

Peer pressure was an obvious factor, as observed by facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice. A few of the staff members used a high tone of voice when speaking and looked uncomfortable when called upon. Two individuals did not contribute during the focus group at all but later volunteered for the individual interviews to comment on the SEL and TIC professional development.

Several members of the staff appeared cautious yet cooperative. Despite the focus group being voluntary and the release statement clarifying that it would not affect their employment, the initial ten minutes of the session with the teachers and support staff felt somewhat constrained, with brief responses. However, one of the groups quickly became more engaged, leading to a more natural and participative conversation. The school administrators and coaches were forthcoming right from the start. It's possible that many participants were cooperative due to my role within the organization. As an administrator, I had yet to reveal my stance on professional development before the focus groups and interviews. When questioned about classroom challenges and the impact of professional development on their decision-making, several staff members seemed reluctant to respond.

## **Chapter V**

### **Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations**

#### **Rationale**

There is a significant need for more research and literature on the impact of social-emotional learning (SEL) and trauma-informed care (TIC) on educator resilience and teacher retention. While most studies focus on student perceptions of teacher interpersonal behaviors, this study shifted the focus to teacher perceptions and the impact on their wellness, instruction, and likeliness to continue in the profession. By evaluating educator perceptions about the effects of SEL and TIC on the school climate, school leaders can gain valuable insights that better equip them to build capacity within the school system, fostering a more supportive and resilient educational environment.

While a few studies have touched on the relevance of this topic, there are still significant gaps in the existing research. For instance, Goodwin-Glick (2017) produced a study on the impact of TIC professional development on the knowledge of school personnel. However, it still needs to address how it changed attitude and practice. Similarly, Baker et al. (2016) conducted a quantitative study to evaluate the attitudes of certified school employees on TIC implementation, but it did not address practice or wellness. These gaps highlight the need for this study to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of SEL and TIC on educator resilience and teacher retention.

## **Research Questions**

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. Do employees report that participating in SEL and TIC professional development and other supports improve their knowledge of these concepts?
2. Do employees report that their dispositions (empathetic concern, perspective taking, interpersonal relationships) and behaviors improve due to participating in SEL and TIC professional development and support?
3. Do educators perceive that there are significant improvements to their classroom climate due to the professional development experiences with SEL and TIC?
4. Do educators perceive TIC and SEL support in the school as contributing to teacher retention?

## **Theoretical Framework**

Two key theoretical theories framed the study: transformational learning and trauma theory. Transformational learning theory, particularly Mezirow's cognitive-rational approach, focuses on fostering critical self-reflection among educators to bring about profound changes in their teaching approach and students (Mezirow, 1978, 1991, 2000). This perspective aligns with Freire's emphasis on empowerment in adult education (Gomes, 2022), both sharing a constructivist approach that views knowledge as arising from interpretation and reflection on new experiences (Baumgartner, 2001). As educators navigate challenges like those brought about by the pandemic and encounter trauma (Goodwin-Glick, 2017; Bandura, 1989), perseverance becomes crucial in acquiring new knowledge and skills. Ultimately, a shift in disposition has the potential to reshape

educators' understanding of trauma-informed care and social-emotional learning and their practice in the classroom.

### **Discussion by Research Question**

#### ***Do Employees Report That Participating in SEL and TIC Professional Development and Other Support Improves Their Knowledge of These Concepts?***

The focus groups and interviews indicated that the professional development experiences significantly enhanced the participants' understanding of social-emotional learning and trauma-informed care. According to Dorado et al. (2016), the study on the outcomes of implementing the social-emotional learning program “HEARTS” demonstrated substantial improvements and effect sizes in trauma-informed knowledge. This discovery is crucial, as a well-informed and responsive faculty is vital to creating a culture of trauma-informed school districts that prioritize awareness and recognition of trauma symptoms (Craig, 2008; Craig, 2016; Ristuccia, 2013). Utilizing professional development allows for the establishment of a shared vision, mutual understanding, and a common language (Chafouleas et al., 2016). The professional development session attended by instructional faculty focused on recognizing the academic, social, emotional, and behavioral signs of students who have experienced trauma. Participants noted that using a common language has significantly contributed to providing a consistent environment for students and reducing negative behavior issues. This theme was prevalent in focus groups and individual interviews.

In discussions, participants shared their insights about Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Trauma-Informed Care (TIC), drawing connections between the

symptoms of trauma and those of other conditions like emotional disturbances or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. This understanding is crucial for school administrators as implementing trauma-informed practices can reduce the need for special education services (Oehlberg, 2008) and improve the well-being of educators. By equipping staff with the ability to differentiate between trauma-related symptoms and disabilities, misdiagnosis among students can be minimized (Szarkowski & Fogler, 2020). According to White-McMahon and Baker (2016), training in trauma-related professional development (PD) helps all school employees manage challenging behavior in the classroom. Participants noted that the challenges have intensified since students returned to school after the COVID-19 disruptions, but the PD equips them with effective tools to support their students.

A small percentage of individuals (13%) pointed out that wellness activities and social-emotional learning (SEL) seemed to have an unintended impact on staff members. They felt that the abundance of positive interventions made them seem less genuine. One specific administrator mentioned feeling overwhelmed by the daily content and expressed skepticism about the possibility of being consistently positive. This feedback came from a school with a low number of incidents and behavior issues, where a behavior intervention team was not deemed necessary, and the support team spent little time. However, the school did face a chronic absenteeism issue, which the administrator linked to student culture rather than the school environment. It is noted that the school environment could contribute to absenteeism as much as the students' home life. Maurice J. Elias, a professor in the Psychology Department at Rutgers University and director of the Rutgers Social-Emotional Learning Lab, discussed a two-step process for reducing

chronic absenteeism. The first step involves identifying and overcoming barriers to school attendance, and the second step is creating a school environment that encourages student attendance (Harper, 2023). The participants in both the interviews and focus groups noted that school attendance had improved when activities and events were happening at the school that could contribute to a positive school culture. By enriching the school day, the students and staff participate more.

It is important to note that childhood trauma has long-lasting adverse effects on a person's mental and physical well-being. Training in Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) focuses on addressing the outcomes of trauma rather than its root causes. The goal is to enhance resilience, improve education, and empower children (Barnett et al., 2019; Bartlett et al., 2016; Levenson, 2017; Sullivan et al., 2016). The well-being of teachers directly impacts the students that they teach. Research consistently shows that teachers who are more stressed are less likely to form close relationships with students, which can negatively impact student achievement. However, well-being is much more than the absence of illness or stress or even feeling content; it is about teachers flourishing more holistically (Roberts & Kim, 2019). The participants in this study were able to articulate the importance of wellness in their lives to assist students in achieving their goals.

Educators in a trauma-informed school strive to cultivate a safe and supportive environment, taking into account the impact of trauma on learning and behavior (Cole et al., 2013; Plumb et al., 2016; Wolpov et al., 2016). However, school administrators have voiced their concerns about fully grasping these concepts as educators seek their support in gaining a comprehensive understanding of the district's mission and vision. The



administration would appreciate additional training and support from coaches and other sources.

Social-emotional learning (SEL) refers to the process through which students and educators gain and utilize the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to form healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve personal and collective goals, demonstrate empathy, build relationships, and make responsible decisions (SEL Toolkit, 2023). Educators who took part in this study were able to articulate the significance of SEL and its impact on their classrooms on a daily basis. The participants emphasized the importance of building relationships, both in the focus groups and interviews. The professional development equips teachers with a fresh perspective on student behavior. This understanding leads to adjustments in their approach to meet the distinct needs of the students, as they recognize that various factors influence students. Educators can identify behavioral patterns by adopting a trauma-informed mindset when observing students and collaborating with them to support their success. Some educators found applying these concepts to their students and classrooms challenging. They perceived the ideas as abstract and not practical in reality. Consequently, they requested further professional development to implement these concepts effectively.

Many staff members were unaware that the professional development (PD) they were attending had any connection to social and emotional learning (SEL) or trauma-informed care (TIC). Though these topics were not mentioned in the title of the PD, attendance twice a year was mandatory, including participation in Wellness Wednesday, a weekly activity for teachers and staff. The staff were unfamiliar with the labels of Social Emotional Learning and Trauma Informed Care. Still, they were familiar with the concepts and viewed them as behavior modification programs or instructional techniques.

Some educators discussed training from prior districts or sessions attended through the Department of Education (DOE). The district has a team called the Champion Team, which claims to collaborate with every school to promote the principles of SEL and TIC.

Despite the dedicated Champion Team at each school, a few staff members (3) still viewed the concept as a behavior modification program specifically for special education students. They did not believe that general education students would benefit from the program, deeming it unnecessary. However, in focus groups, their peers dismissed this perspective and redirected the conversation toward the idea that every student could benefit from building relationships with educators to support them in reaching their educational goals. The more significant majority of educators had a clear understanding of the concepts and could articulate not only the benefits of the programming but also personal experiences where the concepts had positive results in their classroom.

***Do Employees Report That Their Dispositions (Empathetic Concern, Perspective Taking, Interpersonal Relationships) and Behaviors Improve Due to Participating in SEL and TIC Professional Development and Support?***

The paragraphs below will explore how SEL and TIC PD are perceived to influence employee dispositions and behaviors. The theoretical framework of trauma theory, dispositions, and transformational learning offers a perspective through which we can comprehend the outcomes related to the second question.

The concept of trauma-informed care involves recognizing the importance of understanding a person's life experiences in order to provide effective care. This approach can potentially enhance student engagement, health outcomes, and the well-being of

educators and staff (Hopper, Bassuk, & Olivet, 2010). Demonstrating compassion and empathy is crucial to an educator's effectiveness (Smith & Sharbek, 2013). Perspective-taking, a key aspect of disposition and attitude, encompasses how individuals perceive others and themselves. Study participants noted that they made efforts to better comprehend students' perspectives before making decisions when dealing with upset students and before offering feedback.

The findings also indicate that participants perceived the professional development to have a minor impact on their own feelings of respect, trust, empathy, care, and interpersonal connections with students. Participants noted a shift towards more student-centered attitudes, including consistently treating students with care and respect and developing enduring connections with students that promote positive interactions in the classroom. Participants also reported taking a personal interest in what students do outside of the classroom and recognizing students for small achievements in the classroom as a positive interaction rather than negative consequences. This recognition of students was reported as a result of being aware of the impact of their traumatic experiences and having empathy for the students.

As per the dispositions theoretical framework, the definition of dispositions encompasses habits of mind (Katz & Raths, 1985; Thornton, 2013), feelings, attitudes, beliefs, and preferences that lead to a tendency to react or behave in a specific manner (Eberly et al., 2007), and are integral components of an effective educator (Wasicski et al., 2004). Habits of mind are more challenging to alter than to maintain due to the reinforcement of current mindsets by past experiences (Cranton, 2002). These habits influence self-perceptions and the interpretation of experiences and instructional

knowledge (Cranton, 2002). The nature of habit implies that the behavior occurs without deliberate thought; instructional behaviors are likely rooted in well-thought-out plans, even if they are perceived as unconscious (Simpson, 2012). This suggests that knowledge is more malleable than beliefs, attitudes, and feelings. Two of the four focus groups indicated that the repetitive nature of positive interactions led to the development of habits. Teachers expressed enthusiasm about the opportunity to practice behaviors, and through continuous practice, these behaviors became inherent to who they were as teachers and individuals.

It is suggested that there may be more potential for change in the trauma-informed attitude rather than in behaviors, as proposed by researchers such as Baker (2016), who argued that attitudes toward trauma-informed care influence behaviors. Educator behavior is influenced by the interconnectedness of knowledge, goals, and attitudes, as outlined by Schoenfield (2011), which can be valuable in shaping professional development practices. Changing attitudes can be a slow process, especially when educators are unaware that change is necessary (Schoenfield, 2011). Administrators should collaborate with educators to provide a safe environment for them to explore their attitudes toward traumatized students, allowing for the opening of their minds to new knowledge and behaviors.

Transformational learning occurs when there is a shift in perspective, belief, attitude, or habit (Merriam, 2007). The outcomes indicate that professional development (PD) had a significant impact on attitudes toward trauma-informed care and social-emotional learning, suggesting that transformational learning occurred. This type of learning probably occurred because the new knowledge presented during the social-

emotional learning (SEL) and trauma-informed care (TIC) professional development prompted a critical reflection on the validity of their existing beliefs (Cranton, 2002). This form of learning differs from learning from informational text in that it involves a fundamental change in how individuals perceive themselves and the world around them (Merriam et al., 2007). Brown et al. (2012) acknowledged that gains in knowledge and beliefs do not necessarily lead to a change in behavior. The ultimate goal of the SEL and TIC professional development is to change educators' behaviors to enhance their own well-being and that of their students. Participants reported that it compelled them to reflect on their classroom practices and changed how they perceived and interacted with students on a daily basis.

During the professional development (PD) sessions, participants experienced a transformation in their learning process, leading to a noticeable shift in their attitudes and behaviors in the classroom. The PD sessions specifically impacted their knowledge and understanding of social and emotional learning (SEL) and trauma-informed care (TIC) practices. The activities in the PD were intentionally designed to encourage participants to reflect on their preconceived notions about student behavior and learning.

Engaging in critical reflection sometimes prompted emotional responses such as guilt or embarrassment as instructors recognized the disparities between their new insights and their previous beliefs. Previously, many instructors may have held the belief that student behaviors were primarily manipulative and intentional, thus warranting punitive measures rather than empathy and patience.

The PD sessions consistently provided instructors with a fresh perspective on student behavior, fostering more extraordinary patience in the classroom. Embracing a

trauma-informed mindset enabled instructors to understand that student behavior might be rooted in underlying issues and a genuine desire to succeed despite not knowing how.

Instructors were encouraged to adopt a constructive approach to evaluating student behavior and to focus on their strengths rather than weaknesses. Rather than resorting to punitive measures that could potentially retraumatize a student, instructors were urged to teach students the importance of following rules and to hold them accountable through supportive and non-harmful means. They were able to reiterate this during focus groups and interviews by restating the importance of SEL and TIC in schools.

Students previously labeled as lazy, unmotivated, and troublesome may be seen in a new light through a Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) perspective as withdrawn or troubled individuals seeking a safe space (Cole et al., 2013). In interviews and focus groups, participants demonstrated an understanding that, through a TIC lens, all behaviors serve a purpose and convey something that needs to be addressed (White-McMahon & Baker, 2016). Teachers who were previously upset by student behavior appear to have recognized the importance of maintaining objectivity and respect when students exhibit behaviors commonly seen as disrespectful (White-McMahon & Baker, 2016). Given that a majority of students have adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), educators are urged to approach all interactions with sensitivity (SAMSHA, 2023)

Participants found it easier to admit to employing trauma-informed behaviors rather than acknowledging past dispositions that contradicted the nature of the profession. The disposition was especially apparent given the horrifying stories of traumatized youth and their impact on learning. Participants extensively discussed how embracing trauma-

informed approaches has influenced their professional lives in the classroom, as well as their day-to-day lives at home and in public. They noted that even mundane inconveniences, such as traffic, became more tolerable when they adopted a different perspective on human behavior. Taking a breath and moving forward was reported to make a significant difference.

The findings of the study show that professional development (PD) had a positive impact on shaping perceptions regarding the future use of trauma-informed care and social-emotional learning. For instance, interviewees noted that they started prioritizing the establishment of connections with students and their peers. Collaborating with their peers has led to a consistent approach across classrooms, contributing to a positive and secure student environment. Prior to the PD and coaching, participants expressed challenges in transitioning between classes due to varying expectations. The adoption of consistent terminology has aided students in understanding the expectations of each class. Collaboration has also reduced teachers' feelings of isolation in their classrooms, offering them the chance to share effective techniques, express frustrations, and enhance their teaching methods. At the core of the trauma-informed approach is the deliberate use of behaviors to foster physically and psychologically safe environments for both staff and students (SAMHSA, 2023).

The participants noted improvements in positive behavior when engaging with students and staff, including active listening, offering positive reinforcement for good behavior, and showing empathy towards students. They expressed that the professional development and support have been valuable experiences. Additionally, many participants requested further assistance, such as coaching and various professional

development opportunities, to enhance classroom behavioral support and instructional strategies and proactively address potential issues.

Childhood trauma has been shown to have a negative impact on self-regulation skills, physical health, relationships, perceptions of safety, and academic aptitude (Tishelman et al., 2010). A student's sense of safety at school depends on factors such as trust, respect, predictability, caring relationships with adults, and feelings of acceptance and support, all of which have been demonstrated to influence learning, memory, and higher-order thinking (Willis, 2016). Longitudinal studies have indicated that positive student perceptions of safety and care were linked to higher scores on most achievement assessments (Edgerton & McKechnie, 2022). This study demonstrates that Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Trauma-Informed Care Professional Development (TIC PD) positively influenced educators' empathy and readiness to support traumatized students. It also enhanced the recognition of the importance of trauma-informed care and behaviors, aiming to enhance students' feelings of safety, trust, respect, and caring relationships in order to promote their success.

Educators' biases may lead to unequal treatment of students and affect their interpersonal connections (Souers & Hall, 2016). The study found that teachers' awareness of their biases can help them address and respect all students equally. Participants recognized the impact of biases and acknowledged that professional development had heightened their awareness of their own biases toward students. In the focus group, some teachers found it challenging to confront their biases, feeling uneasy about the possibility of differential treatment. It was emphasized that creating awareness among staff about their biases is crucial for adjusting behaviors and fostering a safe



environment for all students. Biases can manifest in various ways, from discomfort with a student's name due to personal experiences to more complex issues like racial and gender biases in the classroom.

The "reset" concept was frequently emphasized, highlighting the opportunity to correct mistakes rather than persisting on the wrong path. This idea was considered crucial by students, staff, and resource homes, shaping their interactions with students. It prompted a conversation about establishing a shared vocabulary for de-escalation incidents to ensure consistent communication among staff members and better understanding by students during a crisis situation. Educators mentioned that after professional development sessions, they often offer students alternative options, provide encouragement, and engage them in discussions. They also inquire about reasons for students' struggles in completing tasks or offer the chance to discuss them later. However, it was reiterated that these strategies are most effective when there is a pre-existing relationship with the students. To build this foundation, teachers engage students in conversations about assignments and consistently offer two options as part of their implementation of social and emotional learning (SEL). This approach fosters an understanding that students' behaviors are often not intentional but rather a result of trauma and past experiences.

***Do Educators Perceive That There are Significant Improvements to Their Classroom Climate Due to the Professional Development Experiences With SEL and TIC?***

Due to the nature of the students who attend the district's schools, participants felt that the TIC and SEL curriculum was more relevant to their practice than that of a regular school district. The PD was relevant to the daily responsibilities of the educators due to

the amount and variety of interactions with students. Participants discussed at length the importance of establishing relationships with students and, in some cases, were able to articulate how they established the relationships through daily communication and positive interactions. A few teachers were able to explain that remaining positive with the students could become frustrating until there were rewards evidenced by a return in conversation or a smile from a student.

It has been evidenced through the lack of incidents at one school that the PD has had an impact on the interactions with students. Participants were reminded that police interactions were once a daily occurrence at the school, and now they have been reduced to an occasional occurrence. The group attributed this to increased training and support from administrators. The constant talk of “reset” allows them to not only give the students grace but grace to one another when they need a break.

The participants discussed how the curriculum has enabled them to handle tense situations in various public settings, such as concerts, grocery stores, and even while driving. Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) equips them with techniques to de-escalate these situations and offers a new perspective, particularly in traffic. Continued practice allows the staff to refine these techniques, making them an integral part of their approach and fostering a more positive mindset. According to Laird (2022), educators must embody social-emotional learning (SEL) to teach it effectively. To truly understand their students and their learning, teachers who interact with students should be introduced to basic information about trauma, its prevalence, and its impact (NCSS, 2021). This includes understanding both their trauma and their students' trauma, as well as what trauma-informed care entails, particularly the disproportionate effects on individuals from

underserved groups and people of color. Teachers must be aware of what they and their students are experiencing in the classroom and society (NCSS, 2021).

Staff members generally believe that the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) professional development has equipped them with techniques and skills that allow them to demonstrate more empathy and understanding towards students. They have developed a greater tolerance for student behaviors and have learned how to hold students accountable in more meaningful and constructive ways rather than simply punitive. While some staff members have struggled to implement the techniques, they still see value in the concepts. During the training, some staff used the opportunity to voice their concerns about current policies and procedures. It was evident that a few staff members needed help finding the training relevant to their roles. However, those who fully embraced the concepts have been applying them to various aspects of their lives, resulting in reduced stress and improved ability to handle challenging situations. While challenges in the classroom persist, staff members have found it easier to move forward by holding students accountable and then letting go of the issues.

The educators emphasized their ability to maintain perspective and recalibrate when they encounter frustration with students, administration, or colleagues. They underlined the importance of letting go of unimportant issues and concentrating on success. Understanding their own learning styles and acknowledging any personal trauma allows them to recognize their limitations. According to the participants, SEL and TIC made a difference in behaviors and teachers. Over the last several years, it has been a

way to relate to other teachers. It is often simply listening to what is happening in the classroom and supporting each other's decisions.

The majority of the staff mentioned that they have been utilizing de-escalation techniques introduced during the various Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) trainings they attended. Many emphasized the importance of practices such as controlled breathing and showing understanding to students within reasonable limits. They highlighted the significance of building strong relationships early on to prevent behaviors from escalating. Teachers candidly discussed the challenges posed by at-risk students, who sometimes exhibit destructive behavior, aggression, and confrontational attitudes, particularly during transitions in their living arrangements. These behaviors create discomfort for the entire classroom, teachers, support staff, and administration. According to the teachers, these students are not always held accountable for their behavior due to administrative leniency based on TIC and SEL principles. They believe that it's crucial for the students to understand that such behaviors are unacceptable. The teachers acknowledged that building longer-term relationships in the same placement can sometimes help address these challenges but also noted that de-escalation techniques do not always yield the desired results. Trainers emphasized the use of de-escalation techniques and understanding the students' trauma. They highlighted the utilization of non-verbal cues and avoided mirroring the students' energy.

Additionally, they emphasized the importance of allowing students to express themselves, practicing calm breathing, and providing access to calming spaces. Trainers stress the importance of equipping staff with the tools to recognize that building strong relationships is crucial for success in the classroom and can contribute to managing

behavioral issues. While acknowledging that not every student will connect with every teacher on a deep level, all participants agreed that student-teacher relationships play a pivotal role.

Participants noted that the trainers effectively demonstrated the activities they anticipated the staff to utilize, providing choices without imposing any particular approach. They made an effort to encourage everyone to collaborate and work in teams despite knowing that some individuals disliked it. The trainers also presented alternatives for group work, acknowledging that while some people are not keen on participating in large groups, they are willing to engage in smaller ones. Additionally, the trainers emphasized the importance of involving everyone. The educators recognized the significance of these techniques when they themselves were involved in the process.

The coaching sessions evolved into a platform for collaboration. When teachers voiced their frustrations about school policies and procedures, they were directed to the coaching sessions to address their concerns and work together with their colleagues to find solutions. This collaborative approach enables teachers to feel less isolated and empowers them to tackle their challenges with the support of the entire staff.

***Do Educators Perceive TIC and SEL Support in The School as Contributing to Teacher Retention?***

The most meaningful aspects of their profession were not tied to monetary rewards but rather to the moments of progress in student learning and the positive influence they could have on their students' lives. The conversations all revolved around job satisfaction, helping students, and the love of learning. The proudest moments were also not about transactional motivation but centered on breakthroughs with learning and

making a difference in students' lives. More than 77% of the participants expressed that it is often a gratifying experience for educators to witness their students' progress, a testament to the positive relationships fostered with them. The trainers and coaches cite the same reasons for getting into the profession. All were teachers who found that SEL made a big difference with their students or Child Study Team that saw what an impact SEL and TIC had on the every day of students. A fundamental purpose of trauma-informed care and social-emotional learning is to provide appropriate support so that students and teachers can become resilient in the face of life stressors. TIC and SEL are whole-school approaches that benefit staff and students (Blaustein, 2013). Li (2023) determined that resilient educators were better equipped to manage work-related stressors, experienced less emotional burnout, greater job satisfaction, and improved personal interactions. The teaching profession is growing in complexity due to additional stressors such as secondary trauma and compassion fatigue felt by educators who interact with traumatized students (SAMSHA, 2023; Cole et al., 2013)

School administrators must prioritize creating a supportive and secure environment for educators, ensuring they feel safe, encouraged, and capable of success to retain talented professionals in the field. Social and emotional learning (SEL) and trauma-informed care (TIC) professional development programs play a critical role in establishing a physically and psychologically safe environment that fosters academic success for at-risk students. Exceptional leaders articulate and promote their trauma-informed vision, leverage a TIC framework to inform decision-making and actions, and uphold shared values with the school community (Parameswaran et al., 2023). These leaders also empower educators to believe in their ability to support the healing and

growth of traumatized students, demonstrating trust in their capacity to make a positive impact, celebrating small wins, and providing meaningful feedback (Kouzes & Posner, 2012).

Educators must take proactive steps in their school community and fully comprehend their role in creating a trauma-informed school environment. Realizing that their own well-being is as important as their students, in this study, 30% of the educators interviewed prioritized their own wellness. While they possess a firm grasp of the concepts and vision, they are uncertain about the subsequent actions to take. It's crucial for educators to not only have the knowledge but also the confidence to apply trauma-informed practices effectively. Providing support and interventions to educators will boost their confidence and motivation to continue their work at the school. Having trauma-informed dispositions allows educators to establish and maintain positive relationships based on respect and trust, as well as create learning environments that promote resilience. These dispositions guide educators' actions and enable them to manage their emotions in challenging situations, de-escalate confrontations, and believe in their capacity to make a difference. Educators have acknowledged the considerable time spent addressing teachers' personal challenges, which may not be directly related to their students. It's crucial for teachers to have the opportunity to heal and move forward. Many of these concerns are personal, but addressing them is essential for teachers to engage effectively with their students.

Similarly, acknowledging and addressing trauma related to student behavior is essential so teachers can support their students' growth. Teachers and administrators recognize the importance of Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) and Social-Emotional

Learning (SEL) for their students. They stress the need to support students in their healing journey so that they can fully participate in the learning process. Some staff members have also highlighted the necessity of prioritizing their own well-being, understanding that being in a positive state of mind equips them better to support their students.

Educators emphasized the significance of empathy and patience in teaching. They stressed the importance of being patient with students to ensure they feel supported and prevent behavioral issues by building solid relationships through active listening. Less experienced teachers were mainly focused on earning respect and acknowledged the need for support in building relationships. Coaches highlighted the need for teachers to actively listen and address specific behaviors and trauma experienced by students and parents. Additionally, teachers expressed frustration with external stakeholders' excessive influence on classroom matters and feeling isolated from their colleagues and administrators.

Educators have expressed the challenges they have faced since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. They have emphasized the overwhelming pressure to meet the diverse needs of all students. They often feel worn out, especially when they see others working remotely while they continue to teach in person. Maintaining a constant state of readiness can be exhausting, and it becomes even more challenging when faced with disruptive behavior from students. They emphasize the importance of starting each day with a fresh perspective and letting go of negative emotions from the previous day. Understanding that it's not personal helps them to return to the classroom the next day with renewed focus. From a training standpoint, educators are encouraged to prioritize



their well-being and engage in wellness practices. Breathing exercises are integrated into training sessions, allowing staff members to participate actively. Additionally, staff are reminded to seek assistance from administrators or colleagues when they need to step away. The training team provides daily wellness messages and encourages staff to prioritize self-care, understanding that these strategies may not resonate with everyone every day. Still, they can be beneficial for some individuals on certain occasions.

The educators emphasized the deep reward of witnessing a student's progress. They emphasized that building solid relationships with students enables the staff to observe and support their growth. Every teacher is dedicated to their student's success and believes that listening to them and making them feel valued are crucial to fostering these relationships. The instructors are committed to equipping the staff with the necessary tools to understand that strong relationships are fundamental to classroom success and can help address behavioral issues. While not every student will form a close bond with every teacher, nurturing student-teacher relationships remains essential.

There is a widespread sentiment among staff members that they need more support and feel isolated when it comes to accessing information and applying it to their day-to-day classroom activities. On the other hand, some staff members have expressed that the professional development (PD) they received has boosted their confidence in handling the subject matter and effectively reaching students. It is imperative for the administration to actively engage in these sessions rather than just making fleeting appearances. Without administrative buy-in, it's difficult for staff to fully commit to and effectively implement the material in their student interactions. Demonstrating a commitment to coaching and supporting staff members signifies their importance and the

need to provide them with sufficient support. Administrators extend their support to both students and staff in social-emotional learning (SEL) and other initiatives. While they are more inclined to hold staff members accountable than students, it is essential to emphasize that SEL and TIC do not eliminate accountability. Instead, the key is to find the most suitable form of accountability for each situation, fostering a greater sense of support among the staff.

The topic of relationships was a recurring theme in both the focus groups and the interviews. Teachers emphasized the significance of student relationships in their well-being and academic success. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' mental health and well-being has been profound, affecting their behavior and interactions with teachers, leading to decreased attendance and engagement in school. Managing negative behavior in the classroom can be demanding for teachers, resulting in emotional exhaustion and reduced job satisfaction. Social-emotional learning (SEL) has helped educators prioritize these relationships, as the quality of their instruction suffers without them. Research shows that positive work environments enhance student performance. While the structural and classroom processes of SEL quality indicators have been extensively researched, the social-emotional capacity of teachers has only recently been acknowledged as a crucial factor in quality instruction and school climate (Evans et al., 2015; Will, 2022).

### **Summary**

Participants experienced significant positive increases in disposition and behaviors. Still, they noted a particularly strong growth in their knowledge of trauma-informed care and social-emotional learning after attending professional development

experiences and coaching sessions. Interestingly, many participants did not recall attending the workshops and sessions when referred to them by social-emotional learning and trauma-informed care professional development, but they could recount the content during conversations. The participants who did not recall the experiences had attended workshops and seminars; a few had even volunteered for activities and events on the district “Wellness Wednesday.” Prior to the professional development (PD), the participants were not aware of trauma-informed care as a term. However, some had encountered the term or attended workshops in other districts or with the Department of Education. Participants perceived themselves as caring and thoughtful individuals before the PD, and the program simply heightened their awareness of the impact of trauma and the importance of creating a safe environment for students. It is evident that educators require trauma-informed care and social-emotional learning PD to comprehend the impact of trauma on students (Oerhberg, 2008; Phifer & Hull, 2016). More than 77% of participants acknowledged the impact of trauma on students and were able to discuss the concepts with peers and administrators.

A topic of conversation in focus groups and at least three interviews was that the mental health and behavior issues of the students had increased exponentially. When asked about behaviors, it was stated that the behaviors had increased; administrators acknowledged that the behaviors may have increased slightly, but staff members were reacting to them more positively and getting better results since participating in SEL and TIC experiences. Further, COVID-19 impacted the results for 2020. There were minimal incidents because the students were not in school. While the teachers were remote, the school's student population changed, and the teachers were prepared to return with new

expectations and a new outlook on the student population, as seen in the reduction of incidents in 2021 and 2022.

During interviews following their professional development experiences, participants may have been inclined to demonstrate positive change as the researcher was also the chief school administrator. On two professional development days, staff were given the option to work from home if they had planned professional development during the day; two of the time slots for focus groups were scheduled and included in the available professional development. They were then able to self-select into focus groups. The early morning group was eager to discuss how social and emotional learning (SEL) and trauma-informed care (TIC) had positively influenced their practice. They also shared ideas on how the district could further improve its approach. However, during the last session of the day, one staff member expressed dissatisfaction with the training, impacting the group's dynamics. Despite this, several members from that group volunteered for individual interviews and elaborated on their appreciation of the support and training. In addition, the administrative focus group was conducted separately from the staff focus groups, although there was an administrator present in the third focus group.

One of the most prominent topics that resurfaced with both the focus groups and interviews was the importance of consistent vocabulary throughout the school. The term “reset” was reported as a valuable tool both with the students and in the personal lives of the participants. The participants also spoke about using “I” statements rather than “you” statements to create a positive culture in the school. It was reported that the SEL and TIC PD not only impacted their professional life but made things easier for them in their

personal lives. The participants said they were able to diffuse situations in public and create a more positive relationship with the people around them, forming the relationships that they touted as crucial for the success of their students and themselves in the classroom. The relationships are important in establishing the culture of the school, as teachers are not leaving because of the kids; they are leaving because of the culture established (Gomez-Leal, 2022).

It is important to acknowledge the retirement and resignation of three administrators in one school within three years. There may be a connection between the frequency of intense incidents and the departure of administrators. The administrators resigned during 2018, 2019 and the beginning of 2020. There has been a consistent administrator in the school since 2020. The SEL and TIC coaching sessions have greatly influenced the reduction of incidents at the school, and the current administrator strongly supports these programs.

The professional development (PD) received positive feedback from the participants and is considered a valuable tool for fostering a positive culture within the school district. Fostering a positive culture is crucial for retaining teachers and enabling them to thrive in their chosen profession. The research of De Carvalho, Pinto, and Marôco (2017) stated that most teachers who implemented SEL programs scored higher in self-awareness, awareness of their surroundings, and personal accomplishment than in the comparison group. Similarly, Zinsler, Christensen, and Torres (2016) found that teachers in educational settings with SEL programs reported feeling better supported in handling challenging behaviors and experienced higher job satisfaction, which would retain teachers within the profession. It is essential to offer multiple modes of PD

experiences in order to meet the needs of the faculty, not unlike a teacher would for her students. Teachers thrive in different environments, and conveying the same messages in various formats and experiences is important.

## **Recommendations**

### ***District Recommendations***

The findings from the interviews and focus groups clearly indicate the importance of providing support to teachers in the classroom. With teachers spending the majority of their day alone with groups of 6-12 students, it is crucial for them to feel supported during professional development experiences, faculty meetings, and throughout the school day, both by administrators and peers. It is recommended that school administrators actively participate in coaching sessions and other professional development experiences to show their support. Teachers rely on these coaching sessions not only for professional support but also for personal well-being. The coaching sessions, Social-Emotional Learning, and Trauma-Informed Care Professional Development should continue as part of the professional development plan.

Instructors should prioritize providing constructive feedback and highlighting students' strengths rather than their weaknesses. It's crucial for educators to teach students about accountability in a way that avoids punitive measures that could potentially cause further distress. While trauma-informed care is essential, it's not the complete solution. It correctly underscores the specific needs of individuals who have experienced trauma. Positive psychology sheds light on the limitations of solely addressing symptoms and instead focuses on improving the conditions that contribute to overall well-being. Trauma-informed care enables educators to approach trauma with sensitivity to prevent

re-traumatization. The next step would be to establish a healing-centered environment. A healing-centered environment takes a holistic approach, incorporating culture, spirituality, civic action, and collective healing. This approach considers trauma not as an isolated individual experience but as a collective experience of trauma and healing. The concept of healing-centered engagement broadens our understanding of responses to trauma and offers a more holistic approach to promoting well-being (Ginwright, 2018; SAMSHA, 2023). It's important for the district to work towards creating a healing-centered environment as educators familiarize themselves with trauma-informed care.

### ***Recommendations for the Field of Education***

Many participants expressed the need for additional professional development that focuses more on instructional techniques rather than what they perceive as behavior modification programs. They want to take a proactive approach to manage classroom behaviors rather than just addressing existing issues. The primary motivation for entering the education field was to witness students' success and assist them in becoming productive members of the community. By creating an environment that promotes student success, teachers can also thrive in achieving their professional goals. It has been disheartening for educators to encounter disrespect and behavior issues on a daily basis. Since the onset of the pandemic, educators have reported an increase in mental health issues and behaviors in schools, which they are uncertain how to handle. Providing opportunities for educators to collaborate will enable them to develop solutions and create a safe environment for themselves and their students. Educators need support through PD experiences, coaching, and administrative support. Policies must support a

caring and safe school culture in line with the intended purpose of the professional development programs and include time to collaborate and problem solve.

It's essential to consider that classifying students based on their trauma may perpetuate explicit bias and institutional racism. Educators need to recognize that their implicit and explicit racial biases can affect the health and well-being of students and their families as part of a healing-centered approach. Engaging in reflective practice can help educators acknowledge their biases and understand how they influence students.

Throughout the document and study, it is emphasized that the health and well-being of teachers are just as crucial as that of students for overall student success. Educators need to recognize that Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) are essential not only for their students' well-being but also for their own.

### **Further Research**

After implementing professional development in Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and Trauma-informed Care (TIC), researchers can gather and analyze data from various schools, considering factors such as size, demographics, and location. The research will aid in measuring educators' perceptions of trauma-related knowledge, attitudes, and dispositions. Furthermore, researchers can compare the effectiveness of trauma-informed care by studying schools that do not have such programs. Long-term studies are also recommended to examine the outcomes over time. Periodically organizing focus groups and interviews to measure further improvements in knowledge and dispositions could provide valuable insights.

The findings from this study indicate that educators recognized a significant improvement in the implementation of SEL and TIC. However, it's important to note that



educators' acknowledgment does not guarantee actual implementation. It is crucial for researchers, school leaders, and students who regularly engage with educators to assess the implementation of trauma-informed behavior and social-emotional learning in the classroom.

Simpson (2012) suggested that researchers explore the impact of educator dispositions on students' standardized test scores and their educational, personal, and social well-being. Educators may believe that they are caring and exhibit trauma-sensitive behavior; however, if a student fails to have a similar perception, the disconnect between the beliefs can negatively impact the relationship. While SEL and TIC are being systematically embedded into the school culture, administrators and researchers should utilize school data to verify the benefits described in the literature, such as a reduction in school bullying, high school dropouts, suspensions, absenteeism, and teacher retention (Oehlberg, 2008).

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## Appendix A

### Research Questions

Question	Data	Analysis
Do employees report that their knowledge of SEL and TIC concepts improved due to participating in SEL and TIC professional development and support?	Interview Focus groups	Conventional content analysis, descriptive reporting
Do employees report that their dispositions (empathetic concern, perspective taking, interpersonal behaviors) and behaviors improve due to participating in SEL and TIC professional development and support?	Interview Focus Group	Conventional content analysis, descriptive reporting
Do employees perceive improvements to their classroom climate due to the professional development experiences with SEL and TIC?	Interview Focus Groups	Conventional content analysis, descriptive reporting

## Appendix B

### Individual Interview Protocol

Thank you for your involvement in my research. Your participation in the focus group made you an ideal candidate for this study. As previously discussed in the larger group, our district, and organization have invested substantially in social-emotional learning and trauma-informed care. Our teaching staff is encouraged to utilize social and emotional skills, such as reflection and collaboration, during their lessons and as role models within the school community. Throughout this session, I will gain insight into your teaching practices, relationships with students and colleagues, and any concerns you may have. You are welcome to ask me any questions you may have, and if you decide to discontinue, we can halt at any point. Rest assured that your building administrator will not be informed, and your responses will remain anonymous throughout the study.

Question	Does not apply	In the classroom	In your life experiences
Please tell me why you got into teaching and what your proudest moment was at the school.			
Age Range			
Affiliation with the district			
Professional Development sessions attended			
1. Please tell me about your experiences with SEL and TIC.			
2. Could you tell me how trauma impacts students and adults?			

3. What are some of the ways trauma is detected in the classroom?			
4. How do you utilize empathy to create positive and trusting relationships?			
5. When upset with a student, what techniques do you use to diffuse the situation?			
6. What is the connection between your sense of well-being and the educational experience you provide your students?			
7. How do you best support students who experience difficulties outside the classroom? 8. What about inside the classroom?			
8. What are the best strategies for encouraging students to assert themselves constructively?			
9. How do you respond when students aren't engaged in classroom activities?			
10. How do your personal preferences/biases affect how you interact with your students?			
11. How did the PD			

experiences you attended help to make you feel supported in the classroom?			
12. We have been talking about the students. How do the PD experiences help you make decisions in the classroom?			
13. How did the PD experiences and coaching help your personal life?			

## Appendix C

### Focus Group Protocol - Teachers/ Coaches

#### Introductions:

I would like to express my gratitude for your presence today. As you know, our district and organization have invested significant effort in social-emotional learning and trauma-informed care. Our teaching staff is encouraged to exercise social and emotional skills such as reflection and collaboration during lessons and as role models within the school community. A prime example of this is engaging in group discussions to explore diverse perspectives on a given topic. As part of my research study to enhance our organization, I am thrilled to be here today to discuss social-emotional learning and trauma-informed care and how it affects you as educators. During this session, I will learn about your teaching practices, relationships with students and colleagues, and any concerns you may have. You are welcome to ask me any questions you may have, and if you decide to discontinue, we can halt at any point. Rest assured that your building administrator will not be informed, and your responses will remain anonymous throughout the study.

	Does not apply	Coaching	PD group experiences
- What types of experiences have you had related to Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Trauma-Informed Care (TIC)?			
How did the PD experiences impact you as a teacher?			
How did the PD			

experiences impact you as a learner?			
What were the most significant takeaways?			
Would you want to continue with the PD experiences? What aspects?			
Is there value in teachers having the same experiences?			
Did the experiences have an impact on your personal life as well as your professional life?			
Do you have any other comments or feedback?			

## **Appendix D**

### **Adult Consent Form**

Title: The Impact of Social-Emotional Learning and Trauma-Informed Care on Teacher Well-Being and Capacity in the Classroom.

Principal Investigator: Shelley Zion

#### **KEY INFORMATION AND CONSENT TO TAKE PART IN A RESEARCH STUDY**

#### **ADULT CONSENT FORM FOR SOCIAL AND BEHAVIORAL RESEARCH**

**TITLE OF STUDY:** The Impact of Social-Emotional Learning and Trauma-Informed Care on Teacher Well-Being and Capacity in the Classroom.

**Principal Investigator:** Shelley Zion

You are being asked to take part in a research study. This consent form is part of an informed consent process for a research study, and it will provide key information that will help you decide whether you wish to volunteer for this research study.

Please carefully read the key information provided in questions 1-9 and 14 below. The purpose behind those questions is to provide clear information about the purpose of the study, study-specific information about what will happen in the course of the study, what are the anticipated risks and benefits, and what alternatives are available to you if you do not wish to participate in this research study.

The study team will explain the study to you, and they will answer any questions you might have before volunteering to take part in this study. It is important that you take your time to make your decision. You may take this consent form with you to ask a family member or anyone else before agreeing to participate in the study.

If you have questions at any time during the research study, you should feel free to ask the study team and should expect to be given answers that you completely understand.

After all of your questions have been answered, if you still wish to take part in the study, you will be asked to sign this informed consent form.

You are not giving up any of your legal rights by volunteering for this research study or by signing this consent form.

After all of your questions have been answered, if you still wish to take part in the study, you will be asked to sign this informed consent form.

The Principal Investigator, Shelley Zion, Kelley Michalowski, or another member of the study team will also be asked to sign this informed consent.

**1. What is the purpose of the study?**

This study will explore the impact of SEL and trauma-informed care on the culture and climate and teacher retention post-pandemic.

**2. Why have you been asked to take part in this study?**

*Our intended audience consists of teachers who have participated in professional development programs centered around social-emotional learning and trauma-informed care. These educators work within the Department of Children and Families Regional Schools and are inclusive of both male and female teachers, regardless of their background or years of experience.*

**3. What will you be asked to do if you take part in this research study?**

*You will participate in a focus group to discuss the impact of social-emotional learning and trauma-informed care professional development on your professional and personal life experiences.*

**4. Who may take part in this research study? And who may not?**

*Any Department of Children and Families Office of Education instructor may participate in the research study. This study will not exclude any instructor who would like to participate.*

**5. How long will the study take, and where will the research study be conducted?**

*The planned study is set to take place at the Department of Children and Families, Office of Education, located at 50 East State Street in Trenton, NJ 08625. Furthermore, to facilitate convenience and safety, a significant number of interviews are expected to be conducted on the Microsoft TEAMS virtual platform. This will enable teachers to participate in the study without the need for physical travel.*

**6. How many visits may it take to complete the study?**

Participants are asked to participate in one focus group and one individual interview.

**7. What are the risks and/or discomforts you might experience if you take part in this study?**

You may be exposed to differing opinions in the focus group.

**8. Are there any benefits for you if you choose to take part in this research study?**

Our study may not yield any direct benefits. However, it could help us improve our understanding of professional development in the district and provide better support to teachers. This would ultimately benefit both the district and the teachers.



**9. What are the alternatives if you do not wish to participate in the study?**

Your alternative to the focus group is an individual interview or to not participate in the study.

**10. How many subjects will be enrolled in the study?**

*There will be 35 subjects enrolled in the study.*

**11. How will you know if new information is learned that may affect whether you are willing to stay in this research study?**

During the study, you will be updated about any new information that may affect whether you are willing to continue participating in the study. You will be contacted if new information is learned that may affect you.

**12. Will there be any cost to you to take part in this study?**

There is no cost to participate in the study.

**13. Will you be paid to take part in this study?**

You will not be paid to participate in the study.

**14. Are you providing any identifiable private information as part of this research study?**

Your identifiable information will not be used in future research projects or disclosed to anyone outside the research team.

**15. How will information about you be kept private or confidential?**

All efforts will be made to keep your personal information in your research record confidential, but total confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. Data and consent forms will be kept separately in password-protected files.

**16. What will happen if you do not wish to take part in the study or if you later decide not to stay in the study?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, or you may change your mind at any time.

If you do not want to enter the study or decide to stop participating, your relationship with the study staff will not change, and you may do so without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

You may also withdraw your consent for the use of data already collected about you, but you must do this in writing to *Shelley Zion at [Zions@rowan.edu](mailto:Zions@rowan.edu)*.

If you decide to withdraw from the study for any reason, you may be asked to participate in one meeting with the Principal Investigator.

**17. Who can you call if you have any questions?**

If you have any questions about taking part in this study or if you feel you may have suffered a research-related injury, you can call the Principal Investigator:

*Shelley Zion*  
*Education Leadership*  
*856-Contact Number*

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you can call:

Office of Research Compliance  
(856) 256-4078– Glassboro/CMSRU

**18. What are your rights if you decide to take part in this research study?**

You have the right to ask questions about any part of the study at any time. You should not sign this form unless you have had a chance to ask questions and have been given answers to all of your questions.

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**AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE**

I have read the entire information about the research study, research risks, benefits and the alternatives, or it has been read to me, and I believe that I understand what has been discussed.

All of my questions about this form or this study have been answered, and I agree to volunteer to participate in the study.

Subject Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Subject Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Investigator/Individual Obtaining Consent:**

To the best of my ability, I have explained and discussed the entire contents of the study, including all of the information contained in this consent form. All questions of the research subject and those of his/her parent or legal guardian have been accurately answered.

Investigator/Person Obtaining Consent: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**FOR NON-ENGLISH SPEAKING SUBJECTS:**

Translation of the consent document (either verbal or written) must have prior approval by the IRB. Contact your local IRB office for assistance.

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**Appendix E**  
**Recruitment Email**

Hello,

I am writing about a volunteer opportunity to participate in a research study titled: The Impact of Social-Emotional Learning and Trauma-Informed Care on Teacher Well-Being and Capacity in the Classroom. This research study investigates the impact of social-emotional learning and trauma-informed care on instructional staff in the DCF Regional Schools. Potential benefits of this important research study include the continuation of current professional development offered and future supports and enhancements.

You may volunteer to participate in this study if you are an instructor in the DCF Regional School district who has participated in social-emotional learning and trauma-informed care Professional Development. Your participation will require you to participate in a focus group and interview for approximately. This research study will take place virtually utilizing Microsoft Teams or in person at your school location.

There is no compensation for your participation in this study. Contact Shelley Zion about this research study at [zions@rowan.edu](mailto:zions@rowan.edu) or Kelley Michalowski at [michal53@students.rowan.edu](mailto:michal53@students.rowan.edu).

This study has been approved by Rowan University's IRB (Study # Pro 2024-45)

Sincerely,

Kelley Michalowski

## Appendix F

### Reportable Incidents

	2018	2019*	2020* *	2021	2022	2023
Police Involvement	120	55	0	2	4	5
Assault on staff	45	22	0	3	5	3
Assault on students	68	41	0	4	3	2
Threatening Students	120	90	2	10	7	10
Physical Control	52	40	0	3	6	4
Threatening Staff	78	61	1	4	2	3

\*The SEL began widespread in the school in 2019 and continued through 2023. In 2022 and 2023, Wellness Wednesdays were implemented.

\*\* During COVID, no in-person classes existed from March 2020 until September 2020.