

Paving the Road as We Walk It: Creating a Trauma-Sensitive School



Erik Bruner; MA

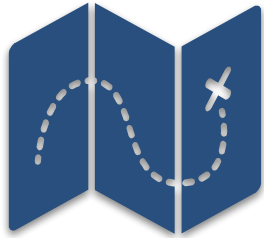
erikbruner@wsdr4.org



Ben Hebisen, Ed.D

benhebisen@wsdr4.org





Roadmap

- Alternative schools transformation into a trauma sensitive school.
- Navigate the policies and restrictions within a public school system.
- Use of Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE's) within a public school.
- Research on neurodevelopment, childhood trauma, and toxic stress to determine the route needed to make a trauma informed transformation.
- Innovative steps in implementing new and alternative therapies, expressive arts, and whole child approach and provide resources and skills for students with extreme social and emotional needs.

A stylized phoenix logo with wings spread, rendered in a gradient of red, orange, and yellow. The logo is centered behind the main text.

PEARCE HALL

HOME OF THE PHOENIX

Pearce Hall

- Wentzville School District
- Fastest growing district in MO
- Total number of students= 16,902
- Houses students from 3 different H.S. and 3 M.S.
- Number of students varies throughout the school year;
Average= 300 - 325
- 5 different alternative programs in the school





ACE's

(Adverse Childhood Experiences)



- Dr. Vincent Felitti was in charge of overseeing an obesity clinic in early 1990s.
- 1998 he started the ACE's study.
- The creation of the ACE's questionnaire emerged from his study.
- 10 questions - yes or no
- Questions centered around abuse, household dysfunction, and neglect

ABUSE



Physical



Emotional



Sexual

NEGLECT



Physical



Emotional

HOUSEHOLD DYSFUNCTION



Mental Illness



Incarcerated Relative



Mother treated violently



Substance Abuse



Divorce

A person wearing a light blue long-sleeved shirt is seated at a wooden table, writing on a white document with a black pen. A smartwatch is visible on their left wrist. In the background, another person in a black shirt is gesturing with their hands. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting an indoor setting with large windows.

ACE Questionnaire

Felitti Study Results: Impacts from ACE's

6 or More

Life expectancy 20 years or less than average

4,600% more likely to become a chronic drug user than those w/ 0 ACE's.

4 or More

20% more likely to attempt suicide

Twice as likely to be smokers

Seven times more likely to become alcoholics

High Scores

More likely to be violent, have multiple marriages, more broken bones, more prescription drugs, and more mental health issues

Neurological Organization

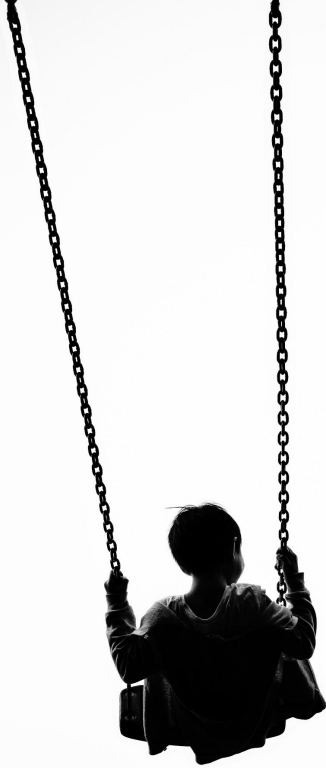


4. Cortex → sophisticated

3. Limbic → emotional

2. Diencephalon →
Safety/Survival/Sensory Relay

1. Brainstem → autonomic/sensory



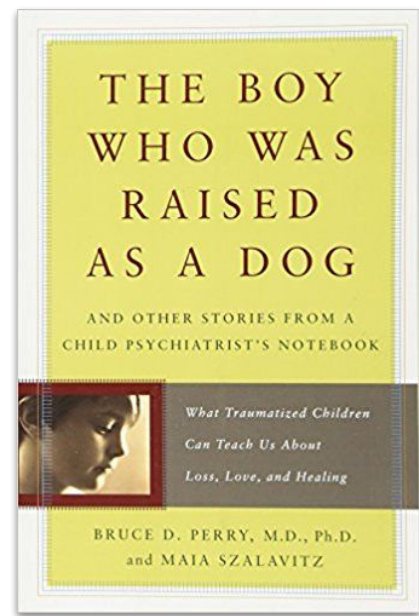
Implications of Neurological Organization

- The myth of early childhood “resilience”
- Sensitive stage vulnerability
- Neural Development: Down-Up, Inside-Out, Simple to Complex
 - Sensory processing: Down-Up, Inside-Out, Simple to Complex
- Differential Neuroplasticity
 - More plastic early in life
 - More plastic in complex parts of the brain
- Complexity of brain correlates with uterine and early childhood stages

WINDOW	WIRING OPPORTUNITY	GREATEST ENHANCEMENT
Emotional Intelligence Trust Impulse Control	0-48 Months 0-14 Months 16-48 Months	4 Years to Puberty
Social Development Attachment Independence Cooperation	0-48 Months 0-12 Months 12-24 Months 24-60 Months	4 Years to Puberty
Thinking Skills Cause & Effect Problem-Solving	0-48 Months 0-16 Months 16-48 Months	4 Years to Puberty
Motor Development	0-24 Months	2 Years to Puberty
Vision	0-24 Months	2 Years to Puberty
Language Skills Early Sounds Vocabulary	0-24 Months 4-8 Months 0-24 Months	2 Years to Puberty

Adaptive / Maladaptive

- Behaviors develop with an adaptive purpose
- Early experiences shape early templates
 - “What kind of world am I living in?”
 - Templates begin forming even in utero
- “Kids do well if they can.” -Ross Greene
- *The baby who didn't cry...*
- [Early vulnerability...](#)





Regulation

- Early in life we rely entirely on caregivers for regulation
- Type of caregiver response determines future templates of adults
- Co-regulation continues throughout our life - We feel safer with other.

Early Socialization and Attachment

- Environments and relationships must be predictable
- *Boredom, adventure, safe return*
- Many repetitions of positive adventure/comfort experiences
- Allows child to receive positive emotional feedback from future relationships
 - ◆ Allowing for future group affiliation





Roseto, Pennsylvania

The Relational Milieu

Memory Storage

- Memories stored in lower parts of the brain - difficult to change
- Cortical memories relatively easy to change
- Frequency or severity
- Sensory information may affect us before the cortex has time to recognize it.
 - ◆ Sight of man with beard, a specific cologne, sounds of fireworks
- Evolutionarily important that these “traumatic sensory memories” are hard to change
- Our brains “categorize” for efficiency

Other Effects of Childhood Trauma and Neglect



- Sensorimotor
 - ◆ The baby who doesn't crawl...
 - ◆ Limited sensory “baths”
- Loss of play experiences
 - ◆ Sense of safety required for play
 - ◆ Practice for social interactions, risk-taking, narrative structures
- Social interaction and facial recognition
 - ◆ Difficulty identifying and presenting emotionally neutral face.
 - ◆ Increase experience with and propensity for lying
 - ◆ Verbal exchanges of short commands vs vocabulary-rich dialogue



“[A]lmost always, during the initial stage of the struggle, the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors.”

“This is their model for humanity”

Pearce Hall Data

75% answered yes to 3 or more

35 % answered yes to 5 or more

10 % answered yes to 8 or more

Original surveys were given to both male and female students.

The students were 18 years or older at the time.

Pearce Hall Data: Highest Percentages

- 80% divorced or broken families
- 60% families where they did not feel support or loved
- 55% humiliated and scared of being physically harmed
- 50% have an immediate family member in prison



Pearce Hall Data

Q1 - scared of physical harm or humiliated 55%

Q2 - Physical harm 35%

Q3 - sexual abuse 20%

Q4 - they did not feel support or loved 60%

Q5 - deprived of basic essentials/parent drunk or high 1%

Q6 - family of divorce 80%

Q7 - Mother hit or threatened 30%

Q8 - Parent/sibling with alcohol or drug issue 45%

Q9 - Family member with mental illness 45%

Q10 - Family member in prison 50%

2 Major Results of ACE's Data

1

Specific categories of trauma prevailed over others:

- Major family dysfunction due to broken families
- Most had been mentally abused sometime in their childhood
- Most felt unsupported and that no one loved or cared about them

2

The number of ACE's these students had was a global epidemic among the participants and school wide resources would be needed:

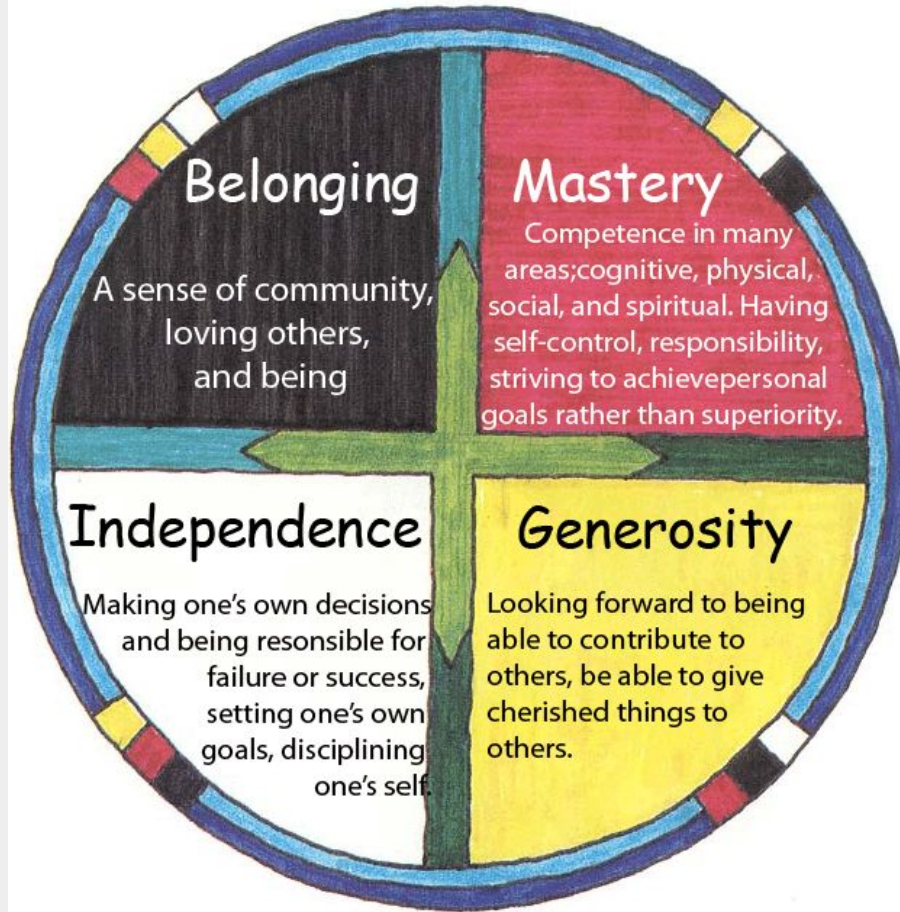
- 75% with 3 or more ACE's
- 35% with 5 or more ACE's
- 20% with 7 or more ACE's



Essentially, all models are wrong, but some are useful.

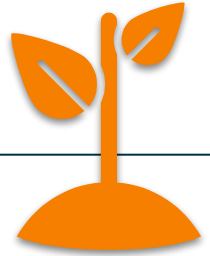
-George E. P. Box

Schools and “Framework Fatigue”





The Building Blocks



Self-regulation	Maintain self-control, manage emotions, delay gratification
Executive Functioning	Pre-planning, visualization, empathy, imagination
Interdependence	Cause and effect, “My actions affect the world.”
Sense of Autonomy	“I can affect change” “I have agency” “I have strengths and gifts”
Sense of Self-worth	“I matter” “My thoughts and ideas matter” “I am respected and my ideas will be taken seriously”
Identity	“I know who I am.” “I groups in which I belong.”

Regulation Approaches and Safety

- Self-regulation not an option for infants (difficult for traumatized children)
- Co-regulation (and dysregulation)
- “Bottom-up” regulation - movement, sensory
- “Top-down” regulation
 - ◆ Sophisticated, requires opportunities and practice
 - ◆ Psychoeducation, therapy, teaching social/coping skills



A Relational Approach and Belonging

- Humans are relational creatures
- Relational interactions - the most rewarding or the most devastating experiences (also the most complex)
 - ◆ The alternative could be the dopaminergic “hits” of sweet/salty foods, drugs, gambling, etc.
- Students aren't afraid of being suspended because they hate time off school...
- Biologically primed to imitate, learn, and relate
 - ◆ ...in surprisingly efficient ways (“Emotional Eavesdropping”)
- In person vs screen teaching languages



A Relational Approach and Belonging



- Children find the groups with which they are the most comfortable in which to do the most reckless things
- How can we make our students relationally comfortable enough with us to take risks in the classroom?
- Modeling socially appropriate responses
- Avoid power struggle and rigid adherence to rules.
- Earn relationships instead of commanding respect
- Don't expect students to use skills they don't possess



Nurturing, Belonging

- Carefully structured environments
- Group students mindfully: *parallel tasks*, then *pairing*, then *small groups*
- Use competitive activities sparingly
- Making “deposits” (and understanding we may not see the pay-off yet)

Nurturing Mastery, Power, and Purpose

- Identify and encourage moments of empathy
 - ◆ Our students may not be aware of them themselves
- “We need to become talent scouts for our kids” - Richard Lavoie
 - ◆ In moments of mastery and morality
- Authentic learning opportunities
 - ◆ Bring the community to your classroom
 - ◆ Circles start small depending on sense of agency (neighborhood, community, county, state, etc)
- PBL and service-based learning
- Mastery through mentoring/tutoring
- Highlight moments of agency - when did they affect change?
- As leaders, we level the playing field

Nurturing Mastery, Power, and Purpose

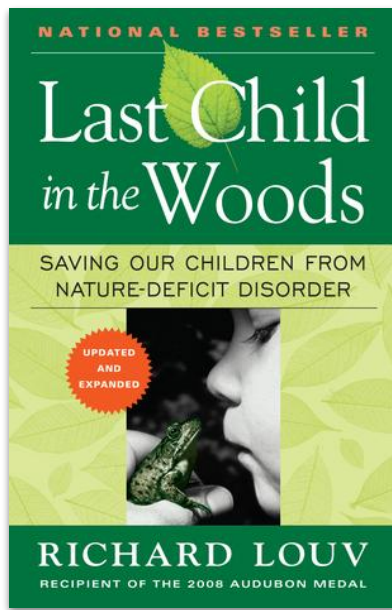


- Take what you can get!
- Understand what we think of as meaningful and challenging may not be the same for others
- Don't assume negative behaviors are to relieve boredom
- Don't use things that engage students as contingencies

Nurturing Adventure

- Repetition, repetition, repetition
- Outdoor learning
- Many definitions of adventure - sometimes simply something new
- Create comfort plans for students and push students in those areas.
- Expressive arts are the first step, not an “if we can”
- Share your enthusiasm!
- “Life doesn’t have to be perfect to be wonderful.”





“Nature offers healing for a child. ... It serves as a blank slate upon which a child draws and reinterprets the culture’s fantasies. Nature demands visualization and the full use of the senses. ... Given a chance, a child will bring the confusion of the world to the woods, wash it in the creek, turn it over to see what lives on the unseen side of that confusion. Nature can frighten a child, too, and this fright serves a purpose. In nature, a child finds freedom, fantasy, and privacy[.]”

Pearce Hall Programs

The overall goal: *find the best program to fit each individual students best needs and provide opportunities within these programs for each student to achieve personal goals, and build the skills needed to be successful.*



The Big Five

1. The High School Alternative Program
2. MO Options
3. Substance Abuse Intervention Program
4. Middle School Intervention Program
5. Anabranch



Yoga Therapy

- The students learned the following yoga poses & techniques: breathwork, seated postures, standing postures, sun salutation, yoga with partners, etc.
- Provided an opportunity for each student to regulate and find balance in the morning.

Therapeutic Animals

- “Bella” the donkey
- lifts spirits and lessens depression.
- lowers feelings of isolation and alienation.
- encourages communication.
- provides comfort.
- increases socialization.
- reduces anxiety.





Boxing Therapy

- Each session students began with a motivational/inspirational group chat, warmed up with various exercises, learned a targeted boxing therapy skill, warmed down and concluded a group summary.
- Boxing Therapy facilitated by Jose Jones of The Boxing Therapy, Inc. with a total number of (39) students participating a total of (89) times in the boxing therapy sessions.



Sports Therapy

- With the sports activities students were led through team and skill building activities.
- Other sporting events in which students had opportunities to participate: Basketball, Hockey, Touch Football, Softball, Soccer & Kickball.

From the Ashes... *Pearce Hall Poets*

- Brings people from all different backgrounds together.
- It allows the students to express themselves and share their feelings.
- Provided an outlets for students who had strong emotions about the problems they were facing.



Art Therapy

Self expression through a variety of different outlets including painting, drawing, and arts and craft projects.



Music Therapy

A licensed Music Therapist was brought in from Maryville University.

Music therapy is a powerful and emerging tool for healing children who have experienced trauma. Current research suggests group music therapy reduces symptoms of complex trauma, encourages neurodevelopment, and encourages positive emotions and feelings of control among traumatized youth.



Home Works - Teacher Home Visit Program

- This program is designed to have teachers and parents working together to help their child achieve the highest academic success they can.
- The home visit program allows the teachers and staff to get to know the parents of our students and for you to get to know us.
- The goal is to build even stronger relationships between families and school and gain even more insight into your child's strength and learning needs as you see them.



Therapeutic (Psychoeducational) Groups

Youth In Need Anxiety Support Group

Over the course of (7) weeks, (8) students participated (21) times in a psychoeducational “Anxiety Support” group facilitated by Youth In Need. The participants received guided support & processing of what anxiety is, ways to disrupt it and tools to manage and reduce it.

Preferred Family Dynamics Group

Over the course of (10) weeks, (9) students participated (49) times in a psychoeducational “Family Dynamics” group facilitated by Preferred Family Healthcare therapists. The participants received support on various types of family conflict, learning about the conflict resolution and learning to be their own self-advocates.



College Campus Visit

(24) students and (2) staff participated in Pearce Hall's 1st Campus Visit to Maryville University. The Pearce Hall students participating in the campus visit experienced a tour of the campus including Maryville's E-sports and Cyber Security programs, an Admissions presentation with a Q & A and finally an opportunity to eat lunch on campus with Maryville students.



College Campus Visit

(9) students and (2) staff participated in Pearce Hall's 2nd Campus Visit, this time to Lindenwood University. The Pearce Hall students participating in the campus visit experienced a tour of the campus including Lindenwood's dorms, the Athletic Center and new Library, an Admissions presentation with a Q & A and finally an opportunity to eat lunch on campus with Lindenwood students.



College and Career Fair

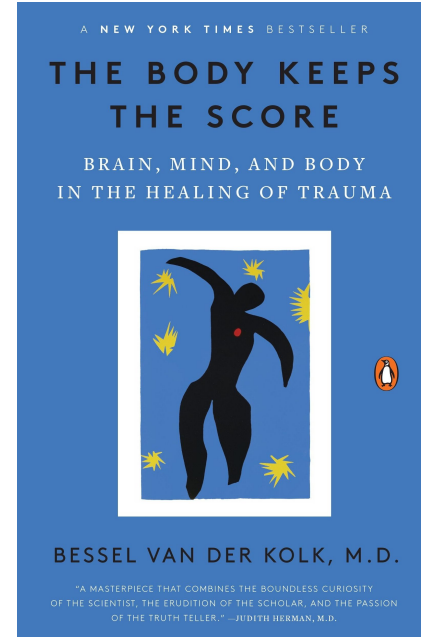
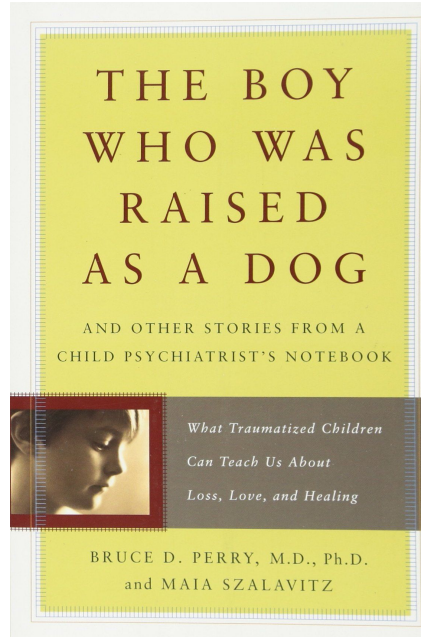
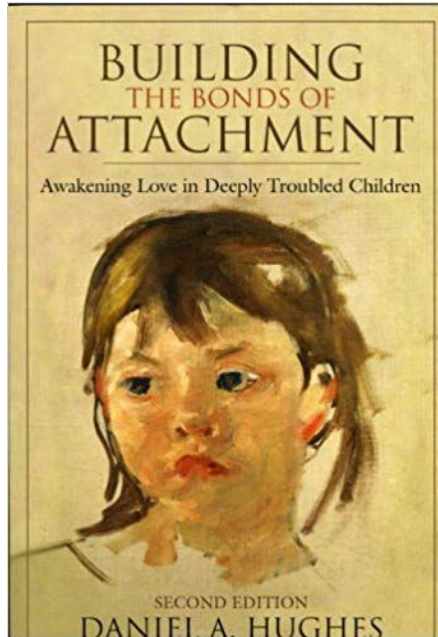
(95) students and (22) vendors participated in Pearce Hall's 2nd College & Career Fair. The fair targeted vendors who work with preparing students for quick entry into the workforce. The goal of the College & Career Fair was to help students discover opportunities available in our local community. Students were prepared for the fair through learning about the types of employers, dressing for success and how to answer common interview questions. During the fair students browsed employer booths, networked with employers and participated in "Q & A's" and a few demonstrations from vendors.



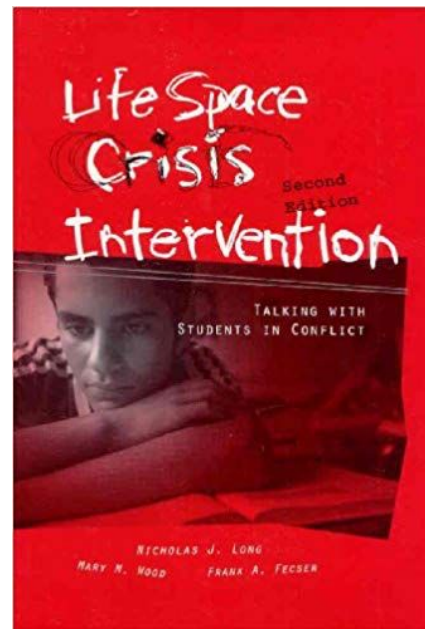
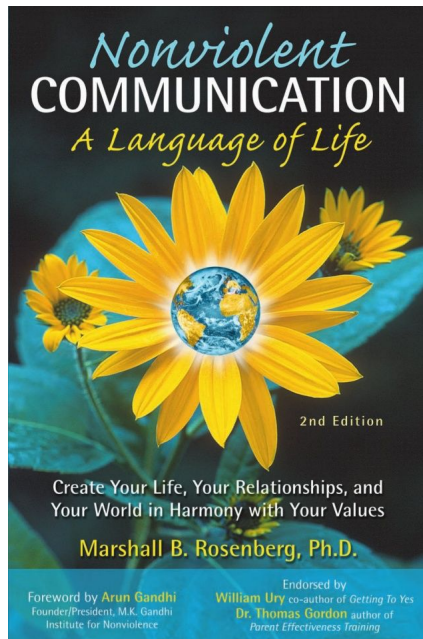
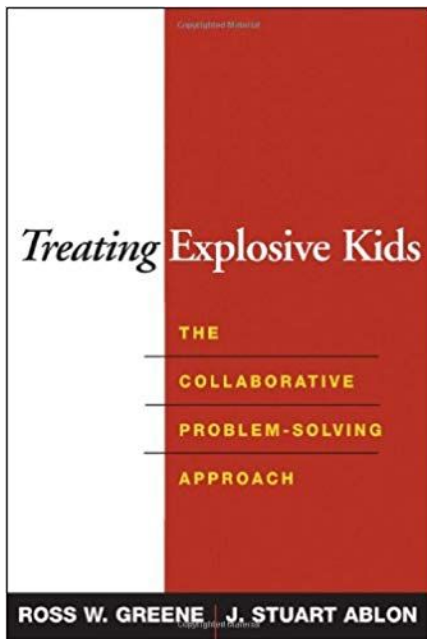
How to make it happen

1. Data and more data.
2. Know your district and work with what it can offer.
3. Work with your central office administration.
4. Reach out to your community and form partnerships with programs and organizations that can provide resources to your students.
5. Network with the experts.
6. Staff that is on board. One caring adult makes all the difference in a trauma sensitive school.
7. Don't be afraid to fail. When you know your why, you can endure any how.

Resources for Changing Mindset and Culture



Resources for Changing Approach



Paving the Road as We Walk It: Creating a Trauma-Sensitive School

Erik Bruner

erikbruner@wsdr4.org

Ben Hebisen, Ed.D

benhebisen@wsdr4.org