

# Desk Reference for System Leaders: Trauma-Sensitive Practice



Trauma-sensitive practice is not a program or a strategy—it is a way of being and leading.

## Trauma-sensitive practice: a shared responsibility

Ontario school boards recognize that many students are affected by adverse experiences, and staff are increasingly learning how trauma impacts development and learning. As a result, school boards are adopting trauma-sensitive approaches, where all staff have a role to help create mentally healthy school environments.

A trauma-sensitive approach fosters predictable, welcoming and inclusive settings that support well-being, healing and academic success. This work aligns with the longstanding efforts by School Mental Health Ontario to promote identity-affirming, mentally healthy schools. Trauma-sensitive practices support mental health promotional practices that boards have intentionally implemented over the last decade. Using a trauma-sensitive approach is a shared responsibility for all staff, to create a sense of safety and belonging in an identity-affirming manner.

This document helps system leaders embed trauma-sensitive practices alongside existing mental health strategies, using Ontario-based tools to guide reflection and support team discussions in alignment with the [Guide for Trauma-Sensitive School Leaders](#) and accompanying slide deck.

## Did you know that...

**We don't need to know someone's trauma story to provide meaningful supports and responses. We are more than what has happened to us—more than our trauma story.**

System leaders are familiar with the term 'trauma-informed' and have implemented approaches that are responsive to the impact of trauma in their boards and school communities. Trauma-informed approaches are system wide, policy-driven and emphasize understanding the prevalence and impact of trauma. Trauma-sensitive practice reflects the application of this knowledge in educational settings through responsive, relational and supportive environments that mitigate triggers and promote student well-being and resilience (Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative; Government of Canada, 2023; Downey & Greco, 2023).

## What you do matters

**What you do as a system leader matters in the life of a student who has experienced trauma!** A trauma-sensitive system leader:

- ▶ reflects a commitment to inclusion, safety and empathy across school communities
- ▶ **demonstrates and models how being trauma-sensitive is more than a set of strategies, reflecting a mindset that supports staff to respond with calm, care, compassion and connection—guiding how systems lead and interact**
- ▶ embeds a trauma-sensitive approach into board policies, procedures, protocols and practices
- ▶ creates the opportunity to use a trauma-sensitive lens in all their work and interactions with staff, students, families and community services



Your daily leadership—how you communicate, respond to behavior, support staff and structure the school and system environment—determines whether students and adults experience school as a place of safety and belonging.

## Six principles to guide trauma-sensitive system leadership

School Mental Health Ontario has developed a framework, illustrated below, which has been adapted from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) six principles of trauma-informed care, to support trauma-sensitive system leadership in Ontario school boards.

### From framework to practice: supporting principals through shared learning

#### Six principles to guide trauma-sensitive schools



A leadership roadmap for mentally healthy and trauma-sensitive schools



#### 1. Identity-affirming approaches

- anti-oppressive practices
- culturally responsive care
- confront systemic trauma



#### 2. Safety

- physical, emotional and identity-specific security
- predictable, calm environments
- evidence-informed data



#### 3. Choice

- student, staff and family agency
- flexibility and autonomy
- supporting change readiness



#### 4. Trustworthiness

- transparent communication
- accountability and repair
- consistent relationships



#### 5. Collaboration

- family and community partnerships
- shared decision-making
- collective responsibility



#### 6. Agency

- strengths-based focus
- resilience and hope
- beyond the trauma

Adapted from SAMHSA's 6 Principles of Trauma-Informed Care

You can inspire meaningful change through your actions by using the six principles of trauma-sensitive practice as a roadmap—guiding the development of trauma-sensitive schools and systems at every level.



SIX PRINCIPLES	
<b>Identity-affirming approaches</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Recognize and respond to the impact of systemic barriers.</li> <li>▶ Honour the lived experiences of students and families.</li> <li>▶ Shift school culture from reactive to restorative, relationship-centred practice.</li> </ul>
<b>Safety</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Ensure physical, emotional and psychological safety for learning.</li> <li>▶ Model calm, regulated leadership, especially in times of stress or crisis.</li> <li>▶ Analyze data related to safety to identify needs and gaps.</li> <li>▶ Cultivate predictable, inclusive environments that foster belonging.</li> </ul>
<b>Choice</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Create opportunities that restore control and stability.</li> <li>▶ Amplify voice and autonomy in decision-making.</li> <li>▶ Prepare communities for change with predictability.</li> <li>▶ Offer flexibility to meet diverse needs.</li> </ul>
<b>Trustworthiness and transparency</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Communicate using clear and consistent language.</li> <li>▶ Build reliable, trusting relationships.</li> <li>▶ Demonstrate accountability through follow-through.</li> <li>▶ Repair relationships when harm occurs.</li> </ul>
<b>Collaboration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Partner with students, staff, families and community.</li> <li>▶ Share responsibility for well-being and learning.</li> <li>▶ Include diverse perspectives in decisions.</li> </ul>
<b>Agency</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Centre strengths in all interactions.</li> <li>▶ Foster hope and possibility.</li> <li>▶ Inspire students to see themselves as capable.</li> <li>▶ Affirm identities beyond trauma.</li> </ul>

## You inspire through your actions

System leaders play a critical role in fostering a culture of belonging and well-being for both students and staff. Through your actions and decisions, you inspire, model and embed trauma-sensitive practices across the system. This work is a shared responsibility—one in which leaders set the tone and direction, supporting all staff in creating environments where students feel safe, supported and able to thrive both academically and emotionally.

## Additional system leader resources

- ▶ [Shared commitment: the role of system leaders in supporting student mental health](#)
- ▶ [MH LIT: Mental Health in Action for system leaders](#) – online mental health literacy course
- ▶ [Student Engagement Toolkit](#)
- ▶ [By Your Side Toolkit – Parent/caregiver resources to support mental health learning and well-being for every family](#)

