



Six Guiding Principles: Deepening Trauma-Sensitive Practice for System Leaders

When we are intentional and consistent in efforts that cultivate safety, trust, choice, collaboration and agency, schools become identity-affirming places where healing and learning can truly coexist.

Trauma-sensitive systems are not built through programs alone—they are shaped by the daily decisions, relationships and leadership practices that make people feel safe, seen and supported.

This resource is a companion to the [Desk Reference for System Leaders: Trauma-Sensitive Practice](#) and encourages system leaders to deepen their understanding and commitment to trauma-sensitive practice throughout their work within the board. This resource is also aligned with the [Guide for Trauma-Sensitive School Leaders and accompanying slide deck](#), which were co-created with Ontario's three principal's associations.

Six principles to guide trauma-sensitive system leadership

School Mental Health Ontario has developed a framework which has been adapted from 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. This framework is illustrated below.



From framework to practice: supporting system leaders through shared learning

Six principles to guide trauma-sensitive school boards



A leadership roadmap for mentally healthy and trauma-sensitive school boards



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 to guide the development of trauma-sensitive systems at every level.

Trauma-sensitive systems are built when identity-affirming practice, safety, choice, trustworthiness, collaboration and agency are intentionally embedded into leadership decisions, relationships and daily action. The following considerations and reflection questions are designed to guide and inform this work.





Identity-affirming principles

Student well-being is shaped by both individual experiences and broader systemic, historical and cultural factors. Identity-affirming practice requires systems to recognize and respond to student identities in meaningful ways.

Trauma-sensitive systems move beyond acknowledgement to actively integrate diverse perspectives into mental health planning, programming, training and practice so that every student can access support that is relevant, respectful and responsive to who they are.

Leadership considerations

- ▶ Engage in ongoing self-reflection on bias, assumptions and decision-making.
- ▶ Strengthen relationships with identity-specific community partners and critically reflect on positionality in leadership.
- ▶ Support staff through sustained professional learning in Indigenous education, reconciliation and equity.

Guiding questions

- ▶ How do we amplify and respond to the lived experiences of students and families—and model this for others?
- ▶ In what ways do identity, power and positionality shape leadership decisions and relationships?



Safety principles

Trauma-sensitive environments intentionally create conditions where individuals identify their emotional, cultural, social and physical safety as consistent and predictable.

Safety is not assumed—it is actively constructed, monitored and improved through relationships, data and responsive leadership.

Leadership considerations

- ▶ Build authentic, relational connections that validate lived experiences.
- ▶ Use multiple sources of data (student voice, surveys, community feedback) to guide improvement.
- ▶ Promote compassionate, strength-based responses across all system levels.

Guiding questions

- ▶ How do we know students and staff are experiencing safety, not just compliance or order?
- ▶ What patterns do we notice when we ‘walk through’ schools or systems with a safety lens? Do these patterns advantage some and disadvantage others?





Choice principles

Choice ensures that students, staff and families have meaningful voice and influence within accessible and identity-affirming structures.

At a deeper level, choice is about shared influence—not just opportunities to respond, but opportunities to shape decisions.

Leadership considerations

- ▶ Create intentional structures for meaningful participation in decision-making.
- ▶ Model validation, amplification and cultural responsiveness in engagement practices.

Guiding questions

- ▶ How does identity impact access to voice, influence and participation?
- ▶ Where can leaders expand meaningful choice within existing constraints?



Trustworthiness principles

Trust is built through transparency, consistency and accountability over time. Trauma-sensitive leadership requires clear communication, explanation of the 'why' and a willingness to respond when harm or breakdown occurs.

Leadership considerations

- ▶ Communicate clearly, consistently and transparently about decisions and rationale.
- ▶ Actively seek and respond to feedback.
- ▶ Repair relationships when trust has been disrupted.

Guiding questions

- ▶ How does our communication build or erode trust and psychological safety?
- ▶ How do we model trauma-sensitive language and accountability in leadership practice?





Collaboration principles

Collaboration is most meaningful when it acknowledges power, centers lived experience and actively works to reduce barriers to participation.

It moves beyond consultation toward shared design and shared responsibility.

Leadership considerations

- ▶ Listen first and co-create decisions wherever possible.
- ▶ Reflect on representation and whose voices are present or missing.
- ▶ Identify and support trauma-sensitive champions across the system.

Guiding questions

- ▶ Who is included in decision-making? Who is not, and why?
- ▶ How are trauma-sensitive principles reflected in how we collaborate?



Agency principles

Agency is strengthened when individuals are supported to recognize their strengths, build resilience and experience real influence over their environments and decisions.

It also requires a culturally responsive lens that honours people beyond their experiences of trauma.

Leadership considerations

- ▶ Centre the lived experiences of those most marginalized in system design.
- ▶ Promote humility, cultural responsiveness and strengths-based practice.
- ▶ Reinforce that individuals are more than their trauma histories.

Guiding questions

- ▶ How are we actively building agency for students, staff and families?
- ▶ What changes in engagement, participation and outcomes when agency is strengthened?



You inspire through your actions

Trauma-sensitive leadership is not defined by knowledge of these six principles, but by how consistently and intentionally these principles are embedded into daily system decisions, relationships and structures. Deepening trauma-sensitive leadership means shifting from understanding trauma-sensitive practice to building systems where it is experienced by all.

Additional system leader resources

- ▶ [Trauma-sensitive practice for school and system leaders](#)
 - Desk Reference for System Leaders: Trauma-Sensitive Practice
 - Guide for Trauma-Sensitive School Leaders and accompanying slide deck
- ▶ [System leaders](#) web content
- ▶ [MH LIT: Mental Health in Action for system leaders](#) – online mental health literacy course
- ▶ [Leading Mentally Healthy Schools](#)
- ▶ [Student Engagement Toolkit](#)
- ▶ [By Your Side Toolkit – Parent/caregiver resources to support mental health learning and well-being for every family](#)
- ▶ [Identity-affirming school mental health: a frame for reflection and action](#)

