



The District's Dime

Going Beyond the Budget Book

The DC Fiscal Policy Institute blog
www.dcfpi.org

June 24, 2015

The Value of Investing in Trauma-Informed Schools in DC

By Soumya Bhat

Children who grow up in poverty are often exposed to high levels of trauma or stress, which can hurt their ability to do well in the classroom. This trauma or stress can result from witnessing violence, suffering from physical or sexual abuse, or not having a stable home. Although DC is implementing programs that help some students overcome trauma, these services should be available in all DCPS and charter schools so every child has the opportunity to succeed.

Across the city, over one in four children live in poverty, and in some neighborhoods in Wards 7 and 8, the child poverty rate is greater than 50 percent. Low-income children are more often exposed to trauma and stress during their developmental years, which leads to high rates of emotional or social problems.¹ As a result, these children are more likely to have problems in school, be absent, be suspended or expelled, or drop out.² Repeated exposure to trauma can lead to chronic, toxic stress which hinders development of key skills necessary for learning, including memory, attention, and language.³

But students who experience trauma can adjust to the classroom if schools create an environment to help students to feel safe and supported. Currently, there are some programs and interventions in DC schools that are having positive results, such as improved attendance, reduced behavior infractions, and decreases in post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms. But, these services are only available to a small number of students with the greatest needs in schools.

Instead, DC needs to take a system-wide approach and train all staff to be sensitive and responsive to students affected by trauma. According to a paper released yesterday by the [Children's Law Center](#), other cities and states, such as Massachusetts, San Francisco, Washington State, and Wisconsin, are leading the way in this area and have created models for trauma-sensitive school environments that may help the District develop a better system. DC can borrow from these states to create a comprehensive, system-wide effort.

You can find DCFPI's testimony from yesterday's Council roundtable on this topic [here](#). For more information on mental health services in DC schools, see our issue brief [here](#).

¹ Evans, G. W., "The Environment of Childhood Poverty", American Psychologist, Vol. 59, No. 2, February/March 2004, pgs. 77-92.

² Stagman, S. & Cooper, J., "Children's Mental Health: What Every Policymaker Should Know," National Center for Children in Poverty: Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, April 2010. Available at: <http://www.nccp.org/>.

³ Evans, G.W; Brooks-Gunn; J. & Klebanov, P., "Stressing Out the Poor: Chronic Psychological Stress and the Income-Achievement Gap," Pathways Magazine, Winter 2011, Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality.