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# Identifying What Educators Need to Support Trauma-Informed Practices in the Schools: A Community Needs Assessment

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### **Abstract**

Educators are often on the frontline of supporting the wellbeing of their students. Thus, it is critical to ask teachers what they need in regard to implementing trauma-informed practices in schools (TIPS). This mixed-methods, community-initiated needs assessment explored educators' wellbeing and use of trauma-informed resources. A random selection of 450 certificated school staff from two school districts were invited to participate. Educators ( $n=178$ ; 39.5% response rate) completed a survey and four focus groups were conducted ( $n=14$ ) to obtain feedback on factors affecting use of TIPS. Descriptive statistics and logistic regression analyses were used to determine the factors most related to resource use. Teachers reported strong well-being, and low levels of secondary traumatic stress, but high levels of burnout. Themes from the focus groups highlight administrator actions that can improve teacher well-being. Teachers rated their most used resources as a list of mental health resources, virtual guided wellness activities, and opportunities to connect with others, whereas the most helpful were opportunities to connect with others, in-person guided wellness activities, and training to identify students who may need support. Teacher well-being and school climate achieved traditional significance values for predicting teacher use of resources; however, they did not reach the Bonferonni-adjusted significance value. Results from this needs assessment indicate that teachers wanted resources to adequately respond to their own and their students' mental well-being.

**Keywords:** Needs assessment; Educators; Trauma-Informed Practices; Burnout

### **Public Significance Statement**

This needs assessment found that teachers utilized mental health resources to support students and expressed desire for clear communication, appreciation and interpersonal connection, and

support from their administrators. These findings elucidate factors school administrators should consider for effective trauma-informed practices in the schools. Researchers and policy makers are provided with a framework for interdisciplinary collaboration to identify their unique community needs.

## **Introduction**

Educators performed a herculean task in the transition to remote learning in the early part of the pandemic. In addition to their instructional responsibilities, educators were on the frontline of supporting the wellbeing of their students, many of whom were already struggling with trauma and its impact on their emotional and behavioral health prior to the pandemic (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2019, 2021). Over two-thirds of children who live in the United States are exposed to at least one traumatic event by the time they turn 16 years old (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2021) and the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this. Lockdowns, social distancing and peer isolation, economic uncertainty or loss, increased family stress and interpersonal violence, and fear of illness and death are key examples of COVID-19 stressors related to increased fear, anxiety, and distress for many students, especially those with existing trauma histories (Shoshani & Kor, 2022).

Educators are in an ideal position to support the wellbeing of their students because children spend a large portion of their waking hours at school, meaning that schools are a key arena for mental health. However, they may not have the preparation to implement trauma-informed practices (Felix et al., 2010). With collectively-experienced stressors like the pandemic, educators may not have the emotional resources to respond when they, too, are affected (Felix et al., 2010). Thus, it is critical to understand educators' perspectives and wellbeing when planning how to implement trauma-informed practices in school settings (TIPS). In this article, we use the term "teacher" to refer to the subset of educators who are providing instruction in the classroom and "educator" to be inclusive of teachers and other school personnel, such as administrators, librarians, and school psychologists.

## **Barriers to School-Based Mental Health Interventions**

In response to the pandemic, there has been a growing focus and influx of federal and state funding to schools to support students' mental health (US Department of Education, 2022). Although there are many evidence-based mental health interventions, sustainability of these programs was a challenge even prior to the pandemic. A systematic review of 24 school-based interventions that targeted behavioral, emotional, and physical well-being found that none were sustained in full (Herlitz et al. 2020). Logistic (e.g., staffing, time and space constraints), motivational (e.g., low staff self-efficacy or administrator support), and financial considerations, as well as prioritization of academics, often precluded sustainability of such interventions. Thus, it is often difficult for teachers to respond to student mental health needs, even when they identify students in need of such support (Williams et al., 2007).

School climate can also impact intervention implementation. School climate consists of interpersonal and systemic factors that influence wellbeing among school community members (Rusadill et al., 2018). There is a positive relation between supportive school climate and teacher self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and commitment, which can affect intervention implementation (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016; Hosford & O'Sullivan, 2016). Conversely, hierarchical administration and lack of support or communication have been found to hinder intervention dissemination (Lochman, 2003).

### **Influences on Educators Implementing Trauma-Informed Practices**

Prior research on educators' needs and interest in psychosocial interventions for students following the September 11, 2001 attacks and Washington, D.C. sniper shootings (Felix et al., 2010) found that educators wanted to know how to identify and address the psychological and emotional aftermath of a traumatic event on students and were relatively less concerned about their own reactions and needs. Feeling prepared before the terrorist attacks, the ability to

adaptively manage work responsibilities in the immediate aftermath, and perceiving increased student problems were significantly related to intervening with students. Notably, this research was conducted within an acute collectively-experienced trauma context, where only a subset of educators reported direct exposure to the events and mental health symptoms in response. The pandemic, however, has affected all educators and became a prolonged stressor spanning years instead of weeks. Feeling able to manage work responsibilities affected educators' ability to intervene with students following an acute crisis (Felix et al., 2010). The ability to manage work responsibilities may be exacerbated with on-going stressors.

Elevated stress can affect educator interest and ability to support students with their mental health in addition to their instructional duties (Felix et al., 2010). In two large urban school districts in the United States, teachers reported concerns with student instructional delay and exposure to pandemic-related stressors and traumas, and perceived varying levels of guidance from their schools and districts on supporting student academics and well-being (Nadeem et al. 2022). In another study with 7,841 teachers across nine states, pandemic-related stressors and their impact on working conditions affected teachers' sense of success, which can impact morale and burnout (Kraft et al., 2021). Teachers in schools with better school climates were more likely to retain their sense of success, which may help them navigate the pandemic-related challenges (Kraft et al., 2021).

### **Current Study**

As a result of the pandemic, many children have experienced the loss of loved ones, increased economic hardship, and social isolation (Center for Disease Control, 2021; Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2021), potentially affecting their health and well-being. Against a backdrop of ever-present and high student needs (CDC, 2019, 2021) and high levels of teacher



stress and burnout (Steiner et al.2022, Kraft et al., 2021), it is critical to ask teachers what they need to have the capacity to continue in their educational roles and to support students.

Understanding which resources provided during the pandemic teachers used and found helpful will help match resources to teacher needs and increase the uptake of resources that teachers find valuable. This mixed methods, community-initiated needs assessment addressed the following research questions:

1. How are educators doing across measures of psychological well-being?
2. What resources did educators say they wanted? What did they use? How helpful did they find it?
3. What factors affected teachers' use of resources?

### **Methods**

#### **Participants**

The administrative teams at two participating school districts facilitated the random-selection of 450 certificated school staff (300 from District 1 and 150 from District 2) for recruitment. Response rates for districts were 40% and 39% respectively, resulting in 178 participants (81.9% were female, 14.8% male, 0.7% gender non-binary/ non-conforming, and 2.7% declined to state) in the needs assessment survey. Most (69.2%) identified as non-Latinx White, 20.0% were Latinx, and 10.8% identified as another race or ethnicity. Detailed information about the roles and range of experience of participants is found in Table 1. We conducted four focus groups with 14 participants. We did not collect specific demographic information for these participants because the participating school districts were relatively small, and collecting demographics could have identified some participants.

#### **Procedures**

This needs assessment was initiated by school leadership and a community funding partner who recognized the need for assistance in trauma-informed schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. The methods were co-developed by the research team with two advisory committees (one at each district) of school leaders who provided input on all methods and aided in recruitment for the needs assessment. The research team consisted of a trauma researcher and licensed psychologist; a credentialed and nationally certified school psychologist and researcher; two pre-service school psychology researchers; two teacher education program professors; and two education specialists and researchers. District advisory committees consisted of various educators, including assistant superintendents, principals, a school psychologist, and a curriculum specialist.

Research approval was obtained from the university's institutional review board and from participating districts. The survey was developed using previously validated scales with supplemental questions attending to logistic concerns identified by the advisory committee. After both districts approved the items, the randomly selected staff were invited to participate. Participants consented to survey and/or focus group participation via an anonymous survey link that was emailed to them by administrators promoting the study. Four semi-structured focus groups were conducted ( $n = 14$ ) to obtain teacher feedback on factors affecting their use of TIPS. Three focus groups were conducted in person wherein teachers were grouped by district and one combined-districts focus group was conducted virtually to accommodate participant availability.

## **Measures**

### ***Teacher Barriers to Using Resources***

Questions were developed to understand what barriers teachers face with regard to trauma-informed resources. Teachers rated their agreement with two statements about barriers on

a five-point Likert scale (0 = “strongly disagree” to 4 = “strongly agree;” see Table 2 for items). Items were used individually instead of as a total score because they were meant to ask about internal and external barriers.

### ***School Climate***

The two-item school climate measure was developed by the research team and used a five-point Likert scale (0 = “strongly disagree” to 4 = “strongly agree;” see Table 2 for items). A mean score was created with higher scores corresponding to a more positive school climate. Internal consistency estimates were good for the current study ( $\alpha = 0.85$ ).

### ***Confidence in Responding to Student Behavior***

Questions designed to measure teacher confidence in their ability to support students after the Boston Marathon Bombings (Green et al., 2015) were modified for the pandemic. Eight items describing student behaviors included “appearing fearful or scared” and “expressing thoughts of hurting self” and were rated on a four-point Likert scale (0 = “not very confident,” to 3 = “very confident”). The composite score is the mean of items, with higher scores indicating greater confidence. Internal consistency was strong ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ) for the current study.

### ***Secondary Traumatic Stress Scale (STSS)***

The STSS (Bride, 2004) measures mental wellbeing of professionals working with people who have experienced trauma using a five-point Likert scale (1 = “never,” to 5 = “very often”). For this study, “client” was replaced with “student” across items. Sample items include “I felt emotionally numb” and “It seemed as if I was reliving the trauma(s) experienced by my students.” In this study, educators who worked directly with students in the 2020-2021 school year rated 16 of the original 17 items (due to human error item 14 was missing from the survey). The composite score is the mean of items, with higher scores indicating greater levels of

secondary traumatic stress. The STSS has demonstrated strong internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ) and convergent validity due to significant correlations with anxiety and depression (Bride, 2004). In the current study, the STSS showed strong internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ).

***Maslach Burnout Inventory Educators Survey (MBI-ES)***

The MBIE (Maslach et al., 1997) measures emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. The MBIE has been found to be psychometrically sound and invariant across grade levels for use with teachers (Byrne, 1993). For the purposes of this study, five items of the burnout scale were administered to educators. The scale was shortened at the request of the community partners in an attempt to reduce the length of the overall survey. Questions include, “I feel emotionally drained by my work” and “I feel like I’m at the end of my tether.” Participants responded on a 7-point Likert scale (0 = “never” to 6 = “every day”). The composite score is the mean of items, with higher scores indicating higher levels of burnout. The burnout subscale has demonstrated strong internal consistency in past research ( $\alpha = .90$ ; Byrne, 1993) and in the current study ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ).

***Teacher Subjective Wellbeing Questionnaire (TSWQ)***

The 8-item TSWQ (Renshaw et al., 2015) measures teaching efficacy and school connectedness. Teachers rated items on a four-point Likert scale (1 = “almost never” to 4 = “almost always”) with higher composite scores indicating higher levels of subjective wellbeing. Example items include “I feel like I belong at this school” and “I feel like my teaching is effective and helpful.” Renshaw et al. (2015) reported strong internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ) and robust test-retest reliability,  $r = .89, p < .001$ . The TSWQ demonstrated convergent validity due to significant positive correlations with teacher self-reported school support and divergent

validity due to significant negative correlations with teacher stress and burnout. The items demonstrated strong internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ) in the current study.

### ***Use and Helpfulness of Resources***

Teachers were asked: “Were you offered trauma-informed / healing and wellness-centered resources by your school district during COVID-19?” All participants who endorsed being offered resources were also asked, “Did you utilize any of these trauma-informed / healing and wellness centered resources?” (0 = no, yes = 1), which is the variable used in our logistic regression. Additionally, to examine what resources were offered and if they were helpful, a list of resources used by teachers following the Boston Marathon bombing (Green et al., 2015) was adapted for this study (see Table 3 for items). Teachers responded yes or no if they used the resource, and if they used it, they then rated the helpfulness of the resources on a scale of 0 to 10 (0 = “not at all helpful,” 10 = “very helpful.”).

### ***Educator Support Systems During the Pandemic***

The research team modified a measure created to explore teacher support systems after the Paris terror attacks (Green et al. 2019). In the present study, 11 items examined the support systems educators engaged with during the pandemic, such as friends, family, and school support staff. The original item “Other teachers outside your school” was split into two items in this study by adding the qualifiers “that you know personally” and “that you don’t know personally (via social media, etc.).”

### ***Requested Resources***

Questions were co-developed with district advisory committees to examine the types of additional training opportunities teachers would like to participate in to feel confident in

implementing TIPS in their classroom. Items included support groups, opportunities for consultation, training in advocacy, supervision, other, and nothing.

### ***Focus Group Protocol***

Four open-ended questions were developed by the research team for use in focus groups to further understand teacher needs and experiences during the pandemic, particularly recommendations for how their districts could better support their wellbeing. The initial draft of the questions was given to both advisory committees. The committees made a few small changes including changing the order of the questions, but the content of the questions remained relatively unchanged. An example question was “We were all contending with stress during the pandemic. Tell me about how you coped? What was helpful?”

### **Analytic Plan**

Given the explorative nature of the needs assessment study, no a priori hypotheses were generated. Rather, the study sought to elucidate educator needs and elevate their voices, guided by the three research questions. Quantitative analytical followed by qualitative analytical approaches were used to investigate the use and helpfulness of extant resources available to teachers in the partner districts. The quantitative analytic approach, binary logistic regression, sought to elucidate educator needs. The qualitative analytic approach, thematic coding, sought to further explore educator perspectives that may not be fully captured through qualitative measures alone, particularly in relation to suggestions for better supporting educators.

*T*-test and Chi-square analyses were conducted to determine the suitability of aggregating district data. Descriptive statistics and frequencies were conducted to describe the well-being and burnout of educators, use and helpfulness of resources, barriers to using resources, school climate, student support, and confidence in responding to student needs. Simple correlational

analysis assessed the interrelations among study variables. Given the number of analyses, a Holm-Bonferroni correction was conducted to identify correlations that were statistically significant (See Table 5). Following the recommendations for regression analyses in Wysocki et al. (2022), we conducted a series of binary logistic regressions to determine the factors associated with actual resource use. A univariate logistic regression model was conducted for teacher secondary traumatic stress, burnout, and overall teacher well-being, prior training in TIPS, teacher confidence in their ability to support students and school climate. Predictors that did not have an interpretable zero were mean-centered to facilitate interpretation of the slopes. Given the number of analyses, a Bonferroni correction places the  $p$ -value for significance at .008.

Next, thematic coding from a grounded theory framework was used to analyze qualitative data obtained in focus groups. This methodology is appropriate for this study because it seeks to develop theories grounded in qualitative data, as opposed to testing existing theories (Charmaz, 2006). Transcriptions of the focus groups were coded for thematic analysis via an iterative constructivist process (Charmaz, 2006) using the procedures suggested by Nili et al. (2020), namely inter-coder reliability technique selection, coding scheme development, coder training, calculating intercoder reliability and resolving discrepancies. Cohen's kappa was selected to ensure intercoder reliability. There was a total of four coders, two of whom had previous experience with the project and all of whom were researchers associated with the principal investigator. A codebook was developed by two researchers based on one transcript. A second pair of researchers independently coded the same transcript using the initial codebook, documenting feedback for the codebook, which was reviewed by all coders, resulting in consolidation of the codebook. Each transcript was coded by one pair of coders for which Cohen's kappa was calculated to assess intercoder reliability. Consensus coding was applied in

all instances where  $K$  was less than 0.80. Inclusion criteria included themes that related to the research questions, resulting in the integration of the “District or School Administrator Communication” and “Social Emotional Learning and Trauma” domains with quantitative data to provide a comprehensive examination of each research question (see Table 4 for themes and definitions).

## **Results**

Independent  $t$ -tests and chi-square analyses were conducted to ascertain any significant differences across district samples on continuous dependent variables and categorical demographic variables, respectively. Only the independent  $t$ -test on the barrier variable indicated statistically significant differences across districts, with a higher mean barrier score in one district ( $M = 1.81, SD = 0.08$ ) than the second district ( $M = 1.45, SD = 0.15$ ),  $t(77) = 2.25, p = 0.027$ . Thus, the datasets for both districts were aggregated across both school districts to increase generalizability and statistical power.

### **Educator Well-Being During the Pandemic (RQ#1)**

Table 5 displays the correlations among study variables and descriptive statistics. Overall, teachers indicated a high degree of well-being and their secondary traumatic stress was low, averaging experiencing symptoms “rarely” to “occasionally.” At the same time, levels of teacher-reported burnout, however, were elevated. The majority of educators reported experiencing symptoms of burnout once a week or more, with nearly two-thirds reporting feeling emotionally drained and close to 60% feeling frustrated by work (see Table 6).

Greater levels of secondary traumatic stress, feelings of burnout, and perceived external barriers to using resources were significantly and negatively associated with subjective well-



being. Conversely, perceptions of positive school climate was significantly associated with less burnout and better well-being. Unsurprisingly, secondary traumatic stress and burnout were significantly correlated. Perceptions of external barriers to resource use were also significantly associated with burn out and secondary traumatic stress.

Focus groups revealed aspects of teacher communication experiences with their administrators that influenced their wellbeing and were consistent with the quantitative findings relating to burnout and feeling frustrated by work. Participants reported experiencing frequently changing protocols related to COVID-19 safety in schools and distance learning, which may have affected burnout. Similarly, a theme emerged wherein district emails that referenced trauma-informed classrooms, self-care, and mental health supports seems to have increased teacher burnout. Teachers indicated that they did not necessarily have the time to read about, let alone engage in these opportunities. One participant reported,

*It's broken down by section like teaching and learning, upcoming dates, social emotional wellness, and they would like sprinkle in an article here or, like a link to a strategy here, and then it was up to you. Yeah, it's up to you whether you read it or not, or made it that far in the giant update.*

Teachers also shared additional information not captured in quantitative measures. For example, they reflected on the ways in which administrators made efforts to demonstrate appreciation, indicating a desire for interpersonal connection, rather than tokens of appreciation. One teacher observed, “*Doughnuts and coffee are not how to appreciate somebody.*” Teachers reacted to a sense of toxic positivity they perceived when they felt administrators responded to distress with false reassurance rather than empathy. One teacher stated, “*I don't need the gold star. I don't need a big old pat on the back, but just like a human connection. Be human for five seconds.*”

Another theme that emerged which was not readily identifiable with quantitative data analysis alone was whether teachers felt their administrators heard and validated their needs and feelings. Some participants reported feeling heard and supported, *“I feel like personally, with my administrator, he's really receptive to talking about this. And he does take it really seriously. So that feels helpful.”* Conversely, other participants felt that communicating with their administrators was not helpful, *“So we can't tell you things like that and get a response that's helpful. Like why would we open up more?”* For some, teacher-administrator relationships even became adversarial, *“...after a while, it's like you're constantly fighting... with administration.”* Despite at times sensing active listening from their administrators, teachers described feeling that school district actions were disconnected from them. For example, they felt their administrators vacillated when it came to streamlining communications to the detriment of teacher wellbeing, *“There's so much happening...we got so many friggin emails just before the start of school like—no make up your mind. And I am a pretty intelligent person, I can figure out most things. I was confused.”* This was congruent with the quantitative findings that positive school climate is negatively correlated with burnout and teacher well-being.

Teachers offered several suggestions for how schools could be improved to support their well-being, enhancing the utility of both the quantitative and qualitative data they provided. One teacher suggested, *“Actually engage with us. Right, be present, walk around, come—come and talk to me once in a while. Any of us.”* Some also indicated taking action to support themselves as individuals when their suggestions for how they could be supported were not taken. One teacher noted, *“it was never followed up with, we weren't offered even mental health days or going, ‘Hey, I see you're stressed, go home.’ .... No, ...my brain is sick, therefore, I'm sick.”* Overall, teachers indicated that they need support with enforcing boundaries on teacher personal

time. They also advocated for open door policies with their administrators and that acknowledgement of the ways in which their own mental health needs impact their work.

### **Resource Use During the Pandemic (RQ #2)**

Table 3 displays the district-offered resources used and their perceived helpfulness. The three most used resources were a list of mental health resources for teachers, parents, and/or students, virtual guided wellness activities, and opportunities to connect with others. The resources rated as most helpful were opportunities to connect with others, in-person guided wellness activities, training to identify students who may need support, and other training. The most common resources teachers expressed desire for were opportunities for consultation while implementing skills (37.7%), more training in advocating for further resources (36.9%), and support groups dedicated to implementing the skills (36.1%).

Focus groups provided further insight into the resources and strategies teachers engage in to increase student socioemotional wellbeing, with the “Student SEL” and “Student SEL Resources” themes emerging. Teachers in the focus groups generally reported that they rely on each other’s experiences.

*“You know, the...the mental health I do every single day with my students in all the strategies I do with it, there are strategies that I’ve learned from my colleagues...what I’ve picked up from them are strategies that I’ve incorporated with my special ed background that I try to incorporate every day.”*

This aligns most closely to the third most used resource selected on the survey, *connecting with others* as well as teachers’ call for more training and support groups dedicated to skills implementation. Teachers also reported what they did to support students, which included the normalization of stressors in the classroom, in addition to the use of school resources.

*“And I’m doing things like ‘What causes you stress? What is stressing you out?’ and they’re writing all over the whiteboard, all of the things that are just taking them under. Now, ‘today, what’s something you do that helps you?’ so we can help each other. So, we’re just spending tons of time on emotional wellness.”*

In general, participants reported a range of strategies for fostering social emotional skills from incorporating skills learned directly from peer teachers to enacting recommendations from their administrators, such as morning circles.

### **Factors Affecting Resource Use during the Pandemic (RQ#3)**

We explored factors that affected teacher use of resources on TIPS, including barriers experienced, school climate, prior trauma training, confidence in addressing student behavior, and educator support systems during the pandemic. More than half the teachers (54.3%) reported that they had received training prior to the pandemic. Educators on average reported they were “somewhat confident” ( $M = 2.1$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ) in their ability to support student needs. Educators were asked where they looked for support in meeting student needs during the pandemic, and most commonly reported talking with other teachers at their school (69.1%) or outside of their school (47.8%), followed by reaching out to administrators (45.5%), friends (41.6%), school mental health staff (40.4%), and family members (40.4%). Less common sources of support were reaching out to teachers outside their school through social media/listservs (14.6%), professional organization websites (11.8%) or no one (5.6%). Barriers to resource use are displayed in Table 2 and are elucidated in the focus group themes. Participants more often endorsed experiencing barriers out of their control that affect their use of resources on TIPS than barriers due to lack of interest in the resources.

With regards to teacher well-being, correlational analysis indicated that burnout and

secondary traumatic stress symptoms were significantly positively associated with perceived external barriers to resource use (See Table 5). Additionally, a series of six univariate binary logistic regressions were conducted to understand the factors influencing educator use of resources (1 = yes, 0 = no; see Table 6). Although none of the predictors reached the Bonferonni-adjusted statistical significance value, teacher well-being and school climate achieved traditional significance values, and the 95% confidence interval for the odds-ratios did not cross 1.00, which increases support that these factors may play a role in teacher use of resources. Better teacher well-being and a more positive school climate likely increases teacher use of trauma-informed resources. Given the relatively small sample size, these factors should be considered in future research and needs assessments.

Focus group results were consistent with the quantitative finding that positive school climate was related to increased resource use by teachers and highlighted additional factors that affected their perceived ability to support their students. For example, some participants felt social emotional learning work was supported by administrators. Thus, they felt safe to engage in this work, which they were grateful for. One teacher said,

*“And I feel like the district now...has put a larger emphasis on the fact that there ...are social emotional issues. And so now, it feels like we can spend more time talking about it because it's been addressed, which feels nice, especially in the lower grades when kids, on top of the trauma, just need to learn how to be people in a public setting in general.”*

In contrast, one teacher contextualized the association we found between secondary traumatic stress symptoms were associated with external barriers to resource use by reporting on the impact of learning from their students about their traumatic experiences,

*“It was heavy as a teacher they shared so glad they did. But also like then I’m carrying it. Right? Like, I just want to bring them dinner. And like, you know, go comfort*

*them.”* Some participants perceived that schools prioritized attendance and academics over student mental health, given what data were collected and prioritized by schools. One teacher shared,

*“And so it’s all about the numbers when it comes to the academic growth only; it’s never about the numbers for mental health. None of the data we look at is about trauma. So, all the data we look at is about attendance.”*

In general, focus group findings were consistent with quantitative findings that suggest positive school climate is associated with increased resource use. Additionally, focus group participants shed light on somewhat divergent feelings. Although teachers with school environments that enabled them to attend to student trauma were happy to engage in this work, they felt unequipped to do so.

## **Discussion**

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought widespread attention to the need to address experiences and symptoms of trauma amongst school-age children and adolescents. Schools often rely on specialized personnel, such as school psychologists and school counselors, to support student mental health both in and out of the classroom. However, on average there is only one school psychologist for every 1,211 students (National Association of School Psychologists, n.d.) and 86% of schools do not meet the recommended ratio for school counselors (Prothero & Riser-Kositsky, 2022). This shortage makes it critical for all educators to have the training and support they need to independently promote TIPS.

Teacher implementation of TIPS has the potential to prevent escalation of student trauma symptoms and promote student learning and can improve teachers' sense of success, improving morale and reducing burnout (Kraft et al., 2021). Although some research has been conducted to understand teacher views on implementing TIPS, prior studies have focused on acute events such as terrorist attacks (e.g., Felix et al., 2010). The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented levels of collectively-experienced stress, adding to the challenges of teachers implementing TIPS while experiencing their own pandemic-related stressors. Thus, research is needed to better understand the resources and supports that promote TIPS implementation. To explore how teachers are doing, what resources they need, and factors impacting teacher use of resources, this study conducted a needs assessment with educators across two school districts in California.

We found that teacher reports suggested high levels of well-being (teaching efficacy and school connectedness) and low levels of secondary traumatic stress. This was a positive finding given teacher well-being is an essential component to a positive classroom environment; however, they also reported high levels of burnout. This level of burnout is not surprising as K-12 teaching is the top occupation in the 2022 Gallup Poll on burnout (Bouchrika, 2022). Assessing teacher well-being within months of the pandemic onset, Chan et al. (2021) found that among 151 elementary teachers in the US, the majority reported experiencing burnout (i.e., emotional exhaustion), task stress, and job ambiguity, which were related to wellbeing. For teachers who reported high teaching efficacy, they felt emotionally exhausted when they were unclear about their job duties (Chan et al., 2021). Teachers reported wanting workplace emotional support and flexibility during COVID-19 to meet the needs of their students. Our study, which was conducted another year into the pandemic, yielded similar findings with focus group results elucidating the desire by teachers to have clear communication, appreciation and

interpersonal connection, and listening to and supporting their needs from their administrators.

Together, these findings point to the need for administrators to address the emotional exhaustion of their teachers and respond with clear instrumental and interpersonal supports.

In trying to improve implementation of TIPS, it is critical to understand what resources are actually used and which ones are most helpful. The three most used resources were a list of mental health resources for teachers, parents, and/or students; virtual guided wellness activities; and opportunities to connect with others. When considering resources that were offered by their districts to support them and their students, the most helpful included opportunities to connect with others, training in various strategies, and in-person guided wellness activities. What they needed but were not offered included training in advocating for additional resources, opportunities for consultation while implementing skills, and support groups dedicated to implementing skills. Mayworm et al. (2016) offer a formal model for school-based consultation related to professional development. After providing school-wide professional development and starting implementation, they recommend a needs assessment with school data and/or surveys to identify teachers who would benefit from additional support. They recommend providing tier two group consultation and tier three one-on-one consultation as needed to support teachers with their ongoing professional development. These recommendations map well onto resources desired by teachers in our study.

In order to implement resources, a positive school climate emerged as key. This is consistent with prior research on teacher concerns related to navigating the pandemic (Kraft et al., 2021; Nadeem et al., 2022). Our study adds detail to these findings by highlighting that teachers sought support from their peers, administrators, and school mental health staff. In addition, this study evidenced that teachers have natural ways of supporting their students that



they test out and share with each other. Thus, it appears that having a school environment rich in support, training, and resources for TIPS can not only add to teacher's TIPS toolkits, but encourage their own expertise for supporting the students unique to their school collaboratively.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

The current study was born out of a community's desire to help implement TIPS in their local schools in response to the pandemic. This community-based needs assessment serves as an example for other schools desiring to build TIPS from the ground up. Considering the logistical constraints schools face when considering how they may address their communities' needs, such as educator and student mental health, the utility of a needs assessment cannot be understated. In this study, the ability to gather information on teacher wellbeing and to identify specific educator needs enabled participating districts to make informed decisions to work towards their goal of implementing TIPS, specifically through administrator and teacher trainings. Understandably as a needs assessment in one community, findings cannot, nor were meant, to generalize to other schools. Instead, they were used to build a partnership to address the teacher needs reported here. In addition, as a needs assessment, data and analyses were designed to be straightforward to reach a community audience, not to test scientific hypotheses.

Overall, our analyses were meant to be exploratory and highlight novel patterns that could be tested in future research. Although these districts enroll students from the full range of social-economic statuses, the districts are funded at higher levels than the state average (EdData, 2021). In addition, although the sample reflected the US teacher demographics (Zippia, 2022) with participants who were predominantly female and White, the results may not generalize to other district compositions. Finally, demographic characteristics of focus group participants were

not recorded to protect their anonymity as they were recruited from the pool of randomly selected survey participants, a list of educators that was provided by the districts.

### **Future Directions**

The patterns highlighted in this study should be tested with educators of more diverse backgrounds in future research to establish more generalizable understanding of educator needs and guidelines for implementation of TIPS in schools based on varying school profiles. For example, districts with differently valanced school climate as reported by teachers, or different levels of teacher burnout and wellbeing may be found to indicate different areas of need. Similarly, districts with different profiles may require different implementation approaches. Finally, future studies that address implementation of trauma informed practices in schools may wish to conduct focus groups to understand important factors related to sustainability of trauma informed practices.

### **Implications for School Practice**

Our results indicate that high teacher well-being is negatively correlated with high burnout. Addressing teacher burnout and their recommendations for how they can be better supported is critical to supporting teacher retention (Steiner et al., 2022). Specifically, the needs of teachers in this sample indicate that appropriate action by administrators include initiatives to improve communication, place the relationship first, and demonstrate authentic appreciation. Teachers also desire additional training in TIPS and receiving this training may boost their confidence and morale while reducing burnout. Thus, we recommend pre-service and in-service training in TIPS to provide teachers with knowledge about trauma and its impact on students, strategies they can use in the classroom during transitions and academic instruction to prevent or

address trauma symptoms, and opportunities to collaborate with their peers and school psychologists/counselors to hone their skills. In addition, promoting a positive school climate with administrative support for TIPS is crucial. Thus, we recommend administrator-level training to understand trauma and how to support teachers with secondary trauma and psychological safety. These two levels of training, paired with consultation from school psychologists and other school-based mental health professionals would support a school climate that allows teachers to build upon their natural TIPS and seek guidance as needed.

The collaborative framework employed in this study can be readily adapted to identify, quantify, and develop responses to wide-ranging areas of concern impacting particular school communities. In particular, conducting needs assessment to improve educator wellbeing is critical to attracting prospective educators to the field.

## **Conclusion**

The increasing complexity of demands on educators must be complemented by the requisite resources, such as time and other supports to adequately respond to their students' as well as their own mental well-being during the school day. Thus, school leaders must be aware of the stress associated with increasing attention to new skill sets and allow for time and space to explore TIPS. Furthermore, teachers reported enjoying the opportunity to gather and share community in ways that support personal and professional relationships. As such, part of developing a positive school community conducive to TIPS is building opportunities for connection amongst all educators.



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**Table 1***Educator Roles and Range of Experience (N = 178)*

Variable	%
<b>Role</b>	
General Education Teacher	57.6
Student Services Personnel	11.9
Special Education Teacher	10.2
Teacher on Special Assignment	7.3
Administrator	5.6
Staff	1.1
Other	6.2
<b>Experience</b>	
0 – 2	5.7
3 – 5	10.3
6 – 10	14.9
11 – 20	30.9
≥ 21	38.3
<b>School Type</b>	
Elementary	53.9
Junior High	18.0
High School	31.5
Other Settings	7.9

*Note.* Educators were able to select more than one age group.

**Table 2***Teacher Report on Barriers and School Climate (N = 81)*

Variable	% Agree
<b>Barriers</b>	
I face barriers to implementing these practices that are out of my control	40.7
I do not use the resources because I do not think they are useful	14.8
<b>School Climate</b>	
I feel supported by my administration in regard to me utilizing these resources	54.4
My school climate makes me feel comfortable discussing topics related to trauma / healing and wellness	62.9

*Note.* Sum represents “Somewhat agree” and “Strongly agree.”

**Table 3***Use and Helpfulness of Resources during the Pandemic*

Event	Used		How helpful	
	%	(n)	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
List of mental health resources	67.1	106	5.6	2.9
Virtual guided wellness activities	55.4	87	5.8	2.4
Opportunities to connect with others	49.4	78	7.2	2.3
Opportunity to talk about your own feelings and responses to the events	48.1	76	5.9	2.5
In-person guided wellness activities	42.0	66	6.5	2.5
Training to identify students who may need support	36.9	59	6.4	2.2
E-mail or letter on identifying students who may need support	36.7	58	5.8	2.0
Other trainings or resources	35.9	56	6.4	3.3

*Note.* 0 = “not at all helpful,” 10 = “very helpful”

**Table 4***Summary of Domains and Themes Arising from Qualitative Coding*

Domain	Theme	Definition
Administrator Communication	Changing Protocols	References to administrators changing protocols/policies, including references to distance learning.
	District Emails	Emails sent from the district to educators that reference trauma-informed classrooms, self-care, and mental health.
	Teacher Appreciation	References to ways that administrators demonstrate appreciation for educators.
	Communication with Administrators	Educators' attempts to communicate their needs, ideas, frustrations, etc. to administrators.
	Toxic Positivity	Reference to administrators dismissing negative emotions and responding to distress with false reassurances rather than empathy.
	Active Listening	Discussion of an educator's needs/feelings being spoken and whether those needs/feelings were addressed or validated.
	District Disconnect	Reference to feeling disconnected/ or sensing a lack of compatibility with district's actions.
Social Emotional Learning and Trauma	Student SEL	References to students' social emotional learning at school. Includes reference to students' social skills strengths and weaknesses and discussion of fostering/encouraging social skill growth.
	Student SEL Resources	Resources/strategies educators engage in to increase social emotional learning in students.
	Student Trauma	Reference to perceived student and/or addressing that trauma with the student.
	Adult Trauma	Reference to trauma educators or parents have experienced.
	Mental Health Data Missing	Reference to data on student mental health not being collected, especially relative to other data being collected.

**Table 5***Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Study Variables*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Extrinsic Barriers	-						
2. Intrinsic Barriers	.03	-					
3. School Climate	-.31	-.24	-				
4. Confidence in Responding to Student Behavior	-.34	-.08	.23	-			
5. Secondary Traumatic Stress	<b>.43*</b>	.06	-.30	-.20	-		
6. Burnout	<b>.44*</b>	.04	<b>-.35*</b>	.00	<b>.55*</b>	-	
7. Teacher Subjective Wellbeing	<b>-.33*</b>	-.21	<b>.34*</b>	.23	<b>-.47*</b>	<b>-.36*</b>	-
<i>N</i>	81	81	81	107	137	149	107
<i>M</i>	2.05	1.23	2.54	2.05	2.38	4.75	3.29
<i>SD</i>	1.23	1.16	1.25	.64	.86	1.53	.55
<i>Range</i>	0-4	0-4	0-4	0-3	1.06-4.88	.00-6	2-4

*Note:* \*indicates rejection of the null hypothesis based on Holm-Bonferroni correction of alpha values at the individual test level.

**Table 6***Teacher Report on Feelings of Burnout Once a Week or More (N = 149)*

Item	% Every Week
Emotionally drained	63.8
Broken down	58.4
Frustrated by work	59.7
Work too hard	56.4
End of tether	49.1

*Note.* Sum represents the combined responses of “Once a week,” “A few times per week,” and “Every day”

**Table 7***Summary of Logistic Regression Results Predicting Utilization of Resources*

	B	SE B	Wald	$\beta$	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Constant	-0.28	0.24	1.36	0.76	.243	
Second. Traumatic Stress	-0.25	0.26	0.93	0.78	.334	0.47-1.30
Constant	-0.26	0.23	1.22	0.78	.270	
Burnout	-0.20	0.15	1.81	0.82	.179	0.62-1.09
Constant	-0.30	0.24	1.56	0.74	.212	
Subj. Wellbeing	0.89	0.44	4.11	2.42	<b>.043</b>	1.03-5.70
Constant	-0.65	0.36	3.34	0.52	.068	
Prior Trauma Training	0.92	0.49	3.59	2.52	.058	0.97-6.53
Constant	-0.96	0.93	1.07	0.38	.301	
Confidence	0.27	0.43	0.40	1.31	.528	0.56-3.06
Constant	-1.71	0.61	7.83	0.18	.005	
School Climate	0.53	0.21	6.48	1.70	<b>.011</b>	1.13-2.54