



# RESILIENT SCHOOLS PROJECT:

A Systems Approach to Building  
Trauma-Informed, Resilience-Focused Schools

## WHITEPAPER

# Our Mission

*Starr Commonwealth leads with courage to create positive experiences so that all children, families, and communities flourish.*

## Vision

*Universal Hope, Boundless Love, and Limitless Success for all children.*

## Authors

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## Resilient Schools Project: A Systems Approach to Building Trauma-Informed, Resilience-Focused Schools

### 1. Introduction

Starr Commonwealth's flagship Resilient Schools Project is an evidence-informed and comprehensive systems approach to establishing a culture of resilience and trauma-informed practices in K-12 school buildings and districts nationwide. The goal is to equip school professionals with knowledge, training, and support to foster resilience in children.

Starr's Resilient Schools Project model was born out of a growing need for schools to address a multitude of students' needs. Given the context of our current time fraught with a legacy of racial trauma, social inequities, along with the sudden and prolonged onset of COVID-19, schools are tasked with ensuring that the educational process provides nourishment, safety, structure, and social and emotional support for students impacted by trauma (Dorado, Martinez, McArthur, & Leibovitz, 2016).

Substantial research, such as the landmark CDC-Kaiser Permanente Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study, points to a behavioral health crisis of trauma and toxic stress that can potentially have long-term effects on individuals over their lifetime (Felitti et al., 1998). The ACEs study shows that youth can be experiencing adversities such as physical and sexual abuse, emotional neglect, and exposure to domestic violence and substance abuse (Felitti et al., 1998). Other studies point to additional adversities youth may be experiencing such as peer violence, community violence, natural disasters, and

structural inequalities (Bartlett, 2020; Murphey & Bartlett, 2019). As one concerned high school teacher participating in our work noted, "These kids deal with things that kids shouldn't have to deal with [such as] homelessness, parent incarceration, poverty, parental drug abuse, house fires, depression, suicide, etc.," and these adversities may likely be impacting students' learning and wellbeing. Amidst concern for these factors, research points to schools as environments that can take action on the harmful effects of the social determinants of health, while promoting resilience in children (Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016; Chafouleas, Johnson, Overstreet, & Santos, 2016; see also Marmot & Wilkinson, 2006). Attention has been focused on schools as settings that can offer students services that bolster their physical, mental, and social health, as well as foster resilience, which may contribute to improved impact on quality-of-life outcomes and enhance life prospects.

Yet with a growing demand for action, some schools are struggling to find the resources, capacity, and expertise in trauma and resilience that is necessary to respond appropriately to this call for action. As more school professionals are faced with addressing issues (e.g., increasing student mental health diagnoses and trauma-impacted students, mounting student suspension and expulsion rates, and declining academic achievement), there is a profound need for systems approaches that support all students, especially students who

are impacted by trauma and toxic stress.

Moreover, while school professionals are often well-equipped to deliver curriculum to students that are socially and emotionally ready to learn (i.e., students able to readily access cognitive functioning and self-regulation strategies), these same professionals may not be prepared to teach students who do not yet possess the social and emotional competencies needed for academic learning. In addition, some school professionals may not have developed the self-care strategies necessary to ensure their own wellbeing while engaging in the work of supporting students.

Recognizing these challenges, Starr Commonwealth and its educational partners identified the growing need for school training programs to provide information on how to work with youth who have experienced trauma and toxic stress. **Starr’s theory of change is that when trauma-informed and resilience-focused adults work within trauma-informed and resilience-focused systems, the wellbeing and success of children will increase.** This theory is the foundation of the Resilient Schools Project that includes not only training, but also practical tools, coaching, and evaluation measures to implement and sustain trauma-informed, resilience-focused care in education settings. Below are some clarifying definitions and language used when outlining the scope and purpose of a Resilient Schools Project:

### Trauma-Informed

Psychologist and trauma researcher, Bessel van der Kolk explains that “trauma occurs when

one loses the sense of having a safe place to retreat within or outside oneself to deal with frightening emotions or experiences” (2003, p. 31). An individual can experience trauma resulting from a one-time event or events with repeated frequency or exposure. When an individual is exposed to ongoing, chronic, or prolonged trauma, they experience toxic stress. For children, toxic stress may lead to adverse

health effects in their adulthood. To be *trauma-informed* means understanding the phenomenon of trauma and toxic stress and its effects. It requires having a curious mindset – to ask what needs are not met, and what has happened or is happening to the individual. To be *trauma-informed* involves asking the “why” behind an individual’s behaviors, recognizing their trauma exposure, and providing support by responding to their needs (SAMHSA, 2014, p. 8). A more definitive trauma-informed approach means

that all professionals across an organization are subscribing to the four “Rs”: (1) *realizing* the impact of trauma, (2) *recognizing* trauma symptomology, (3) *responding* to trauma while ensuring the safety of individuals, and (4) *resisting the re-traumatization* of the individual, or re-introducing and exacerbating the trauma an individual is experiencing (SAMHSA, 2014, p. 9).

### Resilience-Focused

To be resilient means to bounce back from adversity and “to develop in a positive way when faced with setbacks” (Petty, 2014, p. 35).

To be *resilience-focused* is to apply strength-

based, rather than deficit-based practices (Bath & Seita, 2018; Brendtro, 2020). In a school context, it requires asking what the student is doing well and creating ways these strengths can be encouraged, while fostering development in areas for needed growth. It involves cultivating in students a sense of safety and belonging, as well as a growth mindset – the self-belief that with continued effort, one has the ability to learn, develop, and attain mastery (Yeager & Dweck, 2012; Dweck, 2006).

### Trauma-Informed and Resilience-Focused Schools

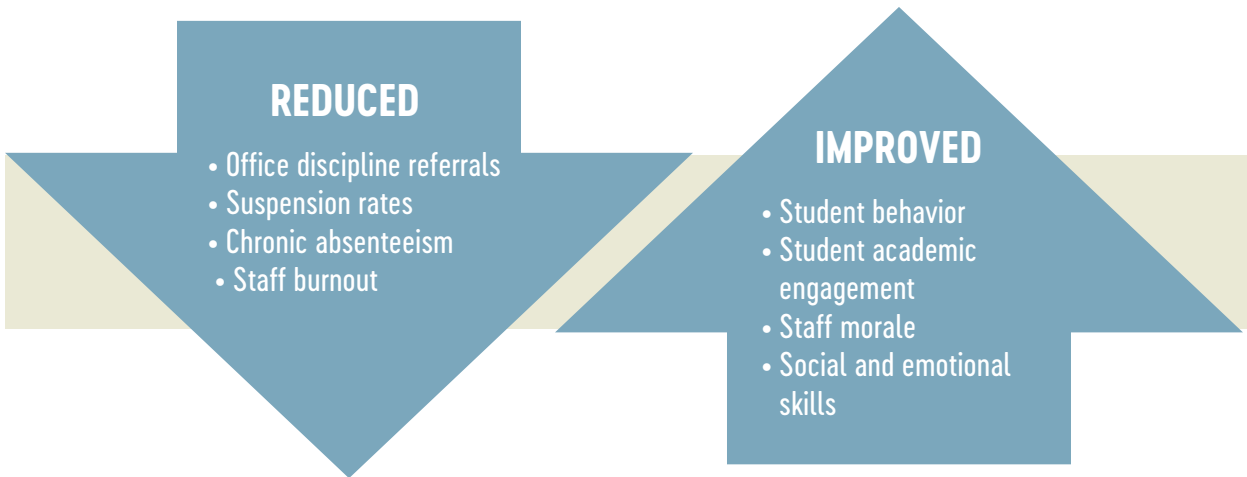
To be a *trauma-informed and resilience-focused school* means that all school professionals across organizational levels understand trauma and its impact, have developed the curious mindset to recognize possible trauma symptoms, and work collectively to support the unmet needs of each child through trauma-informed practices that foster resilience (Soma & Allen, 2020).

No one professional can support an entire system alone. Moreover, systems change requires careful planning to implement impactful measures. Therefore, working across the system, using a comprehensive method is necessary for effective implementation and sustainability.

With the **Resilient Schools Project**, Starr Commonwealth created a comprehensive systems approach to building trauma-informed, resilience-focused schools by:

- Building a network of certified trauma professionals,
- Integrating multi-tiered, age-appropriate, trauma-informed, resilience-focused tools and practices, including integration into existing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) systems, and
- Providing a dynamic new platform for in-person and online professional training coaching, and consulting.

This approach also entails enlisting support and participation from parents, families, and community stakeholders to bolster school system transformation. It is Starr’s belief and experience that through holistic efforts to create a trauma-informed, resilience-focused climate, schools can meet students’ needs and create environments that foster resilience so that all children can flourish—including increased academic engagement, reduced behavioral incidents, and improved social and emotional skills.

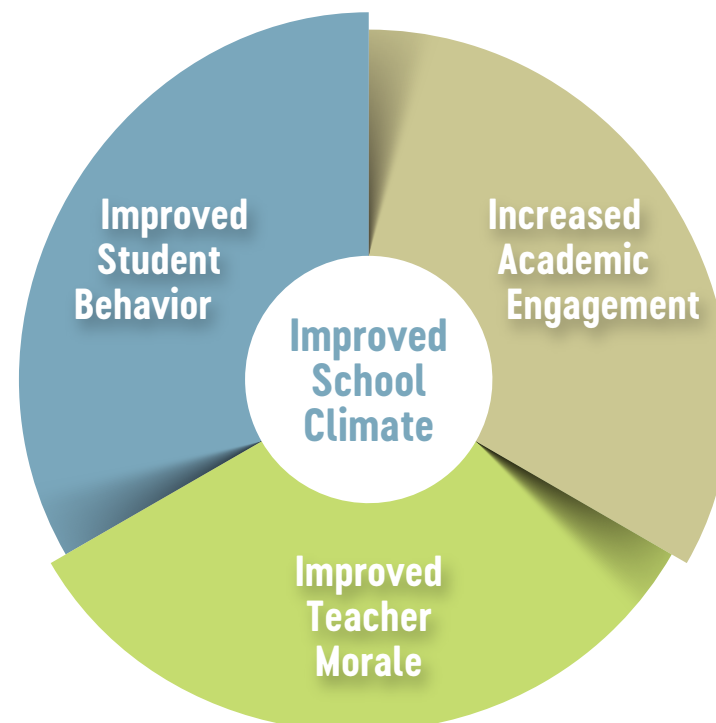




## Starr Commonwealth's Theory of Change

**When trauma-informed and resilience-focused adults work within trauma-informed and resilience-focused systems, the wellbeing and success of children will increase.**

### Resilient Schools Project Patterns



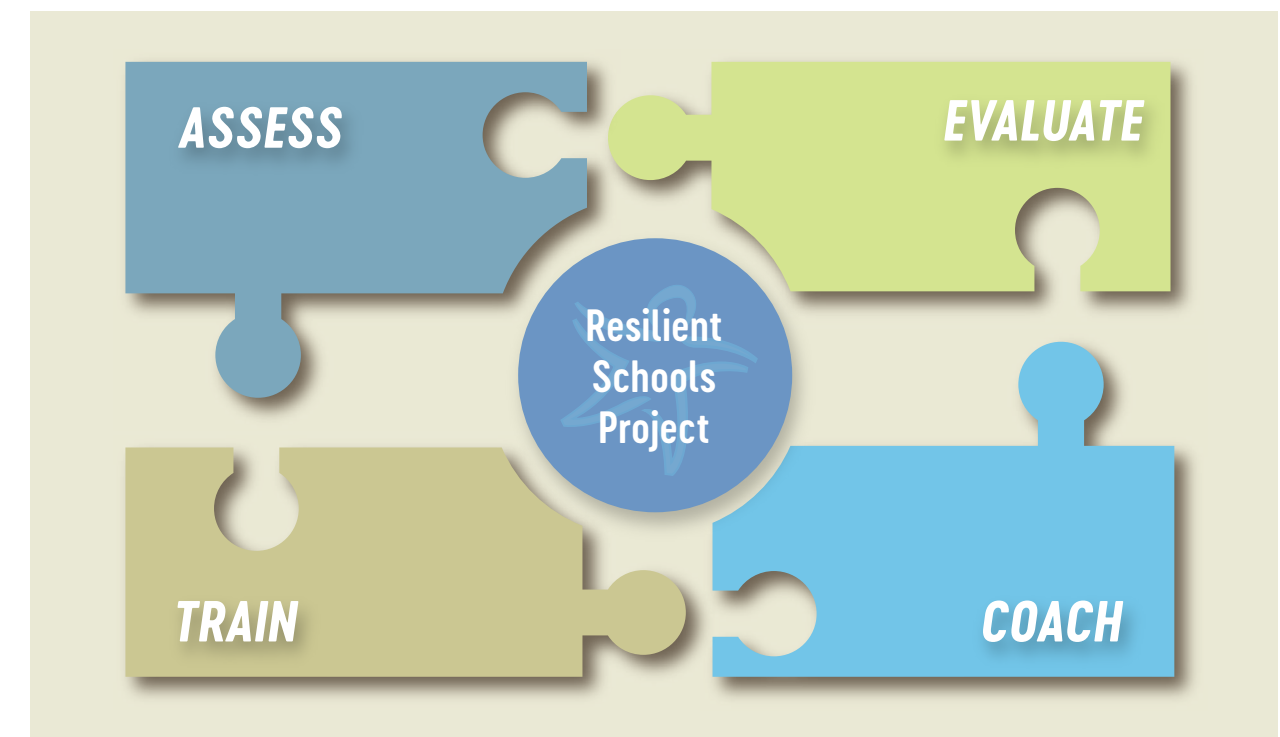
## 2. Resilient Schools Project Process

Since its inception in 2017, the Resilient Schools Project has served as an evidence-informed systems approach, helping schools transform to become safer, more inclusive and supportive environments. Starr helps each school create a new, sustainable strength-based system that provides a safe, structured, and supportive learning environment for students; offers guidance and support to its staff; and approaches all aspects of education in trauma-informed and resilience-focused ways. For this work, Starr provides a host of services to help schools drive their culture and climate transformation. Some of the topics covered include:

- How trauma affects learning;
- The importance of emphasizing social and emotional learning;
- How to incorporate play;
- Creating calming corners in classrooms;
- The importance of brain breaks for tran-

- sitions in the classroom and hallways;
- How to utilize Tier 1 interventions in the classroom;
- Establishing reset spaces;
- Holding restorative conversations; and
- Incorporating self-care practices for both students and professionals.

With the understanding that single-day professional development formats, offering minimal to no ongoing coaching or evaluation, do not provide the level of support needed to shift school culture and educator mindsets, the Resilient Schools Project follows a comprehensive, prescriptive but responsive methodology. The Resilient Schools Project involves the integration of four phases: (1) assessing the school's needs, (2) training all staff to acquire knowledge and skills, (3) coaching staff on successful implementation and best practices, and (4) continuously evaluating progress to track outcomes.





## ASSESS

Starr's Resilient Schools Project begins with a needs assessment to assess a school's culture and climate. The needs assessment involves identifying the school's current conditions, learning the school's desired conditions, making recommendations for how the school can transform to become trauma-informed and resilience-focused, and determining an action plan to do so.

Trauma-informed practice adoption largely depends on staff attitudes towards trauma-informed concepts and the workplace's support of trauma-informed practices (Baker, Brown, Wilcox, Overstreet, & Arora, 2016). Therefore, Starr takes an initial pulse on a school's staff perceptions by administering two assessments. First, Starr deploys an Attitudes Related to Trauma Informed Care (ARTIC) assessment, an evidence-based tool to measure staff attitudes towards trauma-informed care (Baker et al., 2016). Here, individual staff members self-report on attitudes about their students, jobs, and themselves related to trauma-informed care within the context of their workplace.

Second, Starr administers a [Trauma-Informed School Questionnaire \(TISQ\)](#). Starr created the TISQ to measure system change, capturing a broad overview of the school's implementation of trauma-informed, resilience-focused prac-

tices. With this tool, individual staff members self-report their perceptions on the frequency to which they individually, and their school collectively, exhibit trauma-informed, resilience-focused knowledge and behaviors.

Through these tools, Starr gathers a pre-intervention, baseline measure of staff perceptions towards trauma-informed care and the school's implementation of trauma-informed, resilience-focused practices. Starr also collects school-generated data such as school demographics, student behavior, attendance, academic achievement/engagement, and staff retention, to not only understand the context of the school, but also contextualize Starr's generated data. The needs assessment process may also require an initial in-person or virtual site visit that includes school and classroom observations and interviews with school personnel.



## TRAIN

The Resilient Schools Project utilizes Starr Commonwealth's trauma-informed and resilience-focused professional development curriculum, [certification](#) standards, and team development strategy, which together help integrate and sustain a Resilient Schools Project.

Starr's professional training curriculum on trauma-informed and resilience-focused care is based upon, and aligned with, the research of Bessel van der Kolk (2014), Peter Levine (2015) and Bruce Perry (2002), among oth-

ers, including a library of Starr's own extensive research. Starr focuses on how trauma has a different impact at different stages of development. What the research shows is that trauma is a body experience (van der Kolk, 2014). While talk therapy can be an approach, it is not as effective in trauma since the pre-frontal cortex (the logical and linguistic part of the brain) is offline when an individual is experiencing trauma. Medicinal intervention may also be ineffective, as it cannot address the complex ways trauma can manifest (Green et al., 2016). Therefore, practitioners must utilize treatment modalities that address healing and resilience through the body, or they run the risk of misdiagnosing the child and misapplying interventions. Put simply, Starr trains professionals to understand that healing and resilience must incorporate the body.

Starr offers training to all levels of school staff. Training involves helping all school staff (from the bus driver who brings the child to school, to the teachers, administrators, and support staff the child sees throughout their school day), to view student behaviors through a trauma-informed, resilience-focused lens. This means recognizing every student's strength and potential regardless of whether their behaviors fall short of expectations, and to view challenging behaviors as a clue to the child's unmet needs.

Starr's primary training methodology focuses on the power of relationships and creating sensory-enriched environments to establish safe, trauma-informed, resilience-focused schools. To help schools foster resilience, Starr offers training in its resilience philosophy rooted in The Circle of Courage. The Circle of Courage is a model of positive youth development based on the universal principle that to be emotionally healthy, all youth need a sense

of belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity. This unique model integrates the cultural wisdom of tribal peoples, the practice wisdom of professional pioneers with troubled youth, and findings of modern youth development research (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2019).

Through Starr's curriculum and training, school staff learn strategies for building authentic relationships with students such as greeting students at school and in the classroom, holding community circles, using positive acknowledgement, eating lunch with students, and serving as mentors to students as ways to create and sustain meaningful connections. These relationships are key to fostering safety, connections, and creating a community, all factors that are essential to students' social and emotional learning and skill development.

Starr training also helps staff support their students' emotional, mental, and physical safety. Staff learn how to create sensory-enriched environments by integrating sensory activities that support students' adaptation to the learning environment and daily functioning at school (Roley, Bissell, & Clark, 2009). Staff learn mind-body practices such as promoting play, incorporating movement, integrating brain breaks, and using body maps to build students' emotional regulation skills, develop students' present-moment awareness, and prime students' brains for learning. Staff also learn how to use time-in classroom strategies (rather than time out of classrooms) along with how to model emotional regulation techniques so that students can develop skills to self-regulate.

A key part of Starr training also provides self-care strategies for teachers and staff to

manage their job stress and find a balance between the demands of mandated accountability standards while addressing the social and emotional needs of their students. Starr provides in-depth support and training to help professionals find ways to not only live and flourish in their work, but also model ways children can practice resilience.

Starr's professional training and development delivery can include in-person professional development days, live/remote webinar sessions, or training through Starr's on-demand eLearning platform. Each method is specifically designed to help schools build the knowledge and skills needed to implement trauma-informed and resilience-focused practices.

As part of the implementation process, Starr helps schools build a Champions of Resilience (COR) Team consisting of a cross-section of staff who work with one another to lead the project. The team is tasked with becoming certified in Starr's approach, championing the professional development plan, modeling everyday practice, and leading the overall Resilient Schools Project. The COR Team is trained by Starr to become Certified Trauma and Resilience Practitioners, Coaches, and ultimately Trainers who together provide support for project sustainability by serving as in-house experts.

A critical component to ensuring sustainability of a Resilient Schools Project involves direct, expert coaching and real-time implementation support. Starr Coaches are highly skilled in operationalizing trauma-informed, resilience-focused best care implementation and providing scaffolded support through a structured process of coaching, modeling, co-teaching, observing, and providing feedback.



Starr Coaches provide this customized support to individual educators as they implement trauma-informed, resilience-focused best practices in their classroom. In addition, Starr Coaches provide consultation to administrators to implement trauma-informed, resilience-focused best practices building-wide, including strength-based, problem-solving strategies, which empower teachers to make creative decisions that positively impact the children they serve.

A Starr Coach first builds rapport and positive relationships with school staff. The Starr Coach supports all aspects of the ongoing training and offers guidance to the COR Team and staff in their implementation efforts of transforming their school's culture and climate. This includes assistance with integrating a trauma-informed, resilience-focused approach within a school's Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) strategies. It also includes modeling how to notice positive progress and point out areas for growth. Here, the Starr Coach highlights areas where the school is excelling and provides additional support in areas where the school is experiencing challenges, reinforcing the work of the COR Team. The Starr Coach also helps schools shift from focusing on end-results to celebrating small victories along the way – any reduction in negative outcomes and even

slight areas of growth are an integral part of a school's progress, and recognizing staff and students for these benchmarks is essential.

Moreover, the Starr Coach assists with the development of initiatives to engage parents, families, and community stakeholders. To address issues of low parental support and engagement, Starr Coaches work with staff to find ways to collaborate with parents and families in a strength-based, non-judgmental manner. Here, parents and families are included in the problem-solving process, rather than only being notified about their child's behavior or told what will be done to address it. This may include offering resources for additional support services. To build connections between the school and community, the Starr Coach also assists with planning efforts such as promoting school events, inviting guest speakers, and offering service-learning projects.



To measure the effectiveness of a school's Resilient Schools Project, Starr continually monitors each school's progress of trauma-informed, resilience-focused care adoption. To do so, Starr collects data over the course of the project period to measure and track outcomes over time.

As implementation is underway, Starr administers several pulse surveys including a redeployment of the Attitudes Related to Trauma Informed Care (ARTIC) assessment

and the [Trauma-Informed Schools Questionnaire \(TISQ\)](#). Starr uses these tools as ways to compare the school's results to its earlier baseline results, track the trauma-informed, resilience-focused benchmarks the school has achieved, and identify areas for continued growth.

Data collection also includes analyzing open-ended questions featured on the TISQ. These questions concern what trauma-informed, resilience-focused care training school staff have received; how individual staff are applying trauma-informed, resilience-focused strategies; and in what ways their school is implementing trauma-informed, resilience-focused practices.

Data collection may include additional school and classroom observations and interviews with school personnel. In terms of benchmarking and evaluating progress, Starr solicits ongoing feedback from staff on their trauma-informed, resilience-focused initiatives and trains the school COR Team how to interpret and disseminate this information to staff.

In addition, Starr coaching and consulting sessions significantly contribute to the evaluation of a Resilient Schools Project. These sessions feature feedback from Starr Coaches, school COR Team members, teachers, and students that can be used to inform strengths and opportunities for growth. Starr Coaches also keep documentation of what they focused their coaching on for the session, identify areas where the school is progressing, locate areas for growth, and recommend plans for continued action.

*“Many of the students who are living with trauma have started to become more aware of [their] academic needs and are able to talk when [having] difficulty with their academics.”*

– Elementary School Staff

*“Students are growing in their resilience academically and have improved in their frustration tolerance in regards to their academics.”*

– Elementary School Staff

*“It brings practical applications of how we can come into the classroom setting and have this curiosity – this focus on relationships [and] help build resiliency while still teaching students our content.”*

– Middle School Teacher

*“I encourage my students to self-regulate after co-regulation. I try to teach them about the brain and different brain-aligned strategies that will help them in their other classes.”*

– High School Staff

### 3. Lessons from the Classroom

- **Schools with enthusiastic buy-in from administrative leaders who can rally their staff to make collective change are making great progress.** These schools are seeing the biggest gains with respect to school climate improvement.
- **Schools that commit to developing a strong Champions of Resilience (COR) Team are seeing greater project success.** Starr guides the school in selecting school personnel to be champions for their COR Team and then provides extensive training and coaching to the team. This COR Team functions to provide expertise and support to fellow school staff, which is instrumental to effective implementation and project sustainability.
- **School staff who are open to implementing trauma-informed, resilience-focused strategies and taking advantage of the new tools they are learning from the training and coaching are critical to system-wide change.** This is apparent when school staff are expressing their gratitude for the support they are receiving from Starr. As one teacher noted, “It’s not another curriculum, but a way of interacting with others on a daily basis to form meaningful connection.”
- **Having a simple, understandable universal needs model like the Circle of Courage transforms the way educators see behavior.** All students may not have experienced trauma or have not yet been identified as having experienced trauma, but all students can benefit from building skills of resilience (i.e., belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity) through the Circle of Courage.
- **Schools that are able to engage parents and community partners that support afterschool supports and wrap-around services are often far more successful in reaching students more completely.**
- Educators that are willing to adopt a trauma-informed, resilience-focused mindset, shift the lens through which they view student behavior. They **understand the power of relationships and become the change leaders** for the Resilient Schools Project. These educators have a powerful influence on the success of the project because they influence and encourage their colleagues, which ultimately leads to **long-term and sustainable transformation of school culture and climate.**

## 4. Outcomes

Through Starr's Resilient Schools Project efforts with partnering schools, Starr Coaches have documented the following gains that meet the immediate needs of children:

- Teachers are creating safe and secure classrooms by implementing classroom routines, positing daily schedules, and utilizing soft lighting.
- Teachers have shifted from focusing on challenging behaviors to praising wanted behaviors.
- Staff are using restorative language in situations where students were highly dysregulated.
- Staff have been successfully implementing Tier 1 interventions, including presenting choices to students and incorporating sensory tools.
- Teachers are creating comfort corners in the classrooms where students can self-regulate.
- Teachers are using brain breaks and movement to engage students.

Across various case studies, Starr has also found positive outcomes when compared to baseline measures, which have resulted in improved school culture and climate:

- Decrease in office discipline referrals.
- Decrease in chronic absenteeism.
- Decrease in suspension rates.
- Improved social and emotional skills.
- Increase in student academic engagement.
- Improved staff morale.

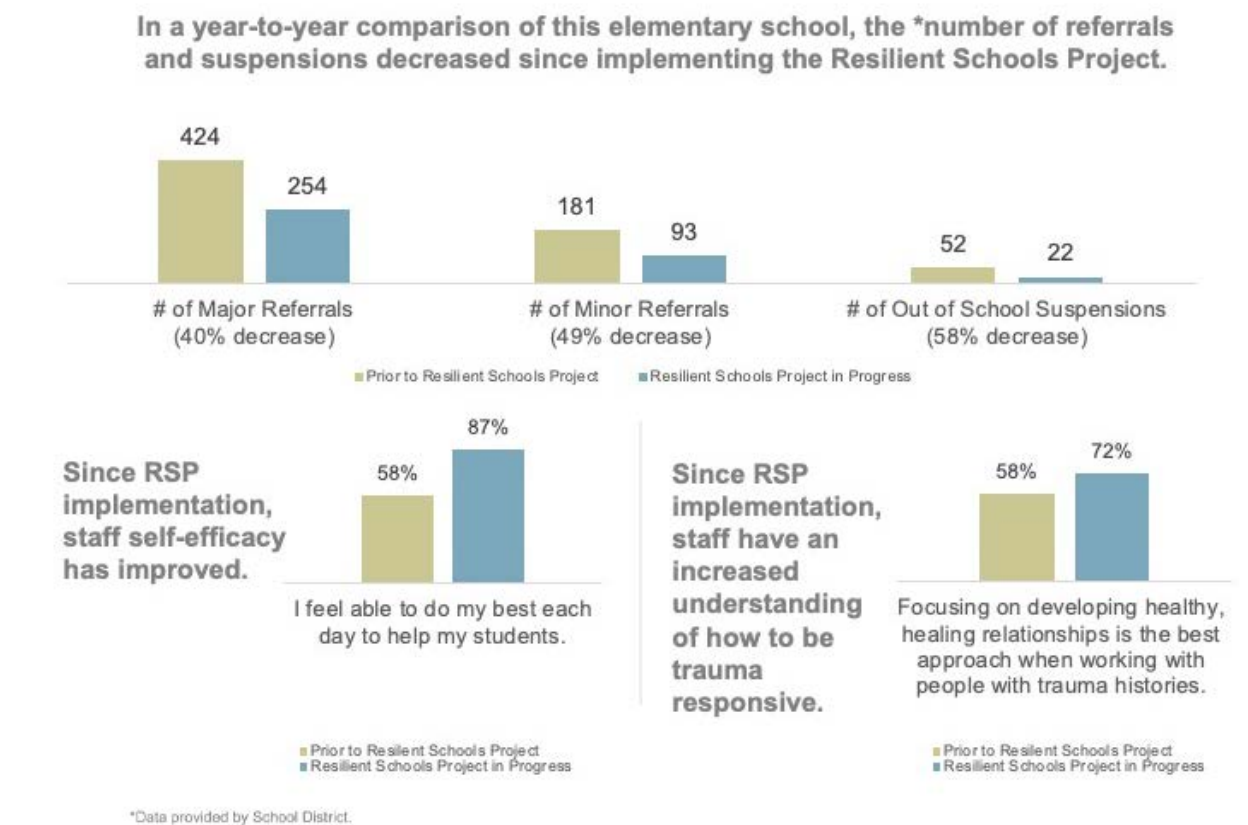
### POSITIVE OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS

- ✓ Improved social and emotional skills
- ✓ Improved student behavior and self-regulation
- ✓ Fewer disciplinary referrals and stressful classroom situations
- ✓ Improved academic engagement
- ✓ Improved academic achievement
- ✓ Improved feelings of teacher and school support

### POSITIVE OUTCOMES FOR STAFF

- ✓ Improved understanding of student behavior
- ✓ Increased use of trauma-informed and resilience-focused practices
- ✓ Improved self-efficacy
- ✓ Improved relationships with students
- ✓ Increased collaboration between teachers and staff
- ✓ Improved feelings of administrative support

In an elementary school case study, for example, the school made the following gains in terms of student behavior, staff efficacy, and staff members' understanding of how to be trauma responsive:



Through targeted research across schools, Starr has been able to identify reasons behind these improvements. In terms of student behavior, school staff report that they have seen significant improvements, attributing this to actively using their learned trauma-informed, resilience-focused skills in the classroom. When surveyed, a staff member explained, "Students appear to be responding well to sensory paths that help them deescalate and reset proactively and reactively".

Teachers are also finding that since the implementation of the Resilient Schools Project, students are demonstrating improved academic engagement. Teachers are seeing decreases in frustrations related to academics and increases in students' focus on learning. When

surveyed, one staff member noted, "Some children are taking risks...putting forth more effort in their studies".

In terms of morale, staff report that they have improved feelings about their work and feel supported by one another. When surveyed, they have expressed enthusiasm for engaging in trauma-informed, resilience-focused work, in both their school and community. One school staff member reported that they "feel empowered to help children and families change for the better." Another staff member commented, "I have learned a lot more patience [and] become a better listener." A middle school teacher remarked, "By implementing restorative practices, such as a calming corner and body mapping, I have

witnessed a change within myself, my students and the overall classroom environment for the better.”

School staff also report that positive outcomes in behavior, academic engagement, and morale have led to overall improvement in their school’s culture and climate. As one elementary school staff member remarked, “The environment has created a safer place for kids to learn, creating a more enriching learning environment.”

Additionally, many staff have voiced that they are eager to receive more training to continue building upon the trauma-informed and resilience-focused knowledge and skills they have learned. Staff have noticed the major impact the Resilient Schools Project has had on not only their students, but also themselves. As one staff member said, “I believe training would be valuable to me personally since I am always trying new ways to help my students do their best learning.”

Schools have experienced these significant improvements, yet challenges remain that support why careful and consistent implementation of the Resilient Schools Project is necessary. A common concern is that school staff may not have received much, if any, pre-service training in trauma-informed, resilience-focused care in their college programs. In these cases, Starr training may be the first and only training that teachers have received on the topic. One school had reported that only 25% of school staff had received some form of training in trauma-informed care, prior to Starr’s training, pointing to a need for both pre-service and in-service training. Moreover, data across schools supports the need for continued training, revealing that when introducing staff to the topic, the major-

ity of staff show enthusiasm and an eagerness to continue the training.

Some staff have also expressed fear that administrators may eschew trauma-informed, resilience-focused care in a year or two. Staff who invest in the process want to see it consistently implemented, supported, and remain in their schools. This was intimidated by staff in a few ways, with some overt comments such as, “Continue with the process and do not stop in a few years for the next new fad,” and others more subtly like, “The program needs to be implemented properly and and staff needs support and continual training.”

Another concern expressed by staff is that they are cautious not to focus too much attention on students exhibiting challenging behaviors at the risk of overlooking other students. The Resilient Schools Project helps school staff understand that they must prioritize all students and recognize that practicing trauma-formed, resilience-focused care benefits all students. In addition, school staff are trained to keep high expectations for students with the understanding that supports should be provided so that every student can meet their potential.

A related concern is that some staff commented on the power struggles that are present with some students in the classroom, where “students [are] taking advantage of our system and some of the behaviors continue.” Here, staff noted the challenge of resisting the urge to fall back on punitive behavior measures. The Resilient Schools Project presents staff with a multitude of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) strategies so that staff address student behavior in a way that is both responsive to trauma and fosters resilience. Staff also learn ways to collaborate and support

one another so that they can best meet the needs of students.

Finally, school staff recognize that it can be difficult to change a teacher’s mindset who has taught, or received training to teach, in ways that run counter to trauma-informed resilience-focused practices (e.g., the use of reward systems or punitive measures). Changing a teacher’s mindset can be especially challenging if they have become accustomed to utilizing specific strategies for most of their career. Yet, what Starr’s data shows is that punitive methods are not proving to be successful and only perpetuating school practices that continually fail to meet the needs of all students.

These challenges point to the growing demand and urgency for the Resilient Schools Project in order to provide schools with tools and support. Here, Starr equips school staff with the training, coaching, and resources necessary to

meet children’s needs and foster resilience. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (2014):

Our knowledge about what constitutes resilience in children is evolving, but we know that several factors are positively related to such protection, including cognitive capacity, healthy attachment relationships (especially with parents and caregivers), the motivation and ability to learn and engage with the environment, the ability to regulate emotions and behavior, and supportive environmental systems, including education, cultural beliefs, and faith-based communities. (pp. 4-5).

Starr Commonwealth’s Resilient Schools Project has proven to be an effective way for schools to build supportive education environments. In doing so, schools can help children flourish in the face of adversity and make a lasting impact on their wellbeing and success.

***“We had very few tools—suspension, code of conduct, send them out [of school]. We felt we were not meeting their needs and there was danger inside the school...We realized it wasn’t about academics...We were failing to meet their needs. By bringing a trauma-informed practice into our schools...when we started treating them like humans first, [we now have] the highest test scores...and the highest enrollment in 13 years. We’re finally doing the right thing for kids.”***

– School Superintendent

## 5. Advocating for a Resilient School A Local, State, and National Approach

Creating trauma-informed and resilience-focused schools requires a collective, constant effort and advocacy for the health and wellbeing of children that often begins with, but quickly expands from, a teacher, parent, or administrator (a “Champion”) who recognizes the fundamental needs of children and sets out to find solutions to meet those needs. The Resilient Schools Project model provides advocates with a clear structure and pathway to transforming a school, but Starr is careful to recognize the need to advocate for and build each project from the ground up in the same way each child (and advocate) has unique strengths, needs, and pathways to resilience.

It is important to recognize when first advocating for a Resilient Schools Project that many of the existing programs, committees, services, and professionals are already in place. The need for more and better mental and behavioral health services, for example, is often well understood in schools and communities, but how all staff, teachers, administrators, and community members rally around the common goals and objectives of an education system is often fractured, frustrating, and sometimes even counterproductive. Moreover, schools are often not equipped with the human and financial resources to address the complex nature and sources of trauma. What a school can do, however, is commit to becoming trauma-informed and resilience-focused. This is the first step towards addressing trauma and embarking on the pathway to fostering children’s resilience.

It is imperative that schools offer a responsive plan. The [National Council for Behavioral Health](#) (2015) outlines several domains of trauma-informed care policies and practices with which schools can align their goals such as:

- Nurturing a trauma-informed and responsive workforce,
- Promoting evidence-based and emerging best practices,
- Creating safe environments,
- Initiating community outreach and partnership building, and
- Monitoring performance improvement and evaluation.

Nurturing a trauma-informed and responsive workforce begins with assessing needs, training and coaching on the fundamentals of trauma, and promoting evidence-based and emerging best practices for creating safe environments that foster resilience. These actions require advocacy and, wherever possible, should be incorporated into policies and practices within each school system. In addition, collaboration with families and social services is critical to a “continuity of care” strategy.

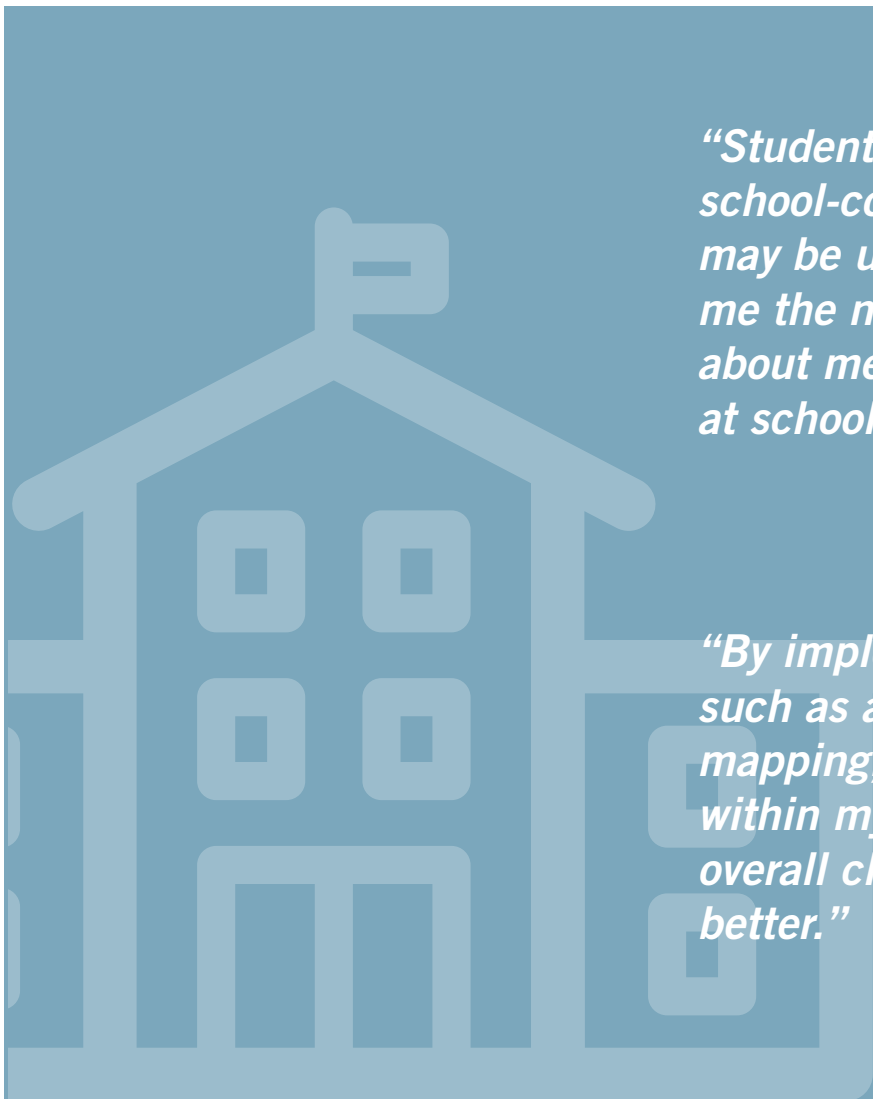
Starr Commonwealth also participates in the [Campaign for Trauma Informed Policy and Practice \(CTIPP\)](#), which seeks to work with Congress to build on bipartisan accomplishments and continue to strengthen federal resources to address trauma. In response to the expansive body of evidence, studies, and publications, this whitepaper seeks to support

this campaign and “promotes a grassroots effort to educate and engage congressional offices and other federal, state, and local leaders in supporting policies, programs, legislation, and appropriations that prevent and address childhood trauma and build resilience” (CTIPP, 2020, para. 2).

The needs of school administrators, teachers, students, and their families navigating a profoundly changed learning environment is best served by the explicit recognition of funding eligibility and the integral value of professional development for trauma-informed care. This would represent a significant step in improving schools’ access to the best training

available, and make the most effective use of federal and state dollars in America’s classrooms. Starr Commonwealth and many others are continuing to work with Congress to ensure that students and teachers nationwide have the resources they need to succeed in these unprecedented times.

Local advocacy, however, is where systems change truly begins. To re-emphasize Starr’s theory of change, *when trauma-informed and resilience-focused adults work within trauma-informed and resilience-focused systems, the wellbeing and success of children will increase.*



***“Students are experiencing more school-connectedness. Although students may be upset with me one day, they tell me the next day how much they care about me and feel safe in my room and at school.”***

– Elementary School Staff

***“By implementing restorative practices, such as a calming corner and body mapping, I have witnessed a change within myself, my students and the overall classroom environment—for the better.”***

– Middle School Teacher

## 6. Conclusion

Starr Commonwealth begins its work with school partners by asking a simple but comprehensive question: “What could your local schools look like one, two, or five years from now, once you’ve adopted trauma-informed and resilience-focused practices and once a team of teachers and staff are fully trained and certified to implement Starr’s approach within your system?”

Starr Commonwealth has been piloting the Resilient Schools Project across the country to help education partners respond to a behavioral health crisis that is the result of accumulating trauma and toxic stress in children, families, and communities. The landmark CDC-Kaiser Permanente Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study provided insights to begin seeking solutions (see Felitti et al., 1998). Around the same time, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, or PBIS, became a standard that schools use to address students that exhibit challenging behaviors by altering staff behaviors and developing systems and supports to meet children’s behavioral needs (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, & Leaf (2012).

The evidence gathered during and since these advances yields two key findings: (1) stressed and traumatized children cannot learn with the same focus and success as children who have not had these experiences, and (2) trauma-informed, resilience-focused interventions can help all children whether or not they have had trauma exposure.

Today, in the face of the COVID-19 global pandemic, nation-wide unrest over racial

injustice, economic uncertainty for families, school closures, and unfunded school and community supports, this is a time that requires no explaining or complicated rationale for being trauma-informed and resilience-focused. The need has always been there, but today more than ever it is time for change.

Since 1913, Starr Commonwealth has been at the forefront of this change, advocating and “leading with courage to create positive experiences so that all children, families, and communities can flourish.” School systems, because of the incredibly important role they play in every community, every family, and every child’s life, are at the heart of this work. Leading up to the global pandemic that has gripped the world, Starr had trained over 80,000 professionals in its approach. In just 3 months, from April to June 2020, that number has more than doubled. This is a key indicator to Starr that professionals recognize the vital importance of being trauma-informed and resilience-focused and are actively seeking ways to be responsive to the needs of children.

Starr’s Resilient Schools Project aims to establish a team of Champions in every school in the country. The Resilient Schools Project brings a systems approach to transforming education environments, one teacher, classroom, and district at a time. Yet, the project is not a disparate or individual resilient school project, but rather a collective effort across schools and districts nation-wide.

Starr works with its school partners to assess each school’s specific needs; build a diverse professional development curriculum and

resource library to train school practitioners in trauma-formed and resilience-focused practices; coach schools in their transformation to a trauma-informed, resilience-focused environment; and evaluate outcomes—all to ensure

sustainability. This is the Resilient Schools Project, and Starr invites every school professional and district throughout the country to join in the quest for educational change to foster resilience in children.

*“It doesn’t matter what you teach, it doesn’t matter what students you teach, it doesn’t matter what grade level you teach – everybody can come away...with some strategies that they can use with students that they see every day in their classrooms.”*

– School Administrator

*“I feel supported and feel empowered to help children and families change for the better.”*

– Elementary School Staff

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