



The process of implementing trauma-resilient informed practices at LA's BEST

By Eric Gurna, President & CEO

Everything was not OK. At first, I thought it was. I had worked at LA's BEST in the late 90s and when I returned to the organization in 2015, I found that positive youth development and the prioritization of youth voice remained bedrock strong, even with the organization's significant expansion of scale and services. But everything was not OK. It quickly became clear that the challenges children and staff faced were broader and deeper than ever before. Situations I was accustomed to seeing in middle and high school programs—suicidal ideation, self-harm, high levels of anxiety—were manifesting in elementary school-aged children. And in September 2015, three young boys were found stabbed to death in an SUV. The tragedy hit close to home: two of the boys were enrolled in an LA's BEST school, and the stabbing took place next to another LA's BEST school.

While this tragedy was certainly not typical, it was clear to us that violence and toxic stress—in LA and around the world—was escalating. As an afterschool program dedicated to not just supporting young people in the afterschool hours, but to being part of a movement to value emotional health and wellness for all, we needed to better equip our staff to respond to these situations, and to create the conditions for children to learn the social and emotional skills essential for navigating their lives.

I admit I had reservations about collaborating with mental health specialists—something that seemed the obvious first step—primarily because I was aware of research showing that young people of color are over-diagnosed and over-prescribed medication¹. I didn't want to contribute to that nor take an overly clinical approach to our children and staff. Fortunately, our partners are some of the most forward-thinking experts in the field. The team at Los Angeles Unified School District School Mental Health Department, led by Pia Escudero, who is now LAUSD Director of Health and Human Services) and her team—including LA's BEST's first Mental Health Consultant Joel Cisneros, who is now Director of School Mental Health—are compassionate and dedicated mental health professionals who believe in the potential of the afterschool setting to serve as a true

¹ **“We are overmedicating America’s poorest kids,”** by Nancy Rappaport, June 4, 2014
https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/06/04/we-are-way-too-quick-to-diagnose-poor-children-with-adhd/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.9426364819f3

community investment into prevention and wellness. Debe Loxton, LA's BEST's Chief Operating Officer and the primary architect of our 200 school afterschool system, felt equally passionately about this need, and was committed to providing our team with the resources they needed to match their high levels of compassion for our children. Together we embarked on becoming the first trauma-resilient informed (TRI) large-scale afterschool system in the nation.

Our first step was for our leadership team (20 people) to learn about the impact of trauma and the resources available that would equip our staff and children to build stronger responses to crises and transform trauma into strength. We experienced extensive professional development that focused on understanding the short and long term impacts of trauma, and how to help children and staff alike understand and regulate their emotions, and ultimately build strengths and skills that promote positive outcomes.

The next step was to create a full-time leadership position dedicated to leading the TRI work. Supported by private funds, this position is a psychiatric social worker from the LAUSD School Mental Health Department embedded full time in the LA's BEST leadership team. This was an incredibly important step in our journey – to have full time mental health expertise on our team, and a professional bridge to district and external resources means that we can integrate emotional wellness in all that we do, have better and more consistent responses to crises, and create systems that give our young staff the support they deserve.

One priority of this new work was integrating the knowledge and skills from the trauma-resilient field with our longtime investment in social emotional learning (SEL). LA's BEST has been dedicated to SEL since our founding in 1988. Our founding President and CEO Carla Sanger ensured that the social and emotional needs of children was always the priority. Today, we work diligently with our partner Sanford Harmony, which provides high quality materials for our staff to utilize. We knew we needed to ensure that TRI wasn't an *additional* set of materials or expectations, but rather seamlessly integrated with the existing SEL work.

As we rolled out the TRI professional development to the larger LA's BEST staff, two major learnings helped with the integration of TRI and SEL. First, we learned that the aspect of TRI that most resonated with staff working directly with children was about self-care: *How can we recognize and address our own trauma? How can we continue to thrive and grow despite being in close proximity to so much childhood and community trauma? How can we avoid "compassion fatigue."* Second, we learned that what staff learn and experience in TRI training deepens the "why" of what we do. For example, the TRI training motivates them to understand how profound their connections with young people are, or can be, and inspires them to go even deeper. The SEL material then provides them with the "how" – tangible tools and resources for helping kids build coping skills, for facilitating useful conversations, and for building capacity for emotional recognition, self-regulation, and other social-emotional skills. Understanding their own emotions better and considering what they need to sustain their compassion for young people and their own

wellness deepens their connection with others that then sets the stage for the most effective use of tools and resources.”

We understand that to be effective and successful with this work over the long term, we need to focus not only on its execution, but also on measuring its effectiveness. For that reason, we’ve partnered with two venerable institutions to help us ensure this work is evidence based. Dr. Angela Venegas, a pediatrician and researcher out of UCLA is working with LA’s BEST and LAUSD to pilot-test trauma-resilient informed curriculum in a few program sites and measure the outcomes on both young people and staff. From this, we can distill the practices that should be taken to scale. In addition, Dr. Tiffany Berry of Claremont University is partnering with us to determine what practices LA’s BEST already utilizes that build protective factors known to be critical to young people’s choices and later outcomes.² You can read the full study [here](#).

We are also happy to join a growing movement to de-stigmatize seeking mental health support. I believe we should consider mental health support the same way we think of dental or vision care – preventive care works wonders, regular check-ups are important, and sometimes we all need more regular care. It doesn’t make us weak to seek help, any more than I am weak because I wear glasses or have fillings in my teeth.

For me, the important thing for us to remember in how we approach this work is that the children we serve are not "other" from us. We have all faced adversity, we’ve all coped with tragedies and complicated emotions. We are a community. We are our children, grown up. When we stand with them, facing the world together with love and solidarity, rather than across from them, looking to fix what is wrong with them, we move past and through community trauma, and toward community strength, healing, and joy. We can do more than make everything OK.



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² “Building Protective and Promotive Factors in Afterschool” by Jessica Dym Bartlett, Kathryn Steber, Sarah Shea Crowne, Tiffany Berry, Lisa Teachanarong Aragon, Michelle Sloper
<https://www.childtrends.org/publications/building-protective-and-promotive-factors-in-afterschool>