

Guide for Trauma-Sensitive School Leaders

“Trauma-informed approaches emphasize understanding the prevalence and impact of trauma, whereas trauma-sensitive practice reflects the application of this knowledge in educational settings through responsive, relational, and supportive environments that mitigate triggers and promote student well-being and resilience.”

(Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative; Government of Canada, 2023; Downey & Greco, 2023)

Introduction

For students to learn effectively, they need to feel safe, calm and connected. When trauma disrupts these conditions, it can impact their attention, memory, behaviour, social relationships and other areas of development.

Trauma-sensitive schools intentionally create predictable, welcoming and inclusive environments that support healing, well-being and academic success. In recent years, there has been increasing emphasis on trauma-informed practice in Ontario schools. School Mental Health Ontario (SMH-ON) has advanced this work for many years through the concept of mentally healthy schools.

This document supports principals and vice-principals in leading in trauma-sensitive ways that complement board and school mental health strategies and action plans. It draws on existing made-in-Ontario tools and resources. It can be used as a reflective tool and to support conversations with school teams.

Trauma-Informed to Trauma-Sensitive

School leaders are familiar with the term “trauma-informed” and have implemented approaches that are responsive to the impact of trauma in school communities. However, “trauma-informed” refers to the systemic, policy-integrated and organization-wide infrastructure built around trauma awareness.

While “trauma-informed” often emphasizes the knowledge and policies of trauma, **“trauma-sensitive” is described as a more experiential and practical application of that knowledge, focusing on being responsive and attuned to the needs of individuals,** as noted by the [Child Trauma Research Centre](#).

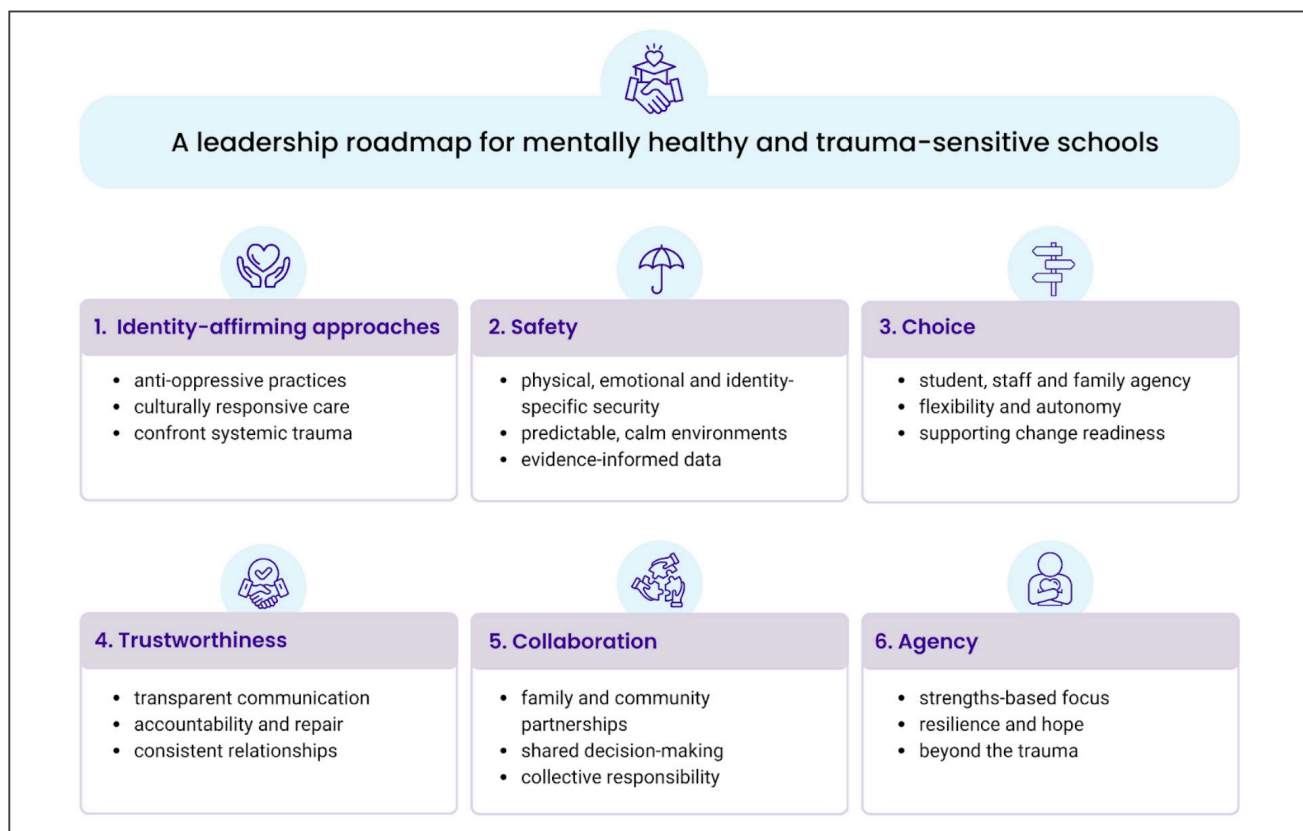
Trauma-sensitive reflects a strong commitment to building a culture and practice of promoting inclusion, safety and empathy for all community members. This approach, more than a set of strategies, is a mindset and way of being that enables educators and staff to more consistently respond with calm, care, compassion and connection.

Trauma-sensitive approaches enhance Tier 1 practices:

- Focused on building a culture of safety, empathy and predictability regardless of known or unknown trauma history using an identity-affirming approach.
- Grounded in the belief that all students benefit from safe and supportive environments that prevent crisis and build resiliency.
- Staff act in a supportive role, not as therapists. We create a strong sense of connectedness and belonging.
- **Tier 1 is everyone’s work.**

SMH-ON’s Six Principles to Guide Trauma-Sensitive School Leadership

Based on current research, SMH-ON has developed a framework to support trauma-sensitive leadership.





1. Identity-Affirming School Mental Health Frame

- a. School leaders strive to employ identity-affirming approaches to trauma (i.e., practices that recognize and address the role of oppression, racism, stereotypes and biases) by offering responsive services that amplify healing practices and acknowledge historical trauma.

(SMH-ON's [Identity-Affirming School Mental Health Frame](#) can assist schools in this critical work.)

- b. **Leadership Moves**

- Increase understanding of the impacts of colonialism, racism, bias and oppression in schools and work to dismantle them.
- Intentionally engage in personal self-reflection to understand how bias impacts decision-making.
- Strengthen relationships with Indigenous partners and services.
- Understand how positionality and social location impacts leadership decisions.
- Continue to offer thoughtful professional learning for staff in the areas of anti-oppression, equity and Truth and Reconciliation.

- c. **Guiding Questions**

- i. How might leaders honour stories and lived experiences of others?
- ii. How might school leaders support the understanding of personal identities and the impact on the school community?
- iii. How might staff and school leaders' identities impact relationships and community-building? What evidence might there be to confirm this?



2. Safety

- a. Schools and classrooms strive to be places of inclusion and belonging for all members of the school community and this will look different for each student and staff member. Dimensions of safety can include emotional, psychological, social, spiritual, cultural, moral and physical — as well as being mindful of each individual's multiple and intersecting identities.

- b. **Leadership Moves**

- Create opportunities to build genuine connections with staff, students and families; listening and validating personal stories and lived experiences.
- Use existing and relevant data sources, such as school climate surveys, student forums and individual conversations to examine strengths and areas for improvement.

- Help teams think about ways to create safer physical, emotional, spiritual and identity-affirming spaces.
- Remind staff that any student or staff member may be coming to school having experienced significant trauma and may be more sensitive to threat or perceived threat in the form of bullying, harassment, aggression or violence. Leading with compassion and a strength-based approach supports meaningful interactions.

c. **Guiding Questions**

- How do you know if students feel safe?
- Where might additional support be needed in order to develop co-regulation?



3. Choice

- a. School leaders endeavour to create conditions where students and families have access to choice and voice in decision making.

b. **Leadership Moves**

- Consider how to create intentional structures that ensure students and staff have a voice and influence in decisions that impact them.
- Model and develop trauma-sensitive skills such as emotional validation, empowerment and cultural responsiveness with staff for responding to students and families.

c. **Guiding Questions**

- In what ways does oppression related to identity impact access to choice, voice and influence?
- How might school leaders enhance opportunities for choice, voice and influence?
- As a leader, what might help prepare people for change so that it feels predictable rather than threatening?



4. Trustworthiness

- a. School leaders are foundational in creating a culture of connection, belonging, trustworthiness and transparency, where students, families and staff have a voice and feel heard through formal and informal engagement in various committees and consultations. This includes how conflict is addressed and resolution is created so that they know they will be accepted for who they are.

b. **Leadership Moves**

- Build strong relationships with staff, students and families in your school and/or community.
- Own mistakes and model accountability. Know how to restore relationships.

- Use consistent, clear communication, especially around contentious issues or situations that may trigger individuals.
- Actively seek out feedback to consider diverse perspectives to inform decisions that are inclusive and culturally responsive.
- Ensure others understand the WHY regarding changes and decisions.
- Listen for feedback and validate any concerns.

c. **Guiding Questions**

- How might communication promote clarity, compassion and transparency?
- In what ways might trauma-sensitive language be used to help others feel safe rather than scrutinized?



5. Collaboration

- a. School leaders strive to offer meaningful engagement opportunities within existing boundaries and structures, while challenging systemic barriers that may exist. Collaboration includes providing information in advance of changes, seeking feedback and exploring other possibilities. It also includes acknowledging power imbalances before decisions are made.

The SMH-ON [Student Engagement Toolkit](#) and [Parent/Caregiver Engagement Toolkit](#) provide numerous resources to support collaboration with students for system and school leaders.

b. **Leadership Moves**

- Listen first and partner to make decisions collaboratively.
- Engage in self-reflection to understand lived experiences and ensure appropriate culturally responsive and relevant supports are developed.
- Ensure all staff understand their role in trauma-sensitive work.

c. **Guiding Questions**

- How might trauma-sensitive principles be incorporated into collaborative discussions?
- Who is included in the collaboration and who may be missing?



6. Agency

- a. School leaders strive to empower students, families and staff, especially those with a history of trauma, to recognize their unique strengths, building on their existing resilience, affirming their identities and providing a sense of hope for their future.

b. Leadership Moves

- Honour the lived experiences of students, families and staff. This helps build trusting, collaborative and empowering relationships that promote learning and healing.
- Show humility in deepening an understanding and sensitivity to the impact of trauma on others because of racism and oppressive practices, including colonialism.
- Highlight and build on the strengths of staff, students and families every day.
- Ensure staff understand they do not need to know individuals' trauma experiences to be supportive and emphasize Tier 1 trauma-sensitive strategies.

c. Guiding Questions

- i. What are some ways leaders might welcome, include and develop agency among students and families?
- ii. What might be observed when people experience agency within a trusting environment?

Trauma-sensitive leadership encourages a model of calm, compassion, empathy and connection, while supporting staff well-being and strengthening relationships with families and communities. By embedding these principles into everyday leadership practices, schools can cultivate environments where all students and staff can be themselves, feel valued and ready to learn. This is challenging leadership work. Therefore, it is important for school leaders to attend to their own wellness to bolster their resilience and capacity to co-regulate and support the wellness of others. SMH-ON has developed [Caring for Yourself and Other Adults](#) to support leadership work.

Resources

[Additional SMH-ON Resources to support trauma-sensitive leadership](#)

[Reflection Tool for Educators](#)

[French Version of the Additional Resources](#)