

Safe Schools NOLA offers hope to trauma-exposed students

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Stacy Overstreet, a professor of psychology, Courtney Baker, an assistant professor of psychology, and Kathleen Whalen, an adjunct professor of social work, help local schools accommodate trauma-exposed students. (Photo from Thinkstock)

Since 2015, Tulane University professors Stacy Overstreet, Courtney Baker and Kathleen Whalen have collaborated with a team of community partners to determine how six local schools can better support trauma-exposed students through an innovative study called [Safe Schools NOLA](#). The study will help school administrators create an action plan to support those students.

“Nationally, approximately 67 percent of kids have been exposed to at least one adverse childhood experience,” said Overstreet, a Tulane professor of psychology and the study’s principal investigator.

“Primarily, adverse childhood experiences include things like loss of a parent, community violence,

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family member incarceration or substance abuse,” added Whalen, an adjunct professor of social work at Tulane who has 30 years of experience working with New Orleans public schools.

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Using a trauma-informed approach developed by [The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Agency \(SAMHSA\)](#), the researchers offer training and coaching sessions to help school personnel address students’ emotional and behavioral needs.

“The teachers and school administrators are building skills and, at the end of the year, each school will have its own unique trauma-informed action plan,” said Overstreet. “Our goal is to build capacity within the school and create champions of the work to carry out the action plan when we are no longer in the school full time.”

The [SAMHSA](#) approach incorporates four guiding principles. The first step is to help teachers realize trauma’s impact and then develop potential paths for recovery. Then, the team helps the schools’ personnel to recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma in students, to respond by integrating knowledge about trauma into policies and to avoid re-traumatization.

The Safe Schools NOLA team also places social workers with expertise in trauma-informed care within the schools.

Building on the work of the New Orleans Trauma-Informed Schools Learning Collaborative led by the [New Orleans Health Department](#), Safe Schools NOLA is partnered with the [Children’s Bureau of New Orleans](#), [Project Fleur de Lis](#) and the [Louisiana Public Health Institute](#). The project is funded by a \$2.6 million [National Institute of Justice](#) grant led by Overstreet and Baker, an assistant professor of psychology at Tulane.