

Anne F. Wilson, Private Citizen, MSW Student

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB 367

State Department of Education – Guidelines on Trauma-Informed Approach

**Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee
*March 3, 2020***

As an MSW student in the School of Social Work at the University of Maryland Baltimore, doing a student internship in a treatment foster care child placement agency, I support SB 367, establishing the Trauma-Informed Schools Initiative in the State Department of Education to expand the use of trauma-informed approaches in schools and intensively train schools on becoming trauma-informed schools. The bill requires the Department, in consultation with the Maryland Department of Health (MDH) and the Department of Human Services (DHS), to develop and distribute guidelines, and develop a website, on the trauma-informed approach. In addition, it will select, by July 1, 2020, one school from each of a rural, suburban, and urban/metropolitan area to voluntarily participate in the program and receive intensive training in the trauma-informed approach; providing training, assistance and monitoring, and studying their progress and results and reporting on them annually through 2025.

Trauma is more commonplace than is typically understood. According to the 2008 Presidential Task Force on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Trauma in Children and Adolescents¹, more than two-thirds of children report experiencing a traumatic event (that threatens injury, death or the physical integrity of self or others and also causes horror, terror, or helplessness at the time it occurs) by age 16; more than one-third report multiple traumas². The numbers feel overwhelming: among the almost 900,000 public school children in Maryland³, at least 300,000 have or will experience multiple traumas.

By definition, all foster care children have experienced multiple traumas. There are roughly 4,000 children in foster care in Maryland⁴, scattered among school districts across the state. Among school children, around one in every 250 is a foster child. In addition to the abuse or neglect that has placed them in the foster care system, these children have been uprooted from their homes. Once they are in the system, placement disruptions are not uncommon. It is not unusual for a child to be enrolled in multiple schools within a single school year. These placement disruptions are traumatic in and of themselves.

The movement to address trauma in U.S. schools is now quite widespread. While Maryland has missed the opportunity to be a leader in this field, implementing this Trauma-Informed Schools Initiative will allow our schools to quickly benefit from the work of other school systems⁵.

Because the success of a trauma-informed approach depends on a child's relationships with adults, it succeeds when every adult, in every school, learns it, and lives it. Traumatic experiences have the potential to impact a child's brain development, social functioning, and ability to learn and engage in school. A trauma-informed approach focuses on a child's experiences before trying to correct their behavior. Instead of asking, "What's wrong with you?" it asks, "What happened to you?" The effect of that subtle shift on a child's experience of his/her interactions and relationships with adults is that they come to feel seen, heard, understood, and safe⁶.

There is strong evidence supporting the effectiveness of a trauma-informed approach in creating a school environment conducive to learning for all students – those who have experienced trauma, as well as those who have not. In one Washington high school, implementing a trauma-informed approach reduced suspensions by 83 percent and expulsions by 40 percent in the year following implementation. In Pennsylvania, implementation of the Sanctuary Model resulted in increased student attendance and an increase in the number of students performing at or above benchmark levels following its implementation⁶. A more compassionate environment results in more learning, for everyone.

Trauma-informed schools are inherently cost-effective. It is not costly to operate our schools in a trauma-informed way, as doing so simply requires a change in culture, practices, and policies. While there are startup costs including widespread planning and staff education, these costs will be more than offset by the benefits or savings to be realized. When our children are educated in a school system that addresses the traumas that are faced by more than two-thirds of them, Maryland will reap a more healthy and productive citizenry. When school discipline is compassionate and restorative, children will be more likely to develop the capabilities they need to avoid the school-to-prison pipeline.

On behalf of my clients, Maryland's traumatized foster care children who so desperately need to feel safe and understood, and children across our state, **I urge a favorable report on SB 367.**

Anne Francoeur Wilson
109 Chesapeake Avenue
Annapolis, MD 21403
410.693.5627

¹ American Psychological Association (2008). Children and trauma: Update for professionals. Retrieved from: <https://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/children-trauma-update>

² Greeson, J. K. P., Briggs, E. C., Layne, C. M. et al (2014). Traumatic childhood experiences in the 21st century: Broadening and building on the ACE studies with data from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 29(3), 536-556. doi: <https://doi-org.proxy-hs.researchport.umd.edu/10.1177/0886260513505217>

³ Maryland State Department of Education (2017). Maryland public school enrollment by race/ethnicity and gender and number of schools September 30 2017. Retrieved from: <http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/about/Documents/DCAA/SSP/20172018Student/2018EnrollbyRace.pdf>

⁴ ChildTrends (2017). State-level data for understanding child welfare in the United States. Retrieved from: <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/state-level-data-for-understanding-child-welfare-in-the-united-states>

⁵ McInerney, M., McKlindon, A. (2013). Unlocking the door to learning: Trauma-informed classrooms and transformational schools. *Education Law Center of Pennsylvania*. Retrieved from: <https://www.elc-pa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Trauma-Informed-in-Schools-Classrooms-FINAL-December2014-2.pdf>

⁶ Winfrey, O. (2018, March 11). Treating childhood trauma. *Sixty Minutes*. Retrieved from: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/oprah-winfrey-treating-childhood-trauma/>