





3001 Broadway Street Northeast, Suite 310 Minneapolis, MN 55413 Phone: 1-800-888-7828 info@searchinstitute.org searchinstitute.org

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INTRODUCTION

The relationships youth and adults form in schools and out-of-school time (OST) programs have always mattered. And yet, arguably, relationships have never mattered more than they do now as youth and adults navigate the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic complicated relationship-building in schools and OST programs as adults and youth had to form relationships in unfamiliar environments; environments that required (and still require) social distancing, unexpected closures, mask-wearing, navigating varied vaccination requirements, and for many, a move to virtual learning platforms. Adults and youth in schools and OST settings continue to navigate their changing environments, and find new ways to develop and sustain strong youth-adult relationships.

However, these changing environments have proven difficult to navigate. A national survey of parents and teachers found that the biggest problem the pandemic has created has been the loss of social interactions at school, including making a personal connection with teachers (Digital Promise, 2021). Relatedly, this same study found only 3 in 10 parents and teachers thought their school was doing a good job helping students deal with the social-emotional fallout from the pandemic. The year plus since the pandemic hit has taken an enormous social, psychological, and emotional toll not only in terms of lost learning, but also lost connection for so many adults and youth. While these losses are felt by almost everyone, they are disproportionately felt along racial, ethnic, and groups from low-income backgrounds (United States Department of Education, 2021).

As the new school year begins, the relational, learning, and developmental challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and its unequal impact continue to disrupt school and OST programs. Leaders widely recognize the need to address the stress and trauma that youth and practitioners (e.g., teachers, program personnel) have experienced as a result of the pandemic (Phelps & Sperry, 2020). And yet, many feel they lack the strong relationships and the skills in trauma-informed care required to address these needs.

In this brief, we draw on data from a Minnesota case study to provide a state-level illustration of those national trends in how COVID-19 disrupted relationship-building in schools and OST programs. We use these data to examine how prepared schools and OST programs are to provide youth with trauma-informed care and spaces that support their navigation of these unprecedented challenges. We also look at how educators and youth-serving adults used trauma-informed practices to adjust and adapt to strengthen their relationships with youth.



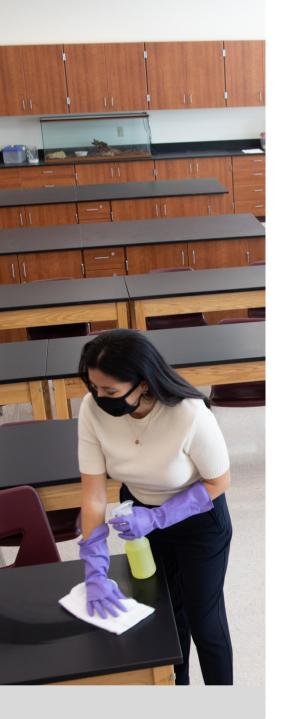
KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Most school and OST staff (i.e., leaders and practitioners) reported having positive relationships with youth. But about half reported that those relationships have weakened during the COVID-19 pandemic; despite staff reporting being more intentional about maintaining relationships with youth during this same timeframe.
- School staff, and to a lesser extent OST staff, saw their schools and programs as responsible for helping youth navigate trauma-related challenges. Yet, most staff saw their schools and programs as being only somewhat effective in helping youth navigate the challenges related to trauma.
- Staff ranged in how competent they felt using trauma-informed practices. Staff felt most competent in understanding how trauma can impact youths' relationships, while feeling least competent at identifying the signs of trauma in youth.
- Although most staff reported that they have connections to external resources (i.e., outside their schools or programs) that are trauma-related, they reported lower internal capacity (i.e., within their schools or programs) to identify and support youth and staff who have experienced trauma.

Trauma is defined as an event or a series of events that has the potential of creating lasting physiological and neurological changes that can impact how we react to day-to-day experiences (Houltberg, 2021). It imprints in such a powerful way that we can experience it as if it is happening repeatedly. It can fundamentally shift a person's sense of self and life trajectory. Navigating trauma often requires social support across the multiple networks that we intersect with in our daily lives (e.g., family, school, OST, faith communities).

The key point to know is that trauma is subjective, and everybody responds differently.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a traumatic event for many at the individual and at the collective level. Health and safety became a central concern as hospitals filled to capacity. Family members and friends became very ill with many losing their lives, unemployment skyrocketed, life celebrations (e.g., graduations, birthdays) were limited, normal routines were interrupted, and interactions with those outside of your immediate household were discouraged. Every person experienced the COVID-19 pandemic differently, with some people experiencing much more loss and hardship than others. Regardless of the loss and hardship experienced, all of these events caused strain on youth and adult mental well-being.



TERMINOLOGY

The term staff is used to represent both leaders and practitioners (e.g., teachers, OST program personnel) in schools and OST programs. When differences exist between leaders and practitioners within or between schools and OST programs, these differences are noted.

METHODOLOGY

This study's data come from Minnesota school and out-of-school time (OST) program leaders (e.g., principals, program directors) and practitioners (i.e., teachers, program personnel) who work with middle- and high school-aged youth. Participants took Search Institute's State of Relationships survey to deepen Search Institute's understanding of the role of relationships within schools and programs across the state. Data were collected between February 2021 and June 2021. Following the survey, 18 school and OST staff participated in interviews and focus groups to provide additional insight and context for the survey findings.

PARTICIPANTS

Survey data come from a diverse sample of 668 school and OST staff from across the state of Minnesota. The sample included: 135 school leaders, 327 school practitioners, 113 OST leaders, and 80 OST practitioners. Two school leaders and two OST leaders participated in interviews. Ten school practitioners and eight OST practitioners participated in focus groups. The sample was distributed across the state of Minnesota.

The school and OST staff who participated in the survey served a wide range of young people. About 20 percent of survey participants said they engaged with youth in settings where two-thirds or more of youth identified as people of color and about 35 percent of survey participants said that two-thirds or more of the youth they serve come from families that are low income.

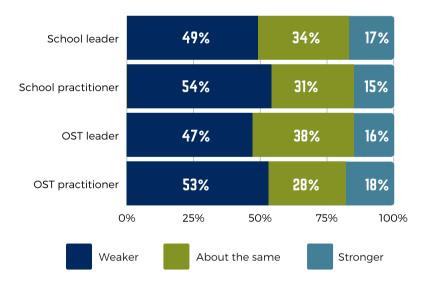


RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING CHALLENGES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges to developing and maintaining strong youth-adult relationships in schools and out-of-school time (OST) programs. As establishing relationships is an important step to creating trauma-informed spaces (Perry & Daniels, 2016), these challenges are essential to navigate and overcome as schools and OST programs begin the 2021-2022 school year.

The data provide insights on how school and OST staff perceived changes in their relationships with youth and families. Furthermore, the findings show how school and OST staff addressed these changes in order to support their youth in navigating trauma experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.





A majority of school and OST staff reported that they have positive relationships with the youth in their school or program.

However, the pandemic weakened many of these relationships. This was particularly true for practitioners who likely experienced the greatest day-to-day shift in how they interacted with the youth.

Practitioners found that some youth continued to engage, learn, and develop in the unfamiliar environments caused by COVID-19 (e.g., social distancing, closures, mask-wearing), while other youth struggled to get their bearings.

"MY EXPERIENCE WITH RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUTH DURING THE PANDEMIC WAS MIXED. SOME STUDENTS FLOURISHED ON ZOOM. THEY LOVED BEING ABLE TO SHARE WITH ME [THROUGH CHAT] WITHOUT ACTUALLY HAVING TO TALK. ON THE FLIP SIDE, IT WAS VERY AWKWARD TO TRY TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS AND HAVE STUDENTS OPEN UP WHEN THEY WERE AT HOME WITH THEIR PARENTS. THAT MADE IT SUPER AWKWARD AND UNCOMFORTABLE. THE SETTING GOT IN THE WAY."

- SHARED BY AN OST PRACTITIONER, GREATER MINNESOTA



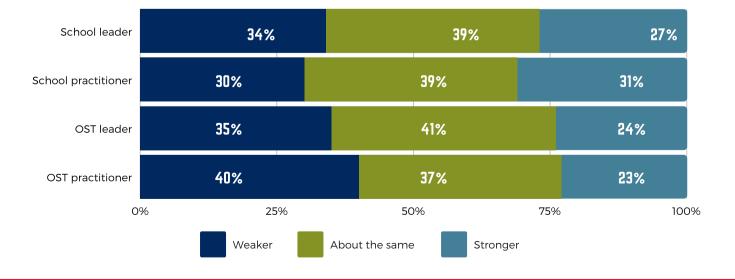
SCHOOL AND OST STAFF'S RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUTHS' FAMILIES WERE IMPACTED LESS BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.



Upwards of 7 in 10 school and OST staff indicated they had positive relationships with the families of the youth in their school or program. More insulated from the pandemic than staff-youth relationships, the strength of staff-family relationships varied. School and OST staff were split on whether those relationships were weaker, about the same, or stronger than before the COVID-19 pandemic. Relationships with families were likely impacted less by the pandemic because most interactions with families prepandemic already were not face-to-face or on a daily basis. Several practitioners noted that some families were more comfortable meeting with them through virtual platforms (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams) because of the ease of not having to go to the school or program.

"ZOOM AND GOGUARDIAN HAVE BEEN
AMAZING. I BELIEVE THAT PARENTS ARE
CALMER AND MORE WILLING TO EXPRESS
THEIR CONCERNS WHEN THEY ARE ON
'THEIR TURF' RATHER THAN THE SCHOOLS. I
HAVE NOTICED THIS ESPECIALLY WITH
SPECIAL EDUCATION AND 504 MEETINGS."

- SHARED BY A SCHOOL LEADER, TWIN
CITIES METRO



SCHOOL AND OST STAFF MADE ADJUSTMENTS TO BUILD POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUTH DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.



Recognizing the importance of supporting youth throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, school and OST staff tried to adjust their methods and approaches to find ways to connect with youth. These adjustments were essential for building and reinforcing positive staff-youth relationships. And, perhaps even more importantly, these relational connections also helped youth navigate the stress and trauma caused by the pandemic, as these relationships provided a caring space for youth to be challenged, continue to get support, have their voices heard, and be exposed to new possibilities in their learning and development.

During the interviews, focus groups, and open-ended survey questions, the four most common adjustments mentioned were:

- Providing training to school and OST practitioners on how to build relationships with youth during the pandemic.
 School and OST leaders recognized that in order to support practitioners and youth in navigating the pandemic, they needed to provide additional resources. Training was offered on topics like stress management, mindfulness, and interactive tools to use in virtual environments or that maintained social distance.
- Checking-in with youth during weekly/monthly meetings. School and OST practitioners found that scheduling weekly/monthly meetings with youth were essential for relationships building. During these check-ins, youth would share about their successes, but also about the struggles they were facing. The check-ins provided opportunities for practitioners to better understand how they could support youth in navigating the COVID-19 pandemic.



- Reaching out to youth and families through different media. Due to the continuous transitions (i.e., school and OST program closures) caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, school and OST staff had to get creative in the ways in which they reached out to youth and families. Staff found that it was easier to connect with youth and families via text message and social media (e.g., Instagram and Facebook) as these platforms were in regular use. These different media provided essential contact points for practitioners to quickly get in touch with families when youth were absent from class or programming was changing.
- Offering explicit opportunities for youth to develop social and emotional competencies (e.g., self-awareness, relationship-building skills, self-management). These opportunities provided space for youth to develop skills to manage stress, reflect on their experiences, and share what they needed more concretely than usual. Some examples included:
 - one-on-one conversations with practitioners and peers,
 - group instruction on social and emotional competencies, and
 - o self-reflection exercises.

"I WOULD SAY, 'HEY, DO YOU WANT TO JUST DO A CHECK-IN? IT WILL BE LIKE A HALF HOUR ONCE A WEEK. IF WE WANT TO CHECK IN MORE, WE CAN, BUT LET'S SET UP A HALF HOUR ONCE A WEEK. WE CAN TALK ABOUT CLASSES, WE CAN TALK ABOUT WHAT'S GOING ON, YOU CAN JUST SEE A FACE BESIDES WHAT'S IN YOUR HOUSE.' AND EVERY SINGLE ONE OF THEM SHOWED UP, EVEN THE ONE THAT DID ABSOLUTELY NO SCHOOL WORK SHOWED UP BECAUSE THEY WANTED THE INTERACTION."

- SHARED BY A SCHOOL PRACTITIONER, GREATER MINNESOTA



CREATING TRAUMA-INFORMED SPACES TO SUPPORT YOUTH DURING THE COVID19 PANDEMIC

To address the stress and trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic, school and OST staff became more intentional about building positive relationships with youth. This intentionality required that staff create trauma-informed spaces that promote safety, well-being, and healing centered around their relationships with youth (Wiest-Stevenson & Lee, 2016).

The data provide insights on school and OST staff capacity to create trauma-informed spaces, and on the resources available—and still needed—for school and OST staff to support youth in navigating trauma.

"THE TRAUMA THAT HAS OCCURRED WITHIN THIS LAST YEAR IS HUGE. EVERY PERSON HAS HAD A DIFFERENT EXPERIENCE WITH THIS PANDEMIC, WHICH MAKES IT VERY DIFFICULT TO DO [SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING] THAT WORKS FOR EVERY STUDENT. WHERE THE SCHOOL MAY HAVE HAD A POSITIVE AND SUCCESSFUL PROGRAM IN THE PAST, IT LIKELY IS NOT WORKING RIGHT NOW. WHEN WE ADD IN THE STRUGGLES WITH FOOD INSECURITY, POOR INTERNET, NO COMPUTER USAGE, ETC. ALONG WITH A HUGE NUMBER OF DEATHS AND PERSONAL FEAR, IT IS DIFFICULT TO KNOW WHERE TO START."

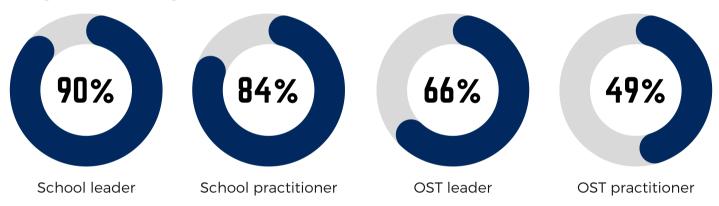
- SHARED BY A SCHOOL LEADER, TWIN CITIES METRO

SCHOOL AND OST STAFF DIFFERED IN HOW THEY SEE THEIR ROLE IN HELPING YOUTH NAVIGATE THE CHALLENGES RELATED TO TRAUMA.

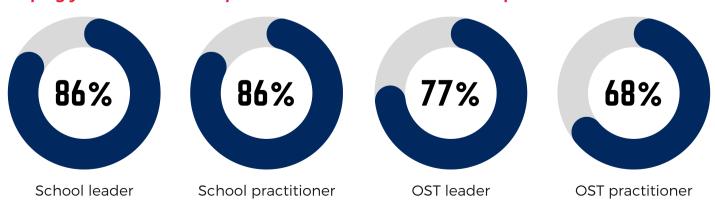


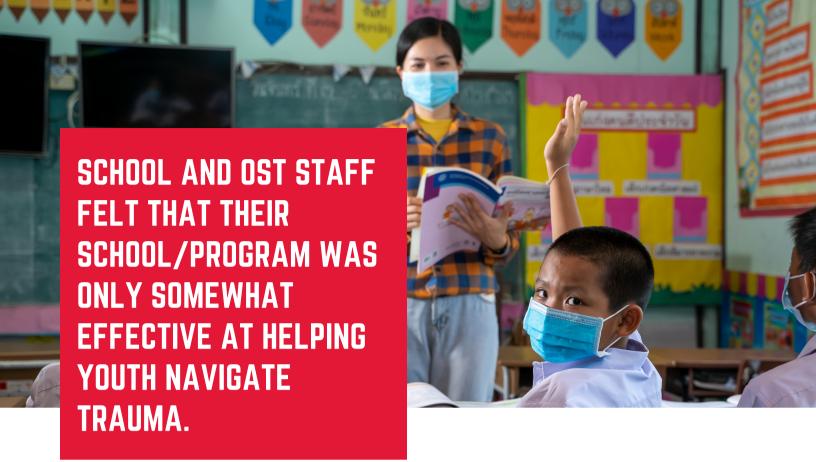
A vast majority of school staff, more than 8 in 10, agreed that their school was responsible for helping youth navigate the challenges related to trauma. This number was lower among OST leaders (7 in 10) and OST practitioners (5 in 10). Additionally, more than 8 in 10 school staff agreed that their school/program was responsible for helping youth build the competencies and skills to buffer the impact of trauma. This number was lower among OST leaders (8 in 10) and OST practitioners (7 in 10).

More than 8 in 10 school staff agreed that their school was responsible for *helping youth* navigate the challenges related to trauma.

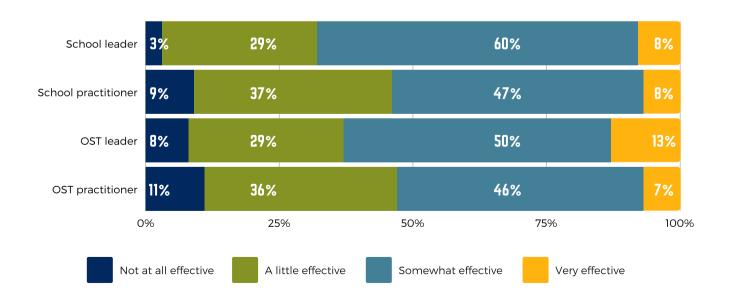


More than 8 in 10 school staff agreed that that their school/program was responsible for helping youth build the competencies and skills to buffer the impact of trauma.





Most staff reported that their school or program was only somewhat effective in helping youth navigate trauma-related challenges. This perceived lack of effectiveness may stem from a belief that it is not the responsibility of their school or program, a lack of training for staff to support youth, or a lack of resources for supporting youth. We explore perceptions of competency and resources further below.



OST PRACTITIONERS FELT THE LEAST EQUIPPED TO SUPPORT YOUTH IN NAVIGATING TRAUMA.



In the face of trauma, it is important to equip school and OST staff with the knowledge and skills to respond competently. School leaders and practitioners, as well as OST leaders, reported feeling more equipped than OST practitioners to live into the 4R's of trauma-informed care (see box to the right).

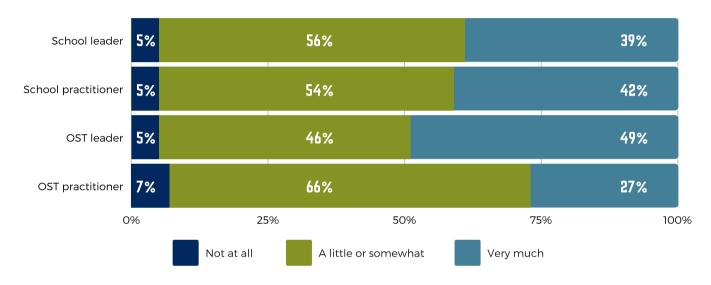
While the sample of OST practitioners in this study is smaller than the school practitioners, these data suggest a critical need to better prepare OST practitioners with more professional learning opportunities tied to the provision of trauma-informed practice. During the focus groups, OST practitioners shared that they rarely receive training on how to support youth in navigating trauma. Further, when they do receive training, it is limited to one session. School practitioners acknowledged that they often receive multiple training opportunities a year on topics related to trauma-informed practice. Additionally, schools often have trained counselors and/or psychologists as a resource, which may not exist in many OSTs. The lack of training opportunities and resources for OST practitioners also may contribute to their perception that it is not the role of OST programs to support youth in navigating trauma.

THE "4R'S OF TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE"

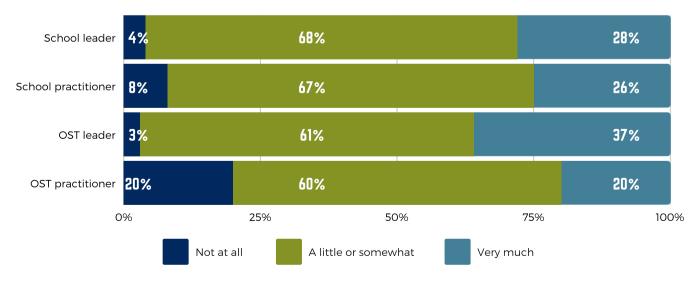
The critical competencies of trauma-informed care include: (a) realization, or understanding, of how trauma can affect youth, peers, families, and the community; (b) recognition of the signs a youth has experienced trauma; (c) responsiveness to trauma; and, (d) resistance to retraumatization by evaluating how individual and institutions actions may further harm or trigger people who have experienced trauma (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014).



About 3 in 10 OST practitioners believed that they were *very much* aware of the unique adversities the youth they work with experience.

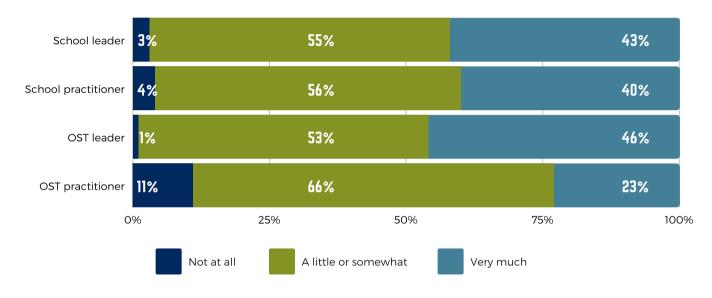


2 in 10 OST practitioners believed that they *very much* knew how to identify the signs of trauma in youth.

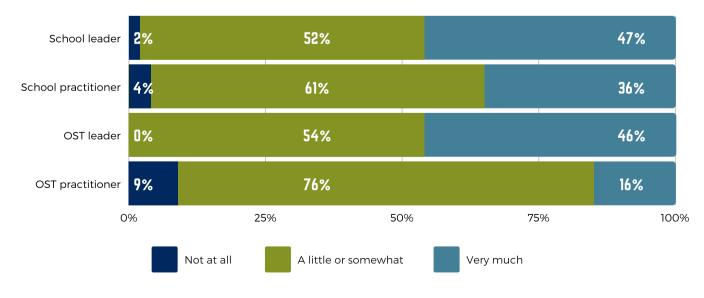




About 2 in 10 OST practitioners believed that they *very much* knew how to respond if a young person told them about a traumatic experience.



Fewer than 2 in 10 OST practitioners believed that they were *very much* aware of how their behaviors could trigger painful memories for youth who experienced trauma.





Overall, more than half of schools and OST programs report having trauma-informed support and resources available. This is a promising start. However, much work remains as less than 6 in 10 of school and 5 in 10 OST staff reported their schools or programs have systems or processes in place to help identify and support youth who have experienced trauma.

It is important for schools and OST programs to be an avenue through which youth receive or are directed to trauma-informed resources. The *most common* resources offered by schools and OST programs were partnerships with community programs and resources that allow youth and their families easier access to the support they need. The *least common* resources were resources and support for staff who have experienced trauma or have mental health needs, and systems or processes to help identify and support youth who have experienced trauma.

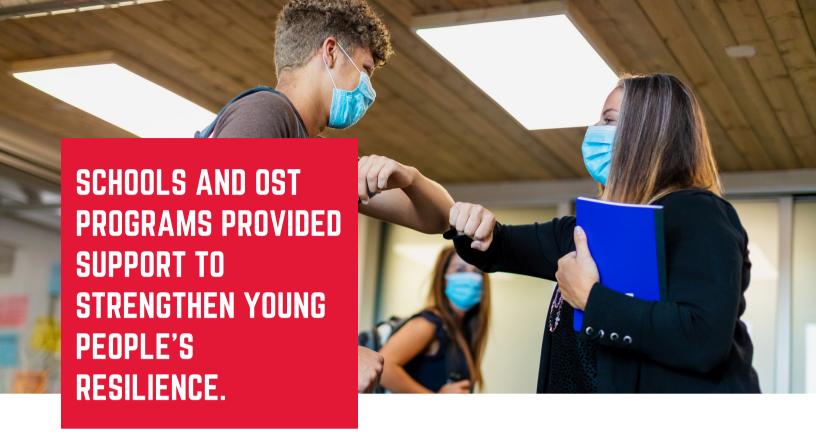
As OST staff were less likely to perceive it was their program's responsibility to support youth in navigating trauma, it is not necessarily surprising that less than 5 in 10 agreed that their program had systems or processes in place to help identify and support youth who have experienced trauma. As youth engage with OST programs during the continuing COVID-19 pandemic, it may be important for OST staff to evaluate their trauma-informed and relationally-focused systems and processes in order to ensure youth feel supported and are having their needs met in these spaces.



The COVID-19 pandemic has also adversely impacted the mental well-being of adults (Roman, 2020). It is even more challenging for staff to support youth in navigating trauma if they are also experiencing the effects of trauma themselves. Therefore, it is important for leaders in both schools and OST programs to increase the resources available to staff who have experienced trauma or have other mental health needs. For example, during the focus groups, practitioners shared a desire for increased access to on-site mental health counselors and training for managing stress and trauma for themselves.

Over 7 in 10 of school OST staff reported their schools or programs had established partnerships with community programs and resources that allowed youth and their families easier access to the supports they need.

	Schools OST Programs		
Established partnerships with community programs and resources that allow youth and their families easier access to the supports they need.	71%	7	7%
Prepared lists of resources youth and/or families can access to receive housing, food, employment, academic, and/or mental health support.	70%	7	′ 1%
Systems or processes to help identify and support youth who have experienced trauma.	62%	4	¥5%
Resources and supports for staff who have experienced trauma or have mental health needs.	60%	6	2%



Schools and OST programs complemented their trauma-informed resources with other supports aimed at generally strengthening youth's resilience, or ability to navigate difficult situations or life events. The *most common* support offered by schools was engaging youth in physical activities or sports, while the *most common* support offered by OST programs was creating opportunities for youth to be involved in play and/or creative activities. This makes great sense, since Search's research has consistently shown the young people's most common deep personal interests or sparks are sports and creative activities (Benson & Scales, 2009).

Unfortunately, the *least common* support offered by both schools and OST programs was building a web of relationships around youth by engaging family (where appropriate) and other important adults. Because the quality of those relationships in and outside schools and OST programs is critical for helping youth navigate through trauma, elevating the emphasis schools and OST programs give to helping youth build those webs of relationships should be a high priority.

While less likely to see their program as responsible for helping youth navigate trauma, OST staff were more likely to provide opportunities for youth to build their resilience, as showcased by the data in this section. Resilience is an essential component of effectively navigating trauma (Thompson et al., 2011). Therefore, OST staff may be more likely to use resilience strategies, such as those connected to building youth resilience, to support youth in navigating trauma than school staff.



OST staff were *slightly more likely* than school staff to report that their program or school provided supports to strength young people's resilience.

	Schools	os	Γ Programs
Engaging youth in physical activity or sports.	82	2%	72%
Creating opportunities for youth to be involved in play and/or creative activities.	64	4%	83%
Helping youth learn skills that promote mental wellness (e.g., mindfulness or meditation activities, positive self-talk).	62	2%	77%
Strengthening youths' social-emotional skills (e.g., relationship-building, regulating emotions and behavior).	61	%	81%
Strengthening the skills young people need to positively support their peers through challenges.	52	%	72%
Building a web of relationships around youth by engaging family.	44	4%	66%



MOVING FORWARD: CENTERING RELATIONSHIPS AND BUILDING TRAUMAINFORMED SPACES

The challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to change education and OST settings in both subtle and dramatic ways. To respond to these changes, school and OST staff are being more intentional about building (or, in some cases, re-building) and maintaining relationships with youth. This requires increased attention to each youth and their needs/experiences, and the integration of trauma-informed practice into the day-to-day interactions between staff and youth, which schools and OST programs in this study found especially challenging. While school and OST staff have made efforts to maintain and strengthen relationships during the pandemic, gaps still exist: some relationships got weaker, and not all staff are prepared to create trauma-informed spaces for youth. Addressing these gaps is critical for effectively nurturing young people's learning, development, and well-being during the 2021-2022 school year and beyond.





To address these gaps, school and OST staff in our Minnesota case study offered the following strategies as possible pathways for centering relationship-building in trauma-informed spaces in the new school year (also see the resources offered by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network):

- Place relationship-building at the center of every interaction. School and OST staff plan to spend more time intentionally building relationships with youth during classroom and OST program time. During the interviews and focus groups, staff shared a desire to ensure that every interaction with youth provides an opportunity to get to know them better, understand what excites and stresses them, and help them navigate challenges. Examples of activities staff plan to implement include: (a) daily group self-reflection activities that allow students and staff to collaborate (e.g., the new student-teacher digital reflection app Along), (b) personalized learning opportunities within lessons, and (c) regularly one-on-one check-in meetings with each youth.
- Offer on-site mental health resources for adults and youth. Given the trauma both adults and youth experienced and continue to experience during the COVID-19 pandemic, schools and OST programs are offering resources to support adults and youth in processing their experiences and healing. These opportunities include professional development for adults on creating trauma-informed spaces, integrating stress management exercises into activities, and providing access to on-site mental health counselors for adults and youth.

- Use technology to support youth in navigating stress and trauma. The COVID-19 pandemic challenged (and, inspired!) school and OST staff to find new and innovative ways to connect with youth. Many schools and programs are turning to online apps to support adults and youth in building their social and emotional competencies, identifying signs of trauma, and navigating stress and trauma.
- Tailor interactions to youths' unique needs. The pandemic showcased the unique needs of each individual young person as well as the variety in the ways in which youth cope with stress and trauma. Staff must differentiate the ways in which they build relationships with and provide trauma-informed care to youth. Leaders are providing increased professional development opportunities to support staff in learning how to identify and tailor supports to the individual needs of the youth they work with and care for.
- Change schools and OST programs to better serve youth. Finally, many school and OST staff realized that they could not go back to how they operated prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the pandemic, youth need more individualized support to help them navigate stress, trauma, and learning. Therefore, schools and programs need to become more individualized. Examples of ways in which schools and OST programs are trying to create more individualization include: (a) reducing the number of students in classrooms and programs, (b) creating flexible schedules for youth to learn, and (c) connecting more directly with families of youth in their homes and communities.



"I HOPE SOME OF THE LESSONS LEARNED THROUGH HOW TEACHING HAS HAD TO BE DONE DURING THIS PANDEMIC ARE NOT FORGOTTEN WHEN THE PANDEMIC IS CONTAINED. KIDS ENJOY THE CALMNESS SOMETIMES, KIDS MISS EACH OTHER, AND THE EXPECTATIONS ARE SOMETIMES TOO FRANTIC FOR OUR KIDS' DEVELOPMENT. IT IS OKAY TO SLOW DOWN AND FOCUS ON WHAT IS IMPORTANT, LIKE RELATIONSHIPS AND FEELING HEARD/VALIDATED."

- SHARED BY A SCHOOL PRACTITIONER,
TWIN CITIES METRO



Supporting school and OST staff in building intentional relationships and creating trauma-informed spaces will be essential to supporting youth in navigating the stress and trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic, and maximizing their motivation and engagement in learning and development despite the pandemic's ongoing challenges. Some schools and OST programs will need more resources from and deeper collaboration with nonprofits, foundations, and government agencies to support staff in identifying and navigating the gaps in their capacities, and in dealing with adults' own pandemic-related stress and trauma.

Many schools and OST programs also will need to actively help staff examine and modulate their roles to include helping youth specifically manage the stress and trauma caused by the pandemic, particularly in schools and programs serving youth and families of color and in lower-income communities, who have carried a disproportionate share of the pandemic burden.

And, regardless of setting, the breadth of the pandemic's impact reminds us that no single setting or relationship can by itself help youth effectively navigate all these stressful challenges, some of which rise to the level of trauma. This study reminds us that collaboration among families, schools, OST programs, funders, community partners, and youth themselves is the only way to build a web of relationships for all youth and ensure that these settings are more strongly prepared to build strong relationship and provide trauma-informed care for those youth who especially need it.





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