



NEW MEXICO  
**Education Speaker Series**

*Connecting Challenges with Ideas & Strategies*

– NOTES –

**Session V: Trauma: Informing How Trauma Impacts Learning  
in New Mexico**

October 23, 2018, Thornburg Campus

This is the fifth of a nine-month lunch series bringing together education and business leaders from around the state to learn from national and local experts about promising and best practices in education in high-performing systems. Participants will engage with each other on possible education reform in New Mexico. The group is using the report titled *No Time to Lose: How to Build a World-Class Education System State by State* created by the National Conference of State Legislatures as a guide.

**Speakers:**

**NM Context:** *Craig Pierce*, Founder & President, Southwest Family Guidance Center & Institute

**Keynote:** *David Osher*, Vice President and Institute Fellow, American Institutes for Research

**Moderator:** *Katherine Ortega Courtney*, Director of Collective Impact Initiatives, Santa Fe Community Foundation

**Pierce:**

*The Impact of Trauma, Abuse + Neglect*

New Mexico ranks 49<sup>th</sup> in education (National Education Week), because it ranks 50<sup>th</sup> in wellbeing (Annie E. Casey Foundation). Research shows that adverse childhood experiences disrupt neurodevelopment impairing social, emotional, and cognitive development which promotes the adoption of health-risk behaviors that yields more disease, disability, and social problems leading to early death.

In New Mexico, we have more poverty and child abuse and neglect, flowing from substance abuse and addiction, that creates great challenges for our educators. Students with little attachment disruption are ready to learn, while students with significant disruption are not ready to learn. They are looking for signs of danger, which will trigger fight, freeze or flight responses, often eliciting inappropriate disciplinary responses that exacerbate the problem or mental health diagnoses. Medication is prescribed which does not address the root causes of trauma, abuse, and neglect.

We put the cart before the horse by focusing on achievement through student testing and teacher evaluations instead of focusing on student and teacher wellbeing. The current

approach is demonstrably ineffective. If we focus on child wellbeing, then achievement will follow. Our *Thriving Students Program*, which is trauma-informed and has a positive education mindset, is yielding good results in New Mexico.

### **Osher:**

#### *Trauma & Conditions for Learning and Wellbeing*

He put his research into context by talking about what he and his wife learned when they adopted from child services: two 5-year children who had experienced trauma, abuse, and neglect. There is a need to align research and practice. We see different outcomes for students with trauma based on different practices. The research and knowledge are converging as to what children need to develop. It is possible for trauma-affected students not only to achieve resilience but even thrive because of neuroplasticity — the brain's ability to reorganize itself by forming new neural connections throughout life

Research and practice have shown that we can improve the capacity for supporting all students by improving the competencies and conditions for learning. These conditions are socio-emotional, pedagogical, and organizational. There are four key elements of the socio-emotional conditions for learning and engagement. Specifically that students are:

- Safe (Emotional safety is more important than physical safety: teachers should know what triggers embarrassment and never do it; identity safety: cultural, linguistic, and intellectual);
- Supported (Meaningful connections to adults with positive peer relationships);
- Challenged (In ways that are relevant to students); and
- Socially capable (The product of individual socio-emotional competence).

The needed social and emotional skills and competencies — cognitive, emotional, and social — are teachable and evaluable. They are also augmented for both teachers and students by their belief ecology, e.g., growth mindset. A meta-analysis shows the positive impact of social-emotional competency on development, including improved achievement test performance.

As schools develop the above combination of competencies and conditions, ALL students can perform. It will be more difficult for some who are more sensitive to flaws in competencies and conditions for learning. We need culturally responsive instruction so students feel safe at all levels. What benefits the most vulnerable, benefits everyone else. They are like the canary in the coal mine. It is hard, but we really can change.

### **What New Mexico can do:**

- Focus more on student and teacher wellbeing instead of student achievement and teacher evaluation
- At the New Mexico schools of education, strengthen understanding and application of the science of learning and development, cultivate the competencies for learning, and promote the understanding and application of the conditions for learning, especially socio-emotional
- Develop common indicators for social-emotional learning (including self-regulation, self-awareness, and empathy) for use in continuous improvement, but not high-stakes accountability

- Train school boards and promote community awareness on the impact of trauma, abuse, and neglect on student performance and on research- and evidence-based practices to support trauma-affected students
- Develop programs for educators on social-emotional learning and how to attune to students and buffer stress

### **Methodology tips:**

- Keep the focus on child well-being
- Avoid using socio-emotional learning indicators for high-stakes accountability
- Provide latitude for educators to be creative
- Model the behaviors that we want students to learn

*“New Mexico is 49<sup>th</sup> in education, because we’re 50<sup>th</sup> in child wellbeing,”* Pierce.

*“Achievement is the cart. Wellbeing is the horse. We’re putting the cart before the horse,”* Pierce.

*“It is possible to not only achieve resilience but even thriving because of neuroplasticity,”* Osher.

*“With improved competencies and conditions for learning, ALL students can perform,”* Osher.



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## Appendix: Detailed Notes

**Craig Pierce**, Founder & President, Southwest Family Guidance Center & Institute

- *Always the beautiful answer who asks a more beautiful question.* EE Cummings
- Why is NM 49<sup>th</sup> in education – low scores in early grades?
  - Misleading to use achievement scores – we have students who can perform well
  - Better teachers, curriculum, ... are not the answer
  - We're 50<sup>th</sup> in child wellbeing. That's the issue.
  - We have more poverty and child abuse and neglect
  - That creates great challenges for our educators
- Nationally 20% of child abuse related to substance abuse and addiction; in NM it's 60%
- Nadine Burke Harris research: adverse childhood experiences (ACES) affect brain development, increase heart disease & lung cancer incidence by a factor of 3, contributes to 7 of 10 leading causes of death, and reduces longevity by 20 years ,
- ACES → disrupts neurodevelopment → impairs social, emotional and cognitive development → increases health-risk behaviors → increases disease, disability, and social problems → leads to early death
- Dr. Bruce Perry: *The brain of a child will become exactly what it was exposed to.*
- On scale of 10: 1-3 no attachment disruption, 4-6 – some disruption but also some palliative conditions; 7-10 multiple ACES – significant disruption
  - Comparing brain maps for children in top and bottom groups highlights lack of brain development
  - Sensory integration, self-regulation, relational, cognitive capabilities can differ by a factor of two for students at kindergarten levels
- Schools have different mixes of students; in NM more schools have more students from the lower group with significant disruption from ACES
  - In the upper group, students are ready to learn; in the lower group, students are not ready to learn, they are looking for danger which will trigger fight, freeze or flight responses
  - Students are being diagnosed with ADHD, anxiety, bipolar disorder, depression, intermittent explosive disorder, oppositional defiant disorder and are being put on medication instead of addressing root causes flowing from trauma, abuse, and neglect.
  - This is generational; need to understand the challenges of the parents; promote access to positive emotions and relationships
- Achievement is the cart; wellbeing is the horse
  - We're putting the cart before the horse
  - The focus on achievement through student testing and teacher evaluation isn't effective
  - We need to focus on child wellbeing and achievement will follow
- Has a trauma-informed approach with a positive education mindset - Thriving Students – yielding good results in New Mexico

**David Osher**, Vice President and Institute Fellow, American Institutes for Research

- My wife and I got into this 20 years ago when we adopted two five year olds from child services
  - We went from being a functional to a dysfunctional family

- We learned that you need to align research with practice
  - Looking globally at effects in schools, we know what ACES can do
  - See different results based on practice
  - What schools can do with the cards they are dealt with
- There is a convergence of knowledge on what children need to develop
  - It is possible not only to achieve resilience but even thriving because of neuro plasticity
- North Lawndale College Preparatory School located in a part of Chicago famous for gangs and violence, but also rich in cultural resources
  - The school had gone 186 days without a fight; students were doing well;
  - Used money to hire counsellors instead of metal detectors;
  - Focus on graduating from college, not just high school; counselors provided support to students in college
  - Students were challenged but were never pushed too far because the teachers had their backs
- Teachers and parents under stress need to attune to young people
  - With compulsory education we need to support teachers
  - University of British Columbia researchers taught teachers to manage their own stress; the cortisol levels of teachers and students went down
- Conditions for learning & equity
  - Showed a picture of his family – many had experienced ACES
  - By supporting each other can help overcome ACES
  - Asked a family member who had been traumatized about what teachers to do to help students be creative; she responded, “Engulf them in learning.”
  - It’s about learning not achievement tests → being competent in life.
- Theoretical basis: importance of both competencies and conditions to learning
  - Improve competencies (not just knowing math but social emotional skills to handle stress) – true for both teachers and students
  - Need both technical and social-emotional (SE) competencies
  - Ability to perform is a product of conditions including SE
  - When have that combination of competencies and conditions – ALL can perform (will be more difficult for some who are more sensitive to flaws in competencies and conditions) → improved capacities
- Conditions for learning: SE, Pedagogical, Organizational
  - High number of women being exposed to sexual aggression → vulnerabilities that can impede learning
  - Four key SE conditions for learning & engagement - students are:
    - Safe (Emotional safety more important than physical safety: teachers should know what embarrasses me and never do it; identity safety: cultural, linguistic, and intellectual)
    - Supported
    - Challenged (In ways that are relevant to students)
    - Socially capable (The product of individual SE competence)
- Social and emotional skills/competencies – cognitive, emotion, social: teachable and evaluable skills (from the work of Stephanie Jones)
  - Augmented by belief ecology: e.g., growth mindset (teachers and students)
  - Meta-analysis shows positive impact of SE competency on development, including achievement test performance

- Implications of the science of learning and development (SoLD): thriving not just surviving
  - Analyzed broad set of research
  - Genetics are not destiny; epigenetics matters – environmental factors on how genes are expressed
  - Malleability and neural plasticity are core to human development
  - SE competencies can be learned
  - Resilience and thriving are possible
  - Address the interconnectivity of children’s cognitive, social, and emotional development
  - Experience and their processing drive growth and change.
  - Context matters: contextual influence and ecology cannot be ignored
  - Relational context is particularly salient
  - Adversity can affect development, mental and physical health, and learning
  - The ability of adults to attune with children, buffer stress and support their cognitive, social, and emotional development is the key to the personalization of learning and development
- Todd Rose (co-worker – *The End of Average*) – maximize individual benefits when we personalize: cockpits needed to be personalized; more is possible today
  - Each of us works our own journey – even identical twins – but we can realize common outcomes
  - Jaggedness of learning
  - Want equifinality – develop different routes to competence (personalization)
- The science of learning & development: how we make meaning
  - Through experience and the moderating lenses of culture, language, visibility & observability (what can and can’t be seen by whom), perceptions as moderated by attitudes, social networks and reference groups, mindsets
  - Education should be about good mindsets
- Body-brain mind loop – multilayered
  - Complex dynamic feedback effects cognition, appraisal, motivation , behavior, memory
  - *We feel, therefore we learn* (Immordino-Yang & Damaiso, 2007)
  - Fear narrows focus (tunneling)
  - Stress – a little is good, a lot is toxic as Dr. Pierce described
  - Anxiety and toxic stress – compromised working memory, less attention, limits to creativity,
- Need culturally responsive instruction so students feel safe at all levels – what benefits the most vulnerable, benefits everyone else – like the canary in the coal mine
  - More oxytocin and less cortisol
- Importance of teacher & administrator social-emotional learning so they can model the behaviors they want students to have
  - Impacts of implicit bias, fixed mindsets, micro-aggressions, discrimination, the experience of marginalization
  - Historical trauma is very real
  - Impact of trauma on performance
- Where do we intervene?
  - Closer the people are to the child the more important
  - Work at 3 levels

- Most important is the foundation at the community level (adapt to where you are) – trauma sensitivity; restorative practice – (stop detentions) – adapt to the needs of students; need to support students, teachers, parents
- Support readiness for learning and wellbeing (teacher & student)
- Spanking increased during the Great Depression (stress)
- Effective conditions for learning
- SE & cognitive skill development – culturally responsible, personalized, find the strengths of the parents,
- We really can change – it's hard

## Discussion

- Asked about the importance of language: it's often viewed as additional instead key to support community and student wellbeing
  - Osher – at a meeting in Capetown, heard about a study of the stress that South African learners experienced when they couldn't use their native language; we need support people including speaking their native language
- In 1912 when we became a State, 2/3's spoke a different language, now it's 1/3; think about trauma we've propagated; we're sending 4-years into schools and stating that your language at home is not good enough; how do we work with 76% of linguistically diverse families?
  - Osher – bilingual students are more likely to be creative; embracing diversity adds; doesn't subtract
  - Pierce – that 1/3 of the population also is more likely to be traumatized; look at the complexity; need to go beyond just learning English
- Effect systemic change: how to you set up the right environment at the State level?
  - Osher – some of the issues are systemic – need to address them while continue operations; people and systems work in fragmented siloes; the siloes ask to collaborate but use their own language which impedes communication
    - Develop common indicators: cited an effort working across 21 federal agencies to develop common indicators; school climate is one of them; use the indicators in strategic planning
    - Train together to develop common language – leverage expertise
    - People who can drive it are families and kids because they are holistic not bureaucratic – this is their life – engage in collaboration
    - Policies that deal with practices and readiness to implement those practices: motivation, organizational capacity, level of competency – support people
  - Pierce – start with education and schools – recognize impact of trauma and disparity among students– need to understand the disparity – avoid exacerbating it and focus on ameliorating it
  - Catron Allred - We didn't include SEL competencies in our ESSA plan; other states did; could build SEL competencies into our ESSA plan
    - Principals don't get the resources often to do it
  - Susan Lumley – ATC is doing a lot with SEL support – get good academic results; mentor program (upper classmen) help younger students set goals and learn how to talk to teachers; one teacher stays with students for 6 years – engage parents; haven't had a fight in 4 years; come as you are to ATC; we cherish and support you so it's a safe place
- Amanda Aragon – what are SE indicators we could look at?

- Osher – self-regulation & executive function are important but need to get to self-awareness, including cognitive and attitudinal indicators; measure SEL but don't use it for accountability – you can't mandate wellness; use for continuous improvement but not for high stakes; include school climate; SEL is so important and personal
- Jeannie Oakes – indicators on school climate
  - Conditions for learning, teachers, families – do I feel safe, connected, challenged – set of questions to triangulate
  - Survey developed by US DoE 2 years ago
- Pierce – number 1 predictor is self-regulation; empathy would be next; teach empathy; students feel empathy; it's teachable and measurable
- Osher – social and self-awareness is broader and captures issues that empathy doesn't capture – understand what they and others were “born” with;
- Pierce – empathy is key to connect; agree on self-awareness
- What do we do at district levels to allocate resources – engaging school board candidates: what should they push?
  - Osher – schools are ecological systems – research shows that all can have some academic success; support implementation; creating transparent metrics (do kids feel connected?); create environments where administrators can be strategic while delivering in the short run; space to be creative
  - Pierce – what will you do to help support bridging the gap between politicians and community
  - Osher – Linda Darling-Hammond is doing great work on the whole child; natural morph into the next presentation