

The following is an excerpt from Rhonda Neal Waltman* response to a question posed by Larry Ferlazzo for Education Week.

http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/classroom_qa_with_larry_ferlazzo/2016/12/response_schools_cant_wish_away_challenges_of_student_trauma.html

... More often than not, educators find themselves discovering a child's trauma after a discipline referral or academic failure because the process in place is reactive rather than proactive. The most effective strategy does not employ a student-by-student approach implemented by one teacher. What is needed is a systemic layer of supports specific to a school's or district's needs including preventative practices, timely interventions and immediate response at the first sign of symptoms. This is attained through mapping available resources and analyzing data to show how well needs are being met. ... If we believe that our students and teachers deserve this systemic approach to addressing trauma, then it is incumbent on us to put the infrastructure in place that responds to the needs of students

Based on research from UCLA's Center for Mental Health in School led by Dr. Howard Adelman and Dr. Linda Taylor, the learning supports framework provides six practice areas where schools can organize and deploy resources in a comprehensive, integrated manner: classroom-based approaches; student and family interventions; transitions; crisis intervention; community collaboration; and family engagement. This approach ensures the response is not limited to the teacher's support; rather, there is a broader, more robust plan for addressing the barriers to learning associated with trauma.

The Alabama State Department of Education has adopted this systemic change approach in 75 school districts. This effort is large in scope, and in many cases, schools started with the simple idea that to learn, the 700,000+ students first needed to be present in classrooms. In the 2011-12 school year, Alabama recorded more than 1,900,000 unexcused absences. Scholastic started to work with the state to organize, identify sources and systematically approach reducing absences as a top priority. Leadership analyzed transportation, schedules, and yes, trauma among students that prevented attendance. In the first year with ten districts, 78 schools saved 110,000 days of absences, and each district saw an average of 25% decrease in student absences.

As Athens, AL, mapped out its resources, district leaders also realized a number of students in need of counseling services were not receiving them because travel off school campus was prohibitive. The district reached out to community partners and today, provides at-risk counseling services on campus. The effort continues to be increasingly preventative as the district redefines what it means to support students in crisis including a program that ensures every student has a personal relationship with an adult who is well-versed in available resources.

Every day, educators help individual children who face unfathomable stress before they walk through the classroom door. To support both the child and the educator, schools must move away from reactive approaches. A whole-school, proactive approach for all children ensures early interventions are in place, teachers know they'll be supported, and students will be ready to learn.

*Dr. Rhonda Neal Waltman has more than 30 years of experience, having served as a teacher, counselor, principal and assistant superintendent. As an elementary school principal in Mobile, AL, Rhonda led a five-year turnaround resulting in National Distinguished Blue Ribbon School status and as former Assistant Superintendent of Student Support Services, she led development of a nationally-recognized program for providing learning support services to displaced students following Hurricane Katrina. Today, Rhonda is Senior Director of Consultancy Services - Learning Supports for Scholastic Education: