

Fall 2019

Hourglass Quarterly



DRIVERLESS CARS

TRAUMA AFFECTS LEARNING

MARYLAND IS CONCERNED

FIRST FRIDAY FORUMS

TRAUMA AFFECTS LEARNING

Distressed Students Need Help

Peter was suspended or expelled from multiple schools after being abused by his mother's boyfriends and taken into foster care.

Stephen lived with his grandparents in deep poverty on the Havasupai reservation and struggled to learn in a severely understaffed school in the middle of Grand Canyon National Park.

Maria left her middle school midyear, after years of physical and sexual harassment and bullying led to a drop in grades and constant anxiety.



These students and others like them are at the center of ongoing lawsuits that argue schools have a responsibility to consider and mitigate the effects of trauma on learning. The outcomes of pending lawsuits could have ramifications for schools nationwide as evidence grows on the negative effects that traumatic events can have on children's learning and wellbeing.

Traumatic experiences can range from discrete events like living through a natural disaster to the ongoing stress of parental

abuse to homelessness to violence. Research has found repeated exposure to trauma significantly increases children's risks of later mental and physical-health disorders, poor academic progress, bad behavior in school, and other problems.

According to Susan Cole, director of the Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative, "Bad things happen all the time that are traumatizing. It doesn't necessarily mean a student becomes disabled." Rather, traumatic experiences can trigger neurological stress responses—often called "fight, flight, or freeze"—and "if the child isn't buffered and helped to overcome these stresses, they can grow into disabilities."

Misdiagnosis Is Common

Attorneys representing Maria and three other middle and high school girls argue that special education teams have a responsibility to be part of that buffering system. All four were suffering from sleeplessness, difficulty paying attention in class, emotional changes, behavioral changes, having a hard time completing assignments in a timely manner. They were frequently running into their assailants or harassers, and there was a constant retriggering of the trauma. 'Here's the person who raped me, and now I've got to go to class to take a math test.'

The lawsuit alleges the students' IEP teams refused to discuss the girls' increased academic and emotional difficulties in the context of those experiences and, for some



likened their symptoms to attention-deficit hyperactivity disorders.

A report by the nonprofit Child Mind Institute found ADHD is one of the most common misdiagnoses for post-traumatic stress. Symptoms common in PTSD, such as difficulty concentrating, exaggerated startle response, and hyper-vigilance, can often make it seem like a child is jumpy and spacey.

Maria was identified as having a learning disability before she started to experience sexual harassment but has since been diagnosed with anxiety issues. After Maria's grades began to fall, she spent the last four months at home. "My grades got better being home-schooled, there's nobody here to harass me or bother me or say derogatory things to me."

She will return to regular classes this year, though she has requested a safety transfer from the school her harassers attend. Maria said she hoped school and district leaders would become more responsive to signs or reports of students experiencing trauma. "Take everything as serious and investigate more."

Trauma as a disability

In California and Arizona, lawsuits argue that chronic and pervasive trauma doesn't just complicate disabilities but also may qualify as a disability status on its own. When schools fail to invest in the resources

needed to support students with complex trauma, teachers are less able to teach students, and students are less able to learn.

Under Section 504 of the federal Rehabilitation Act, students are entitled to accommodations for a disability that "impairs a major life function." Likewise, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires schools to plan supports and monitor progress of students whose disabilities impede their learning.

District leaders need to take stock of how much time and money is being spent on punitive discipline, law-enforcement activities, restraint, and seclusion. Existing resources can be redirected in ways that help students. Routine approaches toward students are often counterproductive or harmful. Lawsuits could set a precedent requiring schools to provide education accommodations and supports for students with a history of trauma.

"It's all about sensitivity to what the young person is experiencing and awareness that trauma turns off the learning switch in the brain," said lawyer Mark Rosenbaum.

Edited from an September 3, 2019 article by Sarah Sparks in Education week **H**