



CASE STUDY: TRAUMA-ENGAGED SCHOOLS

Juneau School District (JSD) serves a diverse student population in Alaska's capital city. While the city is only accessible by air and sea travel, it operates as a hub for many of southeast Alaska's smaller communities. The school district office is in Juneau.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

JSD is more than five years into introducing trauma-engaged programs to its schools. Various partnerships and grant opportunities allow the school district to offer multiple mental health positions and practices focused on integrating trauma-engaged approaches into school community cultures. School sites are adapting to continue implementing this work amidst the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Juneau School District

- » 4,372 students
- » 14 schools

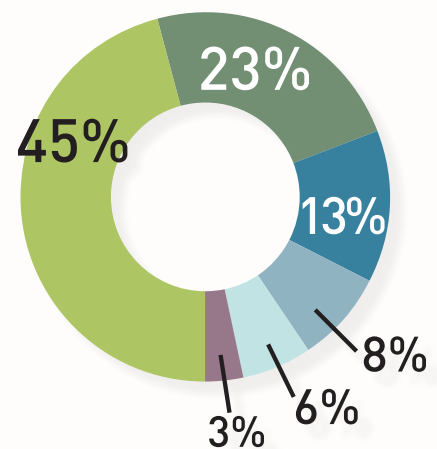
Demographics

- » 20% free and reduced lunch
- » 20% students with disabilities

THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA ON STUDENT PERFORMANCE

During ongoing reviews of academic data, JSD began to identify that students were struggling despite efforts to improve achievement. At the time, the school district was using Response to Intervention for reading and math and began to look for ways to expand into student behavior.

Together with the Alaska Department of Health, the school district identified a need to address social emotional learning, student trauma, and academic performance. JSD started to introduce a series of trauma-engaged approaches and programs to its schools.



- White,
- Two or more races,
- Alaska Native
- Hispanic,
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander

PROGRAMS AND FUNDING FOR TRAUMA-ENGAGED APPROACHES

Building a foundation in trauma-engaged approaches has been a multi-year effort for JSD. Initially, school district leadership participated in a trauma-sensitive schools working group with the [Association of Alaska School Boards](#) (AASB). Since then, the school district has rolled out multiple trauma-engaged pilots and programs, including:

- » Ongoing professional development in three Title I schools focused on integrating trauma-engaged approaches into practice through the [Collaborative Learning for Educational Achievement and Resilience](#) (CLEAR) Project funded by the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority
- » Introduction of a school-district level Trauma Engaged Specialist position and early-childhood to secondary student supports through the [Supporting Transitions and Educational Promise Southeast Alaska](#) (STEPS Alaska) managed by AASB
- » Addition of Mental Wellness Clinicians and Family Advocates at four Title I elementary schools through funding from the [Juneau Community Foundation](#) (JCF), [Alaska Children's Trust](#) (ACT), and school district funding.
- » Addition of Mental Wellness Clinicians at three secondary schools through the [Project Advancing Wellness and Resiliency in Education](#) (Project AWARE) through national grant funds managed by Alaska Department of Education & Early Development (DEED)

Building the workforce

The CLEAR Project launched first in 2017, followed by the STEPS Alaska grant. The CLEAR Project was designed as a pilot and the onsite professional development and reflective consultation services for teachers provided through the project has ended. Funding from STEPS Alaska allowed JSD to create a new Trauma Engaged Schools Specialist position. Establishing a full-time position for the trauma-engaged work was critical to providing a primary point of contact for the programs and for signifying JSD's commitment to advancing the trauma-engaged work.

Awarded to DEED in 2020, Project AWARE provides five-year grant funding for three school-based full-time licensed mental wellness clinicians in three of JSD's five secondary schools. The clinicians provide staff and student individual counseling sessions.

JCF and ACT funding provide ongoing funding for four school-based mental health positions known as family advocates. The family advocates are part-time mental health support positions in elementary schools that focus on co-regulation practices with students and case management support for families.

"Having the clinician, even just having the title and the role says to everyone that . . . this is important to us. Money has been placed to it." – JSD administrator

The family advocates serve in a non-clinical role that helps bridge the gap for students who may not qualify for an IEP or a 504 Plan for students with a disability. “I think it is opening the door for shifting the way that we see the bigger picture and recognizing how we can implement care,” one JSD family advocate said in describing how their engagement with families is helping them address student needs.

Adapting and Sustaining Through COVID-19

JSD further reinforced its trauma-engaged work and community-based partnerships in the school district’s [2020-2025 strategic plan](#). Shortly after introducing the new strategic plan, the COVID-19 pandemic started. The pandemic disrupted the school district’s rollout of the trauma-engaged approaches and created a strain on staff capacity to introduce and sustain programming — a challenge for school districts across the nation.

At the same time, the mental health impacts of the pandemic increased student needs. During this time, some schools expanded their focus on continuing their trauma-engaged programming once they were able to return in person. One of the secondary schools involved in Project AWARE expected increased student needs and initially started offering intermittent social emotional learning lessons for students on topics such as recognizing conflict versus bullying. They quickly saw the value of the lessons and increased the frequency to weekly.

The pandemic has also created immense stress for school staff. One school administrator described the importance of slowing down as needed and taking a thoughtful approach to programming to help teachers continue building on the broad foundational work of trauma-engaged approaches while recognizing the challenges of the last few school years. “We have the increased needs coming out of the isolation of COVID and just the increased stress on the system and on everyone . . . that prioritization ends up really important, where we intentionally validate the frustrations and the feelings of people,” said one school administrator.

EMBEDDING TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACHES

Building on the district-wide commitment and momentum from those initial programs, JSD is now further integrating and sustaining its trauma-engaged approaches in school culture. Engaging staff in the work is critical.

Ongoing training to build consistent practices

JSD has provided district-wide professional development on trauma-engaged approaches. School leadership has found it impactful when they can commit full days to the district-wide professional development instead of spreading it out over multiple short training opportunities. On a school site level, retraining and reminders are important for building consistency and sustaining the approaches daily. School administrators also play a role in helping staff link and prioritize trauma-engaged approaches with academics.

“I think the implementation now, once you introduce trauma-informed practice, is to remind staff that it’s not only good for the students, but it’s good for all staff,” one family advocate explained. “It helps us manage [secondary] trauma.”

Day-to-day application of the approaches can take a variety of forms, such as:

- » Applying a trauma-engaged lens to school discipline practices
- » Adapting classroom environments to allow for student self-regulation
- » Introducing restorative practices to students as a conflict-resolution option
- » Providing de-escalation spaces for students

Starting with place-based resources and school district support

While funding through state and community partners catalyzed JSD's trauma-engaged approaches, they recognize that not all school districts have the same resources or are large enough to devote a full-time staff member to this work. They pointed to Alaska's extensive trauma-engaged resources, including the [Transforming Schools: A Framework for Trauma-Engaged Practices in Alaska](#), as a starting point for school districts.

“Go in eyes wide open that there is work that needs to be done. It's important work, it's challenging work. It's affirming to have the resources to take on that challenging work.”
– JSD administrator

School staff pointed to the value of school district-level support not just for the program delivery but as a resource for questions and the facilitation of a peer network of school staff engaging in trauma-engaged approaches. This peer network includes several schools in the district as well as around the state who have clinicians and administrators engaged in the same programs. These peer networks can serve as a community for one another as they work through the programs. Support through peers and school district trainers is an important aspect of addressing staff mental health and emotional regulation so that they in turn can apply trauma-engaged approaches in their classrooms.

