

The Boston Globe

CUMULO-NIMBLE

TODAY: Sunny to partly cloudy, br
High 57-62. Low 40-45.
TOMORROW: Clouds and sun.
High 55-60. Low 40-45.
HIGH TIDE: 1:38 a.m. 1:48 p.m.
SUNRISE: 7:03 a.m. SUNSET: 5:54 p.m.
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School program seen as model

Those traumatized get added attention

By Lisa Kocian
GLOBE STAFF

The Framingham schools are being lauded by observers for their efforts to help children with classroom problems caused by troubles at home.

Children who experience trauma such as domestic violence can have a much harder time performing in the classroom, according to "Helping Traumatized Children Learn," a report released this week by Massachusetts Advocates for Children.

The report says children who don't turn in homework or who act out need help rather than a trip to the principal's office. And it calls on the state to fund programs like one already in place in the Framingham schools.

"Trauma is a major problem in our schools," said Susan Cole, lead author of the report, which was done in collaboration with Harvard Law School. "It explains many underlying problems that teachers face every single day."

Cole, a senior project director at Mass. Advocates who once was a teacher in the Watertown schools, said the effort grew out of a realization that children who get

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School praised for aiding pupils who face trauma

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into trouble often have problems at home.

The report focuses on children who have been victims of, or witnesses to, domestic violence. But specialists say it could also apply to children who have experienced other traumas, such as the death of a parent.

The report recommends, among other things, that the traumatized students receive speech and language evaluations and be given more regular class schedules because they need more structure than other children.

The advocacy group, established in 1969, helps low-income and vulnerable children and provides pro bono representation to low-income families fighting schools over disciplinary issues.

Framingham, which Cole described as a "pioneer," was one of the first departments in the state to use the principles outlined in the report, including training for all staff on how to identify behavior that could be linked to trauma and how to deal with it.

Laura Goldman, a fifth-grade teacher at the Barbieri School in Framingham, went through the training. Understanding where the bad behavior was coming from, she said, made her much more patient with students. Now, teachers don't just label kids as "troublemakers," she said, but instead seek to respond to the root of the problem.

Goldman said she has at least two or three students every year who have suffered some kind of a trauma, and with the training, it's easier for her to recognize what she's dealing with. "It's existed in the school more than I ever imagined," she said. "I think it was a door that was opened for me that is extremely important to know about."

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SUSAN COLE
Report author

The training also reinforced a tool she was already using. Since she started teaching about five years ago, Goldman has used hand signals to communicate with children who were misbehaving or not paying attention.

She didn't know why it worked until she took the training, where she learned that children who have been traumatized often struggle with verbal communication.

She works out the signal with the student — clicking an imaginary stopwatch for one child who loved football — and the rest of the class doesn't know about it. It's helpful not only because it makes the child feel special, but also because it prevents her from having to scold a student in front of everyone, she said.

Cole said Framingham is much further along than most other districts because the schools received a state grant last school year and again this year to develop a more gentle environment.

"The work they've been doing was very exciting and innovative," she said. "What they're developing

is kind of a toolbox."

Next, the district is planning to use some of what has been learned about trauma in physical education classes, said Cole, where children can learn to better regulate their emotions and behavior through activity.

Jacob Bersin, a physical education teacher at Framingham's Stapleton Elementary School, said he tries to respond to children who have faced some kind of trauma by providing different activities within the same lesson. The idea is that everyone should be able to have some kind of success, he said, so they don't feel frustrated.

"Some children might be withdrawn, some children might be aggressive, some children might be argumentative, said Bersin of different responses to trauma.

He said he hopes to do more by eventually offering a non-contact martial arts class based on one he taught over the summer, which worked well with some of the children who were traumatized.

Cole said physical activities like yoga or martial arts can provide an outlet for a child who is anxious due to trauma, triggering a sense of calm. But just as important, physical education and arts and music are thought to be areas in which traumatized children can enjoy success. That's because those activities use parts of the brain that are usually left untouched by trauma — as opposed to regular classroom work which requires language skills, the first casualty of a trauma, said Cole.

If teachers can use these techniques to spend more time on teaching and less on discipline, everybody wins, said Cole.

"That's best for traumatized kids, but it's best for the whole class, too," she said.

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