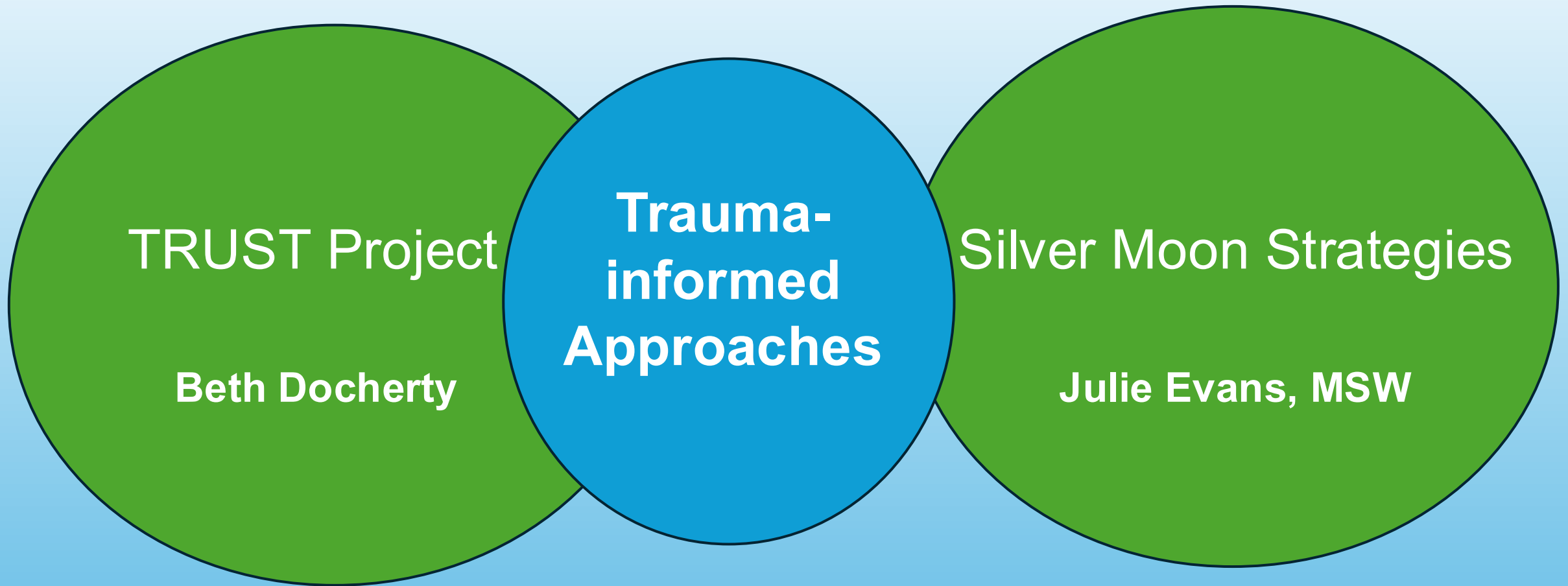


# Welcome

Trauma-Informed Education: A Practical Framework for Student Success,  
Retention, and Workforce Readiness in Career Schools

July 22, 2026

Beth Docherty and Julie Evans  
TRUST Project and Silver Moon Strategies



Feed me and I grow, give me water and I die.

**What am I?**

The more you take away from me the bigger I become.

**What am I?**

Imagine you are on a raft surrounded by hungry sharks in the middle of the ocean.

**What should you do?**



# GROUND RULES

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Be respectful

Engage

Ask questions  
and raise  
concerns

Take a break

Drink water

Stand, move,  
walk

Take a phone  
call outside

Participate at  
your comfort  
level



# What does trauma-informed mean?



How an organization or community thinks about trauma



How an organization or community responds to youth and adults who have experienced trauma



How an organization or community responds to youth and adults who may be at risk for experiencing trauma

“What  
happened to  
you?”

instead of

“What’s  
wrong with  
you?”

# TRAUMA-INFORMED



# Why be trauma-informed?



- **Chronic stress leaves staff and students feeling unsafe**
- **Unsafe feelings lead to abusive behaviors and distrust of the organization**
- **Lack of safety and distrust makes staff and students become highly reactive, see threats and blame, and feed into gossip**
- **Work and learning become laborious (burnout) and limits positive relationships with others**



A photograph of a desert landscape. In the foreground, a small, vibrant purple flower with five petals and a yellow center grows from the sandy ground. The background shows rolling, arid hills under a clear blue sky. The overall tone is warm and serene.

**“Trauma-Informed is a process  
not a destination.”**

Photo by Jeff Semke 2008

THRIVE, 2010





# TRAUMA-INFORMED AGENCIES



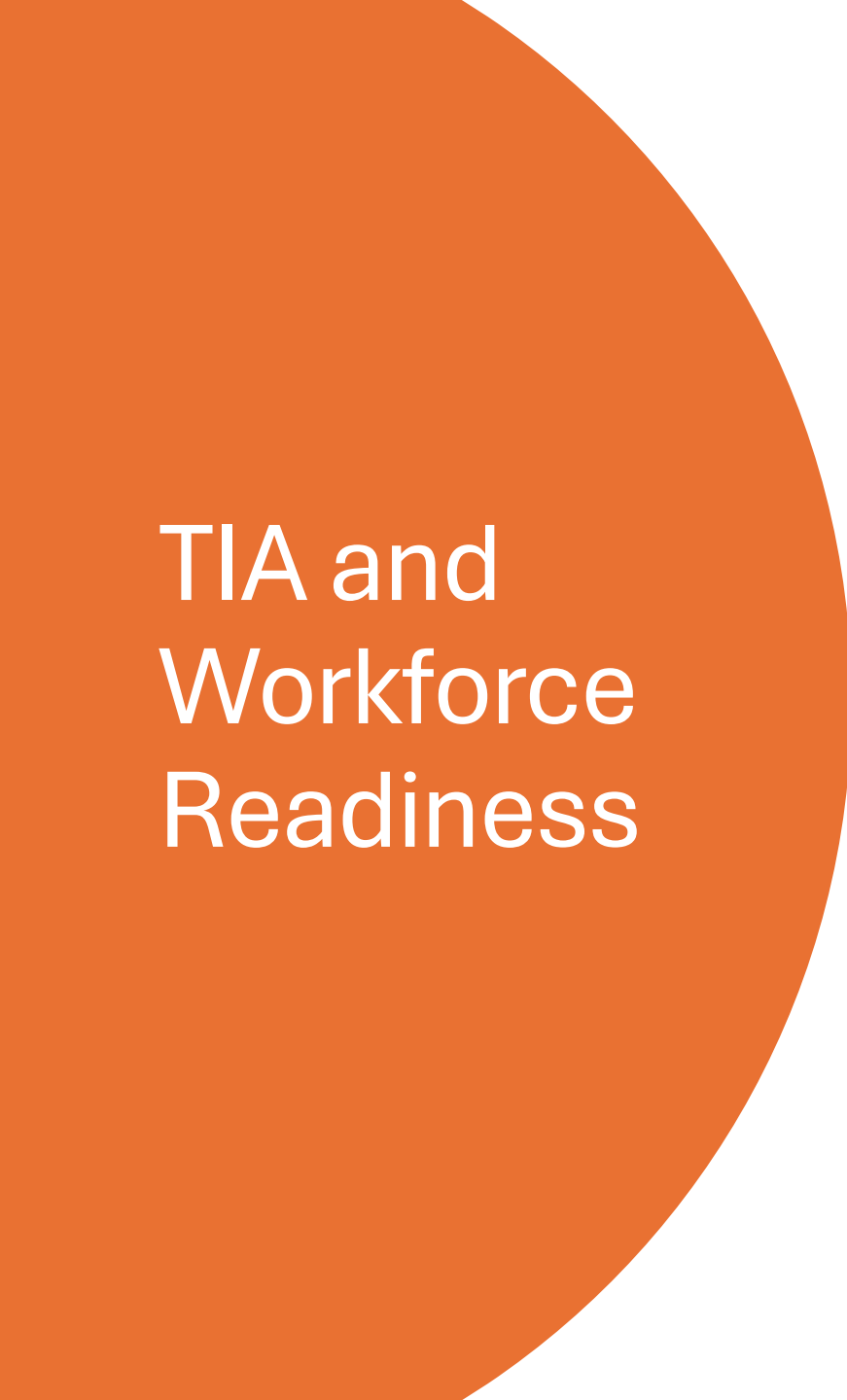
Organizations are living systems made up of people—many of which have experienced trauma



Organizations are impacted by trauma and chronic stress which effects processes used within the system to address issues or problems





A large orange circle is positioned on the left side of the slide, partially cut off by the edge.

# TIA and Workforce Readiness

Nick grew up in under-employed family dependent upon disability with an alcoholic and abusive father.

**KEY TAKEAWAY:** Trauma-informed approaches do not lower expectations – they remove barriers so individuals can reach their full potential in learning and the workplace.

A series of four blue curved line segments are arranged in a dashed, upward-curving path in the bottom right corner of the slide.

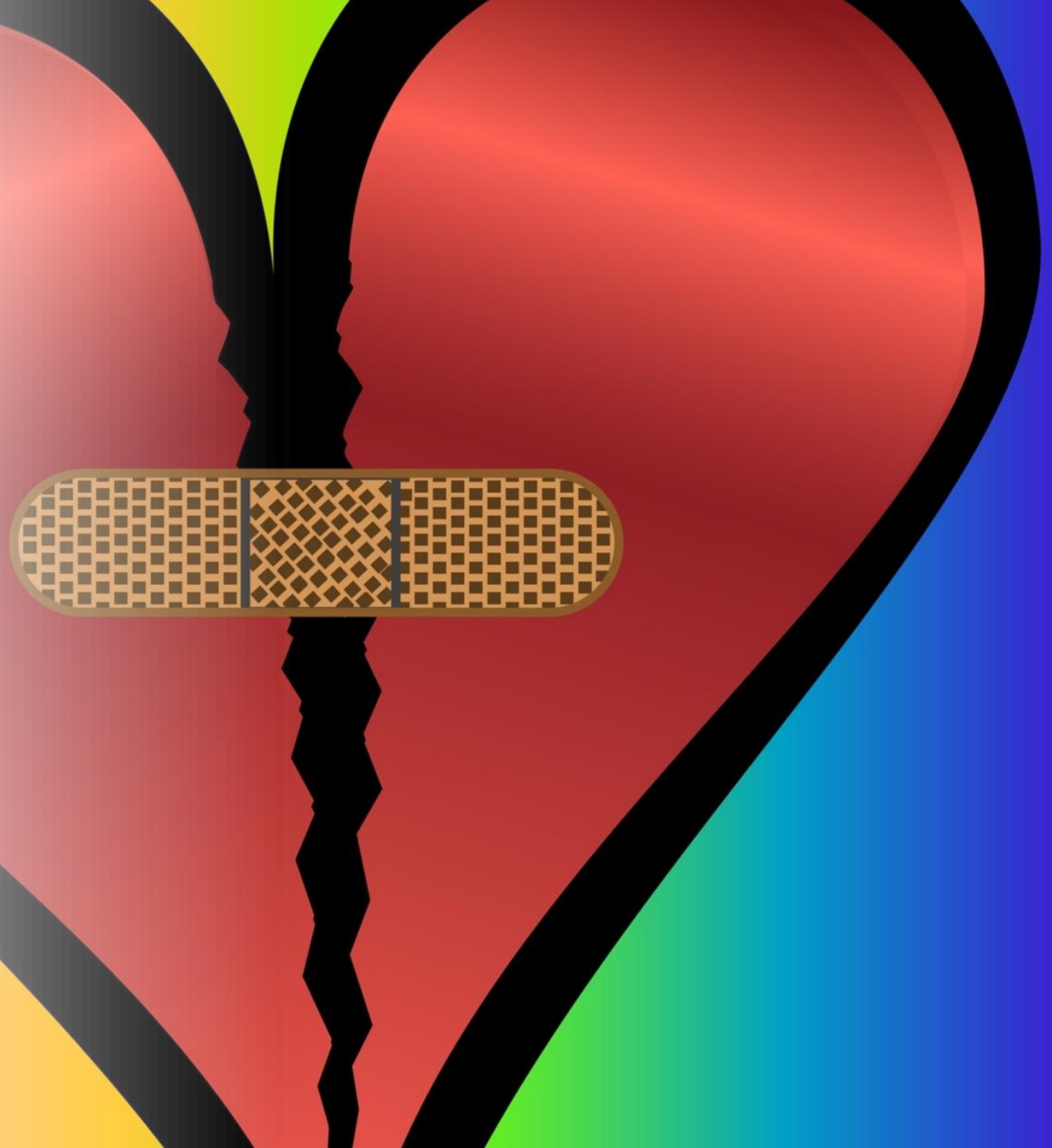


## How to Understand Trauma

# What is Trauma?

Trauma is the experience of an event in which the individual experiences a threat to life, the psyche, or bodily integrity and experiences intense fear, hopelessness or horror.

Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, 2005





# Examples of Trauma

- Abuse or neglect
- Community violence
- Bullying or harassment
- Racism, discrimination, or marginalization
- Family instability
- Medical trauma
- Loss of a loved one
- Natural disasters
- Substance use in the home
- Military deployment or veteran experiences





# What Trauma Can Look Like In Students

- Difficulty concentrating
- Frequent absences
- Irritability or anger
- Anxiety
- Perfectionism
- Withdrawal/Disengagement
- Difficulty trusting others
- Overreaction to feedback
- Trouble regulating emotions

**Trauma changes how people experience safety, relationships, learning, and trust.**



# change perspective



- Instead of: "What's wrong with you?"
- Ask: "What happened to you?"
- Then ask: "What strengths helped them get here today?"



# Trauma Creates Barriers to Learning and Student Success

## **What may look like**

- Laziness/Lack of Motivation
- Resistance
- Disrespectful
- Attention Seeking

## **May actually be**

- Overwhelm
- Mistrust of others
- Feeling Unsafe/Threatened
- A lack of safety.



# How Institutions Create Barriers to Student Success

- Rigid Policies and Procedures
- Unclear Communication and Expectations
- Limited Access to Support and Resources
- Power Imbalances
- Lack of Psychological Safety
- Cultural and Structural Barriers

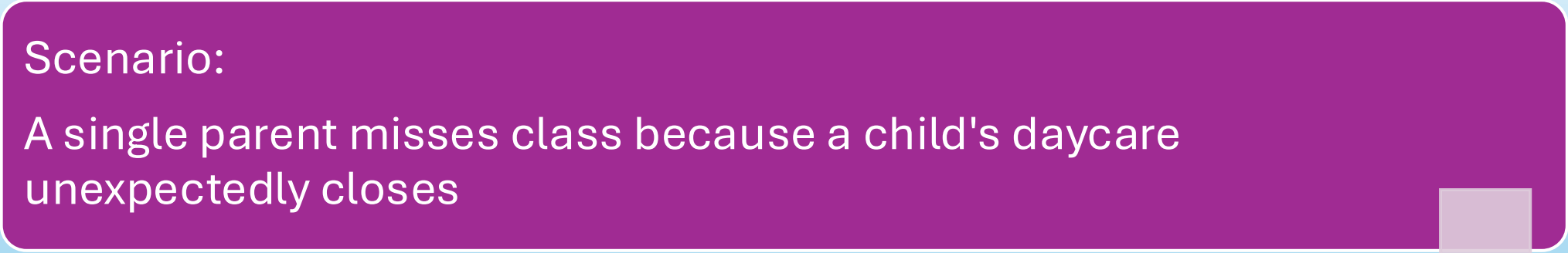




# Case Study

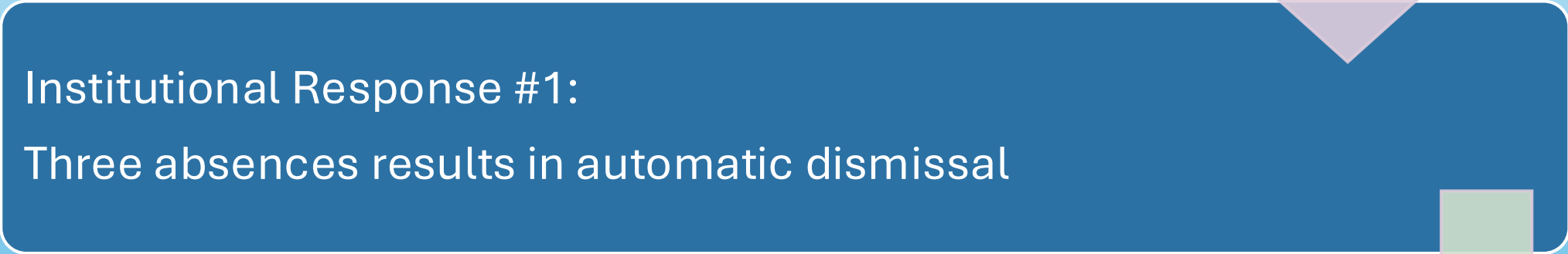
## Scenario:

A single parent misses class because a child's daycare unexpectedly closes



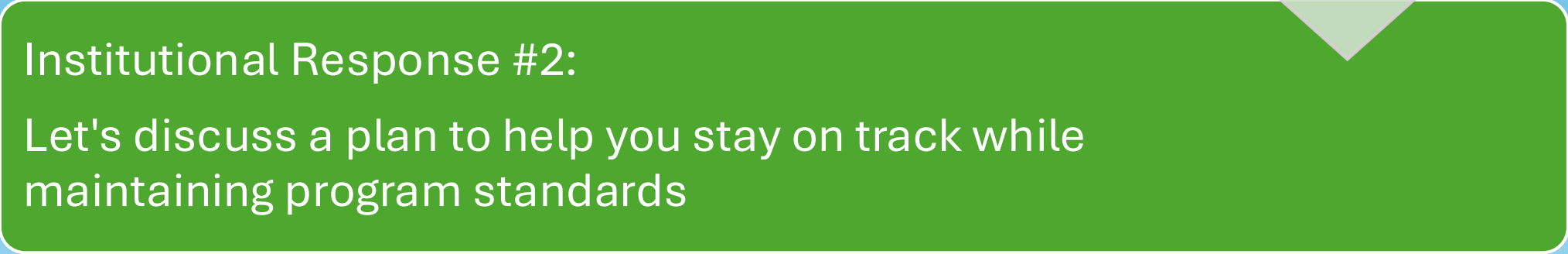
## Institutional Response #1:

Three absences results in automatic dismissal



## Institutional Response #2:

Let's discuss a plan to help you stay on track while maintaining program standards



# 6 Guiding Principles to a Trauma-Informed Approach



Substance Abuse and Mental Health Agency (SAMHSA) and CDC, 2014

# Creating Safety

Predictability  
and  
Transparency

Do students  
know what to  
expect?

Psychological

Can students ask  
questions  
without fear of  
embarrassment?

Emotional

Can students  
experience  
emotions without  
being judged?

Relational

Do students trust  
the people  
around them?

Cultural Safety  
and Belonging

Can students  
show up as their  
authentic selves?



# Case Study – Building Safety

- Imagine a nursing assistant student who is first in her family to attend post-secondary education.
- She walks into class and:
  - Doesn't know anyone
  - Fears asking questions or looking foolish
  - Has never taken a practical exam
  - Is working evenings
  - Wonders if she belongs

**A trauma-informed school creates safety by communicating:**

**You belong here. We will challenge you. We will support you. We expect you to succeed, and if you struggle, we will work with you rather than shame you.**

# Why Safety Matters for Learning

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**When the brain perceives a threat, it shifts resources from learning to survival.**

Students may unconsciously respond with:

- Fight – anger, arguing, defiance
- Flight – avoidance, absenteeism
- Freeze – shutting down, difficulty thinking
- Fawn – people-pleasing, fear of mistakes

When students feel safe, connected, and supported, they are better able to:

- Focus
- Remember information
- Solve problems
- Learn new skills

**The brain is not asking, "How do I learn?" It is asking, "Am I safe?"**

# Building Resilience – Case Study

Resilience can be modeled, learned, and strengthened.

Student: Failed first practical exam

Support: Encouragement, tutoring, practice opportunities

Outcome: Passed second attempt and graduated

Resilience is built when challenge is paired with support.





# Classroom Best Practices

## Create Predictability and Safety

- Clearly communicate expectations, deadlines, and grading policies.
- Provide consistent routines and course structures.
- Explain changes in schedules or assignments in advance whenever possible.
- Offer course calendars and reminders.

## Foster Psychological Safety

- Use respectful, non-judgmental language.
- Encourage questions and participation without fear of embarrassment.
- Normalize mistakes as part of learning.
- Avoid public criticism or shaming.

## Promote Student Choice and Voice

- Offer options for assignments, projects, or participation methods.
- Incorporate student feedback into course activities.
- Encourage students to connect coursework to their personal and career goals.

## Support Regulation and Focus

- Include brief breaks during long classes.
- Allow movement when appropriate.
- Build opportunities for reflection and stress management.
- Recognize signs of stress and respond with curiosity rather than punishment.

# Student Engagement Strategies

## Build Meaningful Relationships

- Learn and use students' names.
- Check in regularly with students.
- Demonstrate genuine interest in their success.
- Create opportunities for peer connection and support.

## Increase Belonging

- Foster inclusive classrooms where all students feel valued.
- Celebrate progress and milestones.
- Highlight diverse experiences and perspectives.

## Connect Learning to Career Goals

- Help students understand how coursework relates to future employment.
- Use real-world examples and hands-on learning opportunities.
- Invite employers and alumni to share experiences.

## Strength-Based Approach

- Focus on students' skills, strengths, and resilience.
- Recognize effort and growth, not just outcomes.
- Reinforce students' ability to overcome challenges.

# Student Support Services

## Early Identification and Outreach

- Monitor attendance, participation, and academic progress.
- Reach out proactively when concerns arise.
- Frame outreach as support rather than discipline.

## Wraparound Support

- Academic tutoring
- Career coaching
- Financial aid assistance
- Mental health resources
- Transportation support
- Childcare resources
- Housing and food assistance referrals

## Success Coaching

- Help students develop goal-setting, time management, and study skills.
- Provide regular encouragement and accountability.
- Assist students in navigating institutional processes.

## Referral Systems

- Train faculty and staff to recognize signs of distress.
- Establish clear referral pathways for students needing additional support.
- Ensure students know how to access resources.



# Trauma-Informed Policies & Procedures

- **Attendance Policies**

- Balance accountability with flexibility when students experience crises.
- Create processes for requesting support during emergencies.
- Focus on re-engagement rather than punishment.

- **Conduct Policies**

- Use restorative approaches when appropriate.
- Seek to understand behavior before imposing consequences.
- Promote accountability while preserving dignity.

- **Communication Policies**

- Ensure policies are transparent and easy to understand.
- Use supportive, student-centered language.
- Provide multiple methods for students to seek help.

- **Grievance and Complaint Processes**

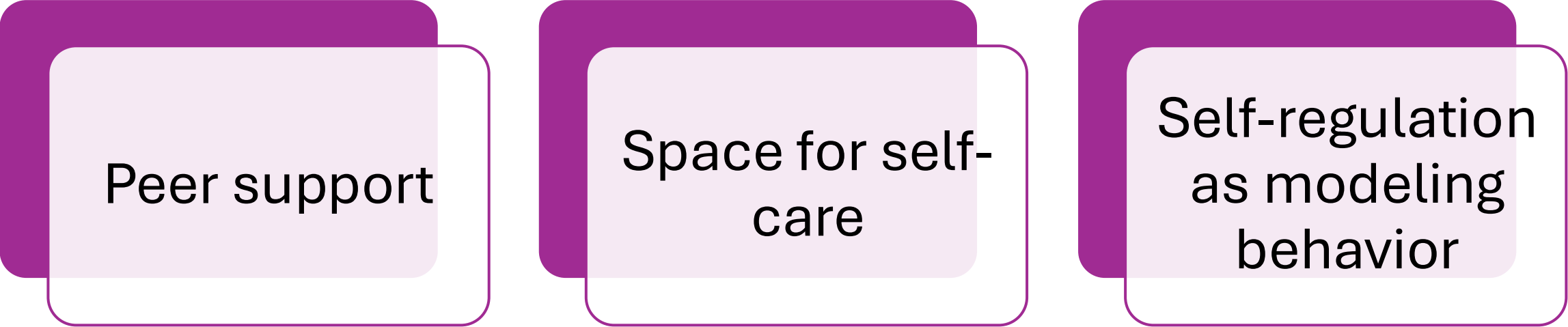
- Create accessible, confidential reporting options.
- Ensure students feel safe raising concerns.
- Respond promptly and respectfully.

# Healthy Workplace and Learning Culture

A trauma-informed safe and healthy workplace and learning environment creates the conditions for individuals to reach their full potential by promoting safety, trust, respect, belonging, and opportunity for growth.

People feel safe, supported, and valued, they are better able to focus, learn, collaborate, and thrive.

# Build Staff Well-Being



Peer support

Space for self-  
care

Self-regulation  
as modeling  
behavior



# Next Steps

Start small. Start somewhere.

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- Try one classroom strategy
- Strengthen one way to engage students
- Improve one support practice
- Review one policy through a trauma-informed lens
- Teach one trauma-informed skill that helps students succeed in school and the workplace



# Contact Information

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