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'Zero tolerance' doesn't help students deal with toxic stress

By Godwin Higa | 5 p.m. Nov. 6, 2014

In line after recess, Jacob gets antsy and starts poking Marcos. Marcos tells Jacob to stop, and when he doesn't, Marcos pushes Jacob. An altercation ensues.

At a school with a zero-tolerance discipline policy, Marcos and Jacob would be sent to the principal's office and suspended based on guidelines set by the district. Tens of thousands of elementary school students were suspended last year statewide. The numbers grow as students advance to middle and high school. Most of the students suspended are children of color and males.

At Cherokee Point Elementary School, where I am principal, the story would have a different ending. After three years of declining rates, we have had no suspensions since the 2012-13 school year. The fight might be handled by a teacher who has been trained to understand how a child's brain reacts to ongoing stress. She might call in a counselor to talk to the students. They would ask not just "what had happened in line?" but also "what's going on at home?"

At our school, the staff would know that Jacob's mother is terminally ill. They'd know that Marcos' father had just moved out. Staff would hold the students accountable by helping them calm down and try to touch each other's hearts. The students would decide together how to make it better.

Overwhelming evidence now shows that school suspension does not change student behavior for the better. It also does nothing to help kids who are acting out because of toxic stress, the kind of stress that comes from chronic exposure to trauma and adverse experiences like abuse, neglect and household dysfunction. In my early years as an administrator, I picked up one of my third-grade students walking from a fast-food establishment with a bag in his hand, unsupervised and alone. Suspension had done him no good, and possible harm.

At Cherokee Point, we have been able to come together around a vision of a school that does not ignore the trauma in many children's everyday lives, but rather understands how it impacts their ability to learn. Toxic stress damages the developing brains and bodies of kids, and may make it difficult to sit still in school or to control emotions in challenging situations.

Lest we think “trauma-informed” schools such as ours are only for a few kids going through tough times, studies show that a majority of Californians have been exposed to at least one adverse childhood experience. At Cherokee Point, teachers, parents, San Diego State professors, college students and community advocates all work together to address these stressors and ensure that our kids’ education is not interrupted by outside factors. That includes offering everything from counseling services to parenting support groups to fresh produce, clothing, and shoes for those who need them.

Increasingly, we are not alone in our efforts to reduce the impact of trauma on children. This year, the San Diego Unified School District is rolling out a new school discipline strategy aimed at resolving the issues that lead to student conflicts. Known as restorative justice, this strategy will help teachers and principals districtwide to look behind the conflict at what was going on for the affected parties, and how it can be made right.

The efforts in San Diego don’t stop with children. San Diego County Health and Human Services also is offering training to help its entire staff become more aware of the impact of trauma on the lives of those they serve. This year, I was appointed by the mayor of San Diego to serve as a Human Relations commissioner. My goal is to help change policies throughout the city to create more trauma-informed schools and compassionate communities.

My hope is that our work in San Diego can serve as a model for other parts of the state and nation. In December, I presented at a summit in Anaheim on “Keeping Kids in School and Out of Court,” where 30 counties were represented. This week, I’ll be speaking at the first-ever statewide summit on adverse childhood experiences. Convened by the Center for Youth Wellness, the summit in San Francisco is bringing together policymakers, educators and health professionals to address this threat to our children’s well-being.

By working together and bringing the resources of our state to bear, we can create more compassionate schools and communities where all children are able to learn, grow up healthy and become productive members of our society.

Higa is principal of Cherokee Point Elementary School in San Diego