



# Trauma-Sensitive Schools

## TRAINING PACKAGE

UNDERSTAND • BUILD • LEAD

# Implementation Guide

June 2018

**National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments**



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The *Trauma-Sensitive Schools Training Package* provides training in trauma and its impact as well as a means for adopting a schoolwide trauma-sensitive approach to support students, families, and staff. The content of this package is informed by research on traumatic stress and its effects on children, youth, and adults along with best practices for addressing trauma across youth-serving systems. Materials support staff in different roles to implement trauma-sensitive practices and to build a trauma-sensitive school culture. The package benefited from collaboration with others who reviewed the materials and provided feedback. We expressly wish to thank the following for their contributions to the review process.

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Representatives from schools, Local Education Agencies (LEAs), and State Education Agencies (SEAs) across the country who participated in the pilot of the training package and provided feedback on package components

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# INTRODUCTION

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Growing awareness of the prevalence and impact of childhood trauma has prompted educators to consider their roles in addressing this public health issue. In school settings, supporting youth affected by trauma can take many forms, ranging from providing therapeutic interventions that address trauma-related symptoms to adopting systemic approaches to ensure that the entire school is equipped to recognize and respond to trauma. Consensus is growing among educators that universal, whole-school approaches are needed to address the magnitude of trauma affecting youth. Trauma interventions must target the individual and the larger context within which support is provided.

The *Trauma-Sensitive Schools Training Package* offers school and district administrators and staff a roadmap and tools for adopting a school- or districtwide approach to addressing trauma and promoting resilience for everyone in the learning environment. To emphasize this universal focus, we use the term “trauma-sensitive” as articulated by Massachusetts Advocates for Children; this term refers to an approach that is adopted by the entire school to benefit all students, families, and staff.<sup>1</sup> This training package supports school and district administrators and staff to do the following:

- Understand trauma in a broad and inclusive way
- Recognize the effects of trauma on students, families, school administrators and staff, and communities
- Learn a process for implementing a schoolwide trauma-sensitive approach
- Integrate trauma-sensitive practices into their daily operations.

## Intended Use

The resources in this training package are intended to foster safe and supportive learning environments where all students have the opportunity to thrive. Package components can be adopted in their entirety or individually as part of ongoing professional development activities. If your school or district has already begun the process of adopting a trauma-sensitive approach, you may consider using this training package to support existing efforts. This package is not intended to replace other frameworks or models that you are already using; instead, it is intended to support or augment them. Although it was prepared for school and district administrators and staff, the *Trauma-Sensitive Schools Training Package* includes recommendations for involving students and families.

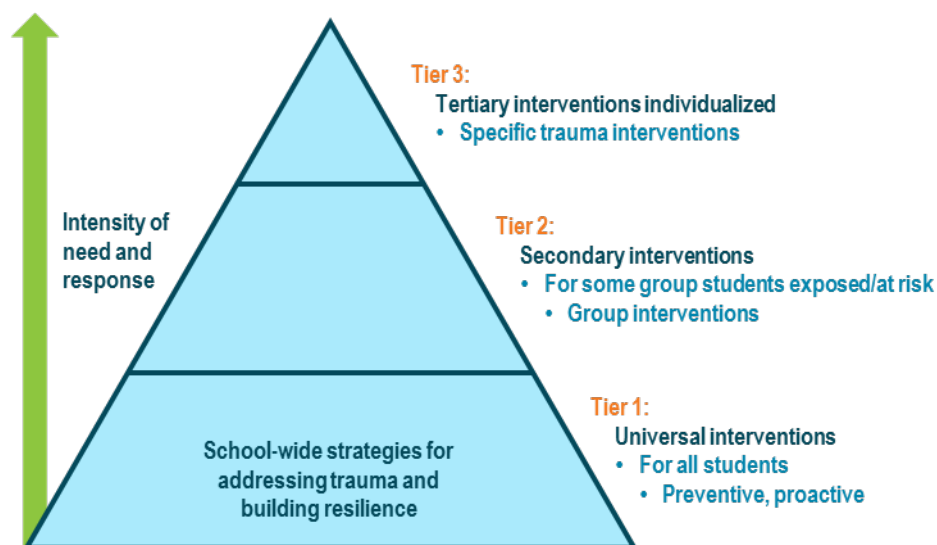
The contents of the *Trauma-Sensitive Schools Training Package* may be distressing to people who have experienced trauma. When using package components, be sure to acknowledge the potentially difficult nature of the material and encourage people to ask for support as needed.

# TRAUMA-SENSITIVE SCHOOLS DEFINED

In a trauma-sensitive school, all aspects of the educational environment—from workforce training to engagement with students and families to procedures and policies—are grounded in an understanding of trauma and its impact and are designed to promote resilience for all.

Within a multitiered prevention framework, trauma sensitivity is a universal approach adopted by all school staff and is designed to have the broadest impact on culture and climate. Creating a solid foundation for schoolwide trauma sensitivity ensures a culture of support for all students and helps staff members recognize students who need more intensive services. Such a foundation fosters an environment in which targeted and intensive interventions for trauma (see Tiers 2 and 3 in Figure 1) are most likely to be successful when they are necessary. A trauma-sensitive approach also addresses negative effects of trauma on families and school staff.

**Figure 1. Trauma Sensitivity and Multitiered Systems of Support**



Adopting a universal approach to addressing trauma requires modifications to school practices, policies, and culture. Trauma-sensitive strategies in schools may include the following:<sup>2,3,4,5,6</sup>

- Educating all school staff about trauma and its effects
- Promoting physical and emotional safety in relationships and in the environment
- Reducing trauma-related triggers in the school environment and eliminating potentially retraumatizing practices, such as harsh or punitive responses
- Considering trauma in all assessment protocol and behavior plans

- Ensuring youth and family voice, choice, and empowerment
- Addressing the secondary effects on educators that can occur when working with trauma survivors

## WHOLE-SCHOOL APPROACH TO TRAUMA

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Schools adopt a universal, whole-school approach to addressing trauma for several key reasons, including increased awareness of (a) high rates of trauma among students and the negative impact of unaddressed traumatic stress on behavior and learning; (b) the positive role that schools can play in promoting resilience and supporting recovery from trauma; (c) the risk of causing harm when trauma responses are misunderstood; and (d) promising, if early, indications that adopting a universal approach has a positive impact on students and schools.

### Prevalence and Impact of Childhood Trauma

In this training package, the term *trauma* refers to an **event**, series of events, or set of circumstances that is **experienced** as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening; that overwhelms the person's ability to cope; and that has adverse **effects** on the person's mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.<sup>5</sup>

A significant percentage of students have been or continue to be exposed to potentially traumatic experiences.<sup>7,8</sup> Exposure to traumatic events in childhood with inadequate adult support can significantly disrupt the child's development of core social-emotional competencies, such as emotional and behavioral regulation, problem solving, planning, and prosocial skills. Disrupted development places children at greater risk for adverse emotional, functional, and academic outcomes.<sup>9,10,11</sup>

Children and youth exposed to trauma are at increased risk for challenges in school that include:

- Spending more time out of class
- Being at greater risk for failing a grade
- Scoring lower on achievement tests
- Having higher rates of suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to special education<sup>12</sup>

## Benefits of Addressing Trauma in Schools

Schools play a significant role in supporting the health and well-being of children and youth, including those affected by traumatic experiences. Without knowledge of trauma and its impact, teachers, counselors, paraprofessionals, coaches, and administrative staff are at risk for misunderstanding, misidentifying, or overlooking students' trauma-related behaviors and responding in ways that may cause additional harm.

Efforts to promote a positive school climate are associated with improved academic and social-emotional outcomes for students.<sup>13,14,15,16</sup> The movement to create trauma-sensitive schools supports and augments efforts to cultivate optimal learning conditions for all students, particularly those affected by trauma. Across the country, schools that implement trauma-sensitive practices report positive effects—including fewer office referrals, improved test scores, and a drop in suspensions—that contribute to creating safe and supportive environments and enhanced connections for students, families, and staff.<sup>17</sup>

## Materials Included in the Package

The materials that comprise the *Trauma-Sensitive Schools Training Package* include an interactive e-resource, two self-paced online modules, a leader action guide, and a range of handouts and tools. Some components are identified as intended only for the group leading the effort; others speak to all school staff. Handouts and tools include assessment instruments, activities, discussion and reflection questions, and case illustrations designed to help everyone implement trauma-sensitive practices (see Table 1).

This training package is supported by a substantial body of research on childhood trauma and its effects, trauma-informed and trauma-sensitive practices across youth-serving systems, and lessons from implementation science. A number of sources were particularly important in informing this package:

- Seminal materials produced by Massachusetts Advocates for Children, including *Helping Traumatized Children Learn*, and *Creating and Advocating for Trauma-Sensitive Schools*
- Compassionate schools work carried out by the state of Washington
- Curricula, assessment tools, and models for implementing a trauma-informed approach in social service settings adapted for schools



**Table 1. Trauma-Sensitive Schools Training Package Components**

Component	Audience	Content
<b>Implementation Guide</b>	School and district administrators	Summarizes the intent of <i>Trauma-Sensitive Schools Training Package</i> , describes the components, and recommends a process for using the materials.
<b>Understanding Trauma and Its Impact</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>E-resource</b></li> <li>▪ <b>Companion Slide Presentation and Activity Packet</b></li> </ul>	All school and district staff, including administrators, instructional and non-instructional staff	Provides information about the prevalence of trauma, its impact on children and youth, and implications for schools. The interactive e-resource can be viewed independently by all school staff on their preferred electronic device (computer or tablet). The companion training materials include a slide presentation and activity packet that parallel the e-resource content for in-person training.
<b>Building Trauma-Sensitive Schools</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Online Module</b></li> <li>▪ <b>Handouts</b></li> <li>▪ <b>Facilitation Guide</b></li> </ul>	All school and district staff, including administrators, instructional and non-instructional staff	Introduces trauma-sensitive practices for use in the classroom and schoolwide. Contains downloadable handouts, including checklists, worksheets, practice guides, and discussion questions for supporting school staff in adopting a trauma-sensitive approach. Includes a facilitation guide with suggestions for how to use the materials for in-person training.
<b>Leading Trauma-Sensitive Schools</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Online Module</b></li> <li>▪ <b>Action Guide</b></li> <li>▪ <b>Facilitation Guide</b></li> </ul>	School and district administrators	Introduces a framework and process for adopting a trauma-sensitive approach schoolwide. Outlines steps that a school can take to (1) prepare to adopt a trauma-sensitive approach; (2) envision what your trauma-sensitive school will look like; (3) align trauma sensitivity with other approaches; and (4) sustain trauma sensitivity. Includes assessment and planning tools for supporting implementation and guidance for using remaining package components with staff. Includes a facilitation guide with suggestions for how to use the materials for in-person training.



# HOW TO IMPLEMENT THE TRAUMA-SENSITIVE SCHOOLS TRAINING PACKAGE

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There are a variety of ways to use the *Trauma-Sensitive Schools Training Package* to support your school in adopting a trauma-sensitive approach. How you use the package depends on a range of factors that include level of motivation and capacity within a school to adopt a trauma-sensitive approach, time and resources available to support implementation, and the extent to which the person using the package is in a position to approve and support operational changes. The package can be used in its entirety as part of a comprehensive implementation process or package components can be introduced incrementally based on a school's readiness for change. (See the decision tree on p. 12 for a visual flow chart of how to use package components based on your role and goals.)

Here we consider two common scenarios in schools related to adopting a trauma-sensitive approach and corresponding steps for using the training package to support change efforts. In the first scenario, school and district administrators are interested in adopting a trauma-sensitive approach schoolwide, and in the second scenario, other school personnel, such as student services staff, are interested in introducing and championing trauma-sensitivity.

## **Scenario #1: You are a school or district administrator who is interested in leading your school in implementing a universal, trauma-sensitive approach.**

### **1. Review the Training Package**

Begin by reviewing all components of this training package to have a complete picture of what it means to implement a trauma-sensitive approach. We recommend reviewing the training package with other colleagues who are in a position to assist you in making decisions about how you might adopt a trauma-sensitive approach in your school (e.g., fellow administrators, department heads, student services staff, members of other work groups leading aligning efforts such as school climate teams). If your school already has a work group or entity focused on trauma or related topics, this group may review the training package.

If the leadership team is familiar with trauma and trauma-sensitive practices and is interested in taking these efforts to a next level of adoption, we recommend viewing the package components in the following sequence:

- a. **Leading Trauma-Sensitive Schools** online module and action guide provide school administrators and others leading change efforts with a vision and process for adopting a trauma-sensitive approach schoolwide that includes recommendations for when and how to introduce other training package

components to staff. A facilitation guide includes steps for facilitating in-person training with your leadership team using the module and action guide.

- b. **Understanding Trauma and Its Impact** (e-resource, companion slide presentation, and activity packet) is the first component to be introduced to all staff and ensures a uniform level of knowledge about trauma and its effects on students, families, staff, and schools. The companion slide presentation and activity packet are designed to support in-person training for staff on e-resource content.
- c. **Building Trauma-Sensitive Schools** (online module, handouts, and facilitation guide) is the second package component to be introduced to all staff and provides an introduction to trauma-sensitive schools and concrete examples of trauma-sensitive practices to apply in the classroom and schoolwide. Downloadable handouts are available throughout the module to reinforce concepts. A facilitation guide includes steps for using the module and handouts for in-person training.

\*Note: If you and your team are not familiar with basic trauma concepts, you may consider starting with the Understanding Trauma and Its Impact e-resource to familiarize yourself with this foundational content, then move to the Building Trauma-Sensitive Schools module to get a sense of what trauma sensitivity is, and finally, view the Leading Trauma-Sensitive Schools module to help you plan your next steps for using these materials with your staff.

If the impetus for change begins at the district level, school administrators and their leadership teams need to be brought onboard early and encouraged to review and discuss training package components and determine interest and support at the school level.

## 2. Determine Interest and Scope of Implementation

The leadership team determines its level of interest in adopting a trauma-sensitive approach schoolwide and considers what that process would require for leaders and staff. If the team determines that they are not ready to fully adopt a trauma-sensitive approach, they may focus on planning for and implementing individual package components. For example, the team may decide that they will focus on getting all staff trained on trauma and trauma-sensitive practices using the e-resource and companion training materials and the building trauma-sensitive schools training module to ensure a common understanding and foster discussion about what it would mean for the school to more fully adopt a trauma-sensitive approach.

If your school has already begun a process of adopting a trauma-sensitive approach, the team determines how best to use package components to support and augment existing efforts. For example, the team may consider ways to use the Understanding Trauma and Its Impact e-resource and Building Trauma-Sensitive Schools online module to supplement existing training. If your school has already trained staff on trauma and trauma-sensitive practices, the team may

focus your efforts on using the Leading Trauma-Sensitive Schools components of the package to move towards systemic adoption of a trauma-informed approach.

When interest in adopting this approach begins at the district level, those leaders need to meet with school leadership teams to ascertain the degree of interest and investment and determine the scope of implementation (i.e., one school at a time, across multiple schools in a district, or districtwide). If several schools adopt a trauma-sensitive approach across the district, school and district administrators should coordinate efforts and meet regularly to explore challenges, successes, and lessons learned as each school moves to implement trauma-sensitive practices. Integrating discussions about trauma sensitivity and implementation progress into existing meetings may help to institutionalize the process and sustain dialogue and support for leaders while minimizing burden.

### **3. Use the Action Guide to Develop and Carry Out Implementation Plans**

The team follows the steps outlined in the *Leading Trauma-Sensitive Schools* action guide to plan for and implement a trauma-sensitive approach using other package components in ways most suited to your school's context, needs, and point in the change process. The action guide includes a sequenced planning process for preparing, envisioning, aligning, and sustaining a trauma-sensitive approach.

### **Scenario #2: You are interested in supporting school administrators and staff in learning about and adopting a trauma-sensitive approach.**

School personnel who commonly play a role in supporting trauma sensitivity include student service staff such as school social workers and psychologists and other school personnel or consultants working on particular grants or initiatives where trauma-sensitivity is relevant. In this scenario, the person using the package is interested in helping school administrators and staff learn more about what it means to adopt a trauma-sensitive approach. School administrators and staff may or may not be ready to fully implement a whole-school approach to addressing trauma, but they are open to learning more and supporting professional development for staff on this topic.

#### **1. Review the Training Package**

We recommend viewing all package components to determine how best to introduce the package materials to school administrators and staff. If you are considering how to support a whole-school approach, you may consider beginning by reviewing the *Leading Trauma-Sensitive Schools* module to get a sense of the bigger picture and roadmap for change and then review the remaining package components for how they fit within the larger effort. If you are new to trauma concepts, begin with the *Understanding Trauma and Its Impact* e-resource, then the *Building Trauma-Sensitive Schools* module and handouts, and finally the *Leading Trauma-Sensitive Schools* module.

## 2. Introduce Package Components to School Leadership

We recommend starting by introducing package components to school leadership (e.g., principal, assistant principal, staff in leadership positions such as department heads). For leaders who are new to the concepts, we recommend the following training sequence:

- a. Provide leadership with access to the Understanding Trauma and its Impact e-resource.
- b. Follow up with in-person group training for leaders using the companion slide presentation and activity packet.
- c. Conduct in-person group training for leaders using the Building Trauma-Sensitive Schools module.
- d. Conduct in-person group training for leaders using the Leading Trauma-Sensitive Schools module and action guide.
- e. Determine leadership interest in trauma sensitivity.
- f. Based on interest, determine with leaders how they want to proceed in using package components with staff. Steps for using materials with staff are laid out in the action guide.

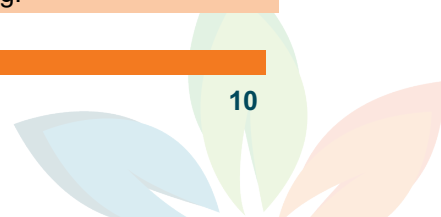
If school leadership is already familiar with and has conducted staff trainings on trauma and trauma sensitivity, we recommend beginning with an in-person group training using the *Leading Trauma-Sensitive Schools* module and action guide to generate discussions around next steps that leadership may be interested in taking to further support universal adoption of a trauma-sensitive approach. After discussions about the big picture, leaders should view the e-resource and Building-Trauma-Sensitive Schools module as a group to determine whether these resources can be used to supplement existing training and support next steps in implementing trauma sensitivity.

## 3. Use Package Components to Support Schoolwide Capacity-Building

Based on your school's level of awareness of trauma and trauma-sensitive practices, along with leader interest in trauma sensitivity, determine how best to use package components to support schoolwide capacity-building. School staff who are championing this process may choose to start by using package components with a certain segment of staff, for example student services staff (e.g., school social workers, counselors, psychologists), to develop a cadre of trainers who can bring this information to other instructional and non-instructional staff across a school or district. In the next section of this Implementation Guide, we provide recommendations for how to implement individual package components that can be applied whether components are being implemented with leadership, a particular segment of school personnel, or with all school staff.

# HOW TO IMPLEMENT PACKAGE COMPONENTS

Component	Implementation
<p><b>Understanding Trauma and Its Impact</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ E-resource</li> <li>▪ Companion Slide Presentation and Activity Packet</li> </ul>	<p><b>Audience:</b> This component is designed for all school and district staff, including administrators, instructional and non-instructional staff.</p> <p><b>Purpose:</b> To ensure that all staff have a shared awareness and understanding of the prevalence and impact of trauma and implications for schools.</p> <p><b>Implementation:</b> The interactive e-resource is designed to be viewed independently by school staff on their preferred electronic device (computer or tablet). In-person training should be planned in conjunction with the release of the e-resource using the companion slide presentation and activity packet to reinforce concepts and encourage group discussion and learning. The slide presentation and activities can be used in their entirety or divided into shorter training segments depending on time available for professional development. The activity packet includes pre- and post-knowledge surveys and a training satisfaction survey for assessing impact.</p>
<p><b>Building Trauma-Sensitive Schools</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Online Module</li> <li>▪ Handouts</li> <li>▪ Facilitation Guide</li> </ul>	<p><b>Audience:</b> This component should be offered to all school and district staff, including administrators, instructional and non-instructional staff.</p> <p><b>Purpose:</b> Introduces trauma-sensitive practices for use in the classroom and schoolwide.</p> <p>Contains downloadable handouts, including checklists, worksheets, practice guides, and discussion questions for supporting school staff in adopting a trauma-sensitive approach.</p> <p><b>Implementation:</b> The <i>Building Trauma-Sensitive Schools</i> module can be viewed individually or as a group. It is recommended that school leaders and champions use this module as part of in-person, group-based training. The module can be viewed at once or in shorter segments. Each segment includes related handouts to support discussion about trauma sensitivity and application of concepts. See the facilitation guide for suggestions about how to use the module and handouts for supporting in-person staff training.</p>
<p><b>Leading Trauma-Sensitive Schools</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Online Module</li> <li>▪ Action Guide</li> <li>▪ Facilitation Guide</li> </ul>	<p><b>Audience:</b> This component is designed for school and district administrators and other school staff helping to lead efforts to adopt a trauma-sensitive approach.</p> <p><b>Purpose:</b> Introduces a roadmap and strategies for adopting a trauma-sensitive approach schoolwide, including how and when to use other package components as part of professional development and capacity-building efforts. The module is accompanied by an action guide that includes assessment and planning tools for supporting a school to (a) prepare to adopt a trauma-sensitive approach; (b) envision what your trauma-sensitive school will look like; (c) align trauma sensitivity with other approaches; and (d) sustain trauma sensitivity.</p> <p><b>Implementation:</b> The <i>Leading Trauma-Sensitive Schools</i> module can be used by school administrators/leadership teams interested in learning a process for adopting a trauma-sensitive approach schoolwide. The module and companion action guide outline a multi-phased process for planning and implementing a trauma-sensitive approach. It is recommended that leadership teams view the module together, stopping as instructed in the module to review corresponding sections of the action guide. The module can be viewed at once or in shorter segments. Leaders should review the entire module and action guide to determine your next steps. See the facilitation guide for suggestions about how to use these materials to support in-person leader training.</p>



# TIMEFRAME FOR IMPLEMENTATION

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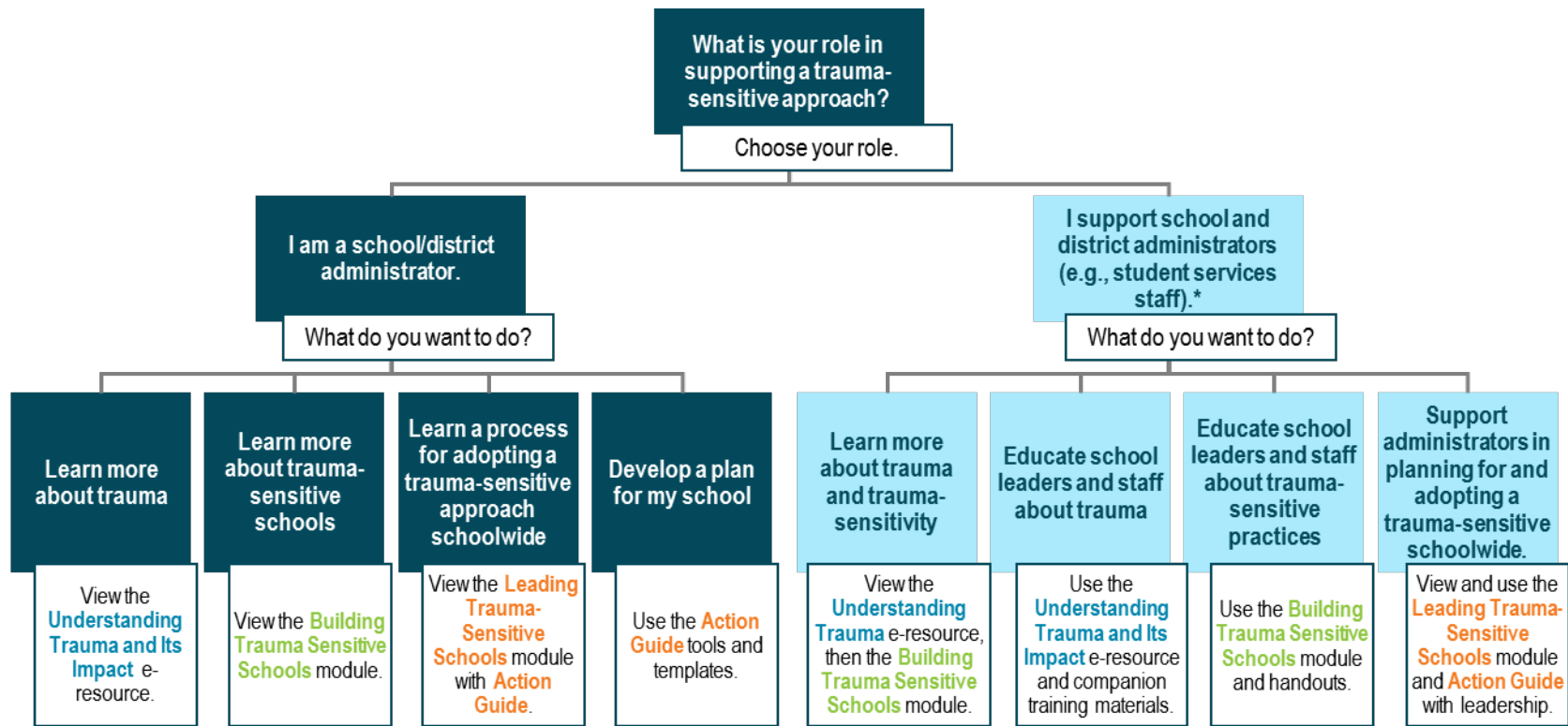
Adopting a trauma-sensitive approach is a long-term process that may take several years to integrate fully. The time it takes to move through each phase of the process depends on the experiences and needs of each school and district. Each school needs to determine the timeline that best meets your needs.

## Possible Stages

Schools and districts can use package components to support adoption of a trauma-sensitive approach at any point in the school year. The following represents a sequence for grouping key activities, which may help you plan an implementation process that meets the needs of your school:

- **Spring/Summer (April–August).** School leadership teams and/or trauma-sensitive work groups review training package materials and develop action plans for supporting a trauma-sensitive approach for the next school year.
- **Fall (September–December).** Begin to implement action plans related to adopting a trauma-sensitive approach based on where your school is in the process. If plans include professional development activities, these months constitute a stretch with fewer breaks and precede spring testing.
- **Winter (January–March).** Continue to implement action plans related to trauma sensitivity. Focus on maintaining work group meetings and monitoring and evaluating implementation of new processes and practices.
- **Spring/Summer (April–August).** Assess and refine implementation plans and identify priority areas for the next school year.

# DECISION TREE FOR USING TRAINING PACKAGE



\* School personnel who commonly play a role in supporting trauma sensitivity include student service staff such as school social workers and psychologists and other school personnel or consultants working on particular grants or initiatives where trauma-sensitivity is relevant.



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