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How Trauma-Informed Practices in Transition Programs Impact Postsecondary Outcomes for Students with Disabilities in Urban Schools

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ABSTRACT

Students with disabilities in urban schools experience persistent inequities in postsecondary education, employment, and independent living, often compounded by trauma and systemic racism. Although federal mandates such as Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA) establish expectations for transition planning, they rarely address trauma's influence on self-determination, executive functioning, and school engagement. This paper synthesizes research across trauma-informed education, transition theory, and urban education to argue for integrating trauma-informed practices into transition services. Principles of safety, trust, empowerment, collaboration, and cultural responsiveness align with predictors of postschool success, including student voice, family engagement, and experiential learning. Yet implementation remains inconsistent due to resource constraints, racialized inequities, educator burnout, and limited mental health infrastructure. Recommendations include embedding trauma-informed competencies into federal guidance, investing in sustained professional development, strengthening interagency partnerships, and prioritizing educator well-being to create more equitable conditions for successful transitions to adulthood.

Keywords: trauma-informed education, transition programs, students with disabilities, urban schools, racial equity

Students with disabilities in urban schools continue to experience deep and longstanding inequities in postsecondary education, employment, and independent

living outcomes (Hennessey et al., 2025; Mazzotti et al., 2021). Although federal mandates such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) were designed to ensure equitable transition planning, these expectations remain unevenly implemented. In special education, transition programs refer to coordinated services and planning processes designed to prepare students with disabilities for postsecondary education, employment, independent living, and community participation after high school (Mazzotti et al., 2021; Rowe et al., 2021). Many youth, particularly Black and Brown students with disabilities, continue to encounter fragmented services, lowered expectations, and limited access to meaningful postschool opportunities (Awsumb et al., 2020; Hughes et al., 2023). In this paper, "students with disabilities" refers broadly to youth receiving services under IDEA across disability categories, including learning disabilities, emotional or behavioral disabilities, autism, intellectual disabilities, and related eligibility areas. Trauma exposure may co-occur with these disabilities and intensify barriers to successful transition outcomes, but trauma itself is not conceptualized here as a disability category (Maddox et al., 2022; Qu et al., 2024). In urban schools where structural racism, concentrated poverty, community stressors, and educator turnover are persistent realities, students' educational trajectories are shaped not only by disability, but by cumulative, systemic forms of trauma (Duane, 2025; Qu et al., 2024).

Trauma's effects on learning are well documented, influencing executive functioning, motivation, emotional regulation, identity development, and relational trust, competencies central to transition readiness (Qu et al., 2024; Stewart-Tufescu et al., 2022). Yet, despite the magnitude of trauma's impact, secondary special education and transition programs rarely integrate trauma-informed or healing-centered frameworks into their design. Instead, many schools respond to trauma-expressed behaviors through exclusionary or compliance-oriented practices that penalize rather than support students (Maddox et al., 2022). This disconnect is especially consequential in urban contexts, where trauma is not an isolated event, but an ongoing condition linked to racialized violence, neighborhood instability, community disinvestment, and institutional oppression (Duane, 2025; Martin et al., 2024). When trauma remains unaddressed, transition services risk preparing students for adulthood in name only, without cultivating the emotional, relational, and regulatory capacities that postschool success requires.

Trauma-informed education (TIE) provides a powerful, equity-centered framework for rethinking secondary transition. Grounded in trauma-informed principles, TIE calls educators to understand how trauma shapes behavior and engagement, while simultaneously resisting re-traumatization and promoting student agency (Gherardi & Stoner, 2024; Martin et al., 2024). Although trauma-informed practices have shown promise in improving school climate and student engagement (Bilbrey et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2025), their application within secondary transition planning is minimal and underdeveloped. Urban districts, in particular, struggle to sustain trauma-responsive practices due to staffing shortages, limited mental health infrastructures, and systemic inequities that create unstable learning environments (Gherardi & Stoner, 2024; Sharkey et al., 2024).

This paper argues that trauma-informed approaches are not optional enhancements but essential components of equitable transition programming. It synthesizes research across trauma-informed education, transition theory, and urban education to highlight how trauma-responsive practices can strengthen postschool readiness for students with disabilities, especially those navigating racialized and systemic trauma. Guided by this purpose, the paper centers two questions:

1. How can trauma-informed education principles be systematically embedded within secondary transition programs to improve postschool outcomes for students with disabilities?
2. What policy and practice implications emerge when these principles are applied within the unique contexts of urban schools?

Addressing these questions is critical because trauma remains a missing variable in most transition frameworks, despite its profound influence on learning, identity formation, and engagement (Qu et al., 2024; Stewart-Tufescu et al., 2022). Embedding trauma-informed practices in urban transition programs offers a pathway for closing persistent opportunity gaps and ensuring that youth with disabilities are emotionally, socially, and academically prepared for adulthood.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Trauma-informed education (TIE) is grounded in the understanding that trauma, whether acute, chronic, racialized, or systemic, shapes how students learn, engage, regulate emotions, and relate to others. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) identifies six guiding principles of trauma-informed care: safety, trustworthiness, peer support, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural responsiveness. These principles have become increasingly relevant in education systems seeking to address both behavioral and academic challenges through healing-centered rather than punitive approaches. In schools, trauma-informed practices reflect a mindset shift from asking "What is wrong with this student?" to "What has this student experienced, and how do we respond with care?" (Maddox et al., 2022).

This conceptual lens is critical for examining transition education in urban contexts, where students with disabilities often navigate intersecting adversities including community violence, racial discrimination, under-resourced schools, poverty, and institutional betrayal (Duane, 2025; Martin et al., 2024). Research on TIE shows that trauma-informed systems promote belonging, reduce exclusionary discipline, and improve engagement by establishing relational safety and culturally responsive practices (Gherardi & Stoner, 2024; Smith et al., 2025). For example, Gherardi and Stoner (2024) found that when teachers receive sustained trauma-informed professional development, they report increased empathy, stronger relationships with students, and fewer behavioral escalations. Similarly, structured programs such as the Trauma Education to Advance Community Healing (TEACH) model lead to greater staff preparedness and more consistent use of trauma-responsive strategies (Smith et al., 2025).

Yet, the majority of trauma-informed research focuses on elementary or general education contexts (Bilbrey et al., 2024; Carton et al., 2025), leaving significant gaps

in understanding how trauma-informed principles can shape special education and transition services. In urban settings especially, trauma-informed education must extend beyond classroom-level strategies to encompass systemic practices that honor cultural identity, address institutional harm, and resist practices that re-traumatize Black and Brown youth (Duane, 2025; Martin et al., 2024). Recognizing trauma as a structural, rather than merely individual, phenomenon positions TIE as an equity and justice framework.

Transition Theory and Postsecondary Readiness

Transition education, defined by IDEA and WIOA, aims to prepare youth with disabilities for further education, competitive employment, community participation, and independent living. Decades of research identify key predictors of postschool success, including paid work experiences, career and technical education (CTE), student involvement in Individual Education Plan (IEP) development, family engagement, and the development of self-determination skills (Mazzotti et al., 2021; Rowe et al., 2021). As shown in Figure 1, these predictors form an evidence-based foundation for high-quality transition planning; however, their implementation remains inconsistent in many urban schools due to systemic barriers such as resource shortages, limited staffing, and inequitable access to work-based learning opportunities (Mazzotti et al., 2021; Rowe et al., 2021).

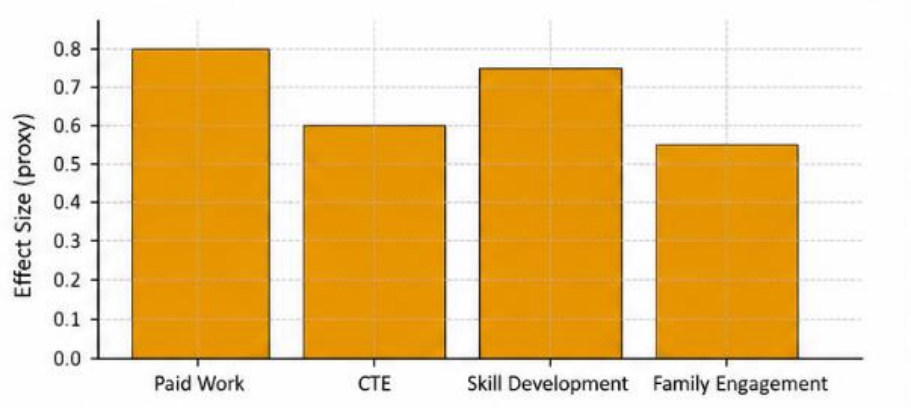


Figure 1: Predictors of Postschool Success

Hennessey et al. (2025) found that authentic student voice during IEP meetings and access to paid employment during high school were the strongest predictors of positive postschool outcomes. However, in practice, these predictors are implemented unevenly, particularly across urban districts. Barriers such as inadequate staffing, insufficient cross-agency coordination, fragmented mental health supports, and competing academic demands often undermine high-quality transition programming (Awsumb et al., 2020).

Moreover, trauma significantly disrupts academic functioning, emotional regulation, executive processes, goal setting, and relational trust, domains central to transition readiness (Qu et al., 2024; Stewart-Tufescu et al., 2022). Students experiencing trauma may disengage, avoid decision-making, struggle with self-determination, or experience overwhelming stress during transitions between school environments and adulthood.

Despite these realities, trauma remains largely absent from transition frameworks, professional standards, or federal accountability indicators such as IDEA's Indicators 13 and 14 (Hennessey et al., 2025). The absence of an explicit trauma-informed perspective across Indicators 13 and 14 therefore creates a potential gap between transition compliance, postschool outcomes, and the lived experiences that connect the two. A student may have a technically compliant transition plan under Indicator 13 yet remain insufficiently prepared to manage the emotional, relational, and environmental demands of employment or postsecondary education measured through Indicator 14. Trauma-informed practices offer an important bridge between social-emotional well-being and transition readiness by supporting competencies such as self-regulation, agency, relational trust, persistence, self-advocacy, and hope. Incorporating a trauma-informed perspective into transition planning does not require assuming that every student with a disability has experienced trauma; rather, it encourages educators to recognize how trauma and chronic stress, when present, may interact with disability, educational experiences, and environmental demands to influence both transition participation and postschool outcomes.

Intersection of Disability, Trauma, and Urban Inequities

Students with disabilities in urban schools often experience a convergence of systemic barriers, including disability stigma, racial bias, community-level trauma, and chronic underfunding of services. These overlapping inequities create cumulative disadvantage that affects access to high-quality transition supports and postsecondary pathways (Duane, 2025; Parohl & Bussière-Prytula, 2025). For instance, Black youth with disabilities are disproportionately subjected to exclusionary discipline, receive fewer opportunities for work-based learning, and are less likely to receive culturally responsive mental health supports (Awsumb et al., 2020; Hughes et al., 2023).

Educators in urban schools frequently report limited preparation for recognizing trauma or integrating trauma-informed practices into IEPs or transition planning (Bilbrey et al., 2024; Carton et al., 2025). Without systemic alignment, leadership support, professional learning, mental health partnerships, and policy guidance, trauma-informed approaches risk becoming performative rather than transformative (Martin et al., 2024). Transition programs that fail to address trauma may inadvertently reinforce inequities by emphasizing compliance and skill attainment without supporting the emotional and relational conditions that make postschool success possible.

This conceptual framework positions trauma-informed education, transition theory, and urban equity as interconnected pillars. Together, they highlight that addressing trauma is not supplementary to transition planning; it is foundational to

equitable postschool outcomes. Integrating trauma-informed principles into transition services allows educators to support students with disabilities in developing self-determination, resilience, identity affirmation, and adaptive skills essential for thriving in adulthood.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Exposure to trauma, including adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), racial trauma, community violence, poverty, and chronic stress, has profound implications for students' learning, behavior, and long-term educational trajectories. A substantial body of research demonstrates a dose–response relationship: as ACEs accumulate, the likelihood of poor academic performance, grade retention, disengagement, and the need for special education services increases (Qu et al., 2024; Stewart-Tufescu et al., 2022). As illustrated in Figure 2, students with higher ACE scores exhibit significantly greater academic vulnerability, underscoring trauma's direct influence on cognitive and emotional development.

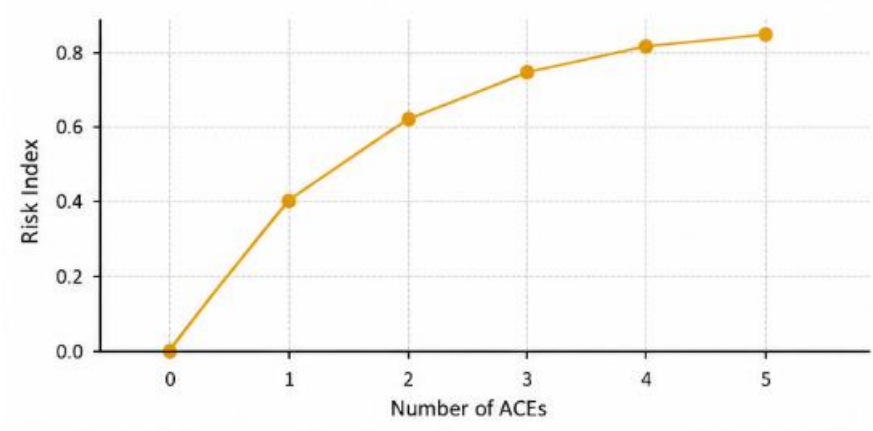


Figure 2: ACEs Dose–Response and Academic Outcomes

Youth in urban settings experience heightened exposure to trauma due to intersecting environmental stressors such as housing instability, community violence, systemic racism, and chronic underfunding of local services (Duane, 2025). Trauma can disrupt executive functioning, attention, emotional regulation, and working memory, core cognitive processes essential for meeting grade-level expectations and preparing for postschool demands (Qu et al., 2024). These disruptions directly affect transition-related competencies such as self-advocacy, problem solving, interpersonal communication, and decision-making.

For students with disabilities, trauma often manifests in ways that compound existing learning or behavioral challenges. Maddox et al. (2022) argue that trauma symptoms such as hypervigilance, defiance, withdrawal, or avoidance are too often misinterpreted as disability traits, leading to punitive practices rather than supportive

interventions. These patterns contribute to exclusionary discipline and chronic absenteeism, both documented barriers to transition readiness and postsecondary success (Stewart-Tufescu et al., 2022). The chronic stress associated with trauma also weakens students' sense of agency, motivation, and hope, which are central to the development of self-determination skills (Mazzotti et al., 2021). When trauma is unaddressed, even well-designed transition programs struggle to support students in building the confidence and emotional stability required for adulthood.

Trauma-Informed Practices in Secondary and Transition Contexts

Although trauma-informed education (TIE) has expanded rapidly across K-12 systems, its application in secondary, special education, and transition contexts remains underdeveloped. Existing trauma-informed models, such as the Missouri Model or the TEACH framework, show strong feasibility in elementary and early childhood settings, but adaptation for high school or special education environments has been limited (Bilbrey et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2025). Even when schools adopt trauma-informed practices, implementation fidelity is inconsistent due to staffing shortages, high educator turnover, limited mental health resources, and varying levels of administrative commitment (Gherardi & Stoner, 2024).

Despite these challenges, emerging research highlights the potential for trauma-informed practices to strengthen transition programming. Trauma-informed professional development improves educator empathy, enhances student-teacher relationships, and reduces behavioral escalation (Gherardi & Stoner, 2024; Sharkey et al., 2024). These practices align closely with transition predictors such as youth engagement, family collaboration, and student-centered planning (Mazzotti et al., 2021; Rowe et al., 2021). For example, self-determination, a top predictor of postschool success, benefits directly from trauma-informed approaches that emphasize empowerment, voice, and collaborative decision-making.

In specialized or therapeutic educational settings, multi-tiered trauma-informed models have improved students' emotional regulation, engagement, and readiness for instructional activities, demonstrating clear implications for transition outcomes (Goldenthal et al., 2024). Although these settings are not identical to standard high schools, their results suggest that integrating trauma-responsive supports into transition curricula could strengthen students' emotional preparedness for adult life. Overall, the literature indicates a promising but underexplored intersection between trauma-informed practices and transition education, a gap that this paper aims to address.

Postsecondary Outcomes for Students with Disabilities in Urban Schools

Despite decades of federal mandates, students with disabilities continue to experience disproportionately poor postschool outcomes, particularly in urban districts. National data reveal persistent inequities in employment, postsecondary enrollment, and independent living opportunities (Awsumb et al., 2020; Hennessey et al., 2025). Hennessey et al. (2025) found that authentic student participation in IEP development and access to paid work experiences during high school are among the

strongest predictors of positive outcomes. However, many urban districts lack robust infrastructure for work-based learning, cross-agency collaboration, or transition-focused mental health supports.

Racial disparities compound these challenges. Awsumb et al. (2020) found that African American females and students with mental health disabilities experience significantly poorer vocational rehabilitation (VR) outcomes than their peers. Figure 3 illustrates these VR disparities, highlighting racial gaps in successful employment closures and service completion. Similarly, Hughes et al. (2023) documented systemic inequities in transition planning for autistic youth, noting that Black students in their sample were least likely to receive school-based mental health supports or evidence-based transition instruction.

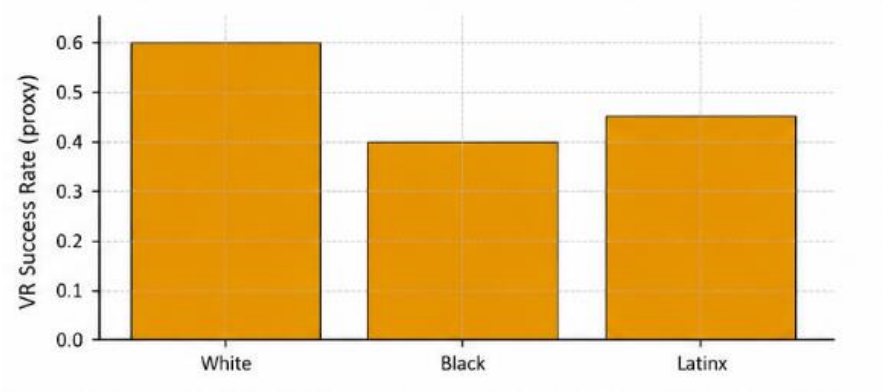


Figure 3: Vocational Rehabilitation Outcomes by Race

These inequities reflect deeper systemic structures that shape urban schooling. Chronic underfunding, staff shortages, and inconsistent training diminish the quality of transition services. Exclusionary discipline and reduced access to rigorous coursework further limit postsecondary pathways. Without trauma-informed practices that address both individual and contextual barriers, transition programs remain insufficient for preparing urban youth with disabilities for successful adult outcomes.

Urban Context Considerations and Systemic Barriers

Urban schools operate within sociopolitical contexts marked by historic and ongoing inequities. Scholars emphasize that trauma-informed approaches in these settings must move beyond individual interventions to address systemic issues such as racialized school discipline, structural underfunding, and institutional betrayal (Duane, 2025; Martin et al., 2024). Educators in urban districts frequently report inadequate preparation for integrating trauma-informed strategies into IEP or transition planning, especially when culturally responsive frameworks are not embedded in professional learning (Bilbrey et al., 2024; Carton et al., 2025).

Despite these challenges, there is evidence of promising innovations. Sharkey et al. (2024) documented a successful university-community partnership providing trauma-informed training that improved educator confidence and reduced burnout, key conditions for sustaining high-quality transition supports. However, such programs are rarely institutionalized or aligned with broader special education and transition initiatives.

Collectively, the literature reveals a clear pattern: trauma, disability, and urban inequities intersect to shape educational and postschool trajectories. While trauma-informed practices show promise, their integration into transition programming remains limited and inconsistent. This gap forms the basis of the argument advanced in this paper, that trauma-informed practices must become integral, policy-driven components of transition education in urban schools.

SYNTHESIS AND ANALYSIS

Building on the reviewed literature, this section synthesizes how trauma-informed practices intersect with transition theory and urban education to answer the guiding questions of this paper: how trauma-informed practices can be embedded within transition programs, and why doing so is especially critical in urban schools. The analysis demonstrates that trauma-informed principles and established transition predictors are not parallel frameworks, they are deeply interdependent. Embedding trauma-informed care within transition programming strengthens both the academic and social-emotional conditions necessary for successful postschool outcomes.

Integrating Trauma-Informed and Transition Frameworks

Evidence from trauma-informed education and secondary transition research reveals a clear alignment between the two frameworks. Trauma-informed care emphasizes relational safety, empowerment, and culturally responsive support systems (Maddox et al., 2022; Martin et al., 2024). Transition research identifies self-determination, family engagement, interagency collaboration, and experiential learning as core predictors of postschool success (Mazzotti et al., 2021; Rowe et al., 2021). These frameworks share a common foundation: students thrive when they experience belonging, agency, relational stability, and coordinated support.

Figure 4 illustrates how trauma-informed principles map onto IDEA Indicators 13 and 14, highlighting clear points of alignment between student voice, collaborative planning, consistent support systems, and emotional readiness. The trauma-informed principle of empowerment, for example, mirrors self-determination practices that encourage students to set goals, make choices, and advocate for themselves, skills directly linked to positive postschool outcomes (Hennessey et al., 2025). Likewise, trauma-informed collaboration parallels transition requirements for meaningful family involvement and effective cross-agency coordination, both of which are essential but inconsistently implemented in urban districts (Awsumb et al., 2020).

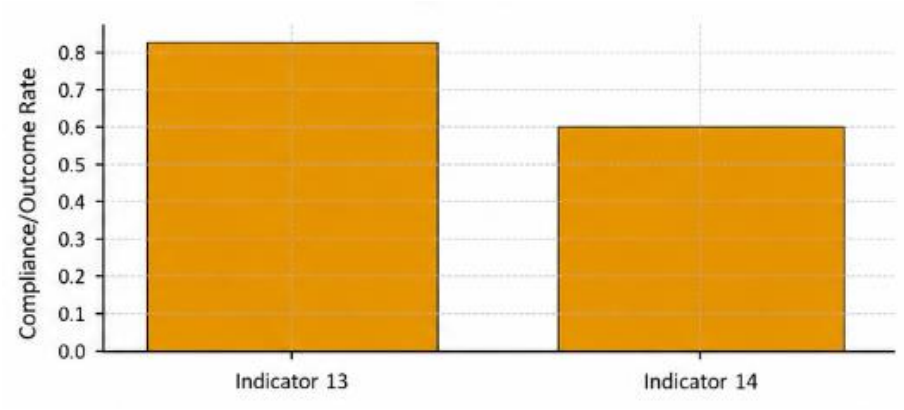


Figure 4: IDEA Indicators 13 and 14 Outcomes

When schools intentionally integrate these overlapping domains, they disrupt patterns of disconnection that often undermine transition planning for students with disabilities. Trauma-informed environments reduce behavioral escalation, increase engagement, and strengthen relationships with adults (Gherardi & Stoner, 2024; Sharkey et al., 2024). These relational conditions are foundational for students to participate authentically in IEP meetings, persist through challenges, and envision long-term goals, core elements of transition readiness.

Enhancing Student Engagement and Emotional Readiness

Transition success requires more than meeting procedural benchmarks; it requires emotional preparedness for the uncertainties of adult life. Students affected by trauma often struggle with the cognitive and emotional skills that support this readiness, including self-regulation, decision-making, and relational trust (Qu et al., 2024; Stewart-Tufescu et al., 2022). Traditional transition activities, such as résumé writing, job exploration, or college applications, are insufficient if students do not feel safe, supported, or emotionally grounded.

Trauma-informed interventions address these gaps by embedding relational and regulatory supports into daily practice. Strategies such as restorative circles, mentoring, mindfulness routines, and structured relationship-building help students cultivate emotional regulation, identity development, and resilience, competencies essential for transition success (Gherardi & Stoner, 2024).

Without these supports, students may complete transition tasks yet remain emotionally unprepared to persist in postsecondary settings. Trauma-informed transition programming reframes readiness as holistic, acknowledging that academic skills alone cannot compensate for unaddressed trauma, disrupted relationships, or diminished confidence.

Bridging Policy and Practice in Urban Contexts

Despite growing evidence of the benefits of trauma-informed practices, they remain absent from federal transition mandates and accountability indicators. IDEA emphasizes compliance with procedural requirements, while WIOA focuses on employment preparation, neither framework addresses trauma, mental health, or systemic inequities that shape students' readiness for adulthood (Hennessey et al., 2025). This omission contributes to fragmented service delivery.

Urban education research shows that trauma-informed implementation requires systemic alignment, not isolated classroom strategies (Duane, 2025; Martin et al., 2024). Educators need sustained professional learning, administrative support, and collaborative structures that prioritize student and staff well-being. Without these conditions, trauma-informed practices often become performative, inconsistently applied, or reliant on individual teacher initiative (Bilbrey et al., 2024; Carton et al., 2025). High turnover, limited staffing, and resource constraints further challenge the sustainability of these efforts in urban districts.

Addressing these systemic barriers is essential for embedding trauma-informed principles into transition programming. When educators receive trauma-informed training and support, they report increased confidence, stronger student relationships, and reduced burnout (Sharkey et al., 2024). These improvements directly impact transition quality, as emotionally regulated and supported educators are better equipped to engage in collaborative planning, support student agency, and coordinate across services.

Identified Gaps and Directions for Innovation

While the literature demonstrates promising connections between trauma-informed and transition frameworks, it also reveals substantial gaps. Few studies examine trauma-informed practices specifically within secondary transition contexts, and even fewer consider the intersection of race, disability, and urban inequity (Duane, 2025; Maynard et al., 2019). Existing research is dominated by small-scale qualitative studies or self-report surveys, with limited longitudinal evidence linking trauma-informed transition practices to postschool outcomes.

These gaps present opportunities for innovation. Embedding trauma-informed competencies in teacher preparation programs, incorporating trauma-responsive indicators into transition quality measures, and developing integrated models that connect school-based mental health services with vocational rehabilitation could significantly strengthen transition outcomes. Expanding trauma-informed transition programs in urban districts, supported by policy, funding, and infrastructure, could reduce disparities in postsecondary, employment, and independent living outcomes for students with disabilities.

Together, this synthesis highlights the central role trauma-informed practices play in effective transition education. Their integration addresses both the emotional and structural barriers that constrain post-school success, especially in urban contexts where trauma and inequity intersect most sharply.

POSITION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper argues that trauma-informed practices must be embedded as a standard, non-negotiable component of secondary transition programs for students with disabilities in urban schools. Trauma is not a peripheral variable, it is a central force shaping students' academic engagement, identity development, executive functioning, and readiness for postschool environments (Qu et al., 2024; Stewart-Tufescu et al., 2022). When compounded by systemic inequities such as racialized discipline, resource disparities, and underfunded mental health infrastructures, trauma significantly undermines the very competencies that transition programs seek to cultivate, self-determination, goal setting, agency, and relational trust (Hennessey et al., 2025; Mazzotti et al., 2021).

At the same time, trauma-informed principles directly align with the evidence-based predictors of postschool success identified across decades of transition research (Mazzotti et al., 2021; Rowe et al., 2021). Despite this alignment, trauma-informed approaches are not reflected in IDEA or WIOA implementation guidance, leaving schools without the structural support needed to integrate healing-centered practices into transition planning. This gap reinforces patterns of fragmented services, compliance-driven procedures, and inequitable postschool outcomes, especially for Black and Brown youth with disabilities in urban settings (Awsumb et al., 2020; Hughes et al., 2023).

Thus, trauma-informed transition programming is not an optional enhancement; it is an equity imperative. Embedding trauma-informed practices can disrupt cycles of disengagement, support emotional readiness, and promote conditions where students are prepared not only to graduate, but to persist, thrive, and navigate adulthood successfully.

Policy Recommendations

1. Embed Trauma-Informed Competencies in Special Education Policy and Standards

Federal and state agencies should explicitly incorporate trauma-informed competencies into IDEA and WIOA guidance and into licensure expectations for special educators, transition specialists, and related service providers. These competencies should include:

- recognizing trauma symptoms
- supporting emotional regulation
- developing culturally responsive IEP goals
- collaborating with mental health professionals (Maddox et al., 2022; Martin et al., 2024).

2. Require Trauma-Informed Professional Development and Support for Educators

High-quality trauma-informed implementation relies on sustained, not one-time, professional learning. Districts should provide ongoing training grounded in SAMHSA principles and aligned with evidence-based frameworks such as the TEACH model, which has been shown to improve educator confidence, knowledge, and trauma-responsive practice (Smith et al., 2025). As illustrated in Figure 5, teacher burnout decreases after sustained trauma-informed professional development, indicating the importance of supporting educators' emotional well-being to improve the fidelity and sustainability of trauma-informed initiatives. These trainings should also incorporate content on racial trauma, cultural humility, and identity-affirming practices to ensure relevance for diverse urban contexts (Duane, 2025).

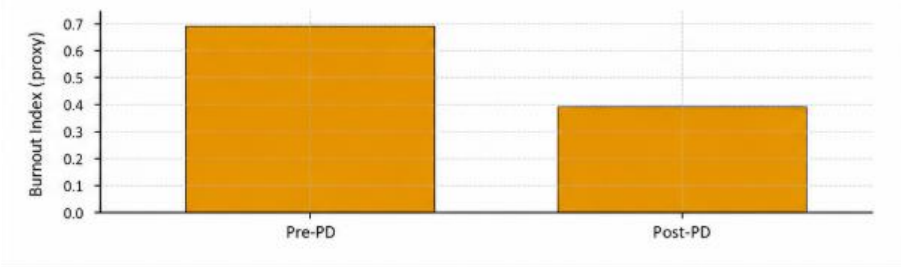


Figure 5: Teacher Burnout Before and After Trauma-Informed PD

3. Integrate Trauma-Informed Practices into Transition Program Evaluation

IDEA Indicators 13 and 14 should evolve to capture the trauma-responsive dimensions of transition services, including: student perceptions of safety and belonging, access to culturally responsive mental health supports, integration of social-emotional goals into transition planning, and the presence of stable, supportive adult relationships (Hennessey et al., 2025). Incorporating trauma-informed metrics would shift emphasis from procedural compliance to holistic readiness, enabling districts to evaluate whether students are prepared for postschool life both academically and emotionally.

4. Strengthen Interagency and Community Partnerships

Trauma-informed transition programming requires coordinated support across schools, mental health agencies, community organizations, and vocational rehabilitation services (Awsumb et al., 2020). Policies should prioritize funding for cross-sector collaboration, shared data systems, and joint professional development to ensure students receive consistent and culturally responsive support as they move across systems. Partnerships with community-based organizations, cultural institutions, and family support networks can extend trauma-responsive practices beyond the school building, fostering continuity of care and strengthening protective factors for urban youth with disabilities (Sharkey et al., 2024).

5. Prioritize Educator and Staff Well-Being

Trauma-informed systems require emotionally regulated educators who experience relational safety themselves. Secondary traumatic stress and burnout are significant barriers to implementation fidelity, particularly in urban schools with chronically high workloads and turnover (Gherardi & Stoner, 2024). Districts should adopt policies that promote staff well-being through reflective supervision, access to mental health supports, reduced caseloads for special educators, and scheduled collaboration time. Supporting educator wellness is essential for cultivating the relational stability and empathy needed to sustain trauma-informed transition programming.

Toward a Culturally Responsive, Trauma-Informed Future

Embedding trauma-informed practices into transition programs represents a necessary evolution of special education policy and practice. Trauma-informed transition models address both the emotional and structural barriers that shape postschool trajectories, aligning with the foundational goals of IDEA and WIOA to promote equitable, individualized pathways for youth with disabilities. For urban districts in particular, a trauma-informed, culturally responsive approach offers a roadmap for closing persistent opportunity gaps and supporting students in developing the resilience, agency, and relational trust necessary for autonomy and adult success.

CONCLUSION

The evidence and analysis presented in this paper demonstrate that trauma-informed practices are essential, not supplementary to effective and equitable transition programming for students with disabilities in urban schools. Trauma profoundly influences academic engagement, emotional regulation, self-determination, and relational trust, all of which are central to postschool success (Qu et al., 2024; Stewart-Tufescu et al., 2022). When compounded by systemic inequities such as racialized discipline, chronic underfunding, and limited access to mental health supports, trauma becomes a structural barrier that widens opportunity gaps for Black and Brown youth with disabilities (Awsumb et al., 2020; Duane, 2025;).

Despite clear alignment between trauma-informed principles and the evidence-based predictors of postschool success, federal mandates such as IDEA and WIOA do not explicitly address trauma or its effects on transition readiness (Hennessey et al., 2025). Current transition systems continue to prioritize procedural compliance over holistic readiness, leaving many students insufficiently prepared for postsecondary environments. Embedding trauma-informed practices into transition programming is therefore critical to ensuring students are emotionally, socially, and academically prepared to thrive in adulthood.

For urban educators, leaders, and policymakers, the implications are clear. Effective trauma-informed transition programming requires sustained professional development, cross-sector collaboration, structures that support educator well-being,

and policies that explicitly integrate trauma-responsive practices into transition evaluation and accountability systems (Martin et al., 2024; Sharkey et al., 2024). These systemic supports are necessary to transform trauma-informed principles from isolated classroom strategies into coordinated, district-wide practices that strengthen both student and educator capacity.

Future research should examine how trauma-informed transition practices influence specific postsecondary outcomes, such as employment stability, mental health, college persistence, and community integration, particularly for racially and linguistically diverse students. Longitudinal and mixed-methods designs are needed to capture both the measurable and relational dimensions of trauma-informed transition work and to build a stronger evidence base for policy change (Maynard et al., 2019).

Ultimately, this paper positions trauma-informed transition programming as a justice-centered approach to supporting students with disabilities in urban schools. Healing is inseparable from learning, and readiness for adulthood cannot be separated from emotional safety, identity affirmation, and relational trust. When urban schools intentionally integrate trauma-informed practices into transition planning, they create conditions where students can develop hope, resilience, and self-determination, foundations not only for postschool success, but for flourishing in adulthood.

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