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TRAUMA INFORMED DESIGN CHECKLIST

20211007-V3.0

The TID Checklist outlines best practices to help shape learning environments that support students and teachers who have experienced trauma.
Pre-pandemic over two thirds of children reported at least one traumatic event by age 16. Post pandemic trauma statistics soared.

To address the pervasive impact of trauma in our schools we present this checklist as a tool to assist designers, educators, and administrators gain knowledge and actionable ideas.

Strategies for dealing with trauma continue to be emergent. This TID Checklist is a start. An open-source compilation of ideas, patterns, and provocations, it is meant to be shared, modified, and revised for specific learning communities. Hopefully it will promote creative thinking and dialogue to embed trauma-informed concepts into new and existing buildings and classrooms. Now more than ever, trauma-informed design (TID) can help heal and empower our students and our schools.

CONTENTS

① GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Guiding Principles are big-picture ideas or goals that frame projects and help prioritize decision making. Different projects invariably have different Guiding Principles. The following list is a compilation of Guiding Principles we often encounter in our projects. Inclusion of Trauma Informed Design ideas within the overarching concepts that shape a project ensures they are more fully integrated into the design.

Safe and Secure

- Welcome

- Highly visible

- Home base
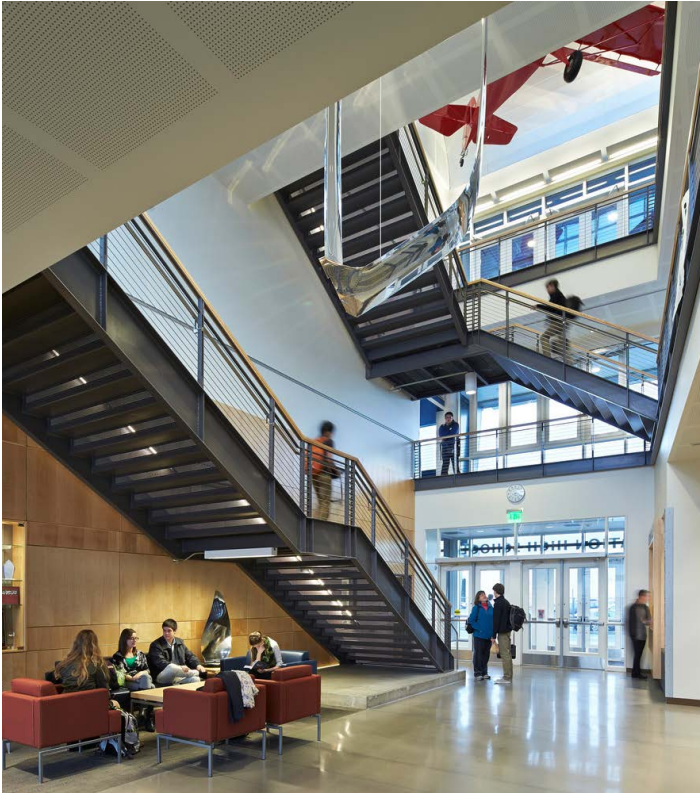
Clockwise from top left: Raisbeck Aviation High School; Arbor Heights Elementary School, Bassetti Architects

Personalized

- Trustworthy, transparent

- Empowering, voice

- Cultural, gender support

Clockwise from top left: Cougar Ridge Elementary School; ROMP; Tigard High School, Bassetti Architects.

Collaborative

- Peer support
- Mutuality

Left:The Big Lab at The Evergreen School; Right: Todd Beamer High School, Bassetti Architects.

Learning Focused

- Brain research
  - Body regulatory network shuts down higher brain functions if stressed
    - Sequence of engagement:
      - Regulatory system balanced (not stressed)
      - Connect emotionally (listened to, respected)
      - Reasoning engaged (higher brain functions – language, history, morals)
    - Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Flexible and Adaptable

- Choice

- Agency

Left: Mountlake Terrace Elementary School; Right: Lynnwood Elementary School, Bassetti Architects.

Community Connected

- Culture
- Identity
- History
- Social justice
- Environmental justice
- Sustainability

Above: Shorewood High School,
Bassetti Architects.

Truman Elementary School,
Bassetti Architects.

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(2) SURVIVAL BASICS

Survival Basics are the fundamental needs that must be addressed so children are ready to learn.

Shelter

- Warm, safe, dry

- Layers of shelter:
  - Retreat - to den for protection
  - Observe - while feeling safe
  - Participate – from safe place to observe

Above: St Thomas School, Bassetti Architects.

Safety

- Allow for hypervigilance
    - Monitor for perceived threats
    - Need for protection

- Realize that for some, trusting others can feel dangerous

- Monitoring for one's safety can be physically/emotionally demanding and exhausting

Clockwise from top left: Bud Hawk Elementary School; Klahowya Secondary School, Bassetti Architects.

Safe and Secure

- Food & drink in learning areas?

- Hunger - learning readiness

Left: United Way. Right: ROMP, Bassetti Architects.

Homelessness

- Hygiene – shower, toileting

- Hunger - kitchenette

- Clothing – laundry, storage

- Sleep – nap, overnight

Clockwise from top left: Shorewood High
School; Arbor Heights Elementary School;
ROMP, Bassetti Architects.

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③ OVERARCHING DESIGN CHARACTERISTICS

Overarching Design Characteristics is list of ideas and patterns that support Trauma Informed Design. This is an evolving list that has been compiled from research, observations, and input from educators experienced in dealing with trauma. The list is intended to be used to spur creative thinking about designing for kids dealing with trauma; to remind us of critical issues impacting traumatic stress; and to help us critique our preliminary designs in the hope of developing more comprehensive solutions.

Personalization

- Human scale

- Less institutional – more personal

- Personal space
  - Don't overcrowd with furniture
  - Navigate without touching others

Left top and bottom: Arbor Heights Elementary School; Left: Mountlake Terrace Elementary School, Bassetti Architects.

Thoughtful Transparency

- Visibility from space to space

- See who's coming and going

- Balance transparency with areas of refuge
    - Avoid being in a fishbowl
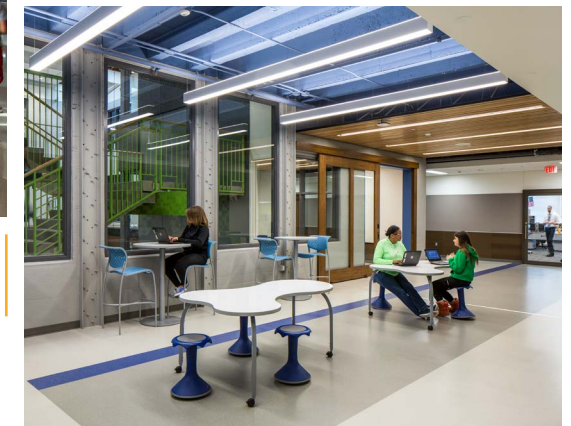
Clockwise from top left: Arbor Heights Elementary School; Bishop Blanchet High School; Stewart Middle School, Bassetti Architects.

Flexibility

- Support multiple ways of using space

- Support equitable use by all

- Adjust for specific needs of kids

- Develop choices
  - Seating/table types, locations, noise levels, light levels, group or solo

Above: Lincoln High School, Bassetti Architects.

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Safe and Secure

- Trustworthy, transparent

- Empowerment, voice

- Cultural, gender support

Above: Spruce Elementary School,
Bassetti Architects.

Optimal Light

- **Excellent daylight in learning areas**
  - Areas of lower light levels

- **Artificial light**
  - High quality, warm values, task lighting
  - Controllable light
    - Dimmers, sensors
  - Sensory triggers
    - Harsh, flickering, buzzing lights
    - Visual complexity – distracting patterns on walls and floors

Left: Lynnwood Elementary School; Natrona County High School, Bassetti Architects.

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Acoustics

- **Balance**
  - Minimize unnecessary and overwhelming ambient noise
  - Sudden or steady noise can be stressful

- **Carpet preferred for noise reduction**
  - Tiled and/or portable carpets are a great alternative in that they can be replaced and cleaned as needed to eliminate pathogens and dust.

- **Variable sound options**
  - Music, calming sound – water, birds
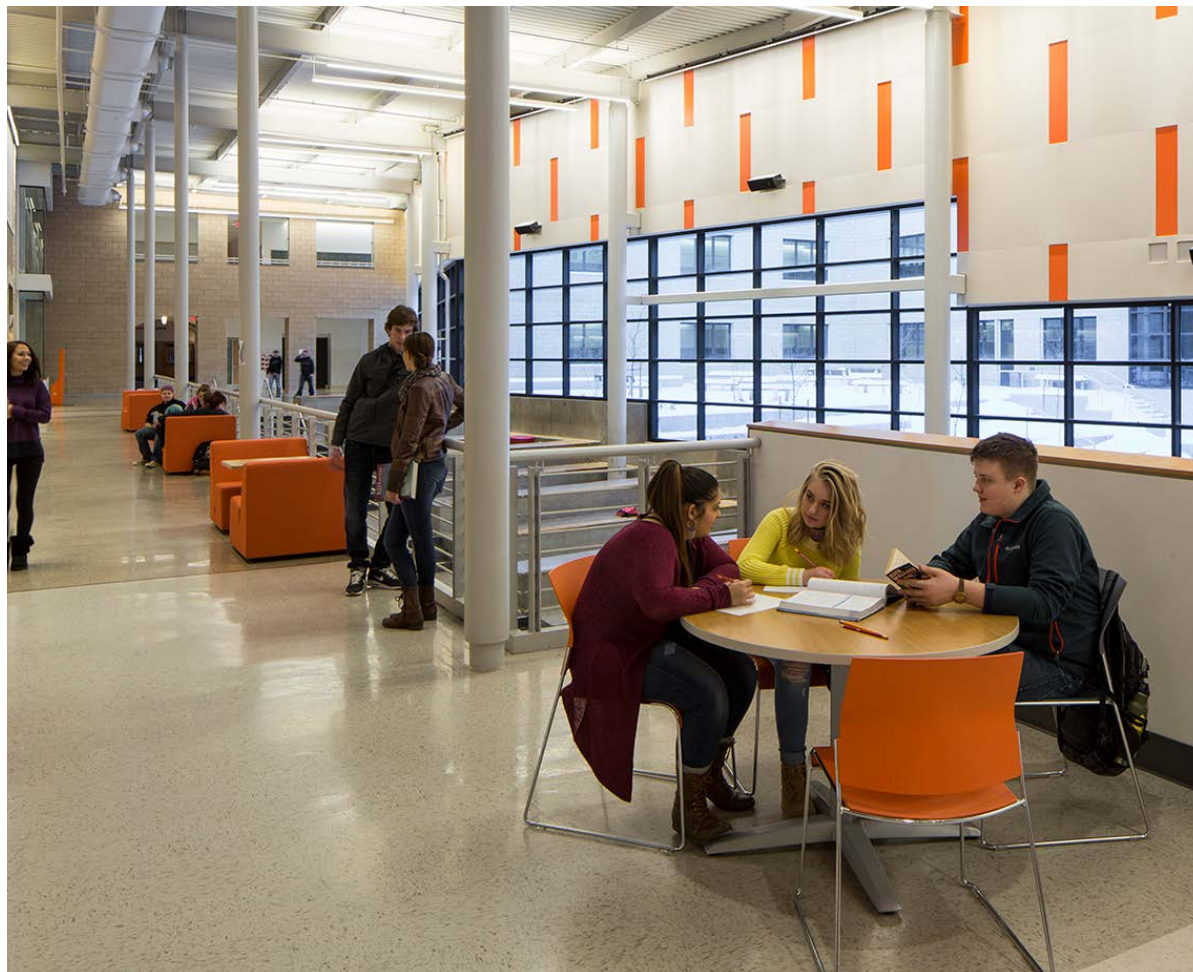
Above: Natrona County High School, Bassetti Architects.

Display

- Provide visual interest and warmth
  - Artwork- landscapes, organic color palettes

- Biophilic elements

- Positive messages in learning areas, gathering areas, circulation areas
  - Avoid punitive sounding messages: can do vs can't do

- Display materials
  - Reduce clutter
  - Avoid too much visual stimulus
  - Avoid overhead, hanging, dangling display – can spark hyper-vigilance

Above: Truman Elementary School, Bassetti Architects.

Materials and Finishes

- **Soft finishes, durable, easy to clean**

- **Biophilic finishes**
  - Avoid institutional, slick feel

- **Wall colors:**
  - Avoid bright white, gray, beige – stark or institutional
  - Avoid sensory triggers – neon intensity, deep saturated colors
    - Red, yellow, orange
    - Pops of color are okay
  - Use light shades of blues, greens, purples, foster spaciousness
  - Avoid distracting patterns on walls and floors

- **Culturally respectful – finishes, colors, patterns**

- **Use low VOC finishes to prevent off-gassing of design materials**
  - Consider a fragrance-free environment

Top: Arbor Heights Elementary School; Bottom: The Evergreen School, Bassetti Architects.

Furniture

- **Unclutter - don't overcrowd with furniture**
  - Ensure adequate space for navigation

- **Separate chair and table options**
  - Flexibility
  - Wheels on tables, chairs – quiet and movable
  - Choice – seating and table types
  - Location, noise level, group or solo
  - Socialization options
    - Seating to face away from or into walls
  - Soft finishes
  - Peace corner
    - Focus, quiet, calm

- **Durable, easy to clean**

Above: The Evergreen School, Bassetti Architects.

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Toilet Rooms

- Verify toileting approach
    - Passive supervision to mitigate bullying
    - All-gender vs binary
    - Traumatized kids need security
    - Consider lockable stalls for privacy vs. concerns for suicide, drugs, sex

- Needs of homeless kids
    - Shower, locker, laundry

Top: St Thomas Gymnasium;
Bottom: Tualatin High School,
Bassetti Architects.

Biophilic

- Support physical and mental well-being
  - Healing, recovery

- Enhance emotional, problem-solving, critical thinking, and constructive abilities
  - Sensory patterns in natural environment
  - Organic, naturalistic design
  - Place-based, vernacular design

Left: Klahowya Secondary School;
Right: St Thomas Gymnasium, Bassetti Architects.

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Areas of refuge

- Provide varied approved, passively or actively supervised spaces for kids experiencing stress to find refuge
  - Areas of refuge within or adjacent to large gathering areas
  - Quiet outdoor space within sight likes of outdoor learning spaces or administrators
  - Edges, nooks or balconies for for retreat or passive observation
  - Flexible soft seating, study niches or counters that face a wall and do not call attention to the need for retreat

- Consider supervised options in place of attendance at whole school assemblies

- Consider multiples spaces and options when trusted adults are unavailable and refuge is needed

Above: John D "Bud" Hawk Elementary School, Bassetti Architects.

Notes
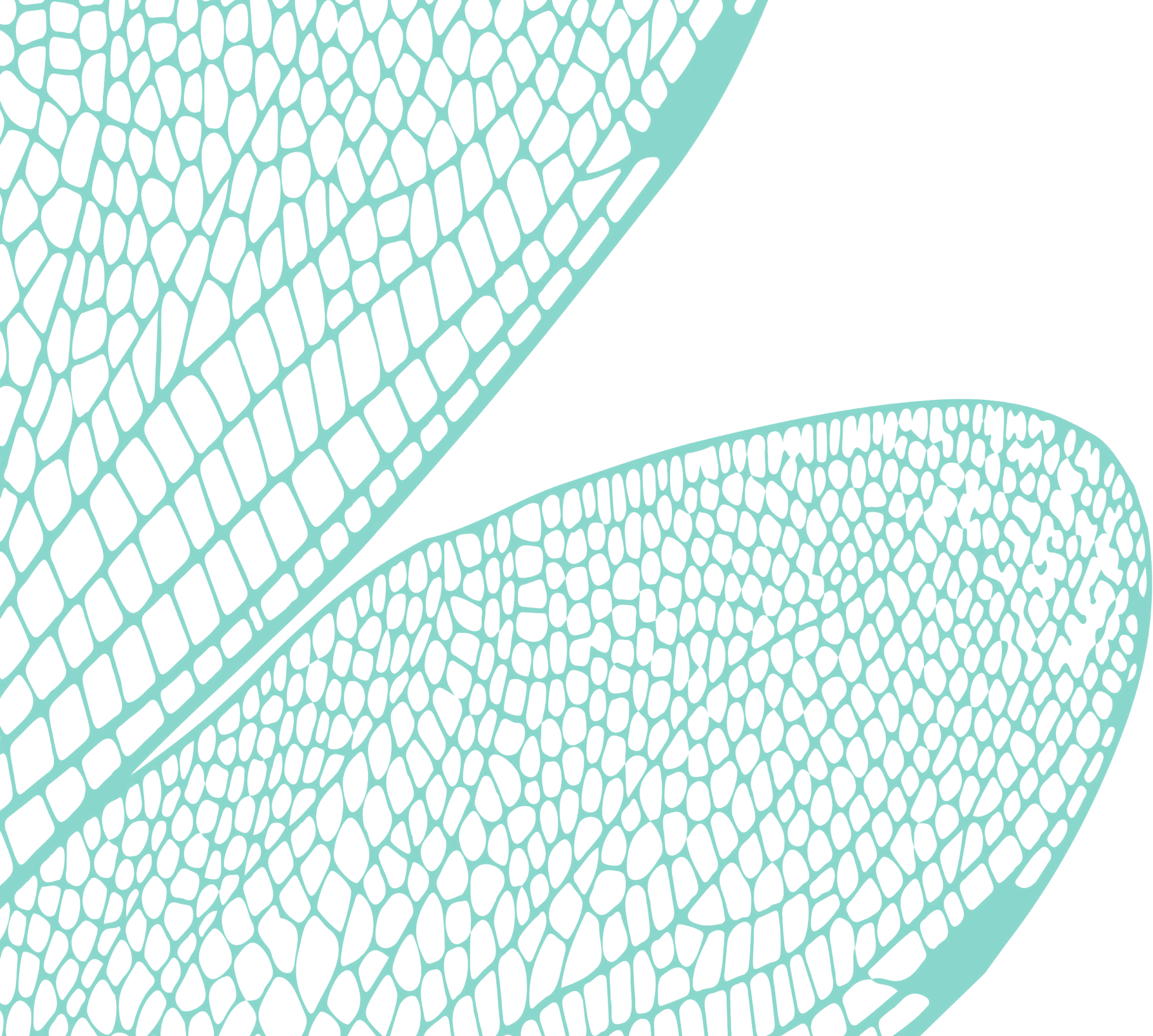
(4) SPACES WITHIN A SCHOOL

This section explores spaces and groups of spaces within an educational environment where aspects of the overarching design characteristics might be applied.

Learning Spaces

- Clusters of Learning
  - Enhance personalization
    - Human scale
    - Home base - known well
  - Balance of social spaces and private spaces
    - See the door(s), window(s)
    - Who is coming and going?
    - More than simply seeing a whiteboard

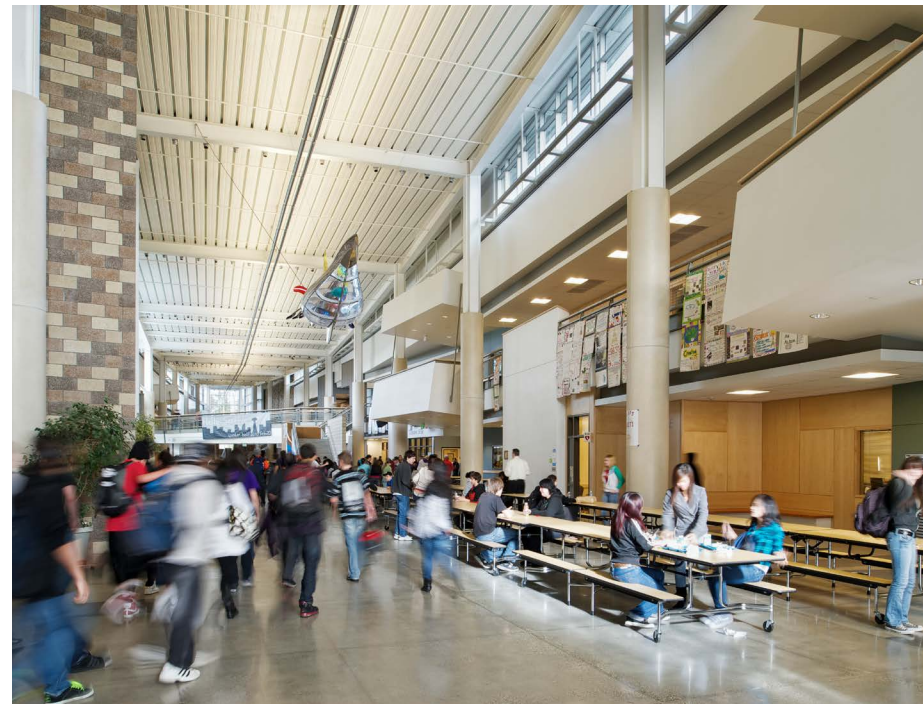Top: Lynnwood Elementary School; Right: Arbor Heights Elementary School; Bassetti Architects.

Clockwise from left: Truman Elementary
School; Raisbeck Aviation High School;
Truman Elementary School; Rose Hill
Middle School; Bassetti Architects.

1 Guiding
Principles
2 Survival
Basics
3 Overarching Design
Characteristics
4 Spaces Within
a School

Learning Spaces

- **Layers of Space**
  - Needs of the student - isolation vs inclusion
    - Home base - personalized, retreat, study, focus
    - Small group space (2-6 students)
      - One-on-one classrooms
      - Collaborate, group projects
    - Students known well by the teacher
      - Medium group space (6-15 students)
    - Adaptable to small group collaboration
    - Group instruction, project-based learning
    - Safe edges, peace corners, nooks
      - Large group spaces (+15 students)
    - Prospect and refuge
    - Safe edges, nooks
      - Outward bound
   - Connection to outdoors, electives, CTE, PE, music, art, etc.,

Above: Lynnwood High School;
Bassetti Architects.

Clockwise from top left: Truman Elementary School; Five Oaks Middle School; Klahowya Secondary School; Cougar Ridge Elementary School, Bassetti Architects.

Outdoor Learning Spaces

- **Enhance connections to nature**
  - Calm, center, de-stress
  - Breathe – oxygenate the brain – enhance learning and focus
  - Enhance problem solving skills, critical thinking, constructive abilities
  - Enhance emotional clarity
  - Enhance healing, recovery

- **Multiple outdoor settings**
  - Support refuge
    - Varied approved, passively or actively supervised spaces for students experiencing stress
    - Edges, benches, slopes
    - Grove, garden, hollow
  - Support learning activities
    - STEAM, reading, poetry, drama, debate, movement…
  - Support exploratory learning
    - On-site:
      - Natural areas, local ecosystems, water story, garden, orchard, arboretum…
    - Off-site:
      - Neighborhood, town, city, parks, ecosystems

- Support Play
  - Active play
  - Passive play
  - S/M/L
- Support fitness
  - Organized and personal
  - track, field, court, course
  - Fitness circuit, climbing, obstacles
- Support social gathering
  - S/M/L/XL
  - Areas that support small trusted group – friend(s), mentor
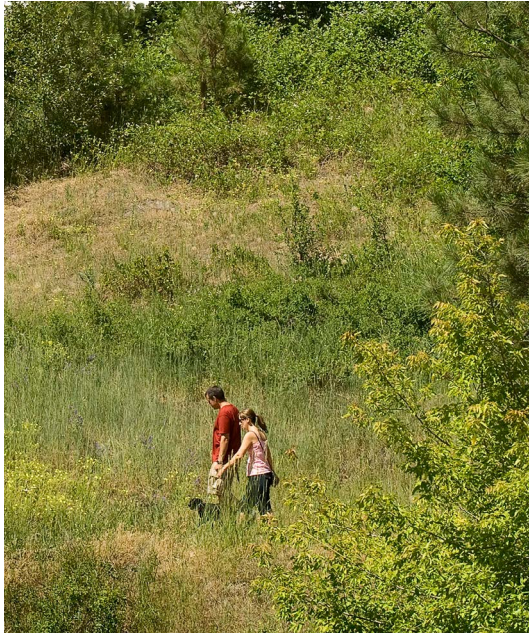
Clockwise from left: Klahowya Secondary School; Barn Beach Reserve; The Evergreen School; Bassetti Architects. Mountlake Terrace landscaping, Site Workshop.

Circulation Spaces

- Layers of connected space
  - Entry sequence
    - Exterior approach
    - Landscape/biophillia, security, welcome visibility,engagement, shelter, protected place, scale
  - Vestibule
    - Shelter, warmth, visibility
  - Lobby
    - Welcome (students, parent/care givers, community partners…)
      - Information, support
      - Avoid punitive sounding messages
    - 'Can do' vs 'can't do'
      - Safety and security, visibility

- Clarity, visibility, thoughtful transparency

- Avoid sharp corners, surprises

- Minimal barriers

- No dead ends

- Consistency, predictability

- Clear consistent signage

- Gracious circulation space, avoid touching, interfering with personal space

Clockwise from top left: Lincoln High School; Raisbeck Aviation High School; Truman Elementary School; Arbor Heights Elementary School, Bassetti.

Professional Work Areas

- Ongoing professional development regarding trauma informed teaching

- Restorative practices
  - Relax, re-focus, biophilic connections

- Passive supervision
  - Safety, comfort, known adult

- Planning, collaboration, counseling
  - Adults model collaboration
  - Coordinate with parent, care giver, counselor, social worker, etc.

- Greet guests
  - Graciously greet folks who serve kids
  - Communication needs – ESL, hearing/ sight impaired, limited literacy

Above: Tualaitin High School, Right: The Evergreen School, Bassetti Architects.

Left to right: Federal Way Public Schools Support Services Center (2); St Thomas Gymnasium; Bassetti Architects.

Community Spaces

■ Restorative practices to support families

    ▫ Family rooms

        • Welcoming, highly visible

        • A place to meet. work, consult

    ▫ Multi-purpose rooms

        • Conferencing - large and small

        • Kitchen

        • Office

    ▫ Nexus of community services, connections, communication

        • Health care

        • Counseling

        • Social services

        • Homelessness services

        • Food pantry

        • Clothes closet

    ▫ Places of Refuge

        • Caring adults

Above: Truman Elementary School Family Resource Center; Bassetti Architects.

Left to right: Shorewood High School (2),
Bassetti Architects.

Notes

Questions to ask as you explore TID

How are you currently using your space/environment to buffer toxic stress?

What are barriers you may have to creating trauma informed space?

Where can you get the most bang for your buck?

Conclusion

Educators have faced the impacts of trauma on children since the inception of organized schooling. Students who experience traumatic events face challenges regulating their emotions and difficulty with attention, learning, and memory.

A growing understanding of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) has helped educators deal more effectively with the impacts of family violence, abuse, divorce, poverty, bullying, racism, and a host of other stressors. The COVID-19 pandemic added yet another layer of toxic stress. Its impacts on marginalized populations, such as people living in poverty, refugees, BIPOC and LGBTQ+ communities, has been particularly severe.

We hope this TID Checklist assists educators, administrators, architects, designers, and managers develop actionable ideas to help shape learning environments that positively respond to the challenges of trauma affected youth.

The importance of discussing, debating, and applying the ideas in this open-source list is critical, particularly as we emerge from a global pandemic. We hope you find it useful and welcome your feedback and ideas by writing us at media@bassettiarch.com.

Find our resources at www.bassettiarch.com/index.php/tid

Look to the horizon, spread your wings, and fly