



# PROJECT EVERS

*Ending Violence and its Effects in Rural Schools*

EVERS Newsletter Spring 2020 \* Volume 1, Issue 2

## \* Team EVERS Partners with Your Community!

In a recent whirlwind tour of Northwest Kansas, Team EVERS saw firsthand the dedication, challenges, and pride of the school districts we will be working with through Project EVERS. In every school we visited, superintendents, principals, and other key administrative staff readily addressed trends, challenges, needs, and ideas related to creating and sustaining positive learning environments for students.

They addressed the challenges of needing to be all things to all students on a daily basis, and the hope and commitment to bringing about the brightest possible future for the students under their care. Every person we have spoken with is ready to welcome and embrace the goals of Project EVERS!

In an era where there is often more need than resources and more ideas than capacity, we look forward to collaborating with NW Kansas agencies to maximize our combined potential. In our last newsletter, we inadvertently misstated the reach of one such partner, High Plains Mental Health Center. They have extensive reach throughout Northwest Kansas with offices in Goodland, Colby, Norton, Phillipsburg, Osborne, and Hays. They also send staff into every county in their service area, often co-locating with primary care, hospitals, and public health departments. A valuable partner indeed, we look forward to learning and planning together with High Plains Mental Health to serve kids, families, schools, and communities as effectively as possible.

If you or a community-based organization is interested in partnering with Project EVERS please get in touch with us by e-mail at: [EVERSforKansas@gmail.com](mailto:EVERSforKansas@gmail.com). Most especially in these early organizational stages, we look forward to working with you!

## \* 12 Core Concepts of Understanding Traumatic Stress Response in Childhood

1. Traumatic experiences are inherently complex.
2. Trauma occurs within a broad context that includes children's personal characteristics, life experiences, and current circumstances.
3. Traumatic events often generate secondary adversities, life changes, and distressing reminders in children's daily lives.
4. Children can exhibit a wide range of reactions to trauma and loss.
5. Danger and safety are core concerns in the lives of traumatized children.
6. Traumatic experiences affect the family and broader caregiving system.
7. Protective and promotive factors can reduce the adverse impact of trauma.
8. Trauma and post-trauma adversities can strongly influence development.
9. Developmental neurobiology underlies children's reactions to traumatic experiences.
10. Culture is closely interwoven with traumatic experiences, response, and recovery.
11. Challenges to the social contract, including legal and ethical issues, affect trauma response and recovery.
12. Working with trauma-exposed children can evoke distress in providers, making it more difficult to provide good support.

As we seek to better understand the educational and community needs of Northwest Kansas and the shape of possible solutions, determining baseline data is an important part of our process. To that end, the Project EVERS team created and distributed a General Survey to gain an understanding of the region's perspective on issues related to cycles of trauma and violence in both communities and schools.

To date we have received over 500 survey responses, and some important clarity is beginning to emerge. Over 87% of respondents say that exposure to violence and/or trauma is affecting student's educational engagement in their district, with 55% rating that effect as severe. Conversely only 23% seem confident that their district has a clear and effective plan to support students affected by trauma. Equally telling, even though 77% of our survey respondents identify themselves as working in education, only 25% believe that school staff are well prepared to address student needs related to trauma or violence.

In short, the picture being painted is one of an increasingly and often severely traumatized student population and educators who feel overburdened and lacking in answers and appropriate responses.

It would be easy to be worried by this report. The increasing numbers of students affected by cycles of trauma and violence can feel like a tidal wave rising to utterly overwhelm already stressed educators and educational systems. Nobody is able to look into that future and smile.

However, Project EVERS chooses to interpret this data from a different perspective. Rather than feeling worried, we are excited. With our growing collection of baseline data we realize more every day that Project EVERS is the right idea in the right place at the right time. The school districts we serve sprawl across three states, two time zones, and more than 20,000 square miles. As a group we will collectively write a new story about cycles of trauma and violence, and the first step to writing a new story together is to start on the same page.

We are there. 85% of our survey respondents recognize their need for new training and skill development to better serve students affected by trauma or violence. And of that number, the significant majority are ready to actively pursue it. Further, survey respondents see a healthy connection between school districts and the communities they serve. Every district that we have visited has welcomed Project EVERS as an ally in this endeavor.

Our conversations with the districts remind us of the deep courage and high quality inherent in the educators and communities in the area. Cycles of violence and trauma are deeply entrenched. So are our patterns of addressing (and not addressing) them. But the winds of change are blowing across the high plains. Together we are going to shape a future in which fewer and fewer children will experience violence and trauma.

While the Project EVERS team is excited to partner with you to address the needs of children, families, schools, and communities, we never forget that you are the ones who have the power to affect this change, not us. You—the parents, educators, and community members—will ultimately make the decisions and enact changes that shape the future. It is our privilege to serve you in this most vital of endeavors.

Please reach out to us this month. Tell us who you are, where you are, what you are seeing, and how you are ready to help. Then give this article to a friend and have them do the same. Together, we promise to make a difference in the lives of children, youth, families, and schools.

## \* Project EVERS Focus on Childhood Trauma

It is a sad truth – childhood trauma exists. We all want to believe that every child grows up in a safe and trusted setting. We do not want to think about childhood trauma occurring, but unfortunately it does exist. It can happen to any child at any age, and its impact is monumental.

Research shows that roughly 20% to 25% of children in the United States will experience some form of childhood trauma before they reach adulthood. But there is hope. Over the next several years, your work with Project EVERS will enable you to learn about, prevent, identify, and help children understand and overcome trauma in Northwest Kansas.

Life can be hard, and we know that bad things sometimes happen to children as they grow up. Some are obvious, like natural disasters that destroy a home, or community violence that shake a child's (and even an entire community's) sense of

well-being and safety. Others are more discreet and may take place privately, like physical abuse, substance use, illness, or death of a parent. Trauma can include something as simple and sudden as a car accident, or as subtle and complex as a child overhearing frequent arguments between his/her parents.

Learning how to understand and cope with difficulties and tragedies is a natural part of growing up and an important part of a child's development. But a single, intense traumatic experience or repeated experiences may leave a child overwhelmed, scared, and feeling that they have no safety or control over their lives. For some children, these feelings may be so intense that they get in the way of their development. They may act out. They may withdraw or shut down. And the effects of their trauma compounded by their natural reactions may profoundly, negatively, and regularly shape their lives for decades.



*Common causes of childhood trauma include:*

- ▶ Accidents
- ▶ Death of a loved one
- ▶ Sexual abuse
- ▶ Separation from a parent or caregiver
- ▶ Sudden and/or serious medical condition
- ▶ Chaos or household dysfunction that may include domestic violence, parent with a mental illness, substance abuse, or incarceration
- ▶ Violence (at home, at school, or in the surrounding community)
- ▶ Bullying/cyberbullying
- ▶ Emotional abuse or neglect
- ▶ Physical abuse or neglect
- ▶ Stress caused by poverty
- ▶ War/terrorism

When a child is traumatized, their behavior often suffers. They may not be sleeping well, they may suddenly be afraid of things that they were not afraid of before, they may become easily startled, angry, crying, aggressive, or violent. Remember that we do not always have to know specifically what is wrong to know that something is not right.

Over the next few years, we will explore ways that school administrators, teachers, parents, and community leaders can work to prevent childhood trauma, and also learn what to do when we recognize that trauma has occurred or is occurring. A great deal of research is underway to understand childhood trauma, prevent it, and help children and adults heal from trauma.

Basic guidelines tell us that there are specific actions that you can take to help a child deal with trauma:

1. Create an environment of safety. Traumatized children need to feel they are physically and emotionally safe. Make your environment feel as safe as possible and create a safe space just for the child. Make sure each child feels safe in his or her child-care or school setting as well.

2. Provide adult support in a one-on-one relationship. In the best of circumstances, children need three caring adults in addition to their parents who they can turn to for comfort, attention, and support. These adults can be extended family, a neighbor, clergy,

or school professionals; all should be adults they trust, adults they see regularly, and adults they can talk to as needs arise.

3. Teach children self-soothing or self-regulating techniques. All too often traumatized children experience a “fight, flight, or freeze” reaction to life, as if every moment is dangerous. It helps when they have strategies in place to process their complex and often overwhelming emotions. One such strategy is to teach children to describe their feelings. After learning to recognize their feelings and identify when they are experiencing them, children can create alternative ways to deal with these feelings before the feelings become overwhelming. Learning to use even simple techniques like counting to ten, deep breathing, or self-talk can give relief.

4. Build on their strengths. Traumatized children need to feel they are in control over their lives. They need to know that they are strong and resilient, and that they can cope and overcome bad events. You can help them by recognizing their strengths and positive behaviors.

As Project EVERS gains momentum, we will be sharing information and ideas for parents, teachers, administrators, and community leaders alike. We all have a role to play in reducing and alleviating childhood trauma. We look forward to working with you to develop strong, resilient communities, schools, families, and children... that's why we are here!



**Dan Thornton**  
Executive Director, NWKESC

Dan is the Executive Director of the Northwest Kansas Educational Service Center located in Oakley, Kansas. He earned a Bachelor of Arts Degree with a major emphasis in the Social Sciences and Business Education as well as a Master of Education Degree with an emphasis in Public School Administration. Dan served 13 years in Oklahoma as a teacher, building principal, and superintendent. After moving to Kansas, he served as a superintendent for seven years, and has been the Executive Director of the Northwest Kansas Educational Service Center for more than 25 years.



**Lora Thomas**  
Director, Project EVERS

Lora's background in education and experience in the mental health profession run parallel to Project EVERS. She began her career teaching Head Start, but later moved away from formal education settings to focus on community-based organizations that impact and expand services for youth, families, and communities. Lora served as a management consultant with Girl Scouts of the USA for seven years before becoming director of the National Runaway Switchboard for 11 years. Most recently, Lora was executive director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Illinois and worked on contract with the Illinois Division of Mental Health. She has also been a Graduation and Outcomes for Success for Out-of-School Youth (GOSOSY) consultant on mental health for the past three years. For Lora, clearly all roads lead to working with others to impact and improve the lives and personal wellness of all.



**Mick Thornton**  
Trauma Specialist, Project EVERS

Mick has spent his career in service of rural communities. After receiving a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from Wichita State University and a Master of Divinity from Denver Seminary, Mick invested 12 years as the Senior Pastor of a church while also serving the community as a volunteer police chaplain and in other roles as well. Returning to his Western Kansas roots as a Trauma Specialist for Project EVERS aligns perfectly with his passion to serve the most vulnerable and often unseen members of rural communities and to equip compassionate and caring educators and community members with the tools to do the same.

\* **EVERS Mission Statement**

The mission of the Northwest Kansas Educational Service Center is to serve its member districts by working as a partner to develop, implement, and manage a wide range of services that will enable the districts to reach their educational objectives more efficiently and effectively.

Feedback, questions, ideas, and suggestions for The EVERS team?  
Please email director Lora Thomas at [EVERSforKansas@gmail.com](mailto:EVERSforKansas@gmail.com)

