

Brain Science Proves the Need for Customized Learning Approaches

Tweaks to Martha O'Bryan Center's adult education program lead to 300% completion increase

Overview:

Brain science has found an enthusiastic ally in Tennessee.

Nashville's ACEs Coalition, which networks hundreds of local organizations working to align an understanding of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and brain science with practice and policy, provides ongoing guidance on trauma and resilience to community institutions like the city's Metro Public Schools and Metro Police Department.

The Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth's Building Strong Brains initiative also seeks to raise public awareness of ACEs while supporting culture and policy change to reduce the impact of adversity, trauma, and toxic stress on children and families. It offers training resources that summarize the core story of brain development and frame ACEs in comprehensive ways.

In addition, former Tennessee Gov. Bill Haslam and his wife Crissy proved to be strong proponents of ACEs advocacy at the legislative level. Haslam established the funding that would launch Building Strong Brains and hosted numerous state-wide summits on brain science and trauma-informed care.

Involved in many of these efforts is Nashville's Martha O'Bryan Center (MOBC), a cradle-to-career anti-poverty center working to empower children, youth, and adults through early learning, education, employment, and fellowship services. In 2014, MOBC was awarded a Byrne Criminal Justice Innovation grant to pursue long-term reduction of crime and violence in the community by infusing trauma-informed care into its programs.

"Because of the criminal justice grant, we were able to hire a full-time trauma-informed training professional. She was an expert in trauma-informed care and her job over a couple of years was to help transform our organization through the training of staff, board, and clients," explained MOBC's Senior Director of Clinical and Community Services Ken Saefkow.

A year into its trauma-informed transformation process, MOBC was accepted into another groundbreaking initiative focused on applying neurosciences to the revitalization of communities: Change in Mind, a 15-member learning collaborative with



funding through the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and led by the Alliance for | Strong Families and Communities in partnership with the Palix Foundation's Alberta Family Wellness Initiative.

"Change in Mind was a perfect fit for us," said Saefkow. "We could connect to and learn from other organizations that were doing similar things while also sharing our work and getting helpful feedback."

Advances in Neuroscience:

Pervasive trauma and toxic stress can severely limit an individual's capacity for learning. Whether K-12 or adult education, extenuating circumstances related to abuse, neglect, and/or household challenges create gaps in the educational experience. Similarly, standardization and a lack of training and resources for schools across the U.S. compound educational barriers for students facing adversity.

MOBC operates an adult education program for individuals seeking to obtain a high school diploma or improve reading, math, or digital literacy skills. Said Saefkow, "Martha O'Bryan serves one of the highest poverty, highest crime areas in Nashville. Because of the environment we live in, the folks we serve are under a lot of stress and impacted by trauma daily."

Trauma-informed approaches to care favor student-centered learning. Teachers can factor a student's ACEs or current stressors into his or her classroom performance. For example, whether the student can easily and regularly attend class; the student's relationship with poverty in terms of finances, housing instability, or lack of food; or if the student is bringing experiences such as domestic violence or substance abuse into the classroom. This knowledge helps educators work with students in ways that foster achievement and success.

"Our students come in and they're already stressed because maybe there's domestic violence in the house, or they're wondering where they're going to get money for their next meal," said Saefkow. "We wanted to try and introduce an environment where students could take a moment, clear their brains, get rid of all the stress, and prepare themselves for learning."

Educators have long advocated for personalized lesson plans tailored to an individual student's learning style and ability. This approach contrasts with the didactic, lecture-dependent methods to which U.S. education has grown accustomed. Switching from one method to the other is commonly referred to as "flipping" a classroom.

By taking a trauma-informed approach to education, MOBC would use lessons learned from Change in Mind to effectively flip its adult education classroom model and dramatically improve completion of the state's HiSET high school equivalency exam by students.

Change in Mind:

Judy Rye, director of MOBC's adult education program, was an early adopter of Change in Mind's goals. Rye received training on the impact of toxic stress on brain development and



executive functioning that fundamentally changed how she taught her classes.

“Judy’s flipped classroom approach was the centerpiece of our Change in Mind project,” said Saefkow. “She was the first one to really embrace the trauma-informed care concepts. She continues to work with it, too; it wasn’t ‘We’ll try it and then go back to the way we used to do it.’ She’s embraced the change and is happy with the results.”

Those results included a nearly 300% increase in the completion rate for students enrolled in the 2015-2016 program, the first year Rye flipped her classroom approach from lecture-style teaching to personalized learning plans that allowed students to work at their own pace, curtailing a trend in program participant drop-off.

Rye also introduced trauma-informed tools such as mindfulness and test anxiety training to help students think beyond their stressors and increase their focus while in the classroom. Saefkow believes the flipped classroom was validated by Change in Mind and is replicable at other organizations.

“It’s really about changing your mindset. If you have the capacity to implement individualized learning plans, along with preparing students to take lessons home so that they’re not always in the classroom, then I think it’d be very easy to replicate,” he said.

As the Alliance’s Change in Mind Initiative formally becomes the Change in Mind Institute, Saefkow points to its specialized contributions to the Alliance’s strategic action network as critical to the progress witnessed by Rye’s adult education program.

“Participating in Change in Mind opened a lot of doors to other opportunities for us to expand our work,” said Saefkow. “Going to different locations, including Canada, to see the work they’re doing and having experts from those organizations help us figure out how to best use neuroscience has been a tremendously positive experience.”

Access to the centralized resources, data, and organizational partners of the Change in Mind Institute is a key driver for organizational buy-in as the sector aligns brain science with practice and policy. These resources played a major role in MOBC’s own conversations with invested parties like staff, the board of directors, and community leaders.

“Change in Mind provides really good, solid data and training tools that just make sense when you tell folks about brain science,” elaborated Saefkow. “Understanding and embracing that knowledge will change the way you approach your work.”

By capitalizing on the wealth of knowledge available through the Change in Mind Institute’s collective assets—from learning collaborative administration and policy consultation to grant management and access to experts—human-serving organizations can, like MOBC, better position programs, policies, and practices for successful systems change in their communities.

“The Alliance has done a great job finding top experts and international leaders in areas of brain development and architecture, bringing them together, and creating a knowledge base that has become the Change in Mind Institute. I don’t have to go searching everywhere for information; I’ve got one place where I can find it.”

***Ken Saefkow**, senior director of clinical and community services, Martha O’ Bryan Center*