



# Kaiser Permanente Special Initiative

Improving Social and Academic Success  
through Trauma-Informed Schools

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Final Evaluation Report

September 2022

# 2017–2022 Evaluation Report

To develop this report, the Child and Family Research Unit (CAFRU) conducted key informant interviews with administrators and educators that received the Collaborative Learning for Educational Achievement and Resilience (CLEAR) model through the Kaiser Permanente Special Initiative grant: Improving Social and Academic Success through Trauma-Informed Schools project.

This report highlights the evaluation results of the CLEAR model efforts to implement and promote the achievement of becoming a trauma-informed school during the period of July 2017 through June 2022.

## Acknowledgements

The CAFRU team would like to thank Kaiser Permanente program managers, school administrators and educators who took time to share their personal experience with us.

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# Introduction

Social isolation and economic disruptions that students and families have experienced through the COVID-19 restrictions such as school closures, shifts to distant and hybrid learning, and the loss of familiar routines and activities have increased risks to SEL and exposures to ACEs, especially for socially disadvantaged families (Bryant et al., 2020; Bryce, 2020; Scott, 2021). Now that students have returned to in-person learning, school-based trauma-informed practices are more relevant and needed than ever. The impact of trauma associated with the COVID-19 pandemic on students and families is realized by school staff who themselves have faced challenges through the pandemic with shifts in modes of instruction, reduced contacts with their students, their own mental and physical health issues, and concerns for their families. The COVID-19 pandemic has catalyzed the expansion of trauma-informed school-based initiatives beyond responding with multiple tiers of service to individual students with histories of trauma, to promoting prevention and protective factors for whole schools and whole education systems (Chafouleas et al., 2021; Frondren, et al., 2020).

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated social and economic disruptions to student and school functioning has been considered a form of trauma (Taylor, 2021) and points to the importance of guidance related to creating trauma-sensitive schools with consistent school-based routines, harm reducing policies, classroom and milieu strategies, mental health collaborations, family and community partnerships as well as systems of staff support and sustained leadership commitment (Cole et al., 2013; Watson et al., 2022; NCTSN, 2008).

*"Everything has been colored by COVID. It's hard to separate the challenges with the programmatic delivery from the pandemic."*  
Jill Donnelly  
CLEAR Consultant

# The CLEAR Model

The CLEAR model strives to promote trauma-informed practices in an effective and effortless manner within educational systems and provides a skillset that administrators and educators can utilize to understand the question “What happened to you” versus “What is wrong with you.” When school personnel work from an approach that understands the difference between these questions, they are better equipped to support and create a safe, predictable, and consistent environment for all students.

The CLEAR model is specifically designed to not be viewed as “one more thing” on your plate, but a new way of designing the “plate” itself in order to support academic achievement and integrate into current organizational initiatives. The model provides a 3-year-systems change process designed to support and strengthen protective factors, enhance academic outcomes, and build resilience in all students through the integration of trauma-informed practices and shifting the system as a whole. CLEAR's goal is to develop a trauma-informed workforce and educational system that is sustainable and responsive to the schools specific climate and culture.

## Core Elements of CLEAR

The foundational tier is professional development for all staff. Monthly, staff gather for one hour to learn, discuss, and collaborate around trauma-informed principles and topics. Lead by a CLEAR consultant, this time helps foster a sense of community, and build skills and common language around trauma-informed systems change.

The second tier is creating and reinforcing an understanding of dysregulation and a universal system for re-regulating both students and staff. This is done through the teaching of Dr. Dan Siegel’s *Hand Model of the Brain* in each classroom. By establishing a common language with an accessible tool, students are empowered to take ownership of their feelings and quickly learn helpful ways of offsetting dysregulation.

The third tier is individual consultation with staff. Through this process, staff gain a safe and confidential space to help strategize around difficult situations. Consultations are voluntary and open to any staff member. CLEAR consultants become confidants, partners, and a trusted source.

# Evaluation: Key Informant Interviews

To better understand the impact of the CLEAR model in the four schools, key informant interview questions were developed in close collaboration with CAFRU consultants and evaluators. The interview was composed of seven questions (see Appendix). The questions included factors such as the helpfulness of the model's process and implementation, successes and barriers, adopted trauma-informed principles, and fit with other programs within their school.

Participants were contacted by their respective consultants and introduced via email to the CAFRU evaluation team. The evaluation team then coordinated with the identified administrators and educators to schedule a time during May and June of 2022 to conduct a 45-minute interview via Zoom virtual platform. A total of nine school staff (five principals, one educator, one PBIS coordinator, and two counselors) were interviewed. In addition to these interviews, two key informant interviews were conducted in-person with the two CAFRU consultants who worked directly with the four schools.

## **Participating Schools:**

**Captain Strong Primary School**  
*Battle Ground, WA*

**Eisenhower Elementary School**  
**Vancouver, WA**

**Carus Elementary School**  
*Canby, OR*

**Lee Elementary School**  
*Canby, OR*

# Successes

Supporting the whole child requires educators to be aware of impact of trauma on learning while emphasizing strengths-based, resilience promoting strategies. The CLEAR model created a foundational shift about how to create and sustain a safe environment within the walls of the school building as well as their own individual classrooms. Strategies to a safe environment include: calming and regulation spaces, standardizing the language used by everyone in the building, and use of the hand model of the brain. By laying foundational principles, CLEAR empowered educators with the knowledge to keep children safe and how to focus on the whole child. One participant shared this story:

*“One student was really unmanageable in the classroom. One of the things CLEAR helped with was to bring people together to problem solve the student. There wasn’t a place before to talk about harder students. It created a care team for this student to try different strategies to see what would stick.”*

During the interviews with schools who have received the CLEAR model, a theme that consistently came up was how important their relationship was with their consultant. While nearly all interviewees

said they valued the content and the tools that came with CLEAR, many articulated that the overall success of implementing the model was made possible because of their relationship with their consultant. This relationship educators had with their consultant can be attributed to participating in the consultation piece and applying the trauma-informed principles and tools into their daily classroom lives. The right fit of consultant to school can help build strong trauma-informed educational systems and environments at the organizational and individual level.

Another theme that arose from interviews was how much educators valued the content of the CLEAR model, which ranged from taking a deeper dive into brain science to how the content integrates into other social emotional curriculum being implemented in the said school. Many interviewees discussed how the time their consultant spent on finding resources or tools with them showed the dedication the consultants had for their respective school as well as the CLEAR model itself. This in turn helped build trust with educators, and the program as a whole.

Overwhelmingly, the majority of key informant interviewees were satisfied with their CLEAR experience on how the knowledge and skills were delivered to them. The majority indicated that the model's length was appropriate, not too short or too long. Similarly, participants described that since starting CLEAR many had have positive impacts in various areas of their professional life. Two areas that arose as themes as being an improvement were staff being able to give themselves grace in situations where they weren't able to do that prior to CLEAR and the trauma-informed concepts could be utilized within their classroom as well as with their peers, so intentional integration was occurring all day.

The majority of participants interviewed described that they were motivated to participate in CLEAR because of its help with building a deeper trauma-informed practice skillset, addressing trauma-related behaviors, and how to appropriately address those behaviors while building resiliency. Some other factors that influenced their motivation to participate included that the program was that it aligned and melded together with other social and emotional learning curriculums already being implemented within the school while adding a unique focus on adults.

The CLEAR model created an opportunity to bring different sectors of the school (i.e., classified staff, certified staff, administration) together to best address the needs of their school. This

allowed for a whole organizational approach to common trauma-informed language, skills and knowledge, and developing a more standardized system to addressing student's needs and behaviors at the whole school level. By involving all sectors of the staff in the CLEAR implementation, the model's intended goals were more likely to be met throughout the three years and beyond.

The ability for school district staff, both certified and classified, to attend professional development opportunities can be impacted by location, availability, and funding. Participants described the onsite location, monthly availability, and funds covered by the Kaiser Permanente grant were a success in accessing the CLEAR model professional development opportunities. By being able to have all staff participate in the same professional development program, it creates a cohesion towards a deeper understanding and skillset of trauma-informed practices.

*"Monica gave us more tools and just a different lens to look at what the kids are struggling through. Not just to look at the behavior, but to look at the needs. Monica gave us hope and gave us expertise and knowledge."*

**Key Informant Interview  
Participant**

# Barriers to Implementation

## CLEAR & COVID-19

A unique barrier that negatively impacted the CLEAR model was the COVID-19 pandemic, which heavily impacted staff's ability to implement the model to its fullest as restrictions such as social isolation and virtual learning became imminent during the early stages of the pandemic. Many interview participants indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted CLEAR implementation and created an uphill battle within their respective school during COVID-19 restrictions.

Prior to the pandemic, it was reported that there was a lot of progress and momentum in year one and the first half of year 2 towards the implementation of CLEAR. During this time, the foundational knowledge and skillset of intentionally utilizing trauma-informed strategies had begun being ingrained into everyday practices.

During the pandemic, nearly all interview participants indicated the ongoing restrictions had an impact on programming, prompting changes in whether and how CLEAR was

implemented and prioritized. Participants reiterated that they seemed to see the greatest improvement within their school when CLEAR was able to be implemented in-person. Participants stated that COVID-19 restrictions put staff on high alert, and it was easier for staff to be checked out and not engaged during the time they were not together in-person. Some participants stated this impacted the level they could take CLEAR throughout their school. One participant recommended that if CLEAR cannot be delivered in-person, then the model

*"The fit of the consultant to the school and the quality of the relationship is where the action is."*

**Dr. Monica Whitlock**  
CLEAR Consultant



should be put on hold as it was not as effective when delivered virtually.

Several participants described the ongoing challenge of engaging students via virtual platforms, particularly being able to utilize the trauma-informed practices that emerged from the CLEAR model. Some participants reported they had to remove regulation spaces from their classroom due to COVID-19 protocols. One participant discussed that younger students couldn't roam their classrooms or receive direct help with tasks such as writing because of spacing issues required by the pandemic's restrictions.

Key informant interview participants and CLEAR consultants indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic prioritized the importance of educator well-being, mental health, and school safety. Relationships among educators and between educators and the consultants developed more deeply during COVID-19. Some educators reached out more to their CLEAR consultant because it was a new environment that made them adapt their teaching style. Participants also reported that the CLEAR foundation helped them to be able to show up for students, give grace and understanding to students and families, and begin recovery in a way that was trauma-informed and made sense.

### Implementation Lessons Learned

The foundational lesson that arose from challenges discussed in the key informant

interviews is that sustainability must be at the forefront of conversations early in the CLEAR process. If the knowledge obtained over the process of the CLEAR model is not in a structured, sustainable framework, it was discussed that there were challenges to moving the momentum of the model forward once the consultant exits after 3 years. Given the fundamental goal of maintaining a trauma-informed school status, building a strong sustainable framework will help incorporate trauma-informed practices into everyday conversations, new hire orientations, and school action plans for example.

The need for consistent support, communication and stability among leadership emerged as an essential element to successful implementation. It was noted that if it appeared that leadership was not bought into the CLEAR model or did not prioritize it, educators did not have to be bought in or make it a priority either. Participants also shared notable feedback related to their concerns regarding turnover, the model and academics, and leadership support, which included:

- One interviewee shared experiencing challenges related to prioritizing the CLEAR model efforts amid educator and administrator turnover
- One interviewee described challenges related to changes in leadership and the prioritization of CLEAR
- Multiple interviewees indicated a need to collect data to correlate academics to CLEAR

# Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the available information from the CLEAR consultants and key informant interviews and are aimed at strengthening delivery and building communication efforts. CAFRU advises the following recommendations for the CLEAR model to further its goal of building trauma-informed systems and environments:

## CLEAR Consultant Recommendations

1. Additional support and resources for staff to help offset the impact of collective trauma, secondary traumatic stress, and burnout on educator well-being
  - Focus healthy work-life balance
  - Creation of meaningful wellness strategies
  - Additional mental health supports
  - Time for teaming and connection with peers
2. Begin teaming future participating schools with another CLEAR consultant
  - A team of consultants can provide support to one another because they understand the demands and stresses of implementing the program within a school. This can lead to less burnout and better outcomes.
  - A teaming model approach will let CAFRU new hires gain the experience and exposure to the CLEAR model more effortlessly.
3. Integration of the NCTSN *Creating, Supporting, and Sustaining Trauma-Informed Schools*, system framework into the sustainability plan for participating CLEAR schools.

## Key Informant Interview Recommendations

1. Begin the sustainability discussion sooner rather than waiting until the final year of the program
  - Many interviewees discussed challenges in keeping the momentum of CLEAR alive when a structured sustainability framework was not in place.
  - Sustainability conversation should include district consideration so that external challenges on schools can be considered during implementation.
2. Create a web-based resource site where materials are readily available for current and alumni schools
  - Current and alumni schools should be equipped with the resources necessary to continue CLEAR. By utilizing an online platform to share resources and CLEAR content related materials, schools will be able to stay up to date on current content and continue their relationship with CAFRU.

3. Strengthen the utilization of the CLEAR team, and define the CLEAR team responsibilities and roles so they are transparent

- Additional guidance should be provided to the group that will be defined as the CLEAR team within each respective school.
- The CLEAR team is key to continuing the work in-between visits from consultants
- Encourage all voices to be actively engaged in the CLEAR team

The strong and significant successes that emerged from the key informant interviews underline the fact that the CLEAR model has accomplished what it was designed to do. The observed outcomes that interviewees discussed as having the most impact were reduced staff turnover, reduced student behavior and referrals, and an increased climate and culture of trust among staff. Additionally, interview participants mentioned that the consultant relationship with staff was the most impactful because they empowered staff to utilize the knowledge, skills and tools that came from the CLEAR model to meet students and each other where they were at. These acts of encouragement and support provided by the consultant are one of the most important elements to impacts that are profound and lasting.

Responses from interviewees in all four schools highlighted the benefits that themselves and other individuals from their school felt they have received from CLEAR. Benefits cited by interviewees

included a deepened knowledge of trauma and adverse childhood experiences, skills that helped simplify big behavior situations, and they were able to handle the battle of COVID-19 a little better. Similarly, some interviewees indicated there was a perceived level of support among educators as a result of the CLEAR model. One participant stated, “Staff as a whole bonded. They allowed themselves to lean on each other.”

When asking interviewees for suggestions to improving programming, many participants did not have any suggestions or noted that the way the program was structured for implementation was valuable. Some of the participants enjoyed the program so much that they were disappointed when the program ended and wished the program was longer or they could go through it again.

Because of how valuable CLEAR was for schools, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, many interviewees discussed their wish for the model to be available district-wide versus school by school. Thus, many participants interviewed reiterated that there is a need for this model within their respective districts and suggested that when there was additional funding to reach out to their districts.

# Reflection & Closing Notes

We would like to acknowledge the hard work and dedication to the administrators, educators, and consultants reflected in this report. The collective story we witness every time we step into a school building is powerful and the evidence continues to validate the investments in trauma-informed models such as CLEAR. Administrators and educators are learning, growing, and feeling more confident and hopeful about ensuring a positive, trauma-sensitive relationship with their students. There is no doubt that the benefits we are seeing will have a positive ripple effect for years to come.

We want to also acknowledge how uniquely challenging the past couple of years have been for administrators and educators as well as their students. COVID-19 has brought into sharp focus the true importance of educators and the work that is done on behalf of their students. We also want to recognize the extreme efforts administrators and educators have made to continue to create a place of safety, predictability, and consistency for their students while navigating the unknown. There is no question that administrators and educators are capable of incredible things.

*"This was an amazing opportunity for us; if there was any school that was hesitant, they'd be passing up a goldmine. Jill was fantastic and really helped a lot of kids. She helped our systems get clear around how to respond to trauma."*

**Key Informant Interview  
Participant**

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# Appendix

## Key Informant Interview Questions

1. Tell us how CLEAR played out in your school during implementation?
2. What is your role in the CLEAR implementing structure?
3. In your opinion, what was helpful about the CLEAR process in your school?  
Was there anything about the program that was not helpful or would there be anything additional to the program that would be helpful?
4. How does CLEAR fit with other SEL and positive behavior practices at your school?
5. How has your school adopted or planned to adopt CLEAR principles in sustained practice?
6. What would you consider the biggest successes to CLEAR implementation?
7. Is there anything else you'd like to share with us about your experience implementing CLEAR?