



Dr. Petra Woodard



GET YO' HAND OUT MY BACKPACK

What students carry to school isn't yours to rummage through — it's yours to understand, respect, and respond to with skill.

Research-Based

Trauma-Informed

Real Scenarios

EVERY STUDENT WALKS IN WITH A FULL BACKPACK.



The backpack isn't just books and lunch. It's last night's argument, the eviction notice on the counter, the hunger, the grief, the undiagnosed ADHD, the trauma that has no name yet.

When educators **punish first and ask never**, they're rummaging through a student's most private pain without permission or training — and making it worse.



The shift: Stop treating student behavior as *defiance*. Start treating it as *communication*. The backpack is heavy — help them set it down safely.

THE BACKPACK METAPHOR

What Students Carry: Invisible Burdens & Trauma



HIDDEN COMPARTMENTS

Fear, anxiety, distrust, and ingrained survival responses (fight/flight/freeze) tucked away.



"OUTBURST" AS OVERFLOW

Behavior is communication. When the load is too much, the backpack overflows.



THE EDUCATOR'S ROLE

Not to unpack it for them, but to acknowledge the weight and create a safe environment to carry it.

HOME & COMMUNITY STRESS



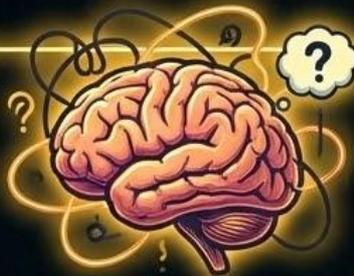
HOME INSTABILITY

Housing insecurity, domestic conflict, food scarcity, caregiver absence.



ECONOMIC STRESS

Work obligations, financial pressure, responsibility beyond their age.



UNMET NEUROLOGICAL NEEDS

ADHD, anxiety, learning differences — often undiagnosed.



RELATIONAL TRAUMA

Abandonment, abuse, grief, broken trust in adults.

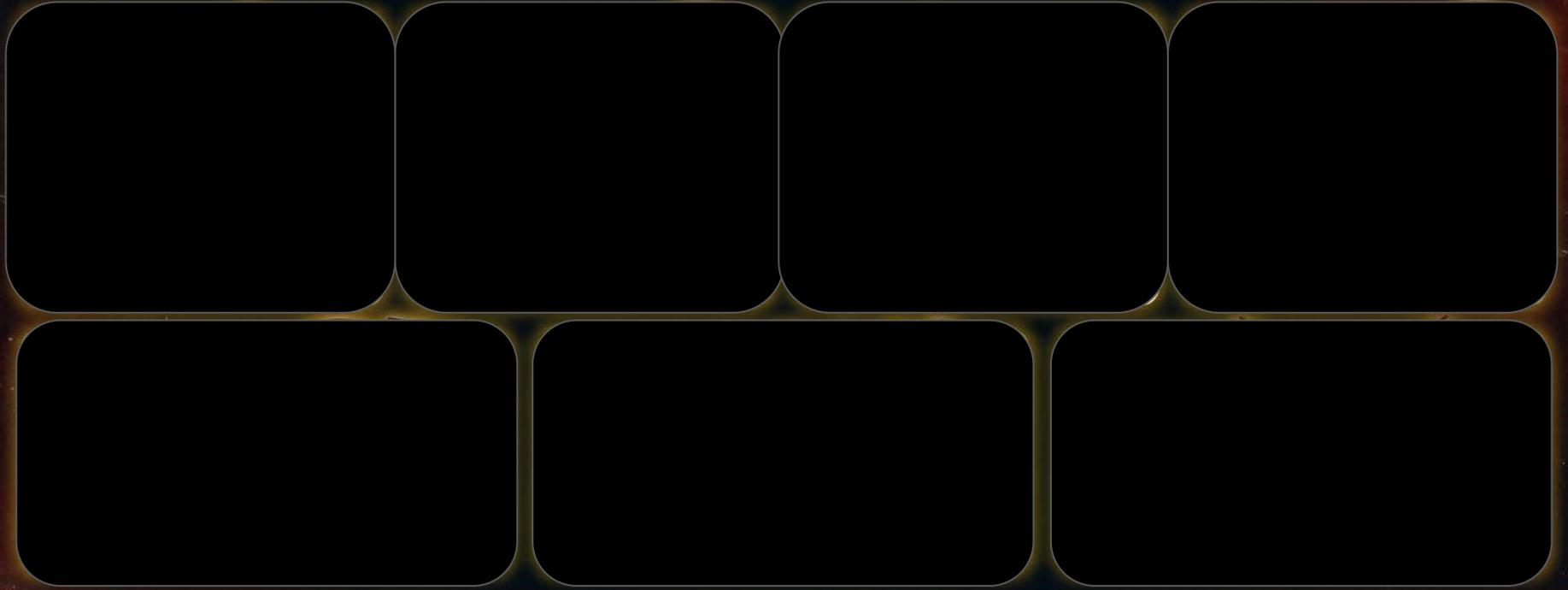


COMMUNITY & IDENTITY STRESS

Racism, immigration fears, social exclusion, unsafe neighborhoods.

TOP 7 REASONS STUDENTS DROP OUT

Research from National Dropout Prevention Center & 25 Years of Studies



⚡ KEY INSIGHT: At least 5 of these 7 reasons are *directly connected to trauma* — and most are visible in student behavior BEFORE a student leaves. The backpack was showing signs. Was anyone paying attention?

TOP 7 REASONS STUDENTS DROP OUT

Research from National Dropout Prevention Center & 25 Years of Studies

01



~40%

Academic Failure

Falling behind creates shame spirals that push students out.

02



~35%

Disengagement

"School felt irrelevant to my real life".

03



~26%

Financial Hardship

Had to work to support family.

04



~22%

Family Crisis

Home instability made attendance impossible.

05



~20%

Discipline & Pushout

Suspensions & expulsions accelerate dropout.

06



~18%

Mental Health

Unaddressed trauma, depression, anxiety.

07



~16%

Lack of Belonging

"No one at school cared if I showed up".

KEY INSIGHT: At least 5 of these 7 reasons are *directly connected to trauma* — and most are visible in student behavior BEFORE a student leaves. The backpack was showing signs. Was anyone paying attention?



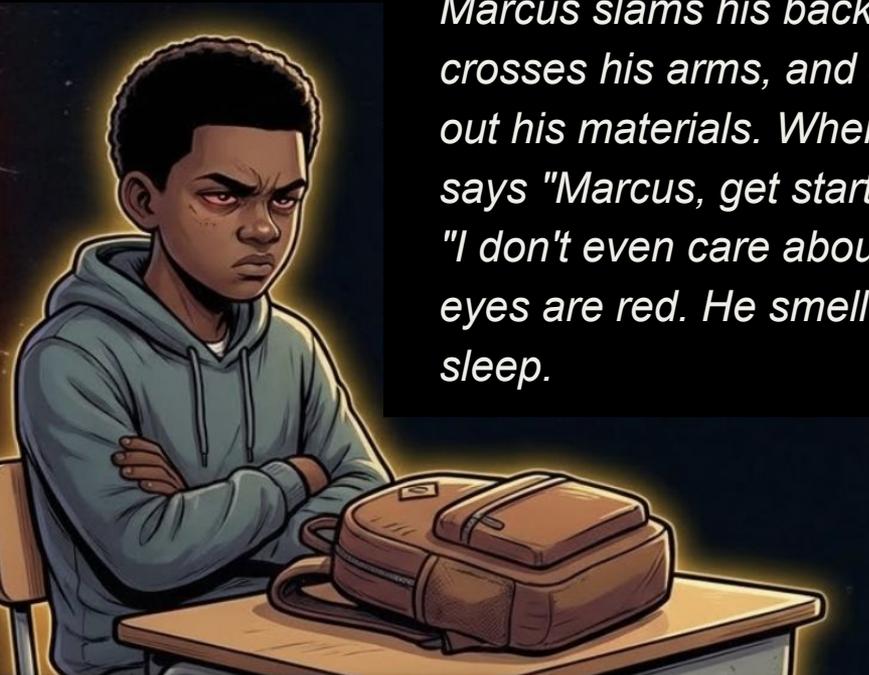
"HE JUST HAS AN ATTITUDE PROBLEM"

DROPOUT LINK: ACADEMIC FAILURE + DISCIPLINE PUSHOUT + LACK OF BELONGING



THE SCENE

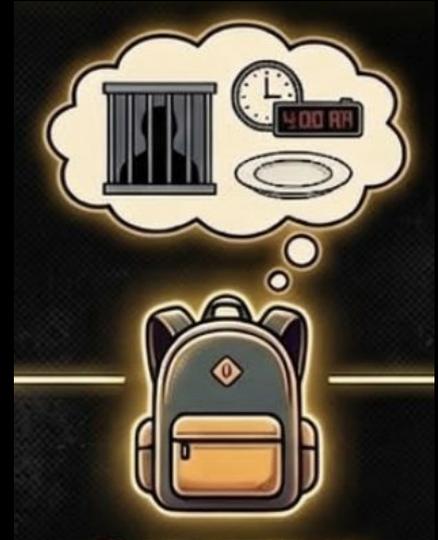
Marcus, 9th Grade — Monday Morning



Marcus slams his backpack down, crosses his arms, and refuses to take out his materials. When the teacher says "Marcus, get started," he replies: "I don't even care about this class." His eyes are red. He smells like he didn't sleep.



What's In The Backpack



Dad was arrested Friday night. Marcus has been up since 4am. He hasn't eaten.

He's terrified and has nowhere to put it — so he puts it on you.



EDUCATOR RESPONSE

HOW YOU SHOW UP MATTERS

✗ DON'T DO THIS



"Marcus, you need to be respectful or you're going to the office." Escalate. Write a referral. Reinforce his belief that school doesn't care.



✓ DO THIS INSTEAD



Quietly crouch down: "Hey — I noticed you. Not the attitude, you. What do you need right now? You don't have to be okay today."

🔧 EDUCATOR TOOL: THE 2×10 STRATEGY

Spend 2 minutes, for 10 consecutive days, having a personal conversation with the student — not about academics. Research shows this single intervention dramatically reduces behavioral disruptions and builds the trust that keeps students in school.

"SHE NEVER PARTICIPATES."

DROPOUT LINK: DISENGAGEMENT + MENTAL HEALTH + LACK OF BELONGING



THE SCENE

Angelica, 11th Grade — Third Period

Angelica puts her head down the moment she sits. She's not disrupting anyone — so teachers leave her alone. She hasn't turned in work in three weeks. Her grade is a 12%. Counselor notes say "unmotivated." She's been referred for tardiness twice.



What's In The Backpack



Angelica is the primary caretaker for her mother who has MS. She's up at 5am getting siblings ready. School feels like a luxury she can't afford mentally — but she keeps showing up. That matters.



EDUCATOR RESPONSE

EMPATHY OVER DISCIPLINE

✗ Don't Do This



- Publicly call out her grade or issue another referral.
- Interpret sleep as laziness and disengage, fueling shame.



✓ Do This Instead



Private check-in: “You keep showing up and that takes strength. What’s one thing I could do to make this class feel less impossible right now?”



EDUCATOR TOOL: FLEXIBLE ENGAGEMENT MENU

Offer 3 ways to participate: verbal, written, or visual. Let students submit work in segments. Don't require eye contact or raised hands as participation metrics. Create a "no-judgment late work" window for students showing distress signals.

"SHE CRIES AT EVERYTHING"

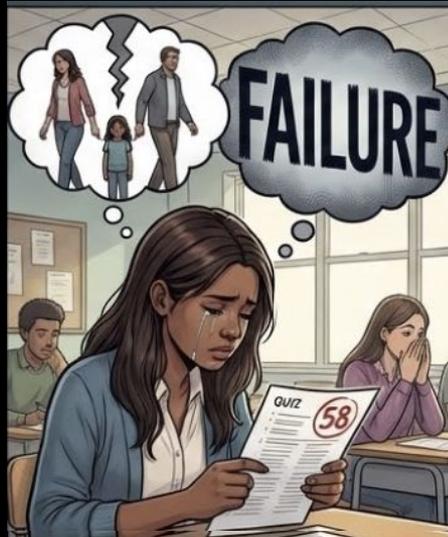
DROPOUT LINK: DISENGAGEMENT + MENTAL HEALTH + ACADEMIC FAILURE



THE SCENE

Diana, 7th Grade — Quiz Day

The teacher hands back a quiz. Diana sees her grade — a 58 — and immediately begins crying. Quietly at first, then visibly shaking. A classmate says "she's so dramatic." Diana gets up and walks out without a pass. There are 29 other students waiting.



What's In The Backpack



Diana's parents announced divorce last week. She's convinced she's failing at everything — home, friendships, school. That 58 confirmed her worst belief about herself. This isn't about a quiz.



EDUCATOR RESPONSE

REGULATE BEFORE YOU EDUCATE



✗ Don't Do This

- Call her back loudly.
- Dismiss the emotion — "It's just a quiz."
- Issue a hall pass consequence.
- Allow classmates to comment without intervention.



✓ Do This Instead

- Send a trusted peer to check on her.
- Leave a note on her desk: "This grade doesn't define you. Come see me after class — I've got you."
- Protect her dignity publicly.



EDUCATOR TOOL: PRE-ESTABLISHED SAFE SIGNALS

Work with students individually to create a private "safety signal" — a card flip, a hand gesture, or a sticky note color — that means "I need a regulated moment without attention." Prepare a cool-down corner or pass system in advance so dysregulated students have dignity-preserving options.



"HE'S NEVER HERE ANYWAY"

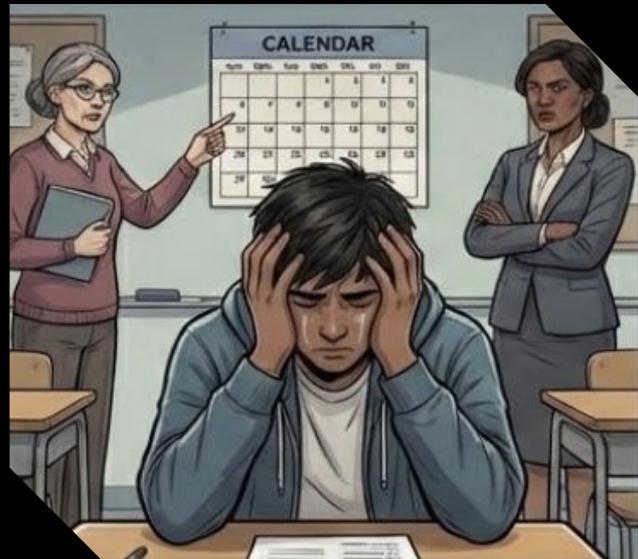
DROPOUT LINK: FAMILY CRISIS + FINANCIAL HARDSHIP + DISCIPLINE PUSHOUT



THE SCENE

Javier, 10th Grade — 27 Absences

Javier shows up after missing a week. The teacher says "You missed the test. There are no makeups." Another teacher says "You're going to fail this semester at this rate." No one asks why he was gone. He puts his head down and counts the minutes until he can leave for good.



What's In The Backpack



Javier works 30 hours a week at a warehouse to help his family pay rent. He comes to school when he can. Every cold reception when he returns chips away at his reason to keep trying.



EDUCATOR RESPONSE

EVERY RETURN IS A WIN

✗ DON'T DO THIS

- Use the absence as a teaching moment. Publicly shame the gap.
- Create academic penalties that make return feel pointless.
- Assume it's laziness.



✓ DO THIS INSTEAD

- “I’m glad you’re here today. Let’s figure out together how to make this work.”
- Create a personalized catch-up plan.
- Connect him with the counselor and community resources.



🔧 EDUCATOR TOOL: THE WELCOME-BACK PROTOCOL

Every student who returns after extended absence gets: (1) A warm, private greeting, (2) A no-fault summary of missed content, (3) A reasonable timeline for catch-up, (4) A check-in from a trusted adult within 48 hours. Make returning easier than leaving.

"SHE'S ALWAYS FIGHTING"

DROPOUT LINK: DISCIPLINE PUSHOUT + LACK OF BELONGING + COMMUNITY VIOLENCE



THE SCENE

Samantha, 8th Grade — Hallway



Samantha is in their third altercation this semester. Each time, they escalate instantly — zero to explosion. They've been suspended twice. The principal says "one more and your gone." Nobody has asked why they're hypervigilant. Nobody has noticed they flinch at loud sounds.

 **What's In
The Backpack**



Samantha grew up in a home where you had to fight to be safe. Their nervous system learned that conflict = danger = act fast. They're not being aggressive — they're surviving. School never felt safe enough to unlearn that.



SAFETY BEFORE ACCOUNTABILITY

✗ Don't Do This



Respond to the third suspension the same way as the first. Remove her from school as a "safety measure" without support. Criminalize survival behavior.



✓ Do This Instead

Ask: "What were you feeling RIGHT before it happened?" Build a personalized safety plan with early triggers. Pair with a restorative practice counselor, not just a punitive outcome.

🔧 EDUCATOR TOOL: RESTORATIVE CIRCLES + NERVOUS SYSTEM MAPPING

Before another suspension, implement a Restorative Circle: bring impacted parties together to name harm and repair it. Separately, work with the school counselor to map Tamara's fight triggers and create a personal de-escalation plan she helps design. Agency reduces reactivity.

FROM PUNITIVE TO PURPOSEFUL

SHIFTING THE QUESTION CHANGES THE OUTCOME

🚫 OLD FRAMEWORK

"What is **wrong** with this student?"

Behavior = Defiance → Punish the behavior

Zero-tolerance: same rule, same consequence for all

Suspension removes the problem from the room

Academic penalty for emotional dysregulation

Parent contact = complaint call

Discipline is the educator's domain alone

VS

 **Remember:**
"Get yo' hand out
my backpack"
means — *stop
rummaging through
pain you're not
equipped to handle,
and start building
the skills to respond
to it with dignity.*

✅ TRAUMA-INFORMED FRAMEWORK

"What **happened** to this student?"

Behavior = Communication → Decode the message

Equity: same goal (safety + learning), individualized path

Removal is a last resort; support is the first response

Separate academic support from behavioral support

Parent contact = partnership + shared understanding

Counselors, social workers, and teachers collaborate

4 TOOLS. REAL IMPACT.

EVIDENCE-BASED STRATEGIES THAT INTERRUPT THE DROPOUT CYCLE

2×10 RELATIONSHIP STRATEGY



2 minutes a day, 10 days in a row of genuine personal conversation — not academic.

- Ask about their weekend, their music, their dog
- Never bring up grades or behavior during this time
- Be consistent — don't skip days
- Research shows 85% reduction in disruptions

RESTORATIVE CIRCLES



Replace punishment with structured dialogue that repairs relationships and builds accountability.

- All parties share their perspective uninterrupted
- Focus on harm, impact, and repair — not blame
- Student has agency in the outcome plan
- Reduces repeat offenses by up to 44%

WELCOME-BACK PROTOCOL



Every return from absence, suspension, or crisis is met with warmth — not punishment or academic walls.

- Warm, private greeting within first hour
- No-fault content summary from a peer or teacher
- Reasonable, negotiated catch-up timeline
- Check-in by a trusted adult within 48 hours

TRAUMA TRIGGER MAPPING



Work with counselors to identify a student's personal escalation triggers and safe de-escalation paths.

- Identify early warning signs per student
- Co-create a personalized calm-down plan
- Give student language for their own experience
- Share map across the student's teacher team

2 x 10 RELATIONSHIP STRATEGY

DAY 1 - 4

Building Closeness

1. If you could invite anyone in the world to visit our class, who would it be?
2. Would you like to be well-known for something? What would it be?

DAY 5 - 8

Fostering Greater Intimacy

1. If you could know the truth about one thing in your life or future, what would you want to find out?
2. Is there something you've always wanted to try? What's holding you back?

BY DAY 10

Deepening Emotional Intimacy

1. Who is the most important person in your life?
2. What would you most regret not having said if you suddenly couldn't talk to anyone again? Why haven't you said it yet?

RESTORATIVE CIRCLES



THE TALKING PIECE

Ensures equal voice & deep listening. Only the holder speaks.



CIRCLE GUIDELINES (NON-NEGOTIABLE)

- Respect everyone.
- Confidentiality.
- Speak from the heart.
- Listen with the heart.



THE CIRCLE



CIRCLE AGREEMENTS (COLLABORATIVELY ESTABLISHED)

- Be present.
- No interruptions.
- Assume positive intent.
- Step up, step back.



CIRCLE RHYTHM

Check-in →
Discussion/Topic
→ Check-out.
Consistent flow builds trust.

EXAMPLES OF TRAUMA TRIGGER MAPPING

Identifying Sensory, Emotional, & Situational Cues

TRAUMA-SENSITIVE SCHOOLS HANDOUT ([LINK](#))



SENSORY TRIGGERS

- Loud, sudden noises (e.g., bells, yelling)
- Specific smells (e.g., cleaning products, cologne)
- Certain lighting conditions (e.g., flickering lights)
- Physical touch without warning
- Crowded or chaotic environments



EMOTIONAL TRIGGERS

- Feelings of rejection or exclusion
- Perceived failure or criticism
- Feeling unheard or invalidated
- Loss of control or autonomy
- Witnessing conflict or aggression

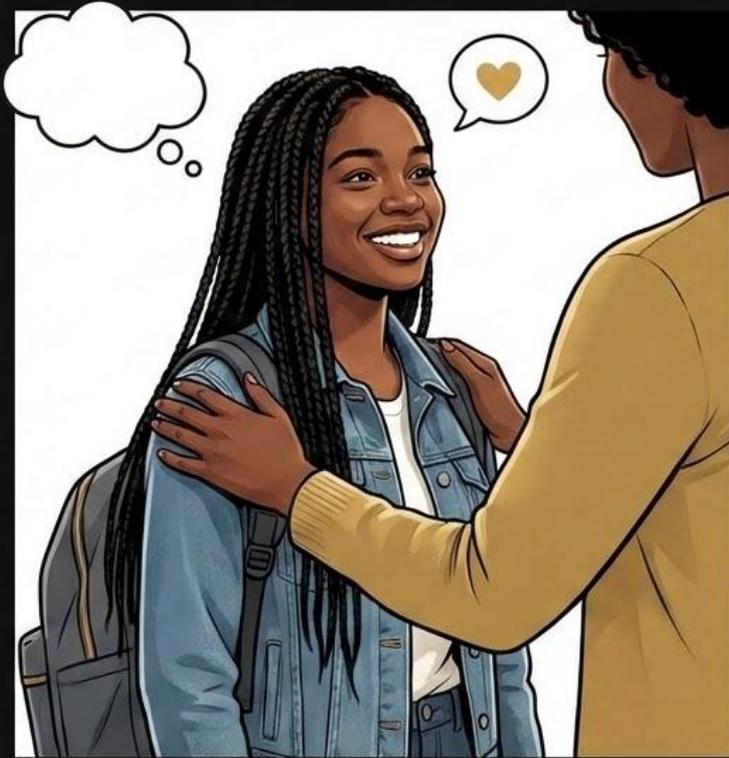


SITUATIONAL TRIGGERS

- Transitions between activities
- Unstructured time or free periods
- Specific times of year (anniversaries)
- Tests or performance situations
- Interactions with authority figures

Goal: To anticipate reactions and implement proactive coping strategies, not to avoid all challenges.

EXAMPLES OF **WELCOME-BACK PROTOCOL**



- ✓ **Warm, Private Greeting:** Acknowledge return without judgment.
- ✓ **No-Fault Summary:** Provide missed content overview, not just a list of tasks.
- ✓ **Reasonable Timeline:** Collaborate on a manageable catch-up plan.
- ✓ **Trusted Adult Check-In:** Scheduled follow-up within 48 hours to offer support.

Goal: Re-establish connection & psychological safety first.

ACTIVITY: LET'S UNPACK THE BACKPACK.



TRAUMA-INFORMED EDUCATION IS NOT A PROGRAM — IT'S A PRACTICE



**THE BACKPACK IS HEAVY.
YOU DON'T CARRY IT FOR THEM -
YOU MAKE THE SCHOOL SAFE ENOUGH
FOR THEM TO SET IT DOWN.**

TRAUMA-INFORMED EDUCATION IS NOT A PROGRAM — IT'S A PRACTICE

SEE THE WHOLE STUDENT

ASK BEFORE ASSUMING

BUILD BEFORE YOU DISCIPLINE

RELATIONSHIPS FIRST

EVERY RETURN IS A WIN

More From Dr. Woodard's Trauma-Informed Educator Series

Un>Welcome to My World



- Recognize a student's proximity to trauma
- Identify School Counselor "super powers"
- Identify student needs based on their worldview (super hero vs alien)
- Discuss how to apply those powers in the appropriate space, time, and perspective

Check Yo'self Before You Wreck Yo'self!



People



Professionally



Procedures
& Protocols



Professional
Ethics

- identify signs that lead to negative interactions.
- list ways staff can respond to students experiencing crisis.
- apply legal and ethical principles of the profession.
- demonstrate understanding of the impact of cultural, social, and environmental influences on student success and opportunities.

Dr. Petra Woodard

*EXEC. DIR. OF COUNSELING, COLLEGE + CAREER READINESS
OKLAHOMA CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS*

*PRESIDENT-ELECT
OKLAHOMA SCHOOL COUNSELOR ASSOCIATION*

CONTACT ME

PWOODARD.OKSCA@GMAIL.COM

PEWOODARD@OKCPS.ORG

405-916-4409