

**Title:** Support to Further *We Can! Building Relationships and Resilience: An Intervention to Support Educators Working with Children who Have Experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences*

**Proposed Start and End Dates:** May 14<sup>th</sup>- June 10<sup>th</sup>

Armeda Wojciak  
Assistant Professor  
Department of Psychological and Quantitative Foundations  
N370 Lindquist Center  
[Armeda-wojciak@uiowa.edu](mailto:Armeda-wojciak@uiowa.edu)

**Abstract:** Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are prevalent. Researchers have demonstrated the negative impact of trauma on individual's health, well-being, and education. Fortunately ACEs are preventable. School systems provide a universal system that serves most children that can be targeted to help mitigate the effects of ACEs. Iowa SF2113- Educator training on suicide and ACE awareness, just pasted indicating that local school boards integrate one hour annually of evidenced-based training of ACEs and strategies to mitigate toxic stress for school personal. Over the past three years I have worked with school personnel to develop and pilot an intervention, *We Can! Building Relationships and Resilience* in local elementary schools. *We Can!* addresses ACEs, toxic stress, strategies to work with students who have experienced trauma, and ways to build resilience among all students. Given recent policy, the need for evidenced-based interventions is of the essence. The one-hour training is a great first step; however, from my experience, once schools become aware of ACEs and toxic stress they want to know what to do about it. A one-hour training does not do fully address it or support schools in their efforts. *We Can!* is the next step. Over the course of the four-week period, I will have two tangible products to move *We Can!* forward: a grant application and a publication. I will also look forward to working with PPC to design and create a fact sheet and policy brief based on the work described in this proposal.

## Narrative

The prevalence and effects of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) in today's youth is critically important to educators and school reform initiatives. Nearly half (47.9%) of U.S. children have experienced at least one ACE (Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative, 2013). Students who experience trauma have poorer academic achievement than their peers (Shonk & Cicchetti, 2001) and are at an increased risk for a learning/behavioral problem (Burke, N. J. et al., 2011). Most notably for educators, students who experience trauma may struggle with executive functioning skills (Kinniburgh et al., 2005), impediments to social emotional development (Schore, 2002), and ability to develop memories (Siegal, 2002). The lack of these skills directly impacts student learning and behavior. Few educators argue with the fact that children who experience trauma have always been a part of education, yet teachers lack ways to manage the effects of trauma within their classroom (Sitler, 2009). The "business as usual" approach ignores trauma and its negative impact on learning. Thus, it is critical for educators to use the growing ACEs research to mitigate the effects of trauma within their classroom and assist all students in reaching their full potential. Trauma presents schools with a serious dilemma: the need to balance the mission of education while addressing the trauma that inhibits students' ability to engage fully in the academic, social and behavioral learning processes at a school (Ko et al., 2008). Within this tension is a critical need for schools to improve student outcomes for those who have experienced trauma. *We Can! Building Relationships and Resilience* is a direct response to this tension (hereafter referred to as *We Can*).

*We Can!* is a year-long, school-wide, system-wide training designed to help elementary teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators understand the prevalence of trauma and the impact it has on brain development, learning, and behaviors. *We Can!* provides strategies for teachers and staff to promote academic competence, emotional and behavioral regulation, relationships with teachers and peers, and ways to promote resilience in all youth. It provides a paradigm shift for understanding student's behaviors and ways to support them. Our program was initially developed with a team comprised of researchers, a school principal, and counselor to ensure educational priorities were accounted for and addressed in each session. A strength of *We Can!* is that it is not "another program" that schools implement. Rather, it is an overarching framework that connects current practices like Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS), social emotional learning, and restorative justice with trauma informed practices. *We Can!* works with the school staff to integrate what they are already doing and how to ensure they are using a trauma-informed lens to maximize student outcomes.

*We Can!* was tested in five elementary schools with promising effects compared to three control schools. Our preliminary results indicate that school personnel reported a significant increase in their understanding of the impact trauma has on students and their ability to effectively work with students who have experienced trauma. Further, school personnel who participated *We Can!* reported significant increases in staff collegiality and worker satisfaction.

To date, *We Can!* has been administered by a small research team to 5 elementary schools. Over the past three years of implementation, interest in *We Can!* has grown beyond the capacity of the research team. Given the growing demand for evidenced-based trauma-informed school curriculum, as put forth by Every Student Succeeds ACT (2015), our curriculum addresses this

critical need. However, given the intensive nature of intervention development, delivery, and high demand for this work, I have not had the time to publish results from *We Can!* to begin to formally build the evidence-base for this intervention. I currently have two years of data that I have only been able to run preliminary analyses. Dedicated, uninterrupted time to support this work is needed to inform educational practice and policy.

### *Proposed Project*

During the Scholar in Residence Program at the Public Policy Center, I will focus my time on two tasks with two tangible products: a) grant application, and b) manuscript.

*Grant Application.* Last summer, I submitted a Letter of Interest to the Carver Trust Foundation to support my efforts creating a more sustainable delivery method for *We Can!* I found out last week that I have been invited to submit a full grant proposal for their upcoming June meeting. As such, I would spend the first half of the Scholar in Residence Program crafting and refining my full grant application.

*Purpose behind grant application and effort for more sustainable delivery method.* Given that Iowa is a rural state, and the intensive nature of the current *We Can!* curriculum delivery method (7 times over the course of the year and delivered to teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators during professional development time), it is not feasible for external facilitators to implement the training in all the schools that are interested. With the promising support of *We Can!*, this project has two aims to continue our work and address the needs of our schools and students: 1) create a manual for *We Can! Building Relationships and Resilience* that can be used and effectively implemented in elementary schools nationwide, and 2) investigate the effectiveness of implementing the program and manual through a train the trainer model. In the train the trainer method, PIs will train school personnel to implement the curriculum in their schools. Each school personnel trained, will then deliver the curriculum to all other school personnel. In this way, the training and trainers are embedded within the structure of the school to ensure a more universal, school-wide implementation approach, supporting the sustainability of the school-wide curriculum. *We Can!* is a paradigm shift in the way in which educators work with one another and with students. Having a team who can gage the pulse of the school and work with the *We Can!* research team to problem solve and brainstorm ideas for optimal implementation will be valuable for sustainability and ultimately student outcomes.

*Manuscript.* In order to support the development and piloting of *We Can!* I have been current on existing literature related to trauma, ACEs, toxic stress, resilience, and education. I have summarized this information in multiple grant applications that has funded this work thus far. Consequently, I have a wealth of literature and writing on the topic that will easily translate into a manuscript. However, given the need to constantly seek funding, intervention delivery, and connecting with community partners, my time is often devoted to these task instead of publishing. The time, dedicated space, analytic software, and ability to connect with people doing educational policy work provided by the Scholars in Residence program will enable me to collaborate and conduct the appropriate analyses to more effectively evaluate the data from two years of implementation. The dedicated, uninterrupted time and space will also enable me to

have a completed manuscript draft by the time I finish the Scholar in Residence Program. The first manuscript for *We Can!* will be submitted to *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*. This journal is a good fit as it publishes school or system level improvement or reform programs. It also has a system wide policy reform component, which fits with the work I am doing, the implications my research has for school policy and practice, as well as the interests of the Public Policy Center.

### *Why is it Important and Relevant to Policy?*

The proposed work is important and relevant to educational policy in multiple ways. First, as mentioned, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) states that evidenced-based trauma informed interventions/programs are needed and should be implemented for high-needs students. *We Can!* is a comprehensive, long term intervention that has the potential to impact lasting change. When looking at trends from our first year of data collection, our intervention and control school had similar baseline levels of understanding the impact of trauma on students' behavior and learning as well as in their ability to work with students who have trauma. However, at the next data collection point, the intervention groups knowledge and skill increased, whereas the control school starkly decreased. At the third data collection point the intervention and control school levels were similar. When, I asked the principal of the control school about this trend, he stated that he had heard so much about ACEs and needed to get info to his staff. At the fourth time of data collecting, the intervention group stayed high whereas the control group decreased. This indicates the need for ongoing professional development and need to integrate the intervention into the school. Second, Iowa SF2113 indicates that schools need to have one hour of evidenced-based ACE and toxic stress education annually. This is a great start for students in Iowa. Prevent Child Abuse Iowa has a one-hour program, Connections Matter, that fits this perfectly. From my experience, once schools are exposed to the impact of trauma, everyone wants to know what to do next. *We Can!* builds on this work and can meet the needs of schools across Iowa (as described in the grant portion). Third, given the increase in school shooting and school violence, policy and practice related to creating a safe culture and climate is of the essence. I propose that *We Can!* is an intervention that can help create a safe and productive school environment for all involved. *We Can!* offers flexibility and compassion while still holding high expectations for students learning and behaviors. All school personnel change the way they see children. From our qualitative focus groups, teachers report that they no longer take children's behaviors personally or disrespectful which allows them to respond differently to children. Teachers are also more aware of what might be a retraumatizing event that could trigger negative student behaviors and consequently decreases ostracizing by peers. Further, students pick up on the different climate the teachers have created. As our quantitative data indicates school personnel in the intervention group increased in staff collegiality and worker satisfaction. In qualitative focus groups, school personnel talked about how they could turn to their co-workers more and problem solve together. They felt a greater sense of community. An administrator stated that she has noticed a difference in children on the playground. She said after implementing *We Can!* she can see a noticeable difference in how the students are treating each other. This is important as we never directly interacted with students. The climate and culture changed, which changed the way students interacted with each other, which helps to create a safe environment for all.