



## Opening Doors to Safer and More Inclusive Schools

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# While eliminating restraint, seclusion, and other harsh disciplinary practices

Over the past forty years, there has been an explosion of research in multiple disciplines that have vastly increased the knowledge base about the brain and nervous system and human development and behavior. Changes include an [understanding of the role of toxic stress](#)

(unpredictable, unrelenting stress) and trauma on the structure of the developing brain and on functioning. State dependent functioning, the polyvagal theory, bottom up versus top down learning and control and the differences between intentional behaviors and stress behaviors (flight, fight, freeze) are all part of this new understanding. However, despite all this progress students with disabilities and Black and Brown students who are unable to meet the behavioral expectations are not supported or accommodated, but rather, they are punished.

It is time to shift to an approach that is relationship-based, trauma-informed, neuroscience-aligned, developmentally appropriate, individualized, biologically respectful and collaborative to support ALL children in schools across the nation. The solutions that will improve the educational system and improve outcomes for students are the same solutions that will eliminate restraint and seclusion in America's schools. An honest, unbiased review of the principles and research upon which the policies and practices are built is the first step. This must be followed by courageous commitment and action to make the changes necessary to align educational and discipline approaches with current research findings, the goals of the educational organization, and principles of equity.

A "twenty-first century" approach to supporting ALL students requires discontinuation of discipline management systems and standardized approaches that are based on behaviorism and focused on compliance. Schools that focus on understanding and meeting the needs of the individual student have found that when the student's basic needs of being seen, soothed, safe, and secure are met and the students are assisted with managing their stress loads, concerning behaviors are greatly reduced and can be resolved without resorting to procedures such as restraint and seclusion.

The information that follows is relevant for parents, as well as teachers. In fact, implementation of the following approaches, along with discontinuation of practices that are ineffective and counterproductive will improve outcomes for all human service organizations and agencies, including social services and foster care, juvenile justice, and the criminal justice system.

***Twenty-first-century approaches are relationship-based, neuroscience-aligned, trauma-informed, developmentally appropriate, collaborative, individualized, and neuro-biologically respectful. They share the following elements:***

1. Staff understand basic brain development and function, state-dependent functioning, and the impact of stress and trauma on brain development and function. They understand the need for brain/body regulation, including the key concepts of co-regulation, sequential brain development and processing of information, and bottom-up (autonomic, body directed) versus top-down (cognitive, conscious) learning and responses.
2. Relationships are essential for healthy brain development, for emotional regulation and wellbeing, and learning.
3. The struggling child and “behavior” are seen through a new lens. There is an understanding of the role of toxic stress and trauma in behaviors; that behaviors may be intentional, or they may be adaptive or maladaptive responses to stress. The need for a different approach for “stress responses” (autonomic fight, flight, or freeze reactions) is recognized. Compassion, curiosity, and empathy replace assumptions, judgments, manipulation, and control.
4. The concept of “safety” is broadened to recognize the need for emotional, cultural, and social safety in addition to physical safety. Children, youth, and adults must “feel” safe, seen, soothed, and secure to have access to all parts of their brain.
5. There is a shared understanding that adults must be aware of their own social-emotional needs and responses. Adults must monitor their regulatory status and maintain or return to a calm regulated state before interacting with students to respond rather than react to students’ distress.
6. Responses to behavioral challenges must be individualized and collaborative, with the student the primary participant in helping to understand the need beneath the behavior.
7. School policies, procedures, and practices are trauma-informed as well as culturally and racially equitable and nondiscriminatory based on gender, gender identification, sexual orientation, or disability.
8. Self-regulation, and co-regulation when needed, is the key to maintaining or restoring brain/body balance and preventing problematic stress responses. Regulatory activities are preventative strategies that can be built into the structure of the day for all students. Also, since the source of stress overload varies from child to child and even from day to day for the same

child, regulatory or restorative activities must be individualized to meet each child's individual needs.

## **Understanding basic brain development and function, including the impact of stress and trauma**

When teachers (and parents) understand brain development and functioning – including state-dependent functioning, the impact of stress, toxic stress and trauma, and brain/body regulation, they can support students' healthy brain and body development. They recognize, understand, and support students who experience dysregulation and stress responses (fight/flight or freeze). Teachers and parents who understand the difference between intentional (top-down) behaviors and autonomic, non-intentional (bottom-up) behaviors, recognize that punishing bottom-up behaviors is as harmful to the child as it is ineffective as a disciplinary measure. Dr. Stuart Shanker addressed this in an interview with Simon Currigan for the Beacon School Behavior Secrets Podcast, where he stated that the big discovery made over the last 30 years, is that what happens in the limbic system (midbrain) is as important, if not more important, than the things that are going on in the thinking part of the brain (the neocortex). He went on to say that the kids who struggle with behavioral issues have heightened stress loads generally, because of biological reasons. Before the discovery of the impact of stress loads with the resultant (non-volitional) stress responses, there was not an understanding of the difference between a stress behavior coming from the limbic system, and intentional behavior.

***As a result, adults made things worse by punishing and shaming kids for unintentional behaviors. Dr. Shanker reports that “once you make this distinction, once you recognize the stress behavior for what it is, and deal with it accordingly, you get a totally different kid***

# ***and that child’s whole developmental trajectory is transformed as a result of the adults seeing their behavior through a different lens”.***

In the video [Stress, Trauma, and the Brain: Insights for Educators – The Neurosequential Model](#), Dr. Bruce Perry explains how the Neurosequential Model in Education can help educators increase students’ engagement in learning and mitigate behavioral problems. In [The Brain Science Behind Student Trauma](#), Dr. Perry says “the key to the success of any educational experience is the capacity to ‘get to the cortex.’ Yet, each year, nearly one-third of all children attending U.S. public schools will have significantly impaired cortical functioning due to abuse, neglect, domestic violence, poverty, and other adversities. Understanding the effects of trauma on a child’s brain and how these effects alter the ability to learn is essential to improving our public education system. Successful neuroscience- and trauma-informed education practices, programs, and policies show that when children feel safe and connected, our greatest invention—public education—can be more effective in helping express the potential in all students.”

In her book, [Connections over Compliance: Rewiring Our Perceptions of Discipline](#), Dr. Lori Desautels explains that when students are taught about their neuroanatomy, they are able to understand what happens in their brains when they become stressed, angry, or anxious. Knowledge of how the brain works can help a student feel relieved and empowered. To help students (and adults) understand “state-dependent functioning”, Dr. Dan Siegel has developed a “[hand model](#)” of the brain to demonstrate what happens when the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for thinking, problem-solving and other “[executive functioning skills](#)” goes offline. In their book [The Whole Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child’s Developing Mind](#), Dr. Siegel and his co-author, Tina Payne Bryson, Ph.D. explain that “since the brain is significantly shaped by the experiences we offer as parents, knowing about the way the brain changes in response to our parenting can help us to nurture a stronger, more resilient child.

The [PACES Connection](#) provides [information and resources](#) about adverse childhood experiences and resiliency. Resiliency practices, which can be integrated into the school culture and daily routines, can mitigate the impact of ACEs.

## The Importance of Relationships

Research findings from the past 30 years in a variety of fields consistently identify relationships as the most important factor for healthy brain development, learning, and resilience. According to the [Center on the Developing Child](#) at Harvard University, an “environment of relationships” is crucial for the development of a child’s [brain architecture](#) which lays the foundation for later outcomes such as academic performance, mental health, and interpersonal skills. Mona Delahooke, Ph.D. pediatric psychologist and author, reports that neuroscientists studying the brain in the 1990s (the “Decade of the Brain”) came to realize that the (behaviorism) approach overlooked two essential factors: the significance of the targeted individual’s emotions and the importance of [engaged, safe relationships](#).

***“Just because you can alter behaviors doesn’t mean that you are enhancing quality of life or improving outcomes for vulnerable children.”***

In [The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog and Other Stories for a Child Psychiatrist’s Notebook: What Traumatized Children Can Teach Us About Loss, Love and Healing](#), Dr. Bruce Perry states, “Relationships are the agents of change and the most powerful therapy is human love.” In his follow-up book co-authored by Maia Szalavitz, [Born for Love: why empathy is essential and endangered](#) (co-authored by Maia Szalavitz), Dr. Perry states that humankind would not have endured and cannot continue without the capacity to form rewarding, nurturing, and enduring relationships.



Relationships are critical to success

Stuart Shanker, Ph.D. says, “The [practice of Self-Reg](#) occurs within relationships: with students, families, colleagues and the school community”. Dr. Mona Delahooke states in her blog [What Makes an Education “Appropriate”?](#) Building It on Relationships,” the best way to support children will always be through the healing power of human relationships. If we make relationships a priority, we will build children’s programs on a solid foundation and give children the best chance to develop into citizens with character and resilience.” Dr. Delahooke provides additional guidance in [The Key to Supporting Victims of Childhood Trauma: Safe and Supportive Relationships](#).

According to Lori Desautels, Ph.D., “[Secure, trusting bonds with caring adults are critical to human beings during the unfolding of their innate potential.](#)”

## Seeing the Struggling Child Through a New Lens



It's time to see behavior through a new lens

In [Born for Love: why empathy is essential- and endangered](#), Dr. Bruce Perry explains the science behind empathy, the development of empathy in children and adolescents, and how the development of empathy can be thwarted. "[Empathy underlies](#) virtually everything that makes society work – trust, altruism, collaboration, love, charity." Professor McDonnell identifies empathy as the first key element of the low arousal approach. He states that without empathy, the low arousal approach cannot be practiced. Additional information about this approach can be found in his book, [The Reflective Journey: a practitioner's guide to the Low Arousal approach](#).

Dr. Stuart Shanker speaks of [reframing the behavior](#) in terms of responses to stress. He describes self-reg as an ongoing, lifelong, process of understanding stress-behavior that involves interrelated practices for maintaining a healthy energy/tension balance. Dr. Mona Delahooke describes a [paradigm shift](#) in how behaviors are viewed. Instead of asking "what is he getting out of the behavior, ask what the behavior is telling us about the child's underlying neurophysiological processes. Instead of focusing on what we do to children, prioritize how we ARE with children.



Instead of focusing on eliminating behaviors, we need to provide children with signals of safety personalized to their nervous systems that allow social engagement behaviors to emerge spontaneously.

In her 2020 book, [Connections over Compliance: Rewiring our Perceptions of Discipline](#), Lori Desautels, Ph.D., writes that behavior management is not about students; it is about the adults. She recommends moving away from the words “behavior management” because “we are never called to manage another person.” “Brain-aligned relational discipline embraces the knowledge and understanding that discipline is the expression of a compassionate presence, warm demanding and guidance without coercion. **Discipline is not something we do to students; it is something we want to develop within them.**”

[Dr. Stephen Porges](#) and [Dr. Delahooke](#) describe behaviors as adaptive responses and they refer to behaviors that are triggered by a dysregulated brain state, by the brain detecting danger or threat, as “**stress behaviors**”. These are autonomic, non-volitional behaviors initiated by the primitive part of the brain as a defensive response to threat.

Heather T. Forbes, LCSW, in [Classroom 180: A Framework for Creating, Sustaining, and Assessing the Trauma-Informed Classroom](#), states that implementing a trauma-informed platform spins everything that has traditionally been done 180 degrees; shifting from a fear-based platform to a love-based platform. Moving from fear, power, and control to love, relationship and regulation.

According to Professor Andrew McDonnell, author of [The Reflective Journey: A practitioner’s guide to the Low Arousal Approach](#), people are complex and live in a very complex world; therefore, solutions may also require a complex response. “... despite what people tell you, behavior is not as simple as ABC.” The goal should be to help people regulate their behavior, not to attempt to control it through external measures.

Recognizing that attempting to exert control over someone in distress only fuels a psychologically destructive cycle and that this is compounded by past traumatic experiences, Grafton Integrated Health Network adopted a philosophy of [comfort over control](#) and developed a trauma-informed approach based on up-to-date research and individualized to meet each individual’s needs. In 2015, Grafton launched [Ukeru Systems](#), a safe, comforting, and restraint-free crisis management program developed by and for behavioral health professionals and paraprofessionals, educators,

and parents. It is the first crisis-training program to eliminate the use of restraints and seclusion as accepted behavioral management tools.

Guidance is available specifically for parents also. Laura Markham, Ph.D., author of three bestselling books and founding editor of [AHA Parenting](#), speaks of approaching the whole experience of parenting from a new perspective. She identifies three “big ideas.” (1) regulating yourself. (2) Fostering Connection. (3) coaching, not controlling. Alfie Kohn, in his book [Unconditional Parenting: Moving from Rewards and Punishment to Love and Reason](#), speaks of shifting from “how do I get my child to behave?” to “What does my child need and how can I meet those needs?”

## **Safety**

Much of the compliance-based expectations and harsh disciplinary practices of the past 40 to 50 years were made in the name of “safety.” To keep children safe, harsh punishments were pre-determined for drug and weapon offenses. Over time, these harsh disciplinary practices were applied to minor infractions. Federal funding supported police in schools. Student searches were implemented. In some schools, metal detectors were added as well as surveillance cameras. The intent was to protect students from outside threats such as school shootings. The result was schools that feel like prisons. But feeling safe is more than protection against outside intruders. In fact, many of the strategies implemented in the name of “safety” make vulnerable students, including students of color and students with disabilities feel less safe.



Time to end harsh punishments in the name of “safety”

The need for students to feel safe, seen, soothed, and secure was introduced earlier in this article. In the [Power of Showing Up: How Parental Presence Shapes Who Our Kids Become and How Their Brains Get Wired](#), Dr. Siegel and Dr. Bryson explain that for healthy child development, every child needs to feel safe, seen, soothed, and secure. “Safe” means they feel protected and sheltered from harm. “Seen” means the child knows their parents or another adult cares about them and pays attention to them. “Soothed” means the child knows the significant adult(s) in their life will be there for them when they are hurting. Secure means the child trusts their parents or another adult to predictably help them feel “at home” in the world, then learn to help themselves feel safe, seen, and soothed.

Dr. Stephen Porges, the originator of [Polyvagal Theory](#), coined the term [neuroception](#) to describe the way the autonomic nervous system scans the external environment and the body for cues of safety, danger, and life threat without involving the thinking parts of the brain. When the nervous system detects safety, social behaviors emerge spontaneously. This state also supports cognitive

processing (learning) and homeostasis. On the other hand, when danger or threat is detected, autonomic survival mechanisms (fight/flight or freeze) are triggered.

According to Dr. Shanker, "Helping Children feel safe in every way – physically, emotionally, culturally and socially – [provides the foundation for a regulated](#) or balanced state that supports learning and positive social interaction." Dr. Perry, in his book, [Born for Love: why empathy is essential-and endangered](#) writes that everyone needs emotional safety to maximize learning potential. Dr. Desautels agrees, stating that "the developing brains and bodies of our children and youth need to feel safe and to feel 'felt' by others to experience social, emotional, physiological, and cognitive well-being. (from the summation of Applied Educational Neuroscience/Brain/Trauma/Resiliency course at Butler University 2020/2021). The trauma training organization, ECHO, identifies physical and emotional safety as the first item on their list of [components](#) of a trauma-informed compassionate classroom.

## **The Social-Emotional Well-Being of the Teachers and Other Adults is Critical**

According to Mark Greenberg in [Educator Well-Being – We Need Systems Change \(Part 1\): Supporting educator's social and emotional lives](#), there is [substantial data](#) that teacher's social and emotional competence and well-being both influence student behavior and achievement. "As the highly respected Lee Shulman reflected in 1983 " ...[the teacher must remain the key](#). The literature on effective schools is meaningless, debates over educational policy are moot if the primary agents of instruction are incapable of performing their function." The [CASEL School Guide](#) to systemic SEL places a major focus on adult SEL and even recommends the possibility that schools consider focusing on adult SEL before implementing evidence-based SEL Programs for students. The school environment MUST support teachers and other school personnel.

***Seymour Sarason noted decades ago that***

***["sustained and productive contexts of](#)***

***[learning](#) cannot exist for students if they do***

***not simultaneously exist for teachers."***

According to Dr. Lori Desautels “Brain Aligned Discipline begins with the brain state of the educator.” (from the summation of Applied Educational Neuroscience/Brain/Trauma/Resiliency course at Butler University 2020/2021) “Discipline begins with the adult and the nervous system of that adult matters the most!” Dr. Stuart Shanker says, “[Self-Reg](#) begins with you. Consider your own stress and dysregulation and how they affect you and your students.” To “lend students our calm, we first have to understand and manage our own stress, energy and tension and recognize what can feel like for ourselves and what it feels like to be overstressed.” Dr. Perry makes a similar statement, “a regulated, calm adult can regulate a dysregulated, anxious child; a dysregulated adult can never regulate a dysregulated child.”

Dr. Laura Markham advises parents that “your first responsibility in parenting is being mindful of your inner state. If you can notice when you are triggered and restore yourself to equilibrium before you act if you can soothe your anxiety, if you can reflect on your own experience and make peace with it, you can raise happy, emotionally healthy children.” (From [Peaceful Parents, Happy Kids: How to stop yelling and start connecting](#)).

## **Approaches are Collaborative, Individualized, and Respectful**

Other leaders also embrace the power of collaboration. In this [Podcast](#) with Dr. Laura Markham, Alfie Kohn explains how to solve problems through collaboration with your child rather than using a system of rewards and consequences.

Respect for the student is shown through the language used, the adult’s tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language.

***Dr. Delahooke advises readers to respect autistic student’s behaviors for what they are – their means of communicating or being in the world. “It’s a good idea to pause and rethink our initial reactions to behavioral***

***differences we observe in neurodiverse children. Doing so helps us begin to teach children to respect the signals from their bodies and to involve the child in devising creative solutions that honor their individual differences.***

In the [Reflective Journey: A practitioner's guide to the Low Arousal approach](#), Professor Andrew McDonnell cautions that terms like "violence", "aggression," and "tantrums" impact the stereotypes we have about people. He advises against using statements like "he is using behavior to get attention," because that implies the behavior is willful, deliberate, and perhaps even manipulative. He further states that language that implies a child is bad can result in the child believing he is bad. Dr. Delahooke provides advice about the negative impact of labels given to students in this blog: The [Key to Supporting Victims of Childhood Trauma: Safe and Supportive Relationships](#). In [Is Your Child "Violent?" Why the answer to this question may save your child's life](#), Jennifer Litton Tidd explains the great harm that is caused by the careless use of inflammatory words to describe kids who struggle.

Lori Petro created [TEACH THROUGH LOVE](#) to help adults communicate with kids in ways that increase cooperation and build strong relationships. Her communication cards and courses teach parents and professionals how to let go of the unconscious patterns and beliefs related to discipline that keeps them stuck in negative cycles with kids.

In [Schools as Self-Reg Havens](#), Dr. Shanker provides a real-life example of how listening to and interacting with a student in a non-threatening manner can profoundly change the dynamic between the student and the adult.

# Trauma-Informed, Brain-aligned, Culturally and Racially Equitable School Policies, Procedures, and Practices

Many efforts to reduce disparity in disciplinary and other measures fall short because the source of bias and discrimination is not only in the application of policies, procedures, laws, and regulations, but those biases are embedded within the infrastructure of the organization. A systematic review of all policies, procedures, codes of conduct, and practices by representatives of the populations served, including students, is necessary to identify practices handed down over time that reflect cultural, racial, gender, disability, LGBTQ or other biases and/or misalignment with neuroscience and trauma-informed practices. Here is an [Educational Equity Audit tool](#) from Virginia that can be used to guide an [Equity Audit](#) and a [Racial Analysis Equity Tool](#) from Washington state.



Understanding brain state is critical for students and teachers alike

School personnel should engage in professional development opportunities centered around equity, self-reflection, and identification of explicit and implicit biases.

Data collection and analysis should be used as means of monitoring the effectiveness of the actions that are being taken to address discrimination and bias.

## **Regulatory Activities are Brain-aligned, Trauma-Informed Prevention Strategies**

According to Dr. Shanker, the [core concept of self-regulation](#) refers to how the brain maintains physiological stability through complex feedback mechanisms. It is the ability to self-regulate that allows a child to respond to stressors in their environment. [Self-Reg](#) is an ongoing, lifelong, process of understanding stress-behavior; it involves interrelated practices for maintaining a healthy energy/tension balance.

According to Dr. Mona Delahooke, “our educational systems frequently fail to address a [common denominator that underlies every IEP goal](#). This essential factor? Emotional regulation, the child’s ability to feel safe, calm and alert in mind and body.” In [The Brain Science Behind Student Trauma](#), Dr. Perry writes that children who have experienced trauma will be in a persistent state of alarm and less capable of concentrating when they enter classrooms. Because of this, they will pay more attention to the nonverbal cues of a teacher, such as tone of voice, body posture, and facial expressions. Unless teachers adopt some regulating practices for those students, such as meditative breathing or rhythmic motor activity, children will remain in the alarm state, impairing cognitive learning.

In her book, [Connections over Compliance: Rewiring Our Perceptions of Discipline](#), Dr. Lori Desautels devotes an entire chapter to “The Masks of Pain and the Power of Regulation.” She explains that co-regulation and the educator’s brain and body state are the critical change agents at the core of the shift trauma-responsive schools have made to discipline. The resource section of this book provides a vast array of regulation and connection strategies. Dr. Desautels’ ebook [Brain-Aligned Strategies: Addressing the Emotional, Social, and Academic Health of All Students](#) provides specific activities that can be used to support students.

# **Examples of Schools and Organizations Implementing 21st Century Approaches**



Many schools across the United States (and in other countries) have moved away from behaviorism and its focus on behaviors and compliance. Instead, these schools and other organizations, including juvenile correctional facilities and residential facilities use Twenty-first Century Approaches as described in this document.

### Fall-Hamilton Elementary: Transitioning to Trauma-Informed Practices to Support ...



Click on the links below to learn more about how these approaches are working in schools throughout the world.

[Voices of CPS](#) (Collaborative and Proactive Solutions). People who have implemented CPS speak out about their experiences. Here is an example of the use of [Collaborative and Proactive Solutions](#) with an entire class.

**Grafton Integrated Health Network:** In 2004, Grafton Integrated Health Network (Grafton), a system that includes schools, residential treatment facilities, group homes specializing in serving autistic children, adolescents and adults, and individuals with intellectual disabilities and/or complex mental health challenges — issued a mandate to eliminate restraints without compromising employee or client safety. Grafton employees created their own crisis prevention and management system, based on a core philosophy of Comfort vs. Control® and Trauma-Informed Approaches. The organization not only [eliminated seclusion and reduced the use of](#)

[restraints](#) by more than 99 percent and has significantly increased the rate of treatment goals mastered across the organization. Grafton day schools eliminated the use of restraint and seclusion several years ago.

### **Lincoln Alternative High School, Walla Walla, Washington**

[This Town Adopted Trauma-Informed Care—And Saw a Decrease in Crime and Suspension Rates](#)

### **Fall-Hamilton Elementary School, Nashville, Tennessee**

[An Inside Look at Trauma-Informed Practices](#)

### **Centennial School in Bethlehem, PA**

[How the most violent special ed school ended restraint and seclusion](#)

### **Denver, Colorado**

[Can Denver Public Schools Help Kids Experiencing Trauma?](#)

### **Colorado Springs, Colorado**

[Restorative Justice program expands in Harrison School District 2](#)

### **Lincoln-Hubbard School in Summit, New Jersey**

[How Ending Behavior Rewards Helped One School Focus on Student Motivation and Character](#)

### **Choices and Voices: The Nuts and Bolts of Inclusive Teaching**

Karen Hope Blacher, teacher. [“The way I’ve learned to relate to my neurodiverse kids \(which, at its crux, comes down to basic respect, adaptation, and communication\) is actually a pretty awesome way to relate to everyone.”](#)

### **Drumchapel High, Glasgow**

[A radical vision that kept troubled children in school — and cut crime.](#) A high school notorious for its wild behavior has been transformed by adopting a public health approach (United Kingdom)

These schools and individuals provide evidence that there are ways to support students – and teachers that not only eliminate the need for harsh disciplinary practices but also result in happier students and teachers and better school outcomes.

Now is a perfect time to revisit the policies, practices and expectations for our educational system. The evidence continues to mount indicating that an outdated behaviorism approach is not only ineffective for the very students for which it was developed, but is creating “preventable” trauma and mental health problems (anxiety, depression, PTSD) for students who are being punished rather than accommodated or supported when they do not have the ability to meet the expectations. The research around stress and trauma continues to build as does the body of evidence from implementation of approaches that are relationship based, individualized, trauma informed, neuroscience aligned and biologically respectful.

Additional resources can be found on this [list](#).

## Author



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Beth retired in 2018 from a leadership position in Virginia’s lead agency for early intervention for infants and toddlers and is a mother, grandmother and advocate.

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