

**How Adverse Childhood Experiences Affect Student Achievement and Overall School  
Experience in Schools in Watauga County, North Carolina**

by

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Honors Thesis  
Appalachian State University

submitted to The Honors College  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education

May, 2021

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## *Abstract*

This thesis contains an assessment of the prevalence Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in the lives of students in Watauga County, North Carolina and their effects on student achievement. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) defines Adverse Childhood Experiences as “potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood” such as “experiencing violence or abuse, witnessing violence in the home or community, having a family member attempt or die by suicide,” or “growing up in a household with substance misuse, mental health problems, instability due to parental separation or household members being in jail or prison.” The following research analyzes the relationship between the existence of adverse childhood experiences and student achievement trends in Watauga County classrooms.

Research was conducted virtually using Google Forms to survey the superintendent, principals, counselors, and teachers within Watauga County schools. Findings from this study indicate a positive correlation between the existence adverse childhood experiences and poor achievement in Watauga County students. The implications of this study indicate that education professionals have a responsibility to provide support to students with these life experiences in order to help them succeed, and thus reach a high level of academic achievement, in their academic endeavors.

**Keywords:** education, adverse childhood experience (ACE), trauma, achievement, school, students

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## *Introduction*

Socioeconomic status affects many facets of daily life. From where one wakes up in the morning to what clothes they get dressed in and their meal for lunch, finances affect everything that someone experiences on a daily basis. For children, these things can stand out in their minds and permeate their lives.

In addition to financial hardships, adverse childhood experiences can also affect daily life. Being constantly paranoid about hunger or physical danger encompasses the mind, leaving little room for anything else. Comparing themselves and their life experiences to others and worrying about necessities and problems at home can consume a child. This can affect how they perform their daily duties, such as tasks at school.

Adverse childhood experiences can affect education in a variety of ways, from lack of support at home to traumatic childhood events. When the focus becomes on something other than school, it is the responsibility of the teacher to meet that child where they are and offer any type of support that they may need. Divorce is a rampant adverse childhood experience in Watauga County. The “spillover hypothesis” explains the relationship between marital conflict and child outcomes: negative interactions “spill over” into parent and child relationships; so, children need positive interactions, or, positive “spill over.” In this manner, family factors do have an influence on social development (Rikuya). According to a teacher in Watauga County, NC, some students “tend to present a strong ‘front’” while still showing “inconsistent educational gaps” in school. Another teacher mentioned that as parents or guardians are focused on financial stability, their child’s academics can fall by the wayside.

These comments support the hypothesis that students who experience adverse childhood experiences in their lives have lower achievement levels in school than their peers who do not

experience adverse childhood experiences. Additionally, the literature points to an overall positive correlation between adverse childhood experiences and poor education experiences.

This study delves into the Watauga County Schools system and assesses the adverse childhood experiences that students experience, comparing them with things such as attendance and behavior trends. It also builds in the basic statement that adverse childhood experiences do affect education by studying aspects of the education realm such as attendance, grade level performance, mental health trends, and behavior trends relating to various other studies that lead to the hypothesis that adverse childhood experiences have a negative impact on education.

Overall, the study of adverse childhood experiences has a huge impact on the education field. This is a field of growing information, so anything that is available is valuable in helping education professionals to best serve their students. This study contributes to this growing literature and the results imply that students affected by adverse childhood experiences have a harder time being successful in school. The results of this study are similar to what other research has found and supports the idea that schools and educational professionals have a responsibility to provide students with the support and structure That will help them succeed.

## *Literature Review*

There are several factors in students' lives that affect educational attainment and overall performance. The most prominent of which is adverse childhood experiences, colloquially referred to as ACEs. Previous research has identified the common theme of traumas and poor economic, physical, and mental health to be negative effects on both student achievement and experience in school (Benner; Berger; Lanier; Nichol) . These things include socioeconomic difficulties, the lack of parental involvement, absence from school throughout the year, as well as other various traumas. Previous research has also identified other types of traumatic experiences, such as racism and ethnic discrimination, as negative influences on student educational achievement (Lanier).

### **Socioeconomic Status**

There is a correlation between student socioeconomic status and achievement goals. Therefore, there is a complexity in goal formation for students based on their varying statuses. In his academic journal, Nathan Berger identifies six types of goals... The mastery goal is a student wanting to develop competence at an academic task. The performance goal is a student wanting to demonstrate competence at an academic task. The mastery approach goal is a student wanting to develop competence in a task because it is interesting or important to them. The mastery avoid goal is a student recognizing a task as interesting or important but being afraid of not living up to their recognized potential. The performance approach goal is a student wanting to demonstrate a superior ability compared to their peers. The performance avoid goal is a student attempting to avoid unfavorable judgements about their abilities compared to their peers (Berger).

Students of all socioeconomic backgrounds are intuitively aware of social expectations concerning academics, but even so, there is a delineation of social cognitive tendencies between various backgrounds. This is seen in students of low socioeconomic backgrounds attributing actions to external instead of internal forces and facing situations with little to no personal choice or control. Conversely, students of high socioeconomic backgrounds make decisions preferring uniqueness, individuality, and self-focused thinking (Berger).

Socioeconomic status can explain student academic results, such as grade retention, which can result in high dropout rates in secondary education. Some variables that increase grade retention are students speaking different languages at home versus in school and come from single parent families. Contrastingly, some variables that decrease grade retention are early schooling and high family socioeconomic status. Socioeconomic status is merely a subset variable of family aspects; others can include parental education levels and careers and the number of books and educational resources, such as a quiet place to study, internet access, reading, or television, in the home. It is important for teachers to notice learning difficulties as a result of socioeconomic status in students as early as possible so that measures can be developed in an effort to compensate for those effects (González-Betancor).

The socioeconomic status gap is widening due to income inequality, income segregation, high-income individuals having resources, and investments in education being made by those of high-income status. Haigen Huang suggests that the achievement gap is correlated to the socioeconomic status gap and can be reduced through increased learning time and persistence.

There is a strong correlation between family socioeconomic status and child health. Additionally, child health and behavioral problems can predict student skill development, academic achievement, and socioeconomic status later in life. Child health is part of the

pathway of how family socioeconomic status affects development. Children in higher income and parent educated households have better health than their peers who do not grow up in similar situations. Poor child health is associated with parental relationship instability, poor parental health, and the low probability of parental participation in the labor force (i.e. parent unemployment levels). Poor health in relation to children includes behavioral problems, low birth weight, and general health problems (Lee, D.).

What is not addressed in consideration of health is mental health. Child mental health problems are in their own category and are identified by internalizing or externalizing behaviors. There also is a strong correlation between family socioeconomic status and child cognitive development. Student achievement is affected by socioeconomic status and health at critical points in development, and as such, achievement gaps that are observed early in life are likely to remain the same (Lee, D.).

Lower socioeconomic status and low parent education levels are linked to youth and adolescent substance abuse. Studies indicate that adolescents with low socioeconomic status have a heightened need for rewards. Teachers, and others in authority, have looked at two different types of reinforcement for these students. Alternative reinforcement is punishment joined with working to reinforce an alternate appropriate behavior. Complementary reinforcement is behavior that sparks the same reaction as the ones that are associated with things such as substance abuse. These reinforcement techniques along with actionable prevention targets are being used to interrupt the link between parental socioeconomic status and substance abuse earlier in children's lives (Lee, O. J.).

There are differences in language usage and development associated with differences in socioeconomic backgrounds due to the certain level of impact that socioeconomic status has on



conversation. Low socioeconomic status speech is identified by literal words, localized language, and vocabulary only linked with immediate experiences. High socioeconomic status speech is identified by a wide range of vocabulary and interpretation and universalistic language. Language is adapted in people according to their social constructs, and resources and activities can favor one social group over another one. It is important for teachers to recognize these differences and work to provide equal access to vocabulary and language practice to students of all backgrounds (Manison Shore).

Those who live in poverty are more prone to food insecurity which can cause delayed mental development and growth problems, influence school performance, and is related to obesity. Some factors that are associated with food insecurity are: limited financial resources, unemployment, single parent families, being a part of a minority, and low-level education. School feeding programs can successfully improve dietary energy intake and the micronutrient status of students. This security in turn can result in: weight reduction in obese students, the strengthening of healthy eating habits, improved physical, psychological, and mental health, and reduction in school dropout and absence rates, and improved academic performance (Petralias).

Additionally, socioeconomic status is an indicator associated with child mental health functioning. There is a pathway connecting the family processes, the family economic situation, and child mental health functionality. Family income is directly related to child mental health functionality because: family income affects marriage conflicts which affect parenting practices which in turn affect child outcomes. Children in disadvantaged families end up struggling due to limited access to resources that spur child development. There is also an effect of parent education level on children, namely parent knowledge of child rearing and child development (Rikuya).

## **Parental Involvement**

Academic socialization is important for students and takes the form of parents giving their children the tools and skills needed for both independence and academic success. Therefore, parent involvement has a positive correlation to student academic success. There are two main forms of parent involvement: home based and school based. Home based involvement includes things such as parents monitoring their child's homework completion, checking their child's homework for accuracy, and providing educational enrichment opportunities. School based involvement includes things such as parents volunteering at their child's school, participating in school organizations, and attending parent/teacher conferences. These things and more are important because parental involvement is proven to be beneficial for "disadvantaged youth." Additionally, student achievement gaps close when there is more parental involvement. However, parental involvement does not negate the importance of both teachers and peers as having roles in student academic success; rather, it is best to have a balance of these many educational roles in a child's life (Benner).

Students have a certain view of themselves. When they view themselves as persistent, they have better performance; contrastingly, when they view themselves as less persistent, they have lower performance. Encouraging students to persevere in academics is just one thing that teachers can do to help close the achievement gap. Some other things include having parents actively involved in the classroom and school, having more academic learning time, putting an emphasis on early literacy, having high learning standards and leader expectations, and collaborating with school, communities, and partners, which is something that is often referred to as a "microsystem," (Huang).

The “spillover hypothesis” explains the relationship between marital conflict and child outcomes: negative interactions “spill over” into parent and child relationships; so, children need positive interactions, or, positive “spill over.” Children have an inability to adjust socially which can lead to school maladjustment; this is supported by the fact that social skills, or lack thereof, affect social adaptation. Family factors do have an influence on social development (Rikuya).

### **Attendance**

There is a correlation between school attendance and good health. Based on this correlation, there is also a definite link between adverse childhood experiences and school success; in this case, adverse childhood experiences can lead to school absenteeism which leads to an unsuccessful student. These experiences can also predict emotional, mental, and behavioral health problems, and can have lasting impacts long into adulthood. Because these adverse experiences can not only affect academics, but also health, they become something that pediatricians and social workers must focus on in children in order to be able to work to counter-act them. Ideally, teachers, pediatricians, and social workers should all work collaboratively in order to prevent and reduce the impacts of such traumas (Crouch).

High school dropout is both a public health and economic concern; the outcomes range from increased rates of unemployment and incarceration to mortality. The academic factors that cause students to drop out include low achievement, grade retention, special education status, English language learners, urbanicity, and emotional and behavioral disorders. Schools with higher dropout rates tend to have a higher percentage of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds. Most importantly, school socioeconomic status and size are correlated to dropout; thus, large schools that serve low socioeconomic status communities ought to implement dropout prevention strategies at an early age (Wood).

## **Trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences**

Traumatic events violate students' sense of safety in the world and with others. Safety can be felt through calm connections and focused presences, often provided to students by teachers. Keeping the classroom free of traumatic triggers such as touch or conflict is important in providing a safe environment for all students. Teachers should work to pay attention to what prompts changes in children (i.e. what triggers them). Building connections is one of the most important things that a teacher can do in order to reach a child. This is a much better approach than getting drawn into re-enacting trauma with students (like when students attempt to test their power against those in authority). It is best to respond with curiosity rather than anger and exasperation in order to help foster those connections. School can benefit those affected by trauma by providing a routine, social interactions, connections, and role models. The three pillars of trauma-informed care are safety, connection, and emotional and behavioral regulation. When teachers are able to predict environmental responses and how students interact, they can better provide stability (Dombo).

Adverse childhood experiences are potentially traumatic experiences or events that have a negative effect on health and well-being both in childhood and later life and are considered to be a critical public health problem. The most common adverse childhood experiences are economic hardship and the separation or divorce of parents or guardians. Others include homelessness, forced migration, and bullying or harassment. Adverse childhood experiences have many effects such as: fear, terror, helplessness, lower educational attainment, unemployment, poverty, emotional and behavioral challenges, difficulty with paying attention and self-regulation. These effects can carry on into adulthood in the form of things such as: alcoholism, drug abuse, poor physical health, suicide, depression, and obesity (Murphey).

Professionals say that there is a need to make schools trauma-informed climates. This can be done through the strengthening of interpersonal relationships and social emotional skills, supporting physical and mental health needs, and the reduction of practices that may cause traumatic stress or re-traumatize a student. Trauma-informed care involves a variety of approaches that acknowledge the impact of trauma, recognize symptoms, and respond to effects through appropriate practices and policies. Providing social support and protective factors is the main key to trauma-informed care (Murphey).

Recent studies are beginning to include things such as “exposure to racism” in the forms of “discrimination; stigma; minority stress; historical trauma” in adverse childhood experience classifications (Lanier; Nichol). In fact, the 2016-2018 National Survey of Children’s Health reported that ten percent of black children experienced interpersonal racism, or, being treated “unfavorably because he/she is of a certain race.” Due to this statistic, black children often have higher overall trends of adverse childhood experiences in their lives than their white peers. In addition to interpersonal racism, institutional racism is not yet something that is measured and studied in earnest in association with adverse childhood experience research. The research does indicate however, that putting emphasis on remediating and preventing adverse childhood experiences, including institutional racism, overall public health can be improved (Lanier).

The Watauga Compassionate Community Initiative was born from Denise Presnell’s work began with a social work internship project, based on the book *The Heart of Learning and Teaching: Compassion, Resiliency, and Academic Success* by Ray Wolpaw. The compassion initiative she worked on caught the attention of the new principal at the school she began working at and she was encouraged to start a committee to focus more on that issue within the school. This initiative has really taken off since then, and she started the Watauga

Compassionate Community Initiative, which meets once a month and holds an annual conference working to educate as many people as possible about this initiative and fundraising to implement more tools in every classroom in Watauga County. One main thing that they fundraise for are the supplies for “calm corner kits,” which cost around one hundred dollars per kit (one kit per classroom). In order for any classroom in a school to receive a calm corner, the entire school must go through compassionate school training, using the first three chapters of Wolpow’s book. Her belief is that compassionate schools can pave the way for better atmospheres for all children, especially those who have had traumatic experiences; and her main motto is: “relationships, relationships, relationships.” According to her, she says that the best path to take in working to help children through trauma is through education, building relationships, and repairing trauma (Presnell).

**Jonathan Kozol’s *Savage Inequalities: Children in America’s Schools***

The book *Savage Inequalities: Children in America’s Schools* by Jonathan Kozol provides a unique, in-depth look into some of the largest discrepancies in schools and overall communities within the United States of America. Each chapter analyzes a different major city in the country, and exposes things like toxic waste, unsafe conditions for children, and the complete nonexistence of funding for education. This book opens a window into a completely different side of the country, one that many do not see and that others do not want to see, while some live it out every day. These inequalities do play into how children in the communities achieve success, in academics and life, for generations to come.

In East St. Louis, Illinois, there no garbage service, so things such as lead and arsenic are seeped in to the water in the river via the floodplain. Having such toxic materials in the water lead to health problems in the community, but healthcare is hard to come by due to the high

levels of unemployment. The high unemployment rates have resulted in a decline in the male population, as men work hard to leave the community for better lives. The community is seemingly all black and is viewed as an undesirable place to raise children, leading the neighboring white people to be wary of the town. One reason that people view East St. Louis as an unfit place to raise children is because there is hardly any funding for education leading to a lot of layoffs of school personnel and largely dilapidated school facilities (Kozol).

In North Lawndale, Illinois, there are high unemployment rates, gangs, high illiteracy rates, and low high school graduation rates. It is theorized that there is insufficient information about teaching strategies and financing which lead to pedagogic problems and lower academic achievement levels. Tracking also occurs, and this early testing does not help struggling students in the school system (Kozol).

In New York, New York, there is an unequal distribution of resources, seen in overcrowding and dilapidated facilities. Overcrowding is common in inner-city schools and are often populated by minorities, often who have poor, or no, healthcare. In these inner-city schools, the classes are broken down by races and within these breakdowns, are separated by “special” and regular classes. This insensitivity to student needs result in teachers not knowing their students’ names and fuel students to not care and stop attending school. Some schools are in actual school buildings, and while dilapidated, students still have school facilities. However, there are also schools set up in unused buildings such as skate rinks, like the one mentioned in the book. Based on these facilities, it is apparent that these communities view schools and teachers as disciplinarians instead of focusing on the importance of academia and getting students where they need to be to succeed (Kozol).

In Camden, New Jersey, value systems have high importance, and parent influence takes on a bigger role than big budget spending. In this community, businesses are leaving, there is overcrowding in schools, and segregated schools still exist, and many schools are supplied with typewriters instead of computers. While being stuck in the past, school officials are working to move past the many testing disadvantages and lack of creativity and critical thinking activities available in the curriculum. There is a lot of advocacy for preschool, however, there are not many opportunities for such a fundamental societal system (Kozol).

In Washington, D.C., the private schools and schools in the suburbs are highly desired. Magnet schools are even more attractive, and draw many rich people into them, leaving poor people in poor schools. These choices result in the phenomenon of “tracking,” or the school to prison pipeline. Students can sense the labels put on them and begin taking drugs and getting involved in other crimes to get money. School officials have worked to remedy such situations by putting people of minorities in positions of authority, which, while having a benefit, only accept racial explanations instead of striving to change them (Kozol).

In San Antonio Texas, as with many other states, funding comes from both local and national school boards. Again, as in many school districts, funding matters, and the rich tend to have the power in the districts through various foundations. Something that is unique to San Antonio is the separation of one area into two districts, often referred to as “parasite districts,” where there is a rich district set inside of a middle-class district. In this city, money, or lack thereof, runs, or does not run, the schools (Kozol).

**Annette Lareaus’s *Unequal Childhoods: Class, race, and family life***

There are very different social values between the middle class and the poor, working classes and family practices translate into differential advantages in society. The middle-class



places value on organized activities believing their children can gain institutional advantages by participating in them. These institutional expectations are much easier for middle class parents to comply with. People in suburbs view cities as dangerous and therefore, there is higher parent involvement from middle class parents to 'protect' their children. Teachers are seeing children becoming overscheduled. Because of this, children's senses of time are altered because their days are run on schedules. Being overscheduled is bound to lead to scheduling conflicts in families, but activities can cause sibling competition. Occasionally, the various development activities for children are at the expense of family time and its group needs. However, children relish their many activities, preferring to always have something to do rather than be bored. These constant activities result in children's interactions with others of only their same age and gender; professionals believe that parents put such focus on these activities because they want their children to have friends. These descriptions reinforce the concept of concerted cultivation, meaning that talents, opinions, and skills ought to be actively fostered, established by professionals. Likely because of such upbringing, middle class students are more likely to graduate from high school (Laureau).

Working class parents see clear boundaries between adults and children. Working class children have less structured time and organized activities, and children get to choose what to do with their time doing activities for pleasure instead of for benefit. Often times, parents see organized activities as inconsequential, although, when they did participate in them, working class children did not gain as much advantage as their middle class peers. There are often not even any supplies to do laundry, feed children, or get transported around town, much less provide items necessary for creativity or informal play for children. By having self-lead activities, children learn conflict resolution and rule applications on their own and appear more

relaxed and vibrant than their middle-class peers. While this free-reign lifestyle works for fostering creativity in children, these uncertainties result in no sense of a concrete home life. These descriptions reinforce the concept of natural growth, meaning that development will unfold spontaneously, established by professionals (Laureau).

Middle class parenting styles are centered around democratic parenting, focusing on negotiation. In this format, children's opinions are valued and considered. Something that parents do that can cause tension within this parenting style is actually being slightly too involved. By always intervening in their children's conflicts with teams, school, homework, slight illnesses, etc. there is tension between parents and their children. Working class parenting styles are centered around adult provided directions with little to no arguing from children. There is a lot more deference towards teachers from working class and poor parents. Additionally, they do not take an active role in their children's education, but instead depend on school staff expertise for their children's academia. In fact, this deference leads to parents encouraging their children to break the rules when necessary because they feel like they cannot help their children in an institutional manner. The tendency towards rule breaking and aggression is also seen in the homes of working class and poor families in the use of directives and physical punishment on children (Laureau).

In the middle class, parents tend to use high vocabulary and life skills terms in daily conversations. There is a lot less talking in working class homes, so working class children's vocabularies are less developed (Laureau).

## *Methodology*

### **Study Purpose**

The purpose of this project is to evaluate the effects of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) on student achievement in school as well as overall school experience. In particular, this study focuses on the adverse childhood experiences prevalent in schools in Watauga County, North Carolina, and how they might affect student education and experience. In order to explore how these two might be linked, this study utilized interviews with teachers, counselors, and social workers, as well as surveys of the principals, counselors, and teachers throughout Watauga County Schools.

### **Participants**

#### **Interviews**

The majority of research for this study was completed virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the researcher was able to hold in-person interviews with several experts pertaining to the topic of adverse childhood experiences in February 2020 – prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The first interviewee, who is the director of the Watauga Compassionate Community Initiative (WCCI) was contacted first by the research study's second reader. The second reader introduced the researcher to the WCCI director via email to set up a meeting. After the initial meeting, the researcher asked the WCCI director to provide some professional contacts in the education field that could contribute their experiences to the research efforts. The researcher set up meeting times with those contacts for interviews. Therefore, the sampling for the interviews was snowball sampling. No interview lasted longer than thirty minutes.

#### **Surveys**

Field research for this study was conducted virtually for two months during the COVID-19 pandemic from May 4, 2020 until July 4, 2020. The researcher, with guidance from both research study faculty advisors, created survey questions based on information collected from prior interviews and sent them to the superintendent of Watauga County Schools to relay to district principals, teachers, and counselors. Sampling for the surveys was simple random sampling based on who chose to complete the survey.

### **Designing the Interviews**

The interview questions were designed to gain a holistic understanding of the school and students from the interviewees' points of view. They were based on the data collected while the researcher compiled the literature review for the study. The interviews were conducted conversationally, and the answers to the questions were synthesized into paragraph summaries by the researcher. The interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

### **Designing the Surveys**

It was important that the surveys have some of the same questions as the interviews so that an accurate understanding of the adverse childhood experiences in the county. By having professionals in different areas answering the same questions, it was likely that a true assessment of the adverse childhood experiences in the county would be represented. The second part of each survey is different, so essentially, there were three separate surveys sent out. The questions tailored to certain professionals focus on their areas of expertise in the schools. Thus, it was possible to have a holistic analysis about the adverse childhood experiences in the county. The survey questions can be found in Appendix B.

*Interviews***Grade 5 Teacher**

This school year, 2019-2020, the most common adverse childhood experience that this teachers' students have is facing the death of a parent. In previous years, she has had students dealing with both sexual and physical abuse and has had to contact the Department of Social Services on a few occasions. This school has received Compassionate School training and there are calm corners in most classrooms. In fifth grade, however, there is time set aside for daily mindful practice, such as a brain break, drawing, holding the class pet, putting their heads down, a short yoga series, or even sweeping. She says that the, approximately, fifteen minutes spent doing this helps students refocus on their tasks. The school is also in phase two of the Watauga Compassionate Community Initiative (WCCI) plan by working towards implementing a resiliency plan. This basically entails training teachers to help students become more resilient. Overall, she does consider adverse childhood experiences to be an issue in schools today, and has students affected by them in her own classroom. These students receive accommodations on a personal, case-by-case, basis; including, but not limited to, taking a break by leaving the room and being assigned to certain groups during reading based on the literature being explored. She says that she does not see relationship between adverse childhood experiences and poor performance in school; she says that while it could be a factor, there are so many others that go into a student's performance. She also says that student attendance and homework completion are based on their home lives, so they are somewhat, but "not necessarily," connected.

In an effort to help these students be comfortable at school they have "lunch bunch," where they sit and eat with the school counselor. She says that this gives these students a community within their peers even though she does not see any symptoms of desocialization in

them. However, she says she does often see the effects of these adverse experiences in her students; but they are learning to control their emotional reactions. When asked about her opinion on establishing relationships with students, she says that it is “absolutely” essential, saying that “students want to please you if they know that you love them; they learn better when they have a desire to please you.” So, she finds it important to establish and verbalize trust in her students because the relationships with students help them have positive attitudes towards school. She says that another thing that is important in cultivating positive attitudes towards school in her students is constant and fair, or equitable, treatment; because students notice inequity very quickly.

When asked about how she integrates compassion into her classroom, specifically, she mentions how she develops relationships with all of her students, provides time for mindful practice, and works to find something that she genuinely likes or respects about each child. She says that it is important to have direct and different relationships with each student while keeping them all at the same level. She is also a part of the WCCI and says that her motivation in being a part of it is that she sees the success in both academics and behavior management as a result of participation. As with many classrooms, students are grouped for academics based on academic levels, so their adverse experiences generally do not have an effect on their placements. In her opinion, the biggest obstacle when dealing with students with adverse childhood experiences is confidentiality. She says, “If you don’t know, you can’t help.” She says it would be helpful to have all the information about a student upfront.

### **Social Worker & School Counselor**

Both women say that when services are cut county-wide, it has poor effects on students. Some common adverse childhood experiences that they see in students at the school are food

insecurity and increased sexualized behavior. For every school in Watauga County, there is one social worker; however, there are only five in the county, so some are split between schools. Additionally, each school has a school-based therapist through Daymark Recovery Services. Each school receives one full day with a therapist. When asked if they consider adverse childhood experiences to be an issue in schools today, they said that they “absolutely” are, and “feel like it’s getting worse.” There are trends in policies, such as food stamps, being cut which leads to more food insecurity due to the school’s rural location in the county. Students whose families are on food stamps automatically receive free lunch during the school year, and they also have a backpack program that delivers food once a week from the Second Harvest Food Bank in Tennessee. To reach the whole family, the Western Watauga Food Outreach serves community meals once a week.

In terms of education, they both feel that the factor behind why students may miss school or not have homework completed is because parents do not value education or because they are not home and able to help their children with school activities. In an effort to help students thrive, the support staff works to get them into the afterschool program where there is designated homework time. When homework is incomplete, a usual punishment is silent lunch. But, often times, students affected by adverse childhood experiences may elect to sit on their own. To give them a person to talk to, students are paired with an adult lunch mentor from the Western Youth Network. When asked if these at-risk students are socialized, they say that while they can be solid participants, sometimes they will lash out or be unable to control their emotions. To combat this, many teachers have calm corners in their classrooms, based on the school being a Compassionate School, as well as providing journaling time where students can elect to share with their teachers. Some other initiatives that the school has taken on include the silent mentor

program as well as varying morning routines. In the mornings, some teachers may have share time while others do quiet journaling, which they must read due to liability issues. There is also an open-door policy for the counselor's room, and students understand that they can always go there when necessary. By having this open-door policy, students are better able to make connections with both women. The entire room serves as a calming place where students can decompress and talk to both women who then can provide teachers with necessary information to better serve their students.

In terms of sharing information with teachers about students, they go over every student's adverse childhood experience score (ACE score) with teachers before the school year starts. They say that personal relationships with the students are "definitely important," because "when kids feel like they have people invested in their wellbeing, they will try harder and do better [in school]." Additionally, they believe in having "good relationships with families and the outside community," because, as "the connection between home and school and community," they need to have good relationships, often because "parents can be resistant to getting services." In having such a close-knit community and through parent involvement, kids often desire to be at school. This explains the rise in the number of students being on grade level; coming into kindergarten, approximately only twelve percent of students are actually labelled as kindergarten ready, while sixty-two percent of students are on grade level by sixth grade. When asked what their biggest obstacle is, they say it is the limited amount of resources in Watauga County. There is limited housing. There are cycles of generational poverty and abuse. There has been an influx of domestic violence and homelessness over the past year. There is a major lack of funding because Watauga is labeled as a wealthy county due to the rich areas such as Appalachian State University and its surrounding area and the town of Blowing Rock, North Carolina.



Additionally, the Department of Social Services (DSS) is highly overworked, balancing between twenty-eight and thirty-five cases, making it hard to do effective work.

### **Social Worker**

The inspiration for the Watauga Compassionate Community Initiative (WCCI) came from a project she did for an internship based on the book *The Heart of Learning and Teaching: Compassion, Resiliency, and Academic Success* by Ray Wolpow. She was approached by the new principal at the school she was working in and was asked to start a committee focusing on the central ideas, a compassion committee. This grew into what is now the WCCI which has an annual conference grossing an attendance of upwards of 600 people. Outside of the conference, the WCCI holds Compassionate Schools trainings. When schools receive these trainings, they are then labeled as Compassionate Schools and are eligible for funding for things such as calm corners and other supplies. The second training that she hopes to begin implementing in schools is Trauma Resiliency. This goes hand-in-hand with her theory that students can be reached through teachers who are educated on issues, ready to build relationships, and are trained in Trauma Resiliency. Her ultimate goal in a Compassionate School is that they would value emotional safety over physical safety, because emotions affect almost every other aspect of one's life. In order to help students feel emotionally safe, she says that the key is to build relationships with them; her personal motto is: "Relationships. Relationships. Relationships."

## *Findings and Results*

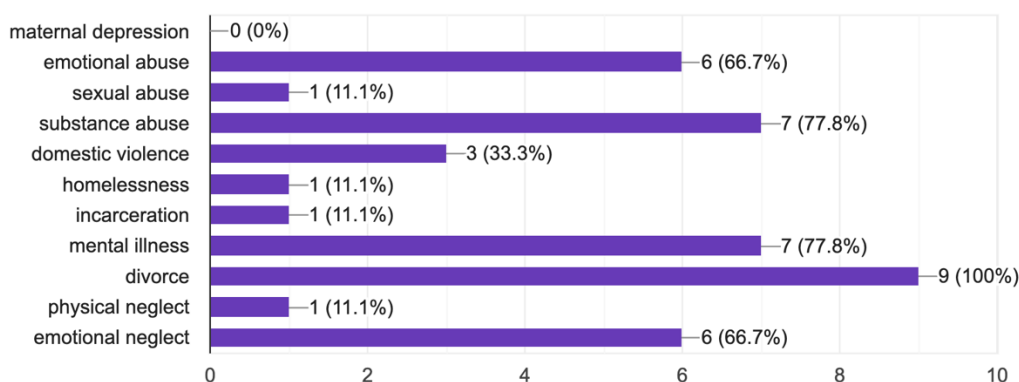
Every principal in Watauga County, as well as eleven counselors and seventy-five teachers took their respective surveys. One hundred percent of principal respondents as well as one hundred percent of counselor respondents said that there are students affected by ACEs in their school. Approximately ninety-three percent of teacher respondents said that there are students affected by ACEs in their school. Approximately one percent of teacher respondents said that there are not students affected by ACEs in their school. Meanwhile, approximately five percent of teacher respondents said that they are unsure if there are students affected by ACEs in their school.

### **Principal Survey**

According to principals, the most frequently occurring ACE in their schools was divorce. The next highest frequency were mental illness and substance abuse, followed by emotional neglect and emotional abuse. According to teachers, the most frequently occurring ACE in their schools was divorce. The next highest frequency were emotional neglect and substance abuse, followed by emotional abuse and domestic violence, succeeded by mental illness and incarceration. According to counselors, the most frequently occurring ACE were mental illness and substance abuse. The next highest frequency was divorce, followed by domestic violence and emotional abuse. A graphical representation of the responses to question two on the

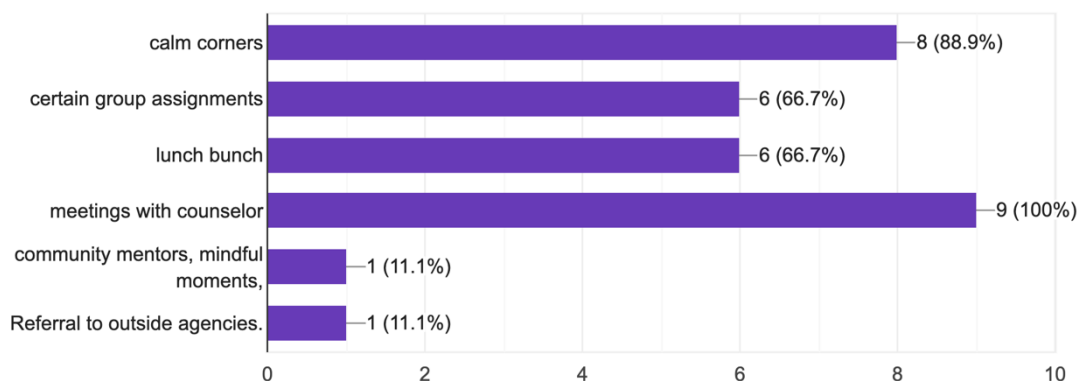
principal survey is provided below.

9 responses



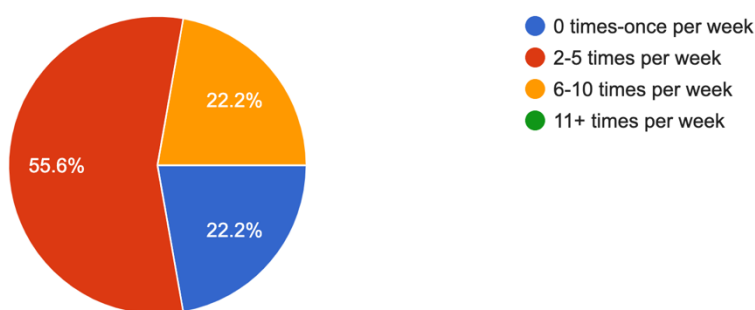
Most principals answered that the resource for students at their schools was meeting with the counselor. The next highest frequent answer was calm corners, followed by lunch bunch and certain group assignments. Most teachers answered that the resource for students at their schools was meetings with the counselor. The next highest frequent answer was calm corners, followed by lunch bunch. Most counselors answered that the resource for students at their schools was meeting with the counselor. The next highest frequent answers were calm corners and lunch bunch. A graphical representation of the responses to question three on the principal survey is provided below.

9 responses



The majority of principal respondents said that they have students in their offices two to five times per week because of discipline or behavior issues. Over seventy-seven percent of principals said that the students in their office are more often students affected by ACEs than those unaffected by ACEs. Again, the majority of principals said that they have students receive detention or suspension approximately two to five times a month. The majority of principals also said that the students who receive detention or suspension are more often students affected by ACEs rather than those unaffected by them. A graphical representation of the responses to question four on the principal survey is provided below.

9 responses



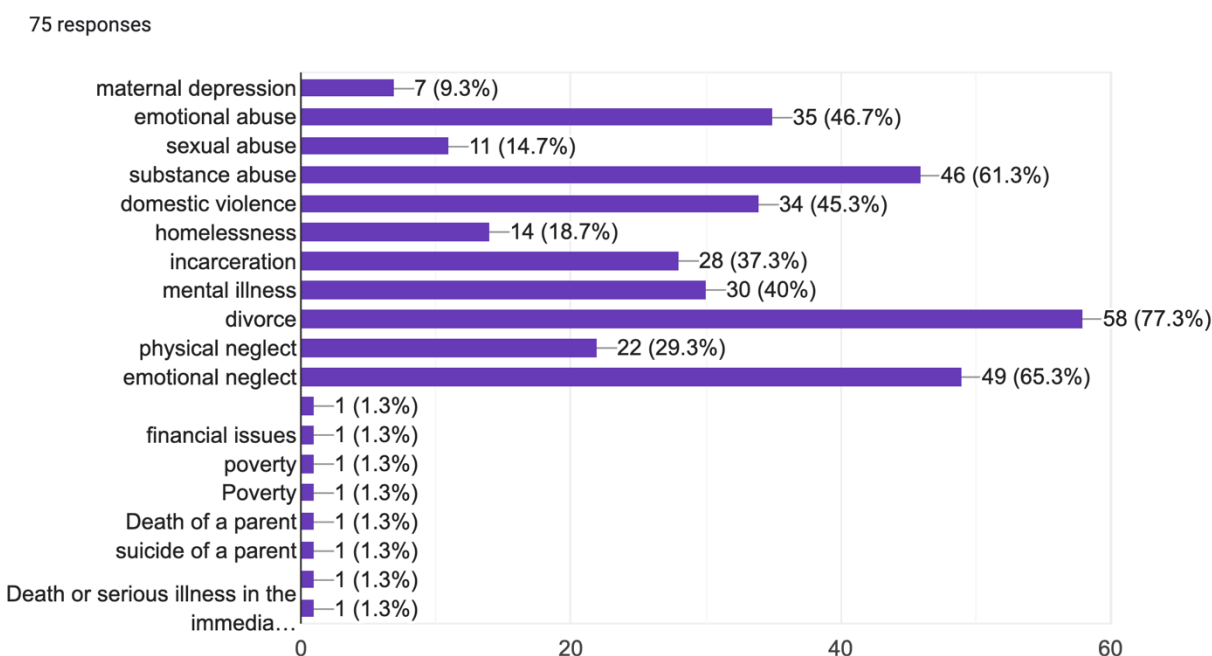
### Teacher Survey

Over seventy-six percent of teacher respondents said that students in their classrooms do not receive federal accommodations due to their ACE status. Fifty percent of teachers said that their students receive special education or individualized education programs (IEPs) while twenty-five percent said that their students receive 504 plans. The other twenty-five percent of teacher respondents said that while some of their students do receive federal accommodations, they are not directly related to ACE status.

Approximately fifty-three percent of teachers said that students in their classrooms do receive personal accommodations due to their ACE status. Thirty-five percent of teacher

respondents said that their students receive assignment extensions due to their ACE status.

Approximately twenty-two percent of teacher respondents said that their students receive less restrictions on movements around the classroom. The other approximately forty-two percent offered information about different assignments and seating arrangements as well as checking in with students and creating things such as certain discipline or motivational techniques. Several teachers mentioned being flexible and molding accommodations to each student and ACE case. A graphical representation of the responses to question two on the teacher survey is provided below.



Approximately sixty-five percent of teacher respondents said that students in their classrooms who are affected by ACEs are not performing on grade level. Fifty percent of teachers said that their students who are not performing on grade level as a result of ACE status are performing one year behind. Twenty-five percent of teachers said that their students who are not performing on grade level as a result of ACE status are performing one year or less behind. Seventeen percent of teachers said that their students who are not performing on grade level as a

result of ACE status are performing two to three years behind while the remaining approximately seven percent were evenly split on whether their students who are not performing on grade level as a result of ACE status are performing between three and five years behind. A graphical representation of the responses to question nine on the teacher survey can be found in Appendix D.

Approximately forty-six percent of teacher respondents said that student who are affected by ACEs are absent from school at least ten or more days per school year. Twenty-three percent said that students affected by ACEs are absent for to six days per school year. And the other approximately twenty-nine percent of teachers were split in saying that their students were absent three days or less (approximately nine percent of teacher respondents) and seven to nine days (approximately nineteen percent of teacher respondents). A graphical representation of the responses to question ten on the teacher survey can be found in Appendix D.

Again, approximately sixty-five percent of teachers said that students in their classes who are affected by ACEs do not regularly complete their homework. Approximately seventy-nine percent of teachers said that in their professional opinion, students in their classes who are affected by ACEs are not as socialized as their peers who are not affected by ACEs.

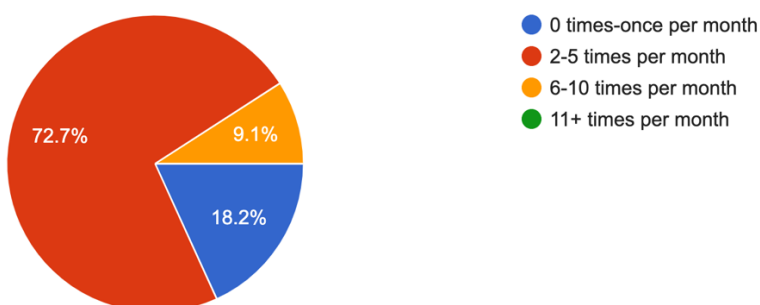
### **Counselor Survey**

The majority of counselor respondents said that less than twenty-five percent of students in their schools meet with them regularly. Ninety percent of counselor respondents said that the students they meet with regularly are more often those affected by ACEs than those unaffected by ACEs.

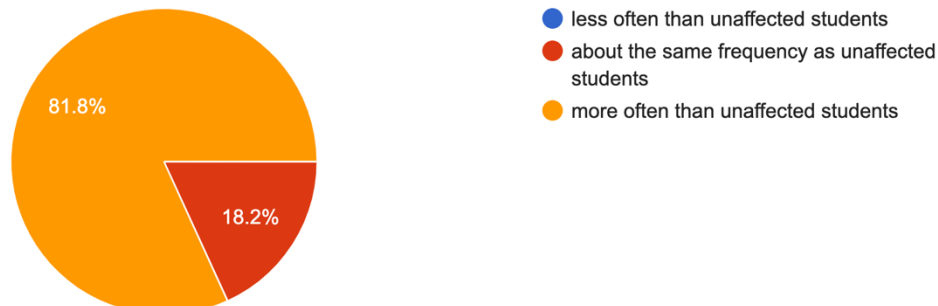
Meanwhile, over seventy percent of counselors said that they refer a student to a mental health professional two to five times per month. According to eighty-two percent of counselor

respondents, students who receive references are more often those who are affected by ACEs rather than those who are not affected by ACEs. Approximately fifty-four percent of counselors said that they have noticed a significant improvement in the students that they referred to mental health professionals. Graphical representations of the responses to questions six, seven, and eight on the counselor survey are provided below.

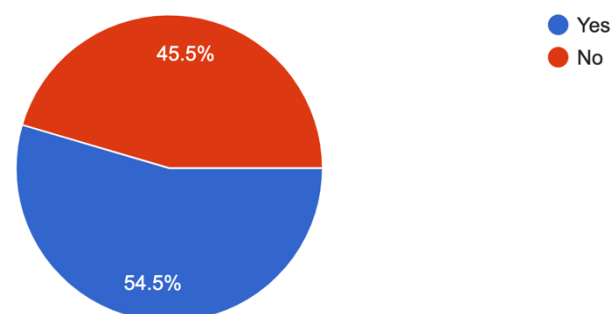
11 responses



11 responses



11 responses



## *Discussion*

Throughout the research process, a sentiment that was often relayed among education professionals was the importance of knowing as much information as possible about each student. One teacher commented, “If you know a little more on the background, ... it would help the teach[er] to student relationship work better.” In knowing in more detail what is going on in students’ lives, teachers are better prepared to respond to situations as they arise throughout the school year. Another teacher said that “Schools need far more support in order to help these students,” suggesting that while teachers are prepared and willing to support struggling students, that the work is not solely up to them but takes a strong community effort. Many teachers do reach out to students and offer support in a variety of ways, from school to out of school assistance. One teacher mentioned that “the ones that [she has] reached out to appreciate that [she] is interested on a personal level.” In showing students that teachers care not only about their education but also their emotional and physical wellbeing, they can start to view school as their safe place and thus begin to achieve greater success in their academic endeavors.

Overall, there were similarities among the data retrieved via interviews and surveys suggesting that there is a significant positive correlation between adverse childhood experiences and overall school experience. The similarities between the interview data and survey data include slight reference to parental death as one of the adverse childhood experiences as well as how students are accommodated in class. The teacher interviewee mentioned offering fifteen-minute brain breaks where students can do something that benefits them whereas survey respondents heavily mentioned things such as lunch bunch and calm corners.

Both the teacher interviewee and the data from the teacher survey recognize both sexual, emotional, and physical abuse as predominant adverse childhood experiences among students.



This overlap in the data suggests that this is a huge issue facing Watauga County. An additional, but positive, overlap is that both the teacher interviewee and teacher survey data have strong mentions of offering flexible accommodations to students. The teacher interviewee mentioned being flexible and catering to individual children's needs and most teacher survey respondents said a variation of the same thing. This is not surprising since the teacher interviewee and the survey respondents are part of the same county, however, it is important to note the overall consistency.

The data collected during this research study matches the information obtained through the literature that the researcher examined. In her academic journal, Elizabeth Crouch mentions how there is a positive correlation between adverse childhood experience existence and poor mental health in children. This is supported in the data of how many students are referred to mental health professionals by their school counselors in Watauga County; seventy percent of school counselor survey respondents said that they refer students between two and five times a month. This data alone suggests that adverse childhood experiences are a large issue in Watauga County schools. Secondly, in the academic journal by David Murphey and Vanessa Sacks, divorce is mentioned as one of the most predominant adverse childhood experiences. This is confirmed by the data from both the principal and teacher surveys; the most frequently occurring adverse childhood experiences that respondents selected was divorce. Lastly, in her academic journal, Eileen Dombo mentions how students benefit from calm connection in their environments. This can be seen in the resilience training provided by the Watauga Compassionate Community Initiative (WCCI) as well as the existence of calm corners in classrooms. The school community in Watauga County fervently lives out the importance of calming techniques as well as building relationships with students to help them feel safe at

school, and thus, succeed. Additionally, in Haigen Huang's academic journal, persistence is mentioned as an important factor in students' positive self-view which is correlated to better overall performance in school. Thus, resiliency is important, as the WCCI director mentions, in students' overall school performance; the positive correlation between the two is that as students grow more resilient, they become better academically.

## *Conclusion*

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) affect everything from behavior to schoolwork while a child is in school. Additionally, they affect overall school experience, or the lack thereof when not in school. This data collected in this study suggests a positive correlation between the existence of adverse childhood experiences and poor overall achievement and experience in schools for students in Watauga County.

The main implication of the discoveries of this study is that students affected by adverse childhood experiences have a harder time being successful in school due to things like absences, behavior, and a lack of support at home. The study also has provided evidence that teachers, and other education professionals, have a responsibility to their students to monitor and understand the adverse childhood experiences going on in their lives based on the success rate of various adaptations, in the form of alternate schoolwork and positive reinforcement when dealing with behavior as well as support through counseling and meeting with administrators, for students struggling with adverse childhood experiences.

The only issue with setting students up to be successful is the lack of information that school professionals are privy to. According to one teacher, via the survey, “Communication and collaboration between community organizations, mental health professionals, families, and schools needs to be stronger...” to help “children to overcome adverse circumstances and experiences.” Only in this manner can adverse childhood experiences be combated.

Resources can be difficult to come by because of issues such as funding, which is why organizations such as the Watauga Compassionate Community Initiative (WCCI) are important to the community they are placed in. The WCCI trains teachers and other school personnel in

resiliency training and provide calm corner resources to schools once they have received their compassionate training.

Heavy involvement from the community, along with the dedication of school personnel in teaching students how to be resilient along with understanding their situations and providing for them in any way they can establish a space where students feel safe. Once students feel welcomed, supported, and safe in their school community, they can focus on their academic endeavors and thus, achieve more than ever before.

Continuing research topics include working closely with school social workers and school counselors to assess what struggles they face day to day. Discovering what resources they need more of and what information they need ready access to in order to be most effective could be helpful in determining a more efficient way for these education professionals to be able to do their jobs in the best manner possible. Since interviewees said that communication and collaboration were important to their success rate. There is a lot of regulation that goes into confidentiality on caseloads, but, ideally, future research could lead to a more efficient way of these professionals getting the information they need in a timely manner and students getting the intervention and assistance they need at a higher rate.

A major continuing research topic is the topic of race, specifically institutional racism. The Jordan Institute's research reveals that not much information has been gathered about how institutional racism is not currently considered among any adverse childhood experience scales, demonstrating that there is a lot more research to be done in the area, specifically on the effects on people in various stages of life. This research ought to begin in urbanized areas that historically were set up against marginalized communities to assess those affects and investigate what could be done to improve future livelihoods there. While this study did not analyze the

impacts of racism as a form of ACE on student educational achievement, the data collected here is likely influenced by these processes. The narrower focus of this study provided the benefit of isolating the perceptions of school principals, counselors, and teachers on how ACEs might affect student achievement. Future locally-focused research can be built upon the foundation that this study provides and further analyze the impacts of forces such as racism on the educational achievement of students in Watauga County North Carolina.

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*Appendices***Appendix A – Interview Questions**

1. What is the predominant race at your school?
2. What is the majority marital status of the parents/guardians at your school?
3. In what type of facility do the majority of students at your school reside in?
4. What, in your experience, is the most common adverse childhood experience (ACE) that students in your school experience?
5. What resources are there at your school for students who have a history of ACEs in their childhood?
6. Do you consider ACEs to be an issue in schools today?
7. Do you have any students affected by ACEs in your classroom?
8. Do these students receive any accommodations due to their ACE status? If so, what?
9. Are these students performing at grade level on assessments?
10. If not, what is their grade, and what level are they performing on?
11. How often, if applicable, are these students absent from school?
12. Do these students regularly have their homework completed?
13. In your professional opinion, do these students seem socialized as comparable to their peers?
14. How do you see the effects of ACEs in your students (if not previously mentioned)?
15. Do you believe in cultivating relationships with your students? Why or why not?
16. If so, do you think that these relationships can boost students' attitudes about or achievements in school?
17. What is something else that you think makes a difference in students' attitudes about or achievements in school?

18. Do you integrate compassion into your classroom? If so, how?
19. What is your motivation in being involved in the Watauga Compassionate Community Initiative (WCCI), if applicable?
20. Has your school received compassionate school training, if applicable?
21. Do you have a calm corner, or another resource, in your classroom? If so, have you seen any positive effects from it?
22. If your school has not been trained, or you do not have calming resources, have you taken any initiative towards providing students with what they need to succeed? If so, what?
23. How do you balance meeting these children's needs while keeping up with curriculum/standards?
24. Or, are these children at a disadvantage/left behind?
25. What is your biggest obstacle when there are children with ACEs in your classroom/school?

## **Appendix B – Survey Questions**

### **Survey for Principals**

1. Do you have any students affected by ACEs in your school?
2. To the best of your knowledge, what are the most common ACEs that students in your school experience?
3. What resources does your school provide to students who are affected by ACEs or have a history of ACEs in their lives?
4. How often do you have a student in your office as a result of a discipline/behavior issue?
5. How often is the student that is in your office as a result of a discipline/behavior issue a student that is affected by ACEs?

6. How often do you have a student that receives detention or suspension?
7. How often is the student that receives detention or suspension a student that is affected by ACEs?

#### Survey for Teachers

1. Do you have any students affected by ACEs in your school?
2. To the best of your knowledge, what are the most common ACEs that students in your school experience?
3. What resources does your school provide to students who are affected by ACEs or have a history of ACEs in their lives?
4. Do any students in your classroom receive federal accommodations due to their ACE status?
5. If you answered yes to the question above, what accommodations are provided? (if no, skip this question)
6. Do any students in your classroom receive personal accommodations due to their ACE status?
7. If you answered yes to the question above, what accommodations are provided? (if no, skip this question)
8. Are students in your class who are affected by ACEs performing at grade level on most assessments?
9. If these students are not performing at their grade level, what is the difference between their grade and the grade level they are performing on? (if you answered yes to the question above, skip this question)
10. How often, if applicable, are students who are affected by ACEs absent from school?  
(responses are per school year)

11. Do students in your class who are affected by ACEs regularly complete homework and course assignments?
12. In your professional opinion, do the students who are affected by ACEs seem as well socialized as students who are unaffected by ACEs?
13. What other information would you like to provide about your experiences with students who are affected by ACEs?

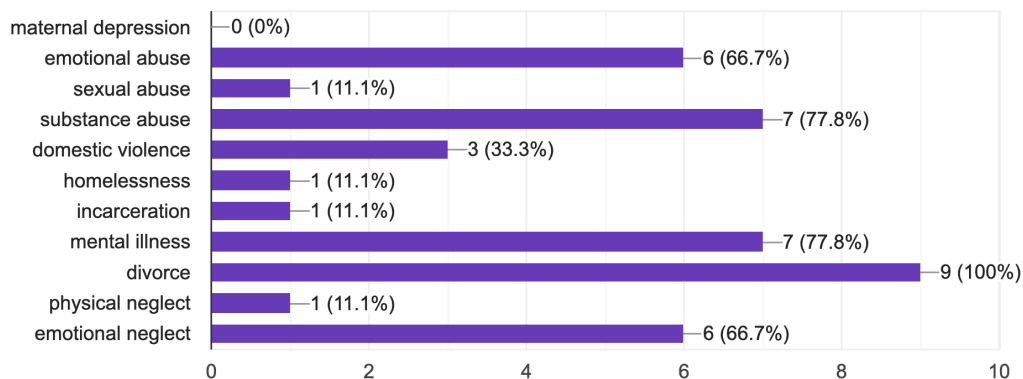
#### Survey for Counselors

1. Do you have any students affected by ACEs in your school?
2. To the best of your knowledge, what are the most common ACEs that students in your school experience?
3. What resources does your school provide to students who are affected by ACEs or have a history of ACEs in their lives?
4. Approximately what percentage of students in your school meet with you regularly?
5. How often are the students that you regularly meet with those who are affected by ACEs?
6. Approximately how often do you consult/refer a student to a mental health professional?
7. How often is the student that receives the consultation/referral a student that is affected by ACEs?
8. If you have referred students that are affected by ACEs to a professional, have you noticed a significant improvement?

## Appendix C – Responses to Principal Survey – graphs created by Google Forms

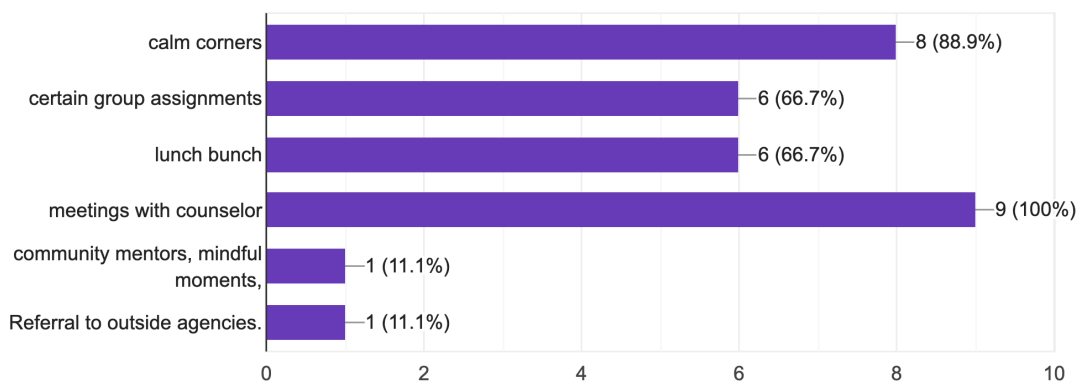
2. To the best of your knowledge, what are the most common ACEs that students in your school experience? (choose up to 5)

9 responses



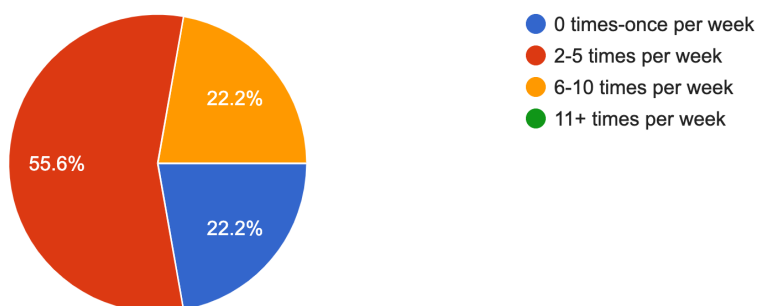
3. What resources does your school provide to students who are affected by ACEs or have a history of ACEs in their lives? (select all that apply)

9 responses



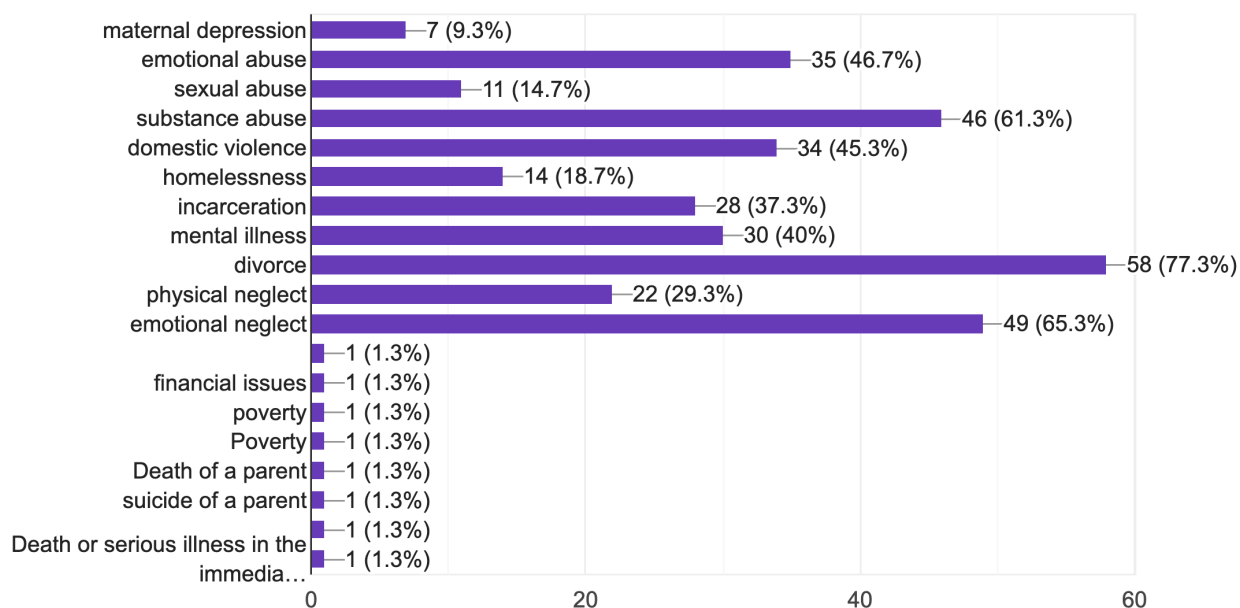
4. How often do you have a student in your office as a result of a discipline/behavior issue?

9 responses



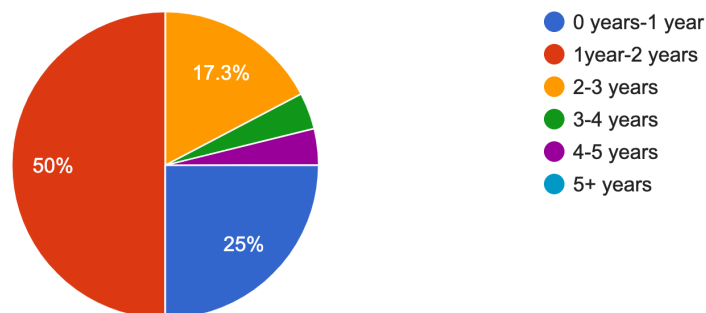
2. To the best of your knowledge, what are the most common ACEs that students in your classroom and/or school experience? (choose up to 5)

75 responses



9. If these students are not performing at their grade level, what is the difference between their grade and the grade level they are performing on? ...red yes to the question above, skip this question)

52 responses



10. How often, if applicable, are students who are affected by ACEs absent from school?  
(responses are per school year)

71 responses

