

Restoring Connection and Community: Building a School Culture that Reduces Stress for both Adults and Children



Live Webinar with Mathew Portell (USA)

The human brain must feel connected and safe, or the prefrontal cortex simply will not allow us to absorb new information.

Modern schools are fueling a quiet crisis: widespread nervous system dysregulation caused by prioritising rigid performance metrics over human safety. Ignoring this distress ignores basic neuroscience. Left unchecked, forcing traumatised or overly stressed children and adults into strict compliance traps them in chronic survival states (fight, flight, freeze, or fawn). This effectively locks down their cognitive capacity, making genuine learning impossible and driving a compounding youth mental health epidemic.

To heal this crisis, it is imperative to create a systemic shift that trades rigid compliance for intentional nervous system regulation, utilising the socioecological model as a structural blueprint to decrease stress in schools. This framework recognises that student well-being cannot exist in a vacuum; it requires dismantling chronic stress at every interconnected layer – from individual student biology and interpersonal classroom relationships to institutional school culture and community policy. By mapping trauma-responsive solutions across this entire ecosystem, Mathew Portell will provide the basis for a practical guide for prioritising adult well-being and co-regulation first. Only when the whole system is structured around safety can a child's brain finally disengage from survival mode and re-engage with deep learning.

During this webinar, participants will:

- Learn to shift from asking what is wrong with a student to evaluating how current systems may be causing them harm.
- Recognise how traditional disciplinary isolation fractures the relational safety students need to learn.
- Audit previous disciplinary decisions to identify where compliance was prioritised over connection.
- Analyse how student behavioural crises can overload nervous systems rather than personal offenses.
- Study how trauma affects the brain and how stress hormones disrupt a student's capacity to learn.
- Identify how Fight, Flight, Freeze, and Fawn responses manifest as classroom behaviours.
- Develop the habit of pausing to assess a student's nervous system state before issuing directives or consequences.
- Learn how to implement rapid, two-minute physiological resets to help calm a dysregulated classroom.
- Learn how physical proximity, vocal tone, and pacing can actively de-escalate students in crisis.
- Explore pre-planned verbal frameworks that validate a student's emotions while maintaining clear safety boundaries.
- Learn to recognise the biological signs of burnout and secondary traumatic stress in themselves and their peers.
- Identify and utilise micro-regulation routines to calm themselves between class periods or after difficult interactions.
- Establish supportive practices where colleagues can step in for non-judgmental "tap outs" during stressful moments.
- Deepen understanding on why specific communities may harbor a historically justified distrust of educational institutions.
- Learn change-management strategies to coach colleagues who fear that reducing stress means lowering expectations.

This workshop is ideal for those in school leadership roles, class teachers, support staff, social workers, school counselors, and all professionals supporting adolescents through direct work and by supporting the systems to reduce stress in a school culture.



Mathew Portell is a dynamic educational leader, author, and elementary school principal widely recognised for his groundbreaking advocacy in trauma-informed practices and social-emotional learning. Beyond his globally celebrated professional roles - which include delivering international keynotes, hosting educational podcasts, and co-authoring impactful books like *Reducing Stress in Schools* from Harvard Education Press and *Culturally Responsive Tier 3 Interventions for Elementary Schools* from Teacher College Press - he finds his deepest fulfillment at home. Mathew is the proud husband of an accomplished engineer and the dedicated father of a 15-year-old son who thrives equally as a stellar academic scholar and a competitive athlete. Balancing the demands of systemic school leadership with a vibrant family life, he consistently champions resilience, empathy, and growth in both the education sector and his personal community.

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