

Applied Educational Neuroscience Framework®:

What It Is and Why We Need It Now More Than Ever Before



By **Connie Persike, MS, CCC/SLP**

THE PAST 17 MONTHS HAVE BEEN DIFFICULT FOR EVERYONE. WHILE THERE HAVE BEEN MANY ADVANTAGES, SUCH AS THE ABILITY TO SLOW DOWN, SPEND MORE TIME WITH FAMILY, AND PROVIDE MORE OPPORTUNITIES TO RE-THINK OUR PRIORITIES, OUR SENSE OF SAFETY HAS BEEN TAKEN AWAY. IN ADDITION, FOR MANY, THEIR ABILITY TO SOCIALLY CONNECT WITH OTHERS HAS BEEN LIMITED.

Furthermore, many have struggled with financial loss as well as illness or the death of loved ones. With these struggles and changes in society come chronic stress, trauma, and an increase in mental health disorders. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, from August 2020 until February 2021, the percentage of adults with recent symptoms of an anxiety or a depressive disorder increased from 36.4 percent to 41.5 percent (Vahratian & Terlizzi, 2021). In addition, according to a survey conducted by Ann & Robert Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago, 71 percent of parents reported the pandemic

had taken a mental health toll on at least one of their children. Therefore, as we begin yet another school year with COVID-19 numbers rising once again, we need to create school environments that are trauma-sensitive, safe, and relationship-driven for both students and staff. Familiarizing yourself with and utilizing the Applied Educational Neuroscience® framework can provide a road map for staff and administrators to do so.

The Applied Educational Neuroscience® (AEN) framework was developed by Dr. Lori Desautels who offers a one-year certification through Butler University to increase awareness and

implementation in schools, districts, and communities around the nation. This trauma-responsive framework includes four pillars that support current relational and brain science. The four pillars consist of the following: educator brain and body state, co-regulation, touchpoints, and teaching students and staff about their brain and body states. The framework begins with adult's brain regulation.

Emotions are contagious (Sigal, Constantinos, Coutifaris & Pillemer, 2018). In order for students and children to be regulated and feel safe, we must begin with a focus on the teachers and staff supporting them. A dysregulated adult cannot regulate a child. In addition, we know that the best way to teach students social-emotional competencies is by modelling them ourselves; it is a powerful teaching tool.

THE FIRST PILLAR: EDUCATOR BRAIN AND BODY STATE

The educator brain and body state pillar focuses on supporting staff by providing them with time for connection and regulation throughout the day. Connection and regulation can be created by building resiliency teams within buildings not only for students but for adults as well, by providing frequent

check-ins with the adults in the building as well as teaching them brain-aligned, focused attention practices that will assist with regulation. In addition, this pillar concentrates on teaching adults to check in with their bodies frequently to notice sensations and name their bodily states and feelings. When we name our feelings, we tame them (Siegel & Bryson, 2016).

When using this framework as a discipline lens to address behaviors that interfere with learning, staff are taught to check in with themselves prior to addressing student behavior. Oftentimes the adult's nonverbal communication and body language can escalate a situation versus help de-escalate a situation. Lastly, this pillar of the framework teaches staff to think deeply and reflect on their own triggers. What situations or experiences can cause dysregulation in their brain and body? Knowing these situations is invaluable to adults who are working with children. With awareness, staff learn to name their triggers and utilize strategies such as breath, movement, and rhythm to regulate themselves.

THE SECOND PILLAR: CO-REGULATION

Co-regulation, which is the second pillar of the AEN© framework, is defined as warm and responsive interactions that provide others the support, coaching, and/or modeling needed to understand and modulate their thoughts, feelings, and behavior (Murray et al., 2015). This pillar focuses on teaching educators to create safety for students through connection and relationships, both with adults and peers in their environment. It teaches the adults to be aware of their nonverbal communication in order for students to see them as safe and caring adults. Nonverbal communication represents two-thirds of all communication, with some research stating that 93 percent of all meaning in a social situation comes from nonverbal information, while only seven percent comes from verbal information. All students' brains will read the body language of adults at a subconscious level. Threatening body language will activate a student's feelings portion of the brain because its job is to keep students safe. This will keep a student escalated or push them into the fight/flight pathway. The way your face and body look and sound will literally change someone's brain! Within this pillar we also focus on movement by providing all students with proactive movement activities to calm their nervous system. Lastly, we explore the power questions can have when used collaboratively and during moments of regulation to learn from and reflect on previous experiences as well as repair negative outcomes previous experiences may have had.

THE THIRD PILLAR: TOUCHPOINTS

Touchpoints are the third pillar within the AEN© framework. Touchpoints are targeted and intentional interactions with students initiated by adults throughout the school day. They are brief in nature, lasting between 30 seconds to five minutes. Touchpoints are positive in nature with a focus on what is going well by noticing and affirming student strengths, in-



terests, passions, belief systems, and culture. Touchpoints help students build resiliency, learn lessons about feelings of despair and hopelessness, and better engage with academics and the people they encounter in school. These touchpoints are embedded into rituals, procedures, and transitions during the school day (Fisher, Frey, & Hattie, 2020; Desautels, 2018).

THE FOURTH PILLAR: TEACHING STUDENTS AND STAFF ABOUT THEIR BRAIN AND BODY STATES

The last and final pillar within the AEN© framework targets teaching students and staff about their brain and body states. They learn about neuroanatomy, their autonomic nervous system, and how their brain and body work together. Students and staff alike are taught that all bodily states are okay; there are no “good” or “bad” emotions or bodily states. We all fluctuate through bodily states and emotions throughout our day. When utilizing the AEN© framework, the focus is on awareness—awareness of our sensations and what that means

about our bodily states and the emotions we are experiencing. Teaching centers around the fight/flight/freeze response and how our autonomic nervous system is our superpower keeping us safe and helping us connect with others. Focused attention practices, movement, rhythm, and brain-aligned activities are taught as ways to help us regulate and calm our nervous system. These strategies and tools are embedded into daily routines and procedures.

As we start another school year during these uncertain times, it is essential we create safe environments for both our staff and students. We can do this by creating trauma-sensitive environments that focus on relationships and social-emotional learning. Learning more about AEN© and utilizing the framework as a roadmap to help you navigate these uncertain times will help you in this endeavor. For more information about the AEN©, you can visit Dr. Lori Desautels’ website, *Revelations in Education*.

References

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Connie Persike, MS, CCC/SLP, is a highly experienced speech language pathologist and educational consultant. As founder of CP Consulting, Connie brings over 20 years of experience in educational settings to provide insight, guidance, coaching, and support to school districts, agencies, and families across Wisconsin needing expert direction in working with children. In addition to running her business, Connie has taught part-time at the University of Wisconsin-Madison as a Clinical Associate Professor in the Communication Sciences & Disorders Department. Connie is a member of the American Speech Hearing Association, the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development, and the Autism Society of Wisconsin. Connie holds a certificate from Edgewood College’s Instructional Coaching Credential Program, The Positive Educator Certification Program through the Flourishing Center, and Butler University’s Applied Educational Neuroscience® Certificate Program. Furthermore, she is a published writer for *Autism Parenting Magazine* and *Exceptional Needs Today* magazine. Connie resides in Waunakee, WI with her husband and daughter. During her free time, she enjoys spending time with her family, reading, landscaping, decorating, and cooking.

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