



TRAUMA-INFORMED vs. DEFICIT-BASED LANGUAGE

SITUATION	DEFICIT-BASED LANGUAGE	TRAUMA-INFORMED LANGUAGE	WHAT IT SIGNALS TO THE STUDENT
Opening the conversation	<i>"Why have you been missing so much school?"</i>	<i>"I've noticed you haven't been around as much, and I wanted to check in, not because you're in trouble, but because I care about how you're doing."</i>	Deficit: You're being investigated. Prepare to defend yourself. Informed: This might be a safe adult. Let's see.
Student says "I'm fine"	<i>"You're clearly not fine. Your grades are dropping."</i>	<i>"Okay. I'll take that for now. I just want you to know I'm here if anything changes."</i>	Deficit: Adults don't actually listen—they just push until they get what they want. Informed: I'm not being forced to perform honesty right now.
Naming the pattern	<i>"This behavior is going to catch up with you."</i>	<i>"Something has shifted for you recently. I don't know what it is, but I'd like to understand it if you ever want to share."</i>	Deficit: My attendance is a moral failure, not a symptom. Informed: They see a change, not a character flaw.
Discussing grades or missed work	<i>"You're falling behind and it's going to be hard to catch up."</i>	<i>"The work will still be here. I want to figure out what you need first before we talk about any of that."</i>	Deficit: School only cares about my performance. Informed: I'm being treated like a whole person, not a transcript.





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Asking about home or family	<i>"Is something going on at home? Are your parents aware of this?"</i>	<i>"Is there anything outside of school that's been heavy lately? You don't have to say more than you want to."</i>	Deficit: My family might get called. I need to protect them (and myself). Informed: I have some control over how much I share.
Offering help	<i>"You need to come to tutoring. I can set that up for you."</i>	<i>"What would actually be helpful right now—even something small?"</i>	Deficit: Adults decide what I need without asking. Informed: I have some agency here.
Closing the conversation	<i>"I really hope you turn things around. We're rooting for you."</i>	<i>"I'm glad we talked. I'm going to check in again—not to monitor you, just because I want to."</i>	Deficit: They want me to perform recovery for them. Informed: This might continue. That might be okay.





KEY PRINCIPLES: Trauma-Informed Re-Engagement Language

1

Lead with curiosity, not diagnosis

"What's been going on?" not "Why are you doing this?" —the first opens a door, the second asks students to justify themselves before they feel safe.

2

Name what you see, not what you judge

"I noticed you haven't been in robotics" lands differently than "You stopped caring about robotics." One is an observation. The other is a verdict.

3

Make the absence of consequences explicit

Students in early warning stages often expect a consequence. Saying "you're not in trouble" directly and early removes a major reason to stay guarded.

4

Offer choice, not just care

"What would be helpful?" gives students agency. Telling them what they need — even with warmth —replicates the power dynamic that often contributed to disengagement.

5

Tolerate not knowing

A student who doesn't open up in a 5-minute check-in isn't a failure. Leaving the door open without pressure is itself a trauma-informed act.

6

Follow up because you want to, not because you have to

"I'm going to check in on you again" means something different when students can feel it's genuine. Frequency and consistency are what make it real.

