Positive school climate builds student success

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Every morning, before the 400 students and 50 teachers at Riverview Elementary School tackle the formal lessons of the day, they first spend 10 minutes getting to know one another.

The morning meetings always start with students exchanging positive greetings with one another. The discussion can range from talking about whether students feel prepared for a test the next day to how they felt when one student shoved another during recess the day before. And they always end with an encouraging statement for the day.

The bottom line: Students get a chance to talk about how they feel at school.

The premise of the exercise is simple. Just as students need to learn how to read and write and solve math problems, they also need to learn how to manage their emotions. Much like adult employees who feel valued in their workplaces, students who feel safe and comfortable at school are more likely to want to return each day and be excited to learn and succeed.

Riverview instituted the morning meeting halfway through the 2015-16 school year after embarking on a process to evaluate and improve its school culture through the School Culture and Climate Initiative, a project of United Way of Northern New Jersey and the College of Saint Elizabeth. This school year, Riverview is one of more than 40 schools serving 17,000 students across northern New Jersey turning to that initiative to help address what leading experts, the most respected studies and New Jersey’s anti-bullying law say is the foundation for all learning—a healthy school climate.

“If we know more about one another, we’ll care more about each other,” says Todd McCabe, Riverview’s counselor and anti-bullying specialist, explaining the philosophy behind making the time for this each day. “It’s all about building successful relationships.”

A model born from listening to students

About 10 years ago, United Way decided to survey middle school students in one of the wealthiest areas in New Jersey—Morris County—where, on average, students had high SAT and standardized test scores and low dropout rates. Everything seemed fine on paper. And, yet, troubling cases of bullying, plagiarism and other risk-taking behaviors were seemingly on the rise. The focus, as in much of the country at the time, was the perceived trouble in the middle school years.

What United Way’s survey results revealed was that these high-performing students were not all fine. And the trouble began as far back as the elementary years. Students reported they didn’t feel safe, felt paralyzed by negative peer pressure and didn’t know where to go for help.

At the same time, the College of Saint Elizabeth was embarking on creating its Center for Human and Social Development to give future educators the tools needed to teach social and emotional skills as well as create positive climates both in the classroom and throughout a school.

From that simple experiment of listening to students and tapping into groundbreaking work done previously in 200 schools by renowned Rutgers University expert Maurice Elias, Ph.D., the two organizations teamed up. Together they developed what is now considered one of the most comprehensive initiatives in New Jersey to both improve school climates and promote students’ health and wellness from kindergarten through 12th grade.

Today, the initiative is a nationally recognized model for evaluating a school’s climate, the conditions contributing to the environment and creating a roadmap toward sustainable improvement. The project was awarded a 2014 national Promising Practice award by the Washington, D.C. - based Character.org.

This school year, schools across northern New Jersey are at varying stages of a three-year engagement with the initiative. From schools like Riverview that completed the first year to those like Lincoln Park Middle School that completed the full cycle, each reports overwhelmingly positive results.
**Saying hello by name matters**

When a fifth-grader at Lincoln Park walks down the hallway today, chances are he or she will feel comfortable to say hello to a passing eighth-grader—and probably by name.

While that may seem insignificant, that hello can be a big deal for a student’s morale. When Lincoln Park started on its journey in 2012, students reported feeling disconnected from one another and there was a strong perception that across all grade levels cliques had a polarizing and negative impact.

Since completing the three-year process last June, students’ feelings of belonging and friendship grew by 16 percent. More dramatic were 25 percent increases in students reporting they felt respected and had pride in their school.

“We’ve changed the way people act during the day, it makes them happier,” says Dominique, a Lincoln Park student who was involved in the early phases of the project.

“If there’s anything teachers want, it’s students who are eager to do their best,” says Michael Meyer, Lincoln Park’s principal. “[The initiative] has been critical to our success, guiding us through the process of assessing and improving our culture, providing resources, and connecting us to industry thought leaders and other schools going through similar challenges.”

All the schools involved in the initiative start out the same way. Each must be willing to engage the entire school community—students, parents, teachers, staff and administrators—in a survey that asks each group about its perceptions of the school’s climate and culture.

Survey results are then crunched by the Saint Elizabeth’s Center to provide schools with an analysis of their strengths, but also opportunities for change. Next, a school climate team is formed with representatives from each interest group as well as a student climate team. With data, leadership and coordination in place, the school is ready to begin developing an improvement plan. Consultants help to guide the conversations, but it’s the students and educators who develop the plans for positive change—a key component of ensuring the change is sustainable.

At Riverview, the survey proved crucial. It was a springboard to what school counselor Nicole Sproule says was “deep and sometimes uncomfortable conversations.” The school had undergone a lot of changes that caused staff to feel overwhelmed, from new state mandates to new teacher evaluations to an updated curriculum. By having that outside consultant facilitate conversations between administrators and teachers as well as teachers and students, the school community was able to identify some easy first steps to take that would demonstrate a commitment to improvement.

Those morning meetings were among the first steps. “Students told us they wanted to have more of a voice in their school environment and it turned out to be so easy to fix that,” Principal Tina Theodoropoulos says. “Without getting involved in this project, we wouldn’t have known that.”

In addition, staff morale is up, disciplinary issues are down and both students and staff report they felt heard on issues that are important to them. Along with the morning meetings, students were given opportunities to speak up and get involved in various school projects and events, including the school culture and climate student team.

**A proven strategy**

The experiences at Riverview and Lincoln Park are what both the experts and the research say happen when schools consistently focus on teaching children social and emotional skills in addition to traditional academics. This means helping students learn about self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making.

Schools that embrace teaching and learning with this philosophy find they have fewer disciplinary issues and higher academic achievement. A landmark 2011 study evaluated 200 schools serving 270,000 students that embraced this approach. The results showed as much as an 11 percentile gain in standardized test scores compared with schools that didn’t embed the school day with this approach.

No other intervention was found to have that strong an impact.

One-day anti-bullying or character education assemblies are proven to be ineffective on their own. The approach must be systemic and woven into the fabric of the school day. More than any
SAT score or high school grade-point average, the greatest predictor of children’s success both in school and later in life is their feelings of connectedness, hope for the future and a healthy sense of well-being.

New Jersey’s anti-bullying taskforce released its final report earlier this year and its recommendations are clear that “creating a positive school climate is the single best way” to prevent harassment and bullying. One of the key recommendations in the report is to “focus on improving school climate and creating a culture of inclusivity and collaboration.”

Cristina Puri, one of three school counselors leading Lincoln Park’s ongoing school climate efforts, says that sentiment is why educators enter the profession in the first place. A good education is about helping students become the adults we want for our society, Puri says.

“When you improve the school climate, students are happier, they feel a part of something bigger than themselves and it makes this a place they want to be during the 35 hours a week they spend here,” Puri says. “That’s the basis for a good school and a good society.”

Students lead the way

At Lincoln Park, the first group of students who were involved in the school climate team have since moved to the high school and new students are expanding on the groundwork that was set.

To break down the cliques, students initially came up with the idea to create four “Houses” in the school, (inspired by the Hogwarts model but named after college sports conferences), where students from each grade were placed on teams. The multi-age teams would compete together at an annual half-day athletic field day. This was a fun way to have students from different grades interact socially with one another.

The winning team would get its House flag flown on the flagpole outside school along with the American flag and the school flag.

The House tradition has continued, but new students have built upon the original idea. Students have since successfully lobbied to upgrade “House Day” to a full-day event and in addition to athletic trials, they now incorporate trivia games. And the Houses compete throughout the school year in various challenges during pep rallies, spirit week, and the canned food drive.

This year, students are hoping to take it one step further and develop an Olympic-style closing ceremony where each House is celebrated for its wins.

“The kids lead the way,” says David Winston, the teacher who led Lincoln Park’s efforts for the first two years. “These students are inspired to make a difference in their school now and will continue to make a difference in our world, tomorrow.”

Liz Warner of United Way of Northern New Jersey and Patricia Heindel, Ph.D., of the College of Saint Elizabeth are co-directors of the School Culture and Climate Initiative. The two led the development of the initiative, which has received a national Promising Practices award. Warner and Heindel present nationally and regionally on models for developing a sustainable, positive school culture and climate.