

Creating Caring school communities

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It is the rare administrator who systematically tracks students' experience of school. Among the few who do gather some form of empirical information, even fewer disaggregate the data to discover whether various ethnic, gender or age subgroups feel safe, engaged or happy in school. We know, for example, that low-income students and students of color tend to feel less "connected" to their schools than affluent and Anglo students, and that older students feel less connected than younger ones (Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson & Schaps, 1995).

Perhaps most district and school leaders do not pay attention to students' experience of school because they are running flat-out to cope with a never-ending stream of demands. Never before have educators been asked to do so much for so many. They must deal with a student population that is the most diverse, most needy, and most precocious in history. They must help these students stay in school longer and achieve

at higher academic levels – dramatically higher levels – than ever before.

They must rear as well as educate these students – to help them avoid drug use; delay sexual gratification; learn social skills; and become civic minded, principled and caring. And should these leaders fail to make "adequate yearly progress," they run the risk of being branded as unmotivated or inept.

District and school leaders may be so stretched that suggesting they add one more thing to their plates – even something they recognize to be beneficial – elicits a skeptical response along the lines of, "You've got to be kidding!" But suggesting one more thing – working deliberately to build all students' connectedness or "sense of community in school" – is precisely the thrust of this article.

The benefits are so wide-ranging, en-

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during and substantial, and the necessary investments are so modest, that community building is truly a no-brainer. It can go a long way toward accomplishing what a lengthy list of discrete character education, social and emotional learning, bullying, drug prevention and violence-prevention programs is often cobbled together to do. Because community building accomplishes multiple objectives simultaneously, a serious focus on it can actually simplify life for a principal or central office administrator.

What is community in school?

What does it mean for a student to be part of a “caring school community”? At the heart of a high-community school is an inclusive web of respectful, supportive relationships among and between students, teachers and parents. We learn best from, and with, those to whom we relate well.

Supportive relationships enable students from diverse backgrounds to fully engage and persevere. Supportive relationships help parents, especially those who otherwise might feel ill at ease, to take active roles in the school and in their children’s education. Supportive relationships among educators help them deal with the many stresses of their daily work.

Emphasizing common purposes and ideals is also important for creating a sense of community. High-community schools emphasize not only the importance of academic learning, but also the other qualities that are essential to social and civic participation: for example, fairness, concern for others and personal responsibility. This emphasis on high purposes establishes common ground and shapes the norms that govern daily interaction.

Regular opportunities to help and collaborate with others is a third feature of high-community schools. With frequent opportunities to cooperate and to be of service, students can learn the skills involved in relating to others and can develop wider networks of positive relationships.

Finally, high-community schools provide opportunities for autonomy and influence. Having some choice in how one goes about one’s own learning, and some voice in the decisions that affect one’s group, also helps

to prepare students for the demanding roles they will assume in later life. Developmentally appropriate “voice and choice” is also affirming for children, just as it is for adults.

A number of studies show that strengthening students’ sense of community in school produces a wide range of desirable effects, including increased academic motivation, social understanding and competence, altruistic tendencies, appropriate conduct in school, and trust and respect for teachers (Osterman, 2000).

It also helps to prevent alcohol and marijuana use, violent behavior, and other high-



risk activities (Battistich, Schaps, Watson, Solomon, & Lewis, 2000; Blum, McNeely, & Rinehart, 2002). And it improves academic achievement as measured by grades or test scores (Blum *et al.*, 2002; Marshall & Caldwell 2007), especially when it is coupled with “academic press” – high expectations and strong norms for student achievement (Schaps, Battistich, & Solomon, 2004).

Methods of building community in school

One way to make it easier for educators to take on the task of community building is by equipping them with practical methods for doing so. Fortunately, a great deal has been learned during the past 20 years about what works in the classroom and the school at large. Feasible ways of building community have been developed and shown to produce results across a wide variety of school settings (Schaps *et al.*, 2004). Approaches that yield consistent results include:

- Class meetings in which students, with their teacher’s facilitation, have opportuni-

ties to set class goals and ground rules, plan activities, assess their progress, and solve problems. Class meetings provide a forum in which students get to know one another, discuss issues, and make decisions that affect classroom life.

- Learning activities in which students collaborate on academic tasks and have regular opportunities to reflect on the ways they work together. These involve the learning of social and academic skills, so that, for example, young children practice taking turns and showing that they are listening, while older students practice ways to disagree respectfully or build on each other’s ideas.

- Cross-age “buddy” programs that regularly bring together whole classes of younger and older students to work one-on-one, each older buddy with his or her younger buddy, on academic, service and recreational activities. Buddy programs build caring cross-age relationships and create a supportive school-wide climate.

- Whole-school events that involve students and their families in ways that honor their diverse backgrounds and personal experiences, such as “Family Heritage Week” or a “Family Hobbies Fair.” Such activities help students, parents and school staff to know each other better and to link them in building a caring school environment.

- Service learning opportunities inside and outside the school that enable students to contribute to the welfare of others. These can range from simple school beautification and clean-up projects to complex organizing efforts with ambitious civic goals. In all cases, however, the activity is most consequential when coupled with follow-up debriefings that solidify students’ learning.

When implemented properly, these approaches become an integral part of a school’s daily life. They become seamlessly woven into its policies and routines. They are not regarded as add-ons, as in “Now it’s time to focus on building community.”

Measuring progress

Measuring students’ sense of community in school is easily done beginning in third or fourth grade, via an annual questionnaire survey. Administering the survey at the same time each year is advisable if one wants

to chart progress over time, since responses tend to vary with time of year.

In the pioneering “National Adolescent Longitudinal Health Study” conducted in the 1990s, Robert Blum and colleagues (Blum *et al.*, 2002; Resnick *et al.*, 1997) used a simple five-item scale to measure what they term “school connectedness.” They asked a national sample of 12,000 students in grades 7 through 12 to indicate on a five-point scale how strongly they agreed or disagreed with each of the following statements:

- I feel close to people at this school.
- I am happy to be at this school.
- I feel like I am part of this school.
- The teachers at this school treat students fairly.
- I feel safe in my school.

Students’ scores on this scale consistently predicted their resistance to a variety

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of problem behaviors including alcohol, tobacco and marijuana use; violence; emotional distress and suicidal thoughts; and early sexual behavior. Their scores also predicted their grades in major academic subjects. Perhaps more than any other study, the Ad Health Study demonstrated the importance of community in school for students’ academic success and their avoidance of high-risk behaviors.

My organization, the Developmental Studies Center, measured elementary students’ sense of community in a series of major evaluation studies beginning in the 1980s. These studies involved a sizable number of urban, suburban and rural districts in California and elsewhere. A three-part scale was used for this purpose. One subscale, called “classroom supportiveness,” consists of 14 items, including:

- My class is like a family.
- Students in my class help each other learn.
- Students in my class treat each other with respect.

• Students in my class work together to solve problems.

Similar to the Ad Health Study, students indicated the degree to which they agree or disagree along a five-point continuum. A second subscale, “autonomy and influence in the classroom,” includes 10 items, such as:

- In my class, students have a say in what goes on.
- In my class, the teacher and students plan together what we will do.
- Students in my class can get a rule changed if they think it is unfair.
- My teacher lets me choose what I will work on.

The third subscale, “school supportiveness,” consists of 14 items, including:

- Students at this school really care about each other.
- I feel I can talk with teachers at this school about things that bother me.
- Students at this school are willing to go out of their way to help someone.
- Teachers and students treat each other with respect at this school.

Benefits of community-building persist

One major finding from our center’s research is that building sense of community during the elementary school years yields benefits that persist through middle school. Middle school students who had come from elementary schools that implemented our community-building program (called the Caring School Community program) scored higher than those from control schools with respect to various school-related attitudes and behaviors (trust in teachers, liking school), and they achieved higher grade-point averages and better scores on district achievement tests. They also continued to manifest more pro-social attitudes and behaviors (Battistich, Schaps & Wilson, 2004).

DSC offers our sense of community scale at no cost to schools and districts. We do this because we believe so strongly in the importance of measuring community on an annual basis. The scale can be found on our Web site: www.devstu.org. (We do ask that anyone wishing to use it write to us for permission to do so, and if possible, share the data with us so that over time we can build a national database.)

We have worked with many districts during our 28-year history. These include districts that are large and small; urban, suburban and rural; wealthy and poor; diverse and homogeneous. Thanks to more than \$80 million in grant funding from 45 philanthropic and governmental sources – much of it designated for demonstration studies that incorporated rigorous process and outcome evaluation – we have been able to track the effects of this work on how classrooms and schools actually function, and on student outcomes.

In the process, we have learned that efforts to build caring school environments tend to succeed under certain conditions and to flounder under others. Below are three lessons we have learned about the conditions that facilitate or impede such work.

1. District and school leaders must actively lead community-building efforts if they are to be successful.

The vast majority of parents and teachers want their school to be a safe and happy place for students. But this grassroots support for community building will not matter unless a district’s leadership is also strongly committed. The district office is key because so many important decisions are made there, whereas even a decade ago such decisions often were made within the individual school.

Moreover, individual schools often lack the expertise to find, and the funds to pay for, effective community-building resources. So, as with any other major improvement effort, schools need district-level leadership, guidance and support. It is critical, therefore, that district leaders be knowledgeable about community building and that they supply the resources needed to facilitate it. Unless community building is a genuine district- as well as school-level priority, it is unlikely to happen with quality and longevity.

It’s become a cliché to contend that the principal’s leadership is pivotal to meaningful school change. But everything in our experience confirms this observation. In fact, we have never seen a school succeed at an ambitious community-building effort by end-running a principal who had a competing set of priorities. Principals simply have

too much formal and informal influence to be on the sidelines of, let alone working against, community building. Unless the principal serves as the champion, it won't happen.

2. Most classroom teachers need implementation materials that are designed to help them become proficient and comfortable with community building.

Twenty-five years ago, John Goodlad (1984) found that didactic instruction was the dominant mode of teaching in most classrooms, with students remaining in very passive roles. Our experience suggests that Goodlad's findings still apply: Most teachers do not – and do not know how to – create participatory classroom communities. Most do not routinely use cooperative learning methods, class meetings or partnering work.

Most teachers do not know how to create academic tasks that are better done collaboratively than individually. When they do create such tasks, they often do not prepare their students to work together productively. And most do not know how to engage students in thoughtful reflection about what they have learned, academically, ethically or socially.

We have also discovered that only a small proportion of teachers – perhaps 10 percent or 15 percent – can effectively revamp their own classroom practice from an overarching set of principles or concepts. Most teachers need very concrete guidance that responds to their entirely legitimate question: “Okay, I like this approach, but exactly what do I do Monday morning? And then what do I do on Tuesday?”

These teachers need materials that provide the specifics they need to guide their learning of new principles and approaches. However, it is important to differentiate such sequenced, structured guidance – which allows teachers the latitude to choose among or adapt the suggested practices and activities – from “scripted” programs that ignore or override their professional judgment. Fully scripted programs do not foster the expertise that teachers must develop for effective instruction and classroom management.

3. Most educators need professional development.

Teachers need professional development as well as high-quality materials to become fully proficient at community building. This is especially true when teachers are learning to facilitate cooperative learning groups and participatory class meetings. Unfortunately, the time and resources available for professional development in most California districts has decreased significantly over the past decade. There are multiple reasons for this, but the bottom line is that our districts



and schools, as compared with those in most other states and most other types of organizations, are under-funded.

What would be especially helpful is funding for district-level staff developers/coaches who work directly with teachers to support improvement efforts. When these coaches are actually deployed to work with teachers in classrooms in an ongoing way, they can make a very big difference.

Students come to care about their school when the school effectively cares for them. The best schools are those that enlist students and parents as active participants in creating a caring environment. The goal is a culture in which all stakeholders feel a shared sense of purpose and treat one another with kindness and respect. ■

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