Engage Students to Embrace Civility

An approach to foster civility through an emphasis on positive social norms, increased student competence, resilience, and restoration.

Embracing failure as an opportunity for growth is a core component of having growth mindset. To be fruitful, it is necessary to note when something is not working, delve into the possible reasons why, and identify strategies that would appear to have a better chance of success.

With this thinking in mind, it appears that what schools are doing, with best intentions and efforts, is not having a positive impact in the addressing bullying. It is not reasonable to expect that continuing to implement the same approaches—but with more vim and vigor—will achieve better results. What is necessary is a shift in approach.

There is a profound misunderstanding about the nature of bullying and other hurtful behavior and, thus, effective prevention strategies. Some students who engage in bullying have experienced trauma and have other risk factors. However, the primary source of bullying, especially at the secondary level, is popular, socially skilled students who are being hurtful to achieve social dominance and status. These students target those who they view as "different," as well as rivals or potential rivals. They are not viewed by staff as the source of problems.

Students who are perceived as "different" often experience being bullied. Sometimes, these students also have social relationship challenges that contribute to their being targeted. Being bullied is a form of trauma.

A significant amount of hurtful behavior in schools is bi-directional or impulsive retaliation. Such "drama" is emotionally distressing and creates a negative school climate that interferes with student learning. The concern of staff who are treating students badly or ignore hurtful situations is often not ever or effectively addressed.

As some students who are hurtful and many students who are targeted have or are experiencing trauma, trauma informed practices provide an underlying foundation for success. The key components of this effort must include increasing positive staff-student connections, mindfulness and de-escalation practices, and problem-solving skills.

However, it will not be possible to reduce bullying using only trauma informed practices. The perceived path to achieving high social status within the school must change. This requites a focus on positive social norms. The majority of students do not like to see their peers be hurtful and truly admire those who are kind and compassionate and step in to help. By revealing this insight, derived through local survey data, behavior is more likely to change.

It is necessary to engage a diverse group of kind, compassionate, and inclusive students in leadership roles to promote positive relations. Placing the students in a position of responsibility for the way in which they treat each other and giving them greater authentic voice in addressing school climate issues will increase their positive involvement and behavior.

As students approach puberty, their profound interest is in gaining independence and handling their own interpersonal relationship challenges. To them, "tell an adult" is "admit personal failure and prepare for shame."

Schools must assist students in gaining greater effectiveness in social relationship skills. This includes how to effectively respond if they witness hurtful behavior, have been treated badly, or have been hurtful. These instructional efforts must support increased peer involvement and resilience, as well a personal accountability and remedy of harm.

Schools have been directed by statute to make "bullying" a violation of the disciplinary code, create a reporting system, investigate student reports, and impose disciplinary sanctions. While schools have been directed to impose disciplinary sanctions on those who engage in bullying, they have also been directed to stop imposing exclusionary disciplinary sanctions. Schools also must make annual public reports of "bullying" incidents—a "blackmark" principals want to avoid.

The majority of students who are bullied do not report these concerns to the school, even if distressed. They think that the school will not respond or this will make things worse.

This "rules and consequences" approach frequently leads a principal to shift his or her focus from seeking to fully understand and resolve the hurtful situation to an assessment of whether the accused student has violated the disciplinary code and should be punished.

Punishment is entirely ineffective. The harm the targeted student has suffered is most often not remedied. This approach often leads to retaliation—which the targeted student does not report because reporting the first time only made things worse.

It is necessary to switch to a more comprehensive investigation and restorative intervention. This intervention must:

- Identify and address the trauma and social relationship concerns of any involved student, hurtful or targeted, in a manner that increases this student's resilience and social skills.

- Require acceptance of personal responsibility and a remedy of the harm to the one treated badly and to the school community by any student who was hurtful—and his or her supporters.

- Make any necessary corrections to the school climate. This includes increasing inclusion and addressing how staff are treating students—also in a restorative manner.

- Engage in ongoing monitoring until it has been established that things have gotten better.

Fortunately, this Engage Students to Embrace Civility approach is based on values that most all educators strongly believe in—a positive approach that supports increased resilience and skills of students and restoration of harm.

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