

Live Well. Teach Well.

A Behavioral Health, Wellness & (P)SEL Newsletter

Issue 7: Relationships & (P)SEL

Message from the CEO



School- community relationships have been strained over the past six months, making the work of district leaders more difficult. Considerable time and energy is spent anticipating and responding to our divided constituency, conditioning us to perceive parent complaints as threats to our work and health. Thus, relationships with parents and caregivers have become a reactive instead of a proactive process.

The same may be true for your faculty, who begin reacting to the office/ position as opposed to the person. At times of prolonged distress, your workforce may interpret your isolation as being out of touch and prioritizing the organization over the individual. These educators need to know you are listening, have a method of providing input, and believe their concerns are being taken seriously, lest they lose confidence in your leadership.

The reality is, relationship building and maintenance becomes a lesser priority during a crisis. The immediacy of critical tasks and constant reiteration of plans leaves little time or energy for people. Your constituency should also appreciate that the risk of skewing away from personal and professional relationships is twofold. It creates isolation for you and others may sense your disconnect and that breeds suspicion or even feelings of abandonment.

Relationships that offer the greatest chance of patience, empathy, and support will be of greatest value. We can express and negotiate with others to see if they can meet our needs, which can offer rewards for only a modicum of effort. Those who are closest to you will endure your short temper and lack of warmth. Remember they may not be getting their needs met either so reserving just a bit of energy for them is important while asking for their tolerance.

Another set of relationships we may consider is our business community, whom we can leverage to demonstrate their investment in districts by giving back, especially in the form of funding. Professional relationships become community partnerships when the mutual interests of both parties are balanced. Ecosystems are created ensuring the longevity of the school by infusing them with sponsorships, in return for which they get to brand their products and services.

Please email us for more information on building ecosystems or to send you a strategic article on dealing with social media attacks on district leaders.



Social Emotional Learning and Relationships – by Ron Hertel

Relationships are an everyday part of our lives and convey the essence of who we are to those with whom we interact.

Relationships can be warm and supportive or can cause conflict and angst. As teachers, through genuine and authentic relationships with students balanced with mutual vulnerability and adversities, academics can become relevant, and learning can become transformative. Healthy relationships are a part of “whole child” education that includes social, emotional, and academic development within a supportive learning environment.

Can the development and maintenance of healthy relationships be taught? The bulk of research that has been done since 1994 by a variety of individual and organizational researchers underscores there clearly are teachable skills that become the foundation for healthy relationships, and that healthy relationships promote academic gains. It is vital to realize these same skills are not only important and beneficial for students but also for teachers, support staff, and administrators, who are often depended upon as role models, mentors, and supportive co-workers.

Several states are collectively and individually working to support the construction of a framework for Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) that can be promoted and offered alongside academic instruction; not only as direct instruction but as an integrated approach to how we teach; a balance between social and instructional teaching practices. As of 2020, 18 states had standalone SEL standards and 26 states had state specific SEL implementation guides.

Much of the SEL work that is being done in these states is based on five SEL standards: Self-Awareness, Social Awareness, Self Management, Relationship Skills, and Responsible Decision Making. By definition, **Self Awareness** refers to the ability to assess feelings, interests, values, and strengths accurately, and to recognize strengths and limitations in our work with students; **Self Management** refers to the regulation of our own emotions and emotional displays, helping students to regulate their emotions and also using the knowledge of our strengths and limitations to set self-improvement goals; **Social Awareness** brings into focus that perspectives differ according to age, gender, and social/cultural/educational/economic backgrounds; **Relationship Skills** are the basis for how we communicate and how we prevent, manage, and resolve interpersonal conflict with students, parents, colleagues, etc.; **Responsible Decision Making** uses multiple forms of evidence to make decisions about how we manage our daily lives, how we make decisions regarding instruction and classroom management, and how we gauge interactions with students, parents, and colleagues. The skills that accompany these standards are interdependent and build on each other, and practice and insight are critical for each of us, students and adults alike, to develop and maintain these skills. For direct instruction, there are several curricula available for the development of specific SEL skills that can be stand-alone and/or woven into academic instruction.

There is broad and growing recognition that relationships matter and schools can do much to help students become proficient in their relationships with peers as well as with adults. SEL is the roadmap to the formation of healthy and sustainable relationships we can rely on for success in school and the creation of fulfilling lives.

Star District



The relationship that an administrator has with his/her principals and teachers is more important than ever, especially when facing so many mental health issues with educators and students during the current health crisis. Newly appointed Superintendent Matthew Carey of the Pittsgrove, NJ school district knows this all too well. "I feel the most important thing I can do as the new superintendent is to listen to my staff and have an understanding of what their needs are, as well as share personal things about myself. In sharing the struggles I have had in my life I feel that it allows me to make a connection with the staff by showing them that I am human too. I also try to show as much empathy and understanding as I can when presented with a situation. Lastly and probably most importantly, I want to provide them with the tools they need to become productive and happy individuals. I know that establishing trust takes time and I am okay with that."

Effective tools and trust are two keys to helping educators deal with any struggles they may be experiencing right now. "I came from a district that struggled with mental health and wellness amongst the staff and students due to student suicides. I saw first hand how this can affect a school district. One of the tools we provided to the staff was TeacherCoach. We are also implementing Mindful Monday's where a weekly Smore newsletter is sent to the staff. This week I wrote an article on the power of positive thinking. As I have only been in my current position for two months, I will continue to collaborate with the stakeholders in my district to address staff mental health and wellness."

Carey has taken proactive steps to take the mental health pulse of his current faculty and ensure that they have the support they need. "One of the first things we did during my transition was to survey the staff about how they were feeling. After reading the survey results it was clear to me that a top priority was going to be to address the mental health and wellbeing of the staff. Although there were varying levels of anxiety reported in the survey there was clearly enough data points to represent a major increase in anxiety and the symptoms of that increased anxiety level."

One factor that has certainly contributed to the anxiety levels of teachers is how much the student-teacher relationship has changed during this new education model of virtual learning and varying hybrid models around it. The physical distance and sense of disconnection has played a significant role in the mental states of both teachers and students. Carey is well aware of this and acknowledges it as one of the main motives for reopening schools and reinstating in-person instruction. "The main thing I have seen is the loss of connection between teachers and students."

Although we are connecting virtually it is just not the same as in-person. It is a major reason that one of my first priorities was developing plans for more in-person instruction, especially for our at-risk students. I believe that there are many more issues that have not even presented themselves yet as a result of this pandemic and the isolation of quarantining, social distancing, school closures, and limited social opportunities outside of school. These connections need to be reestablished as quickly as possible. The great thing in all this is that our students and staff are very resilient and I believe that with care and understanding for each other those connections can happen and are happening as a result of reopening our schools.”

Carey brings with him to Pittsgrove School District his belief in prioritizing SEL and mental health issues. Developing and nurturing relationships with all parties in the district creates effective leadership and effective, engaged teachers. “I believe that addressing SEL and mental health issues within our schools is imperative for continued growth. It is proven that if schools address these two issues, other areas such as attendance, discipline, substance abuse and even test scores will improve as a result. As far as improving relationships I feel that effective communication and collaborative decision making are two keys in bridging the gap between stakeholders in the district. It is important that everyone feels that they have a voice and that there is a collective ownership within the schools.”