



SCHOOL CLIMATE AND YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

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Schools can engage youth as co-leaders and co-learners through the following promising strategies:

1. Frame your work with youth at the center of all decisions.
2. Start with an assets-based approach.
3. Prepare youth for meaningful roles.
4. Value the perspective of youth and allow them to contribute in the decision making process.
5. Work to create the leaders of today, not as a preparation for the future.
6. Engage youth in addressing equity issues and celebrating diversity.

Overview

School climate reform, an evidence-based strategy, supports K-12 students, school personnel, parents/guardians and community members learning and working together to promote pro-social education. Done well, these efforts will result in even safer, more supportive, engaging, helpfully challenging and harmonious schools. The U.S. Department of Education, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the Institute for Educational Sciences, President Obama's Bully Prevention Partnership, the US Departments of Justice and Education's School Discipline Consensus project, a growing number of State Departments of Education and foreign educational ministries support and/or endorse school climate renewal as a strategy to increase student learning and achievement, enhance school connectedness, reduce high school dropout rates, prevent bullying and other forms of violence, and enhance teacher retention rates.

School Climate and Youth Development

Consistently and deliberately supporting students to be engaged as co-leaders and co-learners is an essential requirement for successful school climate improvement efforts. It is a trite truism to envelope our school climate reform efforts with the phrase "it's all about the kids". As we examine our existing policies and procedures, are we able to truly state that students played a significant role in **shaping** the integral parts of determining what we want our school to be? All too frequently, the norm has been to initiate and implement first, and to inform students and ask for input after the fact. If we are truly committed to supporting students in developing strong intellectual, social, emotional, and civic capacities, it behooves us to include them substantively in all

school climate improvement efforts from their inception. One might even contend that the success of school climate improvement efforts depends on it.

There is a perception (and arguably an unfounded fear) on the part of some that providing students with the skills, knowledge and dispositions to be effective and true partners in school climate efforts is running the risk of “giving away the prison to the inmates”. Even the metaphor of school as a punishing place sets us up to relegate the role of students to passive (if not completely insignificant) participants in their educational process. Relegating the role of student to “consumer” of a product that we create is, indeed, an imprisoning model. Effective youth development demands that we listen, learn, engage, and empower youth in meaningful ways.

As with all school climate efforts, starting from an assets-based approach is vital in promoting youth development. Too often, our schools are reduced to exploring what students don't know rather than exploring and celebrating those areas where there are true gifts, talents, skills, that can be activated for the benefit of all. Strong concentration on standardized test scores turns our school communities into “ranking factories”. And, inevitably, there are always those who excel and always those who fall behind. If we use as our fundamental question to youth: “How smart are you?” we set ourselves up to concentrate on what is lacking or what is deficient. Instead, if we approach all youth development efforts with the more exploratory and asset-based question: “How are you smart?” we open up to myriad possibilities for student engagement, growth, participation and success.

There is a plethora of data dealing with graduation rates, attendance, disciplinary issues and college-ready levels that points to a

tremendous “disconnect” of students from schools. For too many, school is a place where they don't feel engaged, challenged, connected, and listened to. In a very real way, students don't readily see a relationship to their school experience and the “real world”. They do not have a sense of purpose and do not feel as if they can make any difference in their school experiences (for either themselves or for others).

Leaders willing and able to tap the wealth of knowledge and skill sets of everyone in the school are on their way to developing an engaging school climate. The school becomes a place where (1) students learn more and are connected to the adults in the schools; (2) adults in the school collaborate and create a sense of belonging through shared responsibility; and (3) inclusiveness is both a vision and practice to ensure everyone is engaged. Shared leadership recognizes that not just a person in a formal leadership position has leadership capabilities, but also the quiet or reserved colleague that provides a research summary on evidence-based instructional practices; the lead custodian who makes sure things are ready to go for the assembly, notices a student's sense of school, and finds a place for a student with an interest in facilities; the student who comes up with a plan for addressing bullying in the hallway; or the outgoing team member that develops and leads activities so students are engaged and valued in the school. The skilled principal nurtures and capitalizes on the leadership in everyone in the school community – making them better as a team than as individuals.

It is almost counter-intuitive that we often fail to engage the largest constituency of our schools, our students, in the process of improving our school communities and our broader communities. Study after study has shown the incredibly powerful results that derive from engaging students as action-researchers, utilizing

service-learning as a tool to make school more effective and more connected, and promoting student voice in all policy and practice decisions.

Strategies to Guide Effective Practice

Anderson Williams has been at the forefront of youth development efforts. His model of understanding the continuum of youth involvement informs our exploration of how to systematically and practically adjust our management models to move from decision makers for to active participants with youth. He reminds us that the challenge we might have in moving along this continuum of youth involvement is changing the way we approach our work and make our decisions. How do we effectively instruct and model to students the crucial progression from participation to voice to leadership and, ultimately, to true engagement?

Williams challenges us to first explore the impediments to changing the *status quo* of how we relate to youth. Undoubtedly, there will be a need to re-structure our pedagogy, our “standard operating procedures” of school life to be effective in our efforts. He then promotes coming to a common understanding of practical ways we can work in youth-adult teams to most effectively promote youth development, engagement and voice. Among his tips for adults to successfully engage youth that are particularly relevant to school climate efforts are:

- Prepare youth to be facilitators and co-facilitators and work to make sure youth are the first to speak.
- Ensure and articulate the youth input and its impact.
- Don't assume that you know more or have more valuable knowledge than the youth.
- Come willing and ready to listen and learn.

A number of other strategies form the core for engaging youth in meaningful ways as you work

to create a school climate that supports youth development:

- Co-creating the environment with youth.
- Frame your work in terms of young people, with students at the center of all decisions.
- Incorporate reflection to stimulate learning and action.
- Engage students in equity issues and the celebration of diversity within the school community and the community at large.
- Use protocols to help student process information and guide interaction.
- Approach youth development work with an eye toward creating the leaders of today, not simply as a preparation for the future.

We know that one of the primary goals of educating our youth is to develop in them the critical skills (minds) for 21st century success. Study after study has shown the tremendous efficacy of directly involving students in this work. The more a student experiences engagement in their educational process, the more likely it is that this student will meet with the attainment of critical skills for civic engagement both now and in the future.

Summary

When we focus deliberate and sustained efforts to improve school climate through youth development, we are ensuring a strong and stable foundation from which to scaffold all future school climate reform efforts. Schools are complex and complicated places. The students with whom we are fortunate to collaborate as co-learners and co-teachers are as well. We need to consciously engage them in our work, not as an afterthought but as a fundamental part of the initial process to transform our schools into the places we want them to be.

References

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