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Each and Every Child

Quick news for Parents, Teachers and Students

An e-newsletter by the Iowa Department of Education's Bureau of Learner Strategies and Supports

When best practices aren't enough

Over the last eight issues, *Each and Every Child* has focused on best classroom practices for students with disabilities. Still, all the best practices in the world are for naught if one critical element isn't considered: the school environment.

Environment goes beyond adequate lighting and functional desks: Is it a safe environment? Are students engaged? Do students feel supported?

Are the answers subjective? Yes, with a caveat: The term "eye of the beholder" applies. It is that very point – one's perception – that is at issue. If a student feels threatened, physically or emotionally, it likely will adversely affect his or her academic performance.

A study published in the *Journal of School Psychology* indicated that children enrolled in special education were more likely to be bullied, to bully others and to be sent to the school office for discipline issues. In this issue, we focus on environment and culture. And we also learn more about the initiative Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. What kinds of successes are they experiencing?

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Maximizing the environment helps achievement

When it was decided that Armstrong-Ringsted and North Sentral Kossuth in northern Iowa were going to unite into one high school last fall, there was apprehension.

"We were concerned how that was going to go," said educator Becky Kinnander.

"North Sentral Kossuth kids were losing their school, they were going to have different teachers. They lost a lot of familiarity they had with their school. "

Luckily for the students, Armstrong-Ringsted already was working on fostering a strong climate through a grant from the Iowa Safe and Supportive Schools. The initiative, which is administered by the Iowa Department of Education, is under way at 21 high schools in the state.

The initiative focuses on three elements in the school: safety, engagement and environment. The program is aimed at developing a reliable measurement system and then improving conditions for learning.

Research has shown that when conditions for learning are positive, students achieve at higher rates.

The work was well under way in Armstrong when the two high schools – now known as North Union – came together.

"The areas identified from previous data focused on student-to-student relationships, student-to-adult relationships and then boundaries and expectations in which clear rules are delineated and enforced," Kinnander said.

Their work has paid off. A survey put out this spring shows that North Union has made substantial gains in the school's conditions for learning – despite the two student bodies coming together.

North Union's school climate is now rated as within the optimal range at 32, up 10 points from two years ago in which the school's climate showed it needed to improve. To put that in perspective, the Safe and Supportive Schools grant has an Index that runs from 0 to 36, in which 0 is the worst score and 36 is the best.

The survey taken by the grant participants shows 12 of the 21 participating high schools improved their scores this year. Though North Union made the highest gains, other schools showed impressive increases: Marcus-Meriden-Cleghorn Community High School, Sioux West High School, Winfield-Mount Union Junior-Senior High School, Sioux City West High School and Keokuk High School.

At North Union, staff, students and the community participated in the Safe and Supportive Schools' annual survey, which shows areas that need improving.

"For us, communication was really where we needed to focus," Kinnander said. "We needed to be able to make sure that expectations for everyone were outlined clearly."

Lorie Spanjers, the learning supports consultant from Prairie Lakes Area Education Agency, said North Union has done a superb job in enlisting the support of students, teachers and the community. And through that, North Union has been able to accomplish a lot in a short period of time.

"This was particularly important since the student population doubled with the whole-grade sharing. It helped foster a sense of community," she said.

Another part of the school's work was to increase positive experiences for the community as a whole.

"For instance, teachers were encouraged to make a certain number of positive contacts with parents each week," Spanjers said. "They received good feedback and will repeat it. They wanted to make sure every student's parents were contacted."

Even if your school isn't involved in the grant, you can still get a head start on improving your school's climate, said Barb Anderson, a consultant for the Iowa Department of Education.

"When places are perceived as safe and supportive, research shows that there can be double digit increases in achievement scores," she said. "When places are not considered safe and supportive, students will not reach their potential."

Anderson, who is part of a team at the state department overseeing the Iowa Safe and Supportive Schools grant, said a school's climate consists of both the physical building as well as the relationships within it.

"At a minimum, a school needs to be a safe place, both physically and emotionally," she said. "But it also matters that it is a welcoming place – when environments are clean and welcoming, it shows value. It puts students in a physical space that is conducive to learning. It shows pride, pride as to who they are as a community."

As for relationships, Anderson said, "you have to be emotionally safe before true learning can take place. For instance, if you are afraid of making mistakes – and learning is about making mistakes – your education will be greatly impeded."

Creating strong, constructive relationships are an essential function for educators, as well.

"That's true for every student in terms of potential and possibility," Anderson said. "We know the people who believe in us. We also are keenly aware of the people who don't. The people who don't believe in us create barriers; in many ways, it can become self-fulfilling.

"We have to hold the bar high for every student. We have to believe it's possible and see the potential."

Putting behavior problems in a timeout

Does your school experience a large number of discipline referrals? A high rate of absenteeism? How about employee turnover? Yes? Chances are, you have a culture problem in school. And if you have a culture problem in the school, you quite likely have students underperforming.

Worse, chronic behavior problems – the key component of a culture problem – increases a child's chances of being suspended, resulting in a loss of academic time, said Iowa Department of Education Susan Bruce.

"Chronic behavior problems set the student back both academically and socially," Bruce said. "Because of this, it increases the child's chance of being referred to alternate placement or special education."

Improving a school's culture isn't easy or quick, but it can be done. That's where Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, or PBIS, as it is better known, comes in.

"Research shows that out-of-school suspension is not effective at reducing or eliminating misconduct," said Bruce, who heads up the Department's PBIS efforts.

"PBIS helps the teachers put in place strategies that are both preventive and supportive. If students are not successful with one set of methods, they are given the chance to succeed using other proven methods. PBIS is a framework that guides school teams in a proactive schoolwide system for defining, teaching and supporting appropriate behavior to create positive learning environments for all."

Clayton Ridge school district in far northeastern Iowa has been incorporating PBIS for the last several years. And educators have seen tremendous progress: 95 percent of the students have had one or no referrals (compared to an acceptable rate of 80 percent). Only 1 percent of the student body has had six or more referrals.

Principal Shane Wahls said the school focuses on appropriate behavior and completed homework. The key, he said, is ensuring that all students know what is acceptable.

"Expectations are such that every student knows to be ready, responsible, respectful and safe," Wahls said. "We reinforce those expectations with a full assembly at the beginning of year, and a booster right after the holiday break."

Expectations are explicit, covering everything from lunchroom to restroom behavior. The school uses quarterly merit trips as motivation for good behavior. One such trip took students to Sundown for skiing in Dubuque.

"It's also important that everybody works well as a team," he said. "Sometimes that is half the battle, not just buy-in but the commitment to it."

For more information on PBIS, contact your AEA PBIS consultant or Bruce at susan.bruce@iowa.gov.

