What Schools Can Do to Welcome and Meet the Needs of All Students and Families

Introduction:

Schools as Caring, Learning Communities

What the best and wisest parent wants for his (her) own child that must the community want for all of its children. Any other idea . . . is narrow and unlovely.
John Dewey

Schools as Caring, Learning Communities

As originally used by the Children's Defense Fund, the phrase *No Child Left Behind* was clearly formulated as a statement of caring. In adopting the phrase, federal education law has increased accountability pressures for achievement test score gains and, in the process, has exacerbated what already was a less than nurturing and supportive climate at many schools.

The paradox is that, over the long run, schools are unlikely to be more effective academically if they do not ensure a positive climate school-wide and in classrooms. To deal with the paradox, school policy must enhance rather than continue to marginalize efforts to promote social and emotional development and functioning and address barriers to learning and teaching.

In caring schools, all stakeholders are involved in creating a safe, supportive, nurturing, and productive school and classroom climate. A caring school is one where school improvement policy and planning fully integrates a systemic and comprehensive approach for enabling all students to have an equal opportunity to succeed at school.

Manifestations of caring begin when newcomers first arrive at a school. Classrooms and schools can do their job better if new students, families, and staff feel they are truly welcome and have a range of social supports. A key step is to connect new students and family members with peers and other stakeholders who can provide social support and advocacy.

School staff also need to feel welcome and socially supported. Rather than leaving this to chance, a caring school develops and institutionalizes a program to welcome and connect new staff with those with whom they will be working and provides collegial supports to build their capacity to function effectively.

On an ongoing basis, a sense of caring for students can be maintained through use of personalized instruction and problem solving, regular student conferences, activity fostering social and emotional development, opportunities for students to attain positive status, and providing special assistance as necessary. The focus is on using each opportunity to nurture and support.

School-wide, a caring culture pays special attention to assisting and advocating for students and staff. With respect to students this is especially important for those who have difficulty making friends or who get into trouble. A special relationship may be established with almost anyone on the staff who is willing to help students

feel positively connected at school. A range of school staff, including teachers, classroom or yard aides, student support and resource staff, and parents can work together to address the problems. For youngsters who really don't know how to act in caring ways, specific guidelines and social skills also can be taught. Clearly, a myriad of strategies can contribute to students feeling positively connected to school and engaged in classroom learning.

Given the importance of home involvement in schooling, creating a caring atmosphere for family members also warrants enhanced attention. Increased home involvement is more likely if families feel welcome and have access to social support at school. To these ends, school staff can establish a program that effectively welcomes and connects families to staff and other families for purpose of ongoing social support, special assistance, and greater involvement in supporting their children's learning.

Maintaining a caring, learning community over time requires that a critical mass of stakeholders feel like valued members who are contributing to the collective identity, destiny, and vision and also are committed to being and working together in supportive and efficacious ways. The aim is to promote feelings of competence, self-determination, and connectedness. Such feelings and attitudes are engendered by ensuring the system has developed mechanisms and interventions that effectively provide support, promote self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation, and foster positive relationships. The degree to which a school does all this is highly related to its capacity to prevent and ameliorate learning, behavior, and emotional problems. And, an obvious connection exists between all this and sustaining morale and minimizing burnout.

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For purposes of clarity, below are some questions and answers that will help set the tone as you proceed.

What do we mean by a caring, learning community?

Learning community

> Learning is neither limited to what is formally taught nor to time spent in classrooms. It occurs whenever and wherever the learner interacts with the surrounding environment. All facets of the community (including the school) provide learning opportunities – thus the term learning community.

Teaching

Whenever a surrounding environment tries to facilitate learning, the process can be called teaching. Teaching occurs at school, at home, and in the community at large. It may be formalized or informally transmitted. Teaching happens most positively when the learner wants to learn something and the surrounding environment wants to help the learner do so. That is, positive learning is facilitated when the learner *cares* about learning and the teacher *cares* about teaching. The whole process undoubtedly benefits greatly when all the participants *care* about each other.

Caring has moral, social, and personal facets

All facets need to be addressed. When all facets of caring are present and balanced, they can nurture individuals and facilitate the process of learning. At the same time, caring in all its dimensions should be a major focus of what is taught and learned.

Teachers are all who want to facilitate learning

This includes professional teachers, aides, volunteers, parents, siblings, peers, mentors in the community, librarians, recreation staff, etc. They all constitute what can be called *the teaching community*.

Everyone is a learner and may be teachers

In the learning/teaching community, all are learners and probably play some role as teachers.

Teaching benefits from organizational learning

Organizational learning, as Hargeaves and others such as Senge have noted, requires an organizational structure "where people continually expand their capabilities to understand complexity, clarify vision and improve shared mental models by engaging in different tasks, acquiring different kinds of expertise, experiencing and expressing different forms of leadership, confronting uncomfortable organizational truths, and searching together for shared solutions."

Communities of colleagues

As Hargreaves has stressed: In schools, the way to relieve "the uncertainty and open-endedness in teaching" is to create "communities of colleagues who work collaboratively [in cultures of shared learning and positive risk-taking] to set their own professional standards and limits, while still remaining committed to continuous improvement. Such communities can also bring together the professional and personal lives of teachers in a way that supports growth and allows problems to be discussed without fear of disapproval or punishment."

Why should a school be the hub of a community and
a classroom be a student's home away from home?

Schools often seem apart from the community

Most schools could do their job better if they were experienced as an integral and positive part of the community – perhaps even as the heart of the community. Schools and classrooms often are seen as separate from the community in which they reside. This contributes to a lack of connection between school staff and parents, students, other community residents, and community agency personnel. Development of a caring, learning community requires creating positive connections between school and community.

School-community connections

For schools to be seen as an integral part of the community, steps must be taken to create and maintain collaborative relationships between school and community with respect to weaving together (blending) learning opportunities, programs, services, and use of facilities, personnel, and other resources.

Opening-up use of the school site

Besides increasing home involvement in schools and schooling, schools must facilitate increased use of school sites as places where parents, families, and other community residents can engage in learning, recreation, enrichment, and can connect with services they need.

Welcoming and social support for students

Most classrooms can do their job better if students feel they are truly welcome and have a range of social supports. Thus, a major focus for school-community collaboration is establishment of a program that effectively welcomes and connects new students with peers and adults at school who can provide social support and advocacy.

Welcoming and social support for parents/families

Increased home involvement in school is more likely if families feel they are truly welcome and have a range of social supports. Thus, a major focus for school-community collaborative partnership is establishment of a program that effectively welcomes and connects newly enrolled families with other families, with school staff, and with ongoing social support and home involvement programs.

Volunteers

Parents, peers, and other volunteers help break down the barriers between school and community. Thus, a major focus for school-community collaborative partnership is establishment of a program that effectively recruits, screens, trains, and nurtures volunteers.

Helping students feel a sense of interpersonal connection

Personalized instruction and regular student conferencing, cooperative learning strategies, curriculum focused on fostering social and emotional development, opportunities to have special status, peer tutoring, peer counseling and mediation, human relations and conflict resolution programs -- all can contribute to students feeling positively connected to the classroom.

What is a psychological sense of community?

People can be together without feeling connected or feeling they belong or feeling responsible for a collective vision or mission. At a school, a psychological sense of community exists when enough stakeholders are committed to each other and to the school's goals and values and exert effort to pursue the goals and maintain relationships with each other. A perception of community is shaped by daily experiences and probably is best engendered when a person senses s/he is welcome, supported, nurtured, respected, liked, connected to others in reciprocal relationships, and a valued member who is contributing to the collective identity, destiny, and vision.

Practically speaking, a conscientious effort by enough stakeholders associated with a school seems necessary for a sense of community to develop and be maintained. Such effort must ensure there are mechanisms that provide support, promote self-efficacy, and foster positive working relationships. That is, a perceived sense of community seems to require that a critical mass of participants not only are committed to a collective vision, but also are committed to working together in supportive and efficacious ways. There is an obvious relationship between maintaining a sense of community and sustaining morale and minimizing burn out.

What's involved in working together?

Collaboration and collegiality

As Hargreaves has stressed, these concepts are fundamental to improving morale and work satisfaction and to the whole enterprise of transforming schools to meet the needs of individuals and society. *Collaborative cultures* foster collaborative working relationships which are spontaneous, voluntary, development-oriented, and pervasive across time and space. When collegiality is *mandated*, it often produces what has been called *contrived collegiality* which tends to breed inflexibility and inefficiency. Contrived collegiality is administratively regulated, compulsory, implementation-oriented, fixed in time and space, and predictable.

Teacher collaboration and teaming

Increasingly it is becoming evident that teachers need to work closely with other teachers and school personnel as well as with parents, professionals-in-training, volunteers, and so forth. Collaboration and teaming are key facets of addressing barriers to learning. They allow teachers to broaden the resources and strategies available in and out of the classroom to enhance learning and performance.

Welcoming for new staff and ongoing social support for all staff

Just as with students and their families, there is a need for those working together at a school to feel they are truly welcome and have a range of social supports. Thus, a major focus for professional development activity is establishment of a program that welcomes and connects new staff with others with whom they will be working and does so in ways that effectively incorporates them into the community.

Overcoming Barriers to working together

Problems related to working relationships are a given. To minimize such problems, it is important for participants to understand barriers to working relationships and for sites to establish effective problem solving mechanisms to eliminate or at least minimize such barriers.

Minimizing Rescue dynamics

A special problem that arises in caring communities are rescue dynamics. Such dynamics arise when caring and helping go astray, when those helping become frustrated and angry because those being helped don't respond in desired ways or seem not to be trying. It is important to minimize such dynamics by establishing procedures that build on motivational readiness and personalized interventions.

Connecting students and families with the right help

A caring, learning community works to develop a comprehensive, integrated approach to addressing barriers to learning and enhancing healthy development. The right help involves the capacity to identify problems quickly and to respond with the right intervention (e.g., programs and services that are a good match for what is needed). Encompassed are systems for promoting healthy development and preventing problems, early-after-onset interventions, and treatment for severe and pervasive problems organized around well-designed content arenas.

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