

## ***I. Brief Overview***

### ***B. How school environments could support mental health and reduce problems***

*Excerpt from: Practices and Conditions that Lead to a Sense of Community in Middle Schools*  
by Susan J. Belenardo, In **National Association of Secondary School Principals**  
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In this era of educational accountability, school success is measured by students' performance on standardized assessments. It is often forgotten that student effort—as well as teacher and parent effort—may depend greatly on the underlying climate and culture of the school. When parents, teachers, and students all feel surrounded by a caring and supportive school environment, they are more likely to respond favorably to schoolwide challenges such as the pressure for students to perform well on tests (Beck and Murphy 1996; Driscoll 1989; Rosenholtz 1991; Rutter et al. 1979)....

**Defining a Sense of Community** This study used the term "community" to refer to a shared psychological sense of coherence at a school. A sense of community is the presence of beliefs, feelings, and relationships that connect members of a school community to each other; it provides a sense of belonging to something that transcends the situational relationships in an organization (Goodlad 1981; Haberman 1992; Sergiovanni 1994). Even though much rhetoric has been devoted to the importance of a sense of community in schools, a clear understanding of the organizational elements that contribute to its presence does not exist (Driscoll 1989; Sergiovanni 1994)...

#### ***Dimensions of a Sense of Community***

**Shared values.** A cohesive, reinforcing school program is built on a core of common beliefs and expectations. These shared values underlie the school vision and provide a uniform direction for the development of the instructional program and for behavioral expectations. A school program developed from a system of shared values eliminates the uncertainty and frustration that occurs if there is a lack of clear direction. Administrators, teachers, and parents have common goals for student learning and behavior. They share a common belief in the kind of people students are capable of becoming, and express that belief in the day-to-day activities of the school. Indicators of shared values include agreements on instructional expectations and practices, the enforcement of schoolwide discipline standards, high academic standards for all students, and explicit achievement goals. These values are communicated to students through stated performance expectations and modeled in the behaviors and conversations of the adults in the school (Bryk and Driscoll 1988; Driscoll 1995; Rossi and Stringfield 1995; Sarason 1974; Smrekar 1996).

**Commitment.** According to Beck and Murphy (1996), commitment is one of the imperatives of a successful school. Commitment is evidenced by a willingness to go beyond expected participation. A strong connection to the school eliminates distractions caused by competing demands for attention. To a large extent, membership in the group reinforces and satisfies the needs of the individual. Thus, the effort and attention given to creating a successful organization contributes to each participant's feelings of success.

**A feeling of belonging.** In schools where there is a sense of community, there is a shared emotional connection that provides participants with a sense of being part of something that has a past, present, and future. This feeling of belonging is created by school programs that recognize the positive performance and contributions of individual members; a common agenda of activities and similar experiences that link students, families, teachers, and administrators to the school's traditions; and the acceptance of all members into the group regardless of their individual differences (Beck 1998; McMillan and Chavis 1986). A strong consistent academic program and the frequency with which teachers participate in activities that involve parents are examples of a common agenda of activities. Respect for individual differences is evidenced by parents' reports that their children feel accepted by teachers, and teachers' indicating they feel accepted as a colleague by other teachers. These shared rituals, recognitions, and experiences unite the members of the organization and create feelings of connection to the institution—of belonging to something of value. This sense of belonging, in turn, binds members to the past and sets a direction for the future (Bryk, Lee, and Holland 1993).

**Caring.** Caring connects members of the group and results in mutual respect, support, and interest. In schools, caring is evident in the actions of teachers as they extend themselves to work with students beyond what is required, and in the presence of programs that are available to meet the needs of all students. A feeling of cooperation rather than competition is demonstrated through the willingness of adults (i.e., educators and parents) to help each other, as well as to help students. Stakeholders emphasize the development of relationships and the development of individuals who care and are cared for in return (Noddings 1995).

Within caring communities, there is a spirit of service that assures that the needs of individual members are met. In schools, examples of caring include special programs that help students who are having difficulty; teachers who take a personal interest in all of their students; and parents who perceive that their children would get help if they were having problems in class. Caring interactions among teachers, students, and parents often make the difference between a positive and a frustrating school experience (Noddings 1995).

**Interdependence.** Schools with a strong sense of community are defined by more cooperative forms of social interaction. A recognized interrelationship exists among individuals, as well as an understanding that all actions occur in relation to others rather than in isolation (Beck 1998). Teachers coordinate curriculum and exchange and share ideas. They regard one another as sources of help with individual problems. This cooperation results in ongoing, mutually beneficial skill development and contributes to the collegiality of the school. This collegiality is reflected in organizational strength that far surpasses the strength of the individual.

Collaborative schools are marked by strong, reciprocal, social, and academic relationships among colleagues (Rosenholtz 1991). Indicators of interdependence include teachers working together to plan lessons and observing one another's instructional practice, and teachers and parents working together to improve school programs. This interaction provides a supportive framework as teachers, students, and parents recognize others' strengths that complement their own.

**Regular contact.** In schools that have a sense of community, importance is placed on providing opportunities for all members to meet and communicate. School communities are identified by the presence of regularly scheduled activities that provide ample opportunities for teachers to interact with one another, develop relationships, and celebrate their membership in the organization (Smrekar 1996). Such schools also provide regular opportunities for teachers to interact with students and parents in

informal activities that promote relationships that go beyond the academically oriented relationships of the classroom. Established procedures ensure that all members are kept informed of school programs and activities.

Regular contact includes parents who participate in school activities and who call other parents if they have a question about the school. Among teachers, regular contact includes engaging in personal and professional conversations with other teachers. The combination of shared values, commitment, a feeling of belonging, caring, interdependence, and regular contact defines the strength of a school's sense of community. Although each dimension is manifested in a myriad of activities, a sense of community is defined as the integration of all these elements.

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<sup>11</sup> This article summarizes findings from a larger study. For the detailed report, see Belenardo (2000). The author acknowledges and thanks Professor Henry "Hank" Becker at the University of California, Irvine, for his contributions to the preparation of this article. Thanks are also extended to all of the schools that participated in the study for their willingness to contribute to this project.

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