

United States Senate Briefing
on
SEL – School Climate & Character Education
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First of all I would like to thank everyone for this opportunity to share the amazing journey of Ridgewood Middle School, a school of 500 7th and 8th graders from low socio-economic families, on the outskirts of St. Louis. My goal is to give you a real life example that supports the research that Dr. Elias shared. In 2000, after an intense year long study of social, emotional and character development in children through the Leadership Academy of Character Education at the University of Missouri, St. Louis, I decided to take a position in a failing middle school to put what I had studied into practice.

So let me paint you a picture of RMS in 2000. The appearance of the school was deplorable; unkempt with every inch of the bathrooms, locker rooms and bleachers covered with graffiti, profanity and racial slurs. A police officer had to be stationed at the school because of the daily violence and drug use. No other school in the district, not even the high schools, had a police officer. Attendance was low and standardized test scores were even lower. Only 30% of the students met the NCLB standards in communication arts and only 7% did so in mathematics. This was not a place where staff and students wanted to be. However, rather than changing academics, I knew the real secret to success was to first address the school climate.

The administration, along with services from Characterplus in St. Louis, began training teachers and staff to intentionally meet student's emotional and social needs and change school climate. The entire staff also did a needs assessment survey and began creating character based initiatives to help meet those needs. I would like to share with you a few examples of these initiatives.

I discovered that at the end of 1st semester in 2001, we had 600 individual F's for only 500 students. When I asked the teachers why, there wasn't one student that the teachers told me was incapable of doing the work...in every case it was because they didn't turn their work in on time and were given a 0. So the bottom line was that we were allowing 12, 13 and 14 year olds to CHOOSE failure instead of teaching them the important life skill of being responsible for their work. We then formed our ZAP (Zeros Aren't Permitted) Program where students are not allowed to opt out of assignments and teachers are not allowed to give 0's in their grade book. If a student does not have their work for the day, their name and assignment is turned in to the office and then we, as administrators, staff this program during lunch. What resulted were students gaining the confidence that they can do the work and be successful, which led them to being successful on tests and feeling positive about their academics. Now those 600 semester F grades are down to 6.

The school counselor set up a truancy program at Ridgewood in partnership with our county juvenile judge who meets once a week with chronically truant students at school to provide intervention and character development to those struggling to come to school. And yes, for years I have knocked on many, many doors when students have not come to school or missed the bus. I personally wake them up and bring them to school, because if I say I care about them being there...I need to make sure they know it. In fact, this is always one of the 1st questions from the new students, “Ms. Pelster, is it true that you are going to show up at our house if we don’t come to school?”

For an entire year before a child comes to Ridgewood, the student and their families are engaged in transition activities through our RMS Transition Program. These activities are designed to help students create a sense of belonging to Ridgewood, set expectations, and develop relationships with staff and students from other schools all before they are an “official” Ridgewood student. And on the 1st day of school we do not go to any of our academic classes. Every 7th grade advisory is paired with an 8th grade buddy advisory for the day and every 7th grader receives an 8th grade mentor. The entire day is spent in “getting to know you” activities and team building activities in an effort to help kids feel comfortable and adjusted and ready to succeed.

Above all else, I believe that every student has a voice and that voice needs to be heard in a leadership capacity. Therefore, we created 3 levels of leadership classes for our students. Character Council is a class that meets every day where students are responsible for identifying issues and needs of their peers, creating lessons that address these topics and then teaching the lessons to their peers in advisory class. Besides teaching their peers, they work in 15 different committees that run many of our schools functions.

Teen Leadership class teaches a wide range of students how to be leaders and develop good character. It begins with the basics of how to properly introduce oneself, how to look others in the eyes, shake their hands and tell them your name to being in charge of school wide events such as Red Ribbon Week.

Aftershock is our at-risk girls’ leadership class and Impact is our at-risk boys’ leadership class. These are our kids that come to school with the baggage of extreme poverty, abuse, broken families, and/or emotional issues such as eating disorders and cutting, and sadly RMS has way too many such kids. These issues can be the reason a student is unsuccessful in school and life. Aftershock and Impact gives these students a voice to say, “Hey, what I have been handed in life doesn’t have to destroy me. Instead I can use my experiences to make a positive impact at my school and in my community”. They study the issues they are facing; they bring in guest speakers, provide service learning opportunities based on the topic, and produce informational newsletters on each topic for the community. Because of these leadership opportunities, we routinely take the kids in danger of dropping out, or much worse, and turn them into caring, pro-social leaders who succeed academically.

RMS holds summits where student representatives examine an issue and plan a full day of workshops and guest speakers for the entire student body. An example of this would be our “Rise Against Bullying Day” in April. Students spent the entire day in workshops hearing from experts such as lawyers, law officials, and athletic coaches. They also heard real candid stories from fellow students that have bullied others or been bullied. They made plans for taking a stand against bullying.

Again, these are just a few examples. It is imperative to understand that this was and continues to be a whole school process. Supporting a child’s social, emotional and character development is integrated in to every facet of our school day at Ridgewood. It is not just a piece on the educational plate; it is the plate!

So, does focusing on character and social-emotional learning work, not only for character development but for academic success?

Our discipline referrals have plummeted from nearly 3000 (most at the suspension level) in 2001 to slightly over 300 in 2010. This is a decline of 89% - the police officer is long gone!

Our failure rate has dropped from over 600 F’s in 2001 to 6 in 2010

Our attendance has increased from 89% in 2001 to 94.2% in 2010

Our standardized test scores have increased from 30% to 68% proficient in Communication Arts and from 6.9% to 71% proficient in Mathematics

As a result, we have made the Top 10 Most Improved List in the State of Missouri 4 times and have been named a National School of Character. We have site visitors that come from all over the world to learn the secret of our remarkable success.

I would like for you to hear the story of Mandy. As a 7th grade student, Mandy had been failing every class at her last school, her attendance was terrible, she had been hospitalized suicidal tendencies and she absolutely hated school. As a new student at Ridgewood, we immediately began caring for her and connecting her to our programs that would help Mandy turn her life around. Over the next 2 years with us, Mandy blossomed into a beautiful and healthy young lady. At the end of her 8th grade year, Mandy told us that she and her mother were moving. In the middle of her first year in high school, I received this e-mail from her....

- hey ...Mrs.Pelster... It's Mandy from last year. I just wanted you to know that I really do miss your school and the help you provided me. I hope you know that your school has helped me better myself emotionally and physically. I always do my homework, I have A's and B's in every class... I'm running for secretary and I'm going to be on the basketball team. Your character education program has inspired not just me but many other students and i just wanted to let you know the character education your school taught me I have passed it on. Jefferson elementary has asked me to help them develop a character education program for the elementary students to help better them as people. I just wanted to say thank you Mrs.Pelster.

I want you to know, that the clientele of Ridgewood has not changed these past 10 years. Our families still struggle with extreme poverty and a section of our attendance area is still one of the highest crime areas in our county..... The difference is these kids, that 10 years ago were destroying the building and each other, now know they are valued and cared about, and now take on the leadership responsibility to create a culture and climate where they value each other, their school, their character, and their academic success.

Most importantly, all this was done without ever changing our academic curriculum or our textbooks....what we changed was how we met the social , emotional, and character development needs of our students. **THIS** is the critical piece for continuing to raise student achievement and successful children in this great country. Thank you.