T-CARE

Teachers Connecting to Advance Retention and Empowerment

CONTENTS

CTL@CSUN IS THE RESEARCH AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ARM OF THE MICHAEL D. EISNER COLLEGE OF EDUCATION.

Founded in 2002 through the Eisner Foundation, our mission is to identify, research, and disseminate what really works in education.

CTL @csun

In the past two years, our T-CARE newsletter has addressed critical and timely themes. Naturally, authors wrote about teaching, learning, and working in a remote environment. We also had a special issue addressing social justice, equity, and access. We challenged authors to do a retrospective entitled "If I had known then..", reflecting on lessons learned over the pandemic and its impact on education. In this issue, we called on school leaders to share experiences, strategies, thoughts, actions, programs, and recommendations.

The submitted articles ranged greatly, from strategies for in-class check-ins to ways to bring dogs to campus. We love the heterogeneity of articles and know you will find one that connects with you. For example, Blanks shared concrete tips she and other administrators use to engage with both students and teachers. Zurheide offered strategies for connecting with students or teachers more regularly. Agan provided suggestions for improved communication with family members. Cabrera described how school leaders could partner with Guide Dogs for the Blind to raise puppies on a school campus.

The importance of looking beyond academics and addressing the mental health and social-emotional learning of adults and students was a prevalent topic. Edemann shared a program her school used to ensure that faculty, staff, and other school personnel reflected inward on their own social-emotional well-being before trying to support students. Casses emphasized the role professionals play in providing therapy and counseling during traumatic times. Finally, Hollett cautioned those who use social-emotional learning superficially and challenged us to dig deeper and integrate justice-oriented SEL into our classes.

Another shared topic was the school-to-prison pipeline. Murphy, Scott, and Garland all shared strategies for trying to break a vicious cycle. Murphy offered a mnemonic of "GEAR UP" to help leaders connect with faculty and students. Scott and Garland introduced a group called the "Peacekeepers" who work as school and community liaisons. Recognizing and addressing problems our schools continue to face was clearly the overall focus of all articles.

As most schools are ending their school year, I want to take a moment to offer a "Shout Out" to all school leaders – from superintendents, to teacher educators, to district office personnel, to principals and vice principals, to department chairs, coaches, and teacher leaders. Teaching is often a difficult and thankless job, but it is definitely made easier when a school leader is there to provide support, vision, resources, and empathy. The last few years have been challenging for everyone but school leaders have been at the forefront, negotiating everything from school cleanliness to vaccination/mask checks, from academic gaps to trauma management, from attendance to legal implications.

Please take a moment to thank a school leader near you!

Wendy W. Murawski, Ph.D.
Executive Director and Eisner Endowed Chair
Center for Teaching & Learning, CSUN

T-CARE

Sit, Roll Over, Take Notes

Bringing Guide Dogs to Campus

8 years ago, as I began my role as the new principal of Don Antonio Lugo High School in Chino, CA, I was tasked by the Superintendent to address multiple issues. The school was in a lower socioeconomic part of the district and was losing enrollment. In addition to increasing enrollment in general, I was asked to resurrect a dying Agriculture program as well as create innovative programs on campus that would draw students to our school and begin to build a positive, inclusive culture. It was this need for innovation that gave birth to the idea of raising puppies on campus for the organization, Guide Dogs for the Blind. What student wouldn't want to go to a school with puppies running around?

As a school with an admittedly waning Agricultural program but an 8-acre farm on campus, our school already had a Future Farmers of America (FFA) club. Guide Dogs for the Blind (GDFB) and FFA have a national partnership that allows students to raise guide dog puppies in lieu of a livestock project. What a perfect fit for our school! After getting the approval of the Superintendent of course, we reached out to GDFB to discuss a partnership. Our first two puppies, Quinn and Quest, arrived on January 3, 2015. The program was easily integrated onto our campus and our school collaboratively began raising those two puppies.

How does raising a guide dog puppy work? First of all, the dogs were insured for a million dollars each through the Guide Dogs for the Blind organization. From the time they are 8 weeks old and handed over to their raiser, they are preparing for service and therefore have many of the public permissions as a working service dog. This journey provided an education for everyone on our campus as to the need of service animals, as well as the do's and don'ts of coming into contact with one. Much of the time spent by student raisers was educating other students – what an excellent learning and teaching opportunity!

Puppies accompanied their raisers all day, every day. Raisers fostered puppies for 12 to 18 months, training them in manners, and socializing in public places including classrooms, restaurants, and movie theaters.

A school, though, is the perfect training ground for a puppy as there is so much to see, smell, hear…and taste! If a puppy raiser could train a guide dog puppy on a campus with 1600 students to be well-mannered and obedient, it was more than likely that puppy would become a good working guide someday.

At the height of our raising and training program, Don Lugo High School had 12 puppies on campus at once. Each of these pups of various ages trained all day by going to classrooms, training meetings, and special events with their handlers. These dogs served more than just one purpose however; they were often used within our school and even at other district schools to comfort students who had experienced traumatic situations. We introduced the pups slowly to our students with moderate to severe disabilities, as many of them were initially fearful of being near the dogs. The pups displayed great patience as many of our students with disabilities were learning for the first time how to greet and trust an animal.

Today, I am proud to say that Don Lugo High School has raised 30 guide dog puppies for the Guide Dogs for the Blind International; approximately 12 of those pups are currently working service dogs across the country. Leaders are frequently asked to think outside the box in the need to address educational puzzles at their school sites. Bringing puppies onto a high school campus solved issues we knew we had, as well as provided solutions to problems we had yet to identify.

Kimberly Cabrera, Ed.D., Dr. Cabrera currently serves as the Director of Student Support Services in Monrovia Unified School District. She has served as an educator for 26 years as a chemistry teacher, assistant principal, and as principal of Don Antonio Lugo High School in Chino, CA.

T-CARE

Actions Speak Louder

Daily Administrative Actions that Work

Effective school leadership, even during a global pandemic, is less about what you "know" and more about what you "do" for kids and teachers on a daily basis. Actions really do speak louder than words, in most cases. Here is a short list of some of the actions that our administrators "do" daily to keep our urban middle school moving forward through the chaos of the last two years, pandemic or otherwise.

- **Do your duty.** Administrators greet each student as they arrive, every day, during their bus and/or car rider "duty". We can often address small issues students bring into school before they become big problems later in the day when we see their faces as soon as they arrive in the morning. Catching "setting events" (events that can trigger behaviors later in the day) can really help.

- **Be visible.** Assistant principals work from open offices in the middle of our grade levels. We are in the halls and classrooms all day long. Our building principal works from a rolling, standing desk that he moves throughout the building. We are physically present wherever we are most needed. All kids and teachers know that an administrator is never more than speaking distance away.

- **Feed your teachers.** This works! Our school went through at least ten different administrators in three years before our current administrative team came on board. Veteran teachers didn't trust us and new teachers had no idea what to expect. In the darkest days of hybrid instruction, I started cooking breakfast each Friday for the teachers. Feeding is an act of care and compassion, two things many teachers feel are lacking in the world right now. It worked wonders for building trust and community on my team.

- **Work with kids.** All administrators have student learning spaces in our offices. Teachers know that we will take kids whenever they need us to. Students know that they can bring their work and get out of the larger mix when they need a break. We all have students working in our offices throughout the day most of the time.

- **Value teaching.** Teachers and students know what to expect when students disrupt instruction. Our messaging is very clear. Teachers teach; students learn. We support teachers and students who are struggling to ensure continuity of instruction.

- **Slow down.** An urban middle school moves quickly. It is tempting to make snap decisions when your cup of problems overfloweth. We have learned the importance, however, of slowing things down. We do a lot of triaging in the moment to keep the instructional day moving and problem solve once we have made the time to investigate, understand, and develop effective solutions. It makes for longer days, but we try to touch most problems only once, rather than dealing with the same thing over and over because we didn't get it right the first time.

- **Just say "Ok".** This is a biggie. As an urban school administrator, you are faced with bad news and new problems all day, every day. It is so easy to get bogged down in frustration in these moments. Or, you can just say "ok" and keep moving forward. This magic phrase deescalates the situation. Not enough laptops for your virtual kids? Ok. An entire teacher team must quarantine for the next week? Ok. Buses are running an hour late? Ok. Detach from your feelings about things you are powerless to change. People can't give you what they don't have. Period.

It may be important to note that most of these practices were not proactively planned, they just happened naturally over time as we addressed emerging needs. However, when administrators do everything they can think of to support teachers and students, it works. We don't have to talk about it… we simply need to act.

Brooke Blanks, Ph.D., Dr. Blanks is an Assistant Principal for a middle school in Roanoke, Virginia. A former Professor of Special Education at Radford University for 13 years, Dr. Blanks decided that her heart was back with teachers and K-12 students.

T-CARE

Let's Check In!

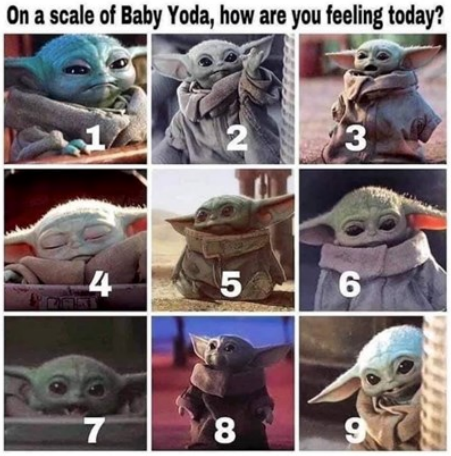
Informal Check-ins To Increase Connection

The role relationships and connection play in well-being and success cannot be minimized – both for students and their teachers. Students need to feel like they belong in school, that their teachers care about them as an individual, and that they are supported when having difficulties. Teachers need to know they too are supported by their school leaders. School administrators and teacher educators should reinforce this belief and model practices for future and current teachers (e.g., making a point to learn all participants' names or doing intro surveys and icebreakers at the beginning of the year). Unfortunately, these can be seen as isolated activities that don't fundamentally change the culture of a school or class if they aren't embedded regularly.

The experience with the pandemic and remote instruction helped highlight the need for infusing more intentional and frequent opportunities for connection. While utilizing strategies such as class meetings or social-emotional learning curricula can certainly be a way to help build connection in the classroom, they are not always practical, especially for those who work in secondary or postsecondary settings. However, there are many little ways to nurture relationships between teachers and students (whether they are 1st graders or college seniors), as well as with teachers themselves, through simple day-to-day interactions.

One of the most impactful activities for me has been doing short check-ins with students during class. Check-ins can also be done with faculty during Staff Meetings. There are many easy ways to structure check-ins, for example:

- **Fist-to-Five Ranking** – Ask participants how they are doing overall or in a specific area (e.g., with the latest assignment, handling their stress, etc.) and have them respond with 0 to 5. A 5 = "I'm doing great, no concerns" and a 0 = "I'm not doing well at all," with 1-4 somewhere in the middle. Respondents put their number on their fingers (or in the chat box for remote classes) and then we have a brief discussion about why they chose the number they did. Variations on this can include using a different range of numbers. For example, an elementary teacher might use 1 to 3 in their class since only three choices is easier for younger students to grasp.
- **"Which _____ are you today?"** Participants choose which of a series of photos best matches up with how they currently feel. There are many variations on this (just Google "which are you today" to find countless fun examples). Even teachers can have fun identifying which Baby Yoda they feel like today!



- **Whip arounds** – Pose a question and quickly go around the room having participants give a short response. You can ask questions, such as "what was the best thing you ate over winter break?" or "what is one word to describe how you feel right now?" Principals might ask their faculty, "What's your non-school passion?" A "pass" option can be added for folks who don't want or don't feel comfortable contributing.

These check-ins serve several purposes. First, they allow teachers and leaders to get a sense of where participants are emotionally. They also allow leaders the chance to empathize and care. For example, if I do a fist-to-five and see a lot of lower numbers, I might say "I see a lot of 2's today. I know this time of year is very stressful. Please let me know if there is any additional support you need." I may also reach out to individuals if I see they are consistently responding in a way that is concerning. Finally, they help build connection among the group. Participants have the chance to share information about themselves and realize that they aren't alone in how they are feeling. While these check-ins usually only take a minute or two, they are invaluable in nurturing positive relationships and connection with others.

Jaime L. Zurheide, Ph.D., Dr. Zurheide is an assistant professor in the School of Education at Elmhurst University in Elmhurst, Illinois. She is a former middle and high school special education teacher and has over 20 years of experience in education.

T-CARE

THE CARING CONNECTION

CLARIFYING COUNSELING FOR EDUCATORS

For those of us who have been at the forefront of caring for the needs of students (and possibly our own children) in the 'relative' aftermath of this pandemic, we may be feeling run-down and exhausted. This current time of what might be described as a pandemic 'let-down' has provided us with a feeling of relative normalcy following a post-caregiving period that required our super-human flexibility, was wholly uncertain, fear-inducing, loss-filled, and seemed to never end.

Understandably, public servants are depleted after coming down from an intense time of care - most of which did not include ourselves. Many educators are struggling to pull up from this let-down and are now needing support and possibly intervention. Where do we turn to intervene? What do we really need? How do we truly understand what is left at the root of this pandemic let-down for ourselves?

One clear message has emerged, 'get counseling.' As a counselor myself, I fully support this message; however, some stigmas need to be broken down to embrace what counseling entails. When I recommend counseling to others, a typical response is, "I have parents/friends who I talk to.' I celebrate that they have these supports in their lives. Yet, I also share that every close individual holds some investment in our lives. Parents want their college students to succeed in school because it "invests in their investment". Friends want their friends to be a source of fun to continue the relationship. Our invested relationships, while fully well-intentioned, may create muddiness in our ability to identify any core issues that will need to be resolved in the long term.

A counselor provides clarity through neutrality. There is a reason that dual relationships are an ethical concern in counseling— because, with ***any*** relationship, there is an inherent want, need, or non-neutrality hidden in that relationship. This is not inherently negative, but our close relationships are not suited to be thought of as counseling for this reason. I consistently urge others and implore any caregiving educator who may feel this sense of depletion during this time of let-down to seek counseling for the outlined purposes.

What a trained counselor provides...

* ***a blank slate***: In counseling, you will be asked to share your thoughts, feelings, and ultimately what is troubling you. A counselor is trained to reflect your statements to allow you to hear what you've shared with no preconceived biases, thoughts, needs, or wants. They are a non-invested party.

* ***identification of the issue***: Aside from any concerns for the well-being of yourself and others, you can speak freely without hurting feelings. This can allow you to identify your core needs without censoring, without feeling that you may be harming an important relationship in your life.

* ***a plan for healing***: Once a root need is identified, you have the support of a counselor to begin identifying a plan for your healing. To be effective, our self-care strategies must align with our root needs.

To accomplish self-care, we must first identify the apparent core need and then align the self-care strategies to fill that need. To arbitrarily begin trial and error self-care strategies would be like skipping the diagnostic testing for a student while randomly plowing through multiple intervention strategies. We understand as educators that we must know the diagnosis before working to intervene with evidence-based strategies. The same holds true for our own core needs. We can prevent unnecessary time-wasting with the trial and error of strategies. When self-care strategies do not meet the core need, they may only provide short-lived benefits. As public servants, we must be willing to be laser-focused on recognizing our own needs before we can be fully prepared to do so with those who we have been called to serve.

Missy Casses, Ed.D., CRC, E-RYT, Dr. Casses is an Assistant Professor of Special Education/ Educational Psychology at the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown. Missy worked in education for 20 years through various service-based positions, including the (Part C) Early Intervention system, behavioral-health counseling and intervention, and as a kindergarten teacher.

T-CARE

GEAR UP

Slowing the School to Prison Pipeline

When school leaders are tasked to address issues around social justice, equity and inclusivity, one area that should not be neglected is the "school-to-prison pipeline," where there is overrepresentation of both children with disabilities and minorities. Disadvantaged students are increasingly becoming part of the criminal justice system rather than public schools. Continued instances of academic failure often lead to behavior challenges which, if followed by harsh punishment and suspensions rather than positive behavior interventions and supports, frequently lead to dropout and even delinquency. School leaders and teacher educators need to introduce current and prospective teachers to the existence of this pipeline and the impact of their actions. Teachers need to have empathy, awareness of pervasive issues and traumas our students may be experiencing, and perhaps more importantly, be self-aware and understand ourselves and our own biases in order to focus on what we can do to break this cycle. This cycle impacts many students, particularly those at-risk and with disabilities, at every grade level and in every school.

Superintendents and school principals can adopt frameworks that structure decision-making and leveled supports (i.e., Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports; PBIS) to replace competing policies (i.e., Zero Tolerance). This empowers teachers and administrators to apply skills/expertise for consistent behavior management. Building partnerships with community organizations can support youth leadership, while local teacher preparation programs can help design evidence-based implementation plans, evaluate effectiveness, or provide district-wide training. Breaking the school-to-prison pipeline requires change; educators need to GEAR UP to promote social justice, equity, and access!

G – Get to know yourself and your students. Be aware of your own culture and how it can impact your own behavior and interactions with students. Likewise, get to know your students and how their culture and life outside of school might impact their interactions with you and their peers in the classroom.

E – Educate students about class norms. Teach students the expectations or norms for the classroom (and even involve them in coming up with these for additional buy-in). Discuss how norms will create a safe space where learning can take place, and how these may be different than expectations at home and other areas within the community. Practice, review, and adjust the rules and norms as needed throughout the school year.

A – Address challenges proactively. Teach students about consequences and apply them consistently. Be sure they are logical and offer opportunities to self-correct. Aim to socially unite and remove barriers for students. When students need additional support, provide general and individual reminders, pre-correct when a difficult transition is coming, and offer high-probability requests for getting reluctant students to comply. Talk *with* your students, not *at* them, and frequently debrief on behaviors and consequences to help them learn new behaviors and see you care.

R – Respond to your students' strengths, needs, and interests. Provide motivating and engaging learning opportunities and incorporate them in your lessons. Include a variety of ways for presenting content, opportunities for students to respond actively, and for students to demonstrate their learning. Learn about Universal Design for Learning by going to www.cast.org. Include students' names in word problems, connect concepts to social media or song lyrics, draw on their interests during discussions; the possibilities are endless!

U – Use a social emotional lens. As you observe students in the classroom, consider what their behavior is telling you about them; are they tired, bored, confused? Do they need a brain break or someone to listen? Behaviors and emotions are equally as important as academics in breaking the school to prison pipeline!

P – Practice what you preach. Remember that you are a role model for your students. You can also use yourself as an example for problem solving and self-discipline. We all have "off days" or difficulties from time to time and it is ok to be real with our students. Remind them: as with life, school isn't about perfection; it's about doing our personal best.

Michelle R. Murphy, Ph.D., Dr. Murphy is Assistant Professor of Special Education and Co-Director of Center of Excellence for Teacher Induction and Retention at Francis Marion University in Florence, South Carolina. Her 18 years in education include K-5 teaching in general and special education and more.

Calling All Peacemakers

Leading change with community help

Like many urban districts, Niagara Falls City School District (NY) serves a highly diverse group of students. Many of these families have low socioeconomic status (SES) and live among high rates of crime, incarceration, and single parent households. Children in poverty have a 4% chance of escaping the generational cycle of hardship and occupying the preschool to prison pipeline (Docuson, 2020). In these settings, community members may mistrust groups who have more power than they do, contributing to a lack of morale and deflated sense of purpose. Recognizing the implications of these factors on the trajectory of his students' lives, the Niagara Falls City Superintendent Mark Laurrie chose to act.

Enter the Peacemakers

Solutions to systemic inequity aren't easy, but they need not be complicated either. When faced with reports from residents, business owners, and bus drivers about bullying, fighting, theft, and vandalism committed by students after school, Superintendent Laurrie called the Niagara Falls Peacemakers. Peacemakers are a network of community volunteers with one goal: reducing crime by promoting safety within the community. Mr. Laurrie connected with the Peacemakers to serve as mediators and mentors who can deescalate behaviors before they result in criminal infractions. Peacemakers live in the same communities and have experienced similar circumstances as their young neighbors. Once the Niagara Falls City students accepted that Peacemakers were trustworthy, they became receptive to advice. They shared more about their troubles, forming a relationship of mutual respect and reaffirming the importance of finding their place in the community.

Safe Passage

To ameliorate the concerns about his students' behaviors in the community, Mr. Laurrie implemented a 'Safe Passage' program, where Peacemakers met students at "hot spots" along routes home from school as a neutral presence.

Peacemakers interrupted the cycle of student misbehavior through cognitive dissonance, convincing students that infractions would only worsen circumstances. For example, it was discovered that older students bullied elementary schoolers, threatening violence if the youth didn't steal and deliver items from local stores. After two years of Safe Passage, NFCSD attributed a significant decline in discipline referrals, theft and vandalism, and negative interactions with law enforcement directly to the Peacemakers' intervention. Peacemakers earned NFCSD's Apple Award for service during the 2020 school year and are building capacity for a Junior Peacemakers mentorship program.

Promoting Peacemakers

As Superintendent, Mr. Laurrie understood that community networks such as Peacemakers had the ability to serve as credible messengers of ways that students in his district could increase opportunities for achieving meaningful success. The Safe Passage program has been complemented by the implementation of the Positive Approach to Student Success (PASS) program. In the PASS program, a select cadre of educators work 1:1 with high school students at risk of dropping out of school. Mentors assist students with academic skills such as study skills, organizational skills, time management, and homework completion. They also assist with teaching social skills, improving self-confidence, increasing motivation, and collaborating with colleagues.

Leadership requires collegiality, creativity, and a knack for identifying talent. Fortunately for the kids in the Niagara Falls City School District, there is an abundance of both within the district and within their community.

Docuson, D. (2020). *Neighborliness: Finding the beauty of God across dividing lines.* Fedd Books.

Niagara Falls Peacemakers (n.d.). https://www.facebook.com/nfpeacemakers/

Ezra P. Scott, Jr., MBA, M.Ed., Mr. Scott serves as the Pupil Service Assistant for Niagara Falls High School and is Founder of the Niagara Falls Peacemakers.

Dennis Garland, Ph.D., Dr. Garland is an Associate Professor in Special Education at Niagara University in New York. He has worked in education since 2006.

T-CARE

Socio-Emotional Learning and Justice

Against Control, Beyond Triage

Socio-emotional learning (SEL) is a hot topic in education, and no wonder. Although harm and violence have existed throughout history, students and teachers may be experiencing trauma in new ways or to new degrees of severity given the multiple intersecting oppressions of the pandemic, global capitalism, militarism, racisms, attacks on queer and trans communities, and escalating climate catastrophe. Many teachers are increasingly turning to SEL as a way to help students cope with the symptoms of these mutually reinforcing oppressions. Unfortunately, common interpretations of SEL may only superficially acknowledge systemic issues as root causes for students' pain or anxiety, if they are mentioned at all. Instead, educators often focus on building students' resilience or enhancing their abilities to name emotions, control their bodies, set goals, recognize authority, and be respectful, among other "skills."

There are at least two problems with this approach to SEL: The first and most obvious is that these skills are predicated on a variety of cultural and institutional norms, many of which are rooted in whiteness, capitalism, ableism, hetero/cis-sexism, and colonization. For example, when I invite pre-service teachers to co-create classroom norms at the beginning of every semester, many suggest, "Respect everyone's opinion," as an important guiding principle for our class. Through a series of questioning strategies that probe notions of respect and query examples of how uncritically respecting all opinions may cause harm, students begin to see that what "respect" is and looks like is socially constructed, not universal, and that it might need to have limits. We must similarly acknowledge that many SEL practices that we take for granted as neutral are actually rooted in, and therefore reinforce, dominant beliefs.

The second issue is that when SEL is exclusively positioned as a means of navigating interpersonal relationships and individual behaviors, we lose an important opportunity to help students and teachers combat causes of oppression and take action to challenge social and political inequities.

Without a critical approach to SEL, one rooted in the context of the current moment and taught from a justice-oriented lens, we might end up diluting students' righteous anger at injustice or teaching them that their knowing discernment that *something is not right* can be easily resolved (e.g. breathing exercises) or doesn't have a place in the classroom.

This is not to suggest that SEL as a concept is bad or wrong—I find a mindful minute calming and I imagine lots of people do, too. It's a good idea to name and share our feelings. However, we must go beyond SEL-as-triage in order to build the kind of world that we and our students deserve. But what does critical, justice-oriented SEL entail? On a basic level, it likely means resisting attempts to use SEL to increase productivity through controlling students' behaviors and refusing to participate in efforts to quantify students' SEL competencies according to dubious rubrics. It also means including students in the process of identifying what is valued and valuable within a shared space. One question I find helpful to ask my students is, "What makes a collective space safer, braver, and more accessible/participatory for you?" The answers my students offer are generative, life-affirming, and, sometimes, surprising.

On a more advanced level, justice-oriented SEL means integrating the study of oppression and the actions people take to challenge harm – including wide-ranging creative and revolutionary tactics like direct action and civil disobedience – into our curriculum and instructional practices. To do so, we will need to teach the truth about injustice, *center resistance to injustice*, and ground our pedagogies in joy, creativity, and social action. The socio-emotional benefits of troubling dominant norms, of taking students' fears and worries seriously, and of finding ways to involve ourselves in emancipatory struggle, may surprise us all.

Alexandria Hollett, Ph.D., Dr. Hollett is an Assistant Professor of Multilingual & Multicultural Education at California State University, Northridge. Formerly a public school teacher and union delegate in Chicago, she specializes in queer, anarchist, abolitionist, and arts-based approaches to education. Dr. Hollett has worked in education for 12 years.

T-CARE

First, Your Own Mask

Fueling our Staff to Success

Gone are the days of teachers solely being the vessels for delivering content to passive students lined up neatly in rows. If there is anything this pandemic and its associated shifts has taught us, it is how critical our educators are in the process of supporting students through tough times, whether those are individual or collective experiences. A particular challenge for us was how to support our staff as they in turn supported students, many of whom were struggling. In order to address this gap, we provided our teachers and staff with strategies to help them become secure attachment figures for our students through empathy, as well as an awareness of their own attachment styles and preferred empathy blockers.

Our school first considered the concept of focusing on faculty stressors and well-being (as opposed to only focusing on the traumas of students) when we partnered with the Center for Teaching and Learning at California State University Northridge and they introduced us to FuelEd. FuelEd provides training focused on the social-emotional growth of school personnel. Our school is located in a community that experiences an onslaught of stressors from poverty to homelessness, domestic abuse, discrimination, and beyond, even without the additional stressors the pandemic added. Thus, we felt that a training on faculty and staff well-being would be beneficial for our teachers and leaders. The initial training supported our teachers as they began to better understand the roles of empathy and attachment. We then committed the common sin in education of the "one-off training" and moved on with our lives, addressing reading, writing, and arithmetic while largely ignoring social emotional learning or educator wellbeing.

How many of us out there thought that when we returned "in-person" that everything would be all better? I know I did. "If we could just get back to the building, we would be okay" was a mantra that I played through my head pretty much on a daily basis throughout 2020 and 2021.

However, we realized we were woefully unprepared for the challenges our students were bringing back to our buildings as they returned in person.

We reflected back to the core support provided by FuelEd around ensuring that our faculty and staff were considering their own mental, emotional, and physical needs, and recognized that we needed these tools more than ever.

We learned from our previous mistakes, and this time we chose to train *all* of our staff, from front office to custodial to human resources and everyone in between. This was a significant shift from our previous strategy of only training teachers and leaders. Why the shift? We realized that our school culture was created by so much more than one group of adults, and that if we wanted to see a change in our environment, we would have to include everyone. In addition, we have always preached that it doesn't matter what adult a child connects with, as long as they connect with someone, but we hadn't actually provided everyone with training to support that idea. We had an opportunity to change the paradigm so that our actions matched our words. Was this easy? No. Was it met with some skepticism? Yes. Was it the right thing to do? Yes.

The FuelEd training received high ratings from participants. Many recognized that by ensuring they managed more of a self-balance and ability to show empathy to themselves and process their own emotions, it allowed them to become *"fully capable of holding space for empathy for others, students, staff, family and friends."* As we move forward through years that continue to challenge us, we know we have a common language of empathy to rely on as our foundation. We plan to continue this work as it is critical that we support each other in becoming emotionally aware and whole as we provide emotional support for our students.

Want more information on bringing FuelEd to your school?

Email us at ctl@csun.edu!

Sadie Edemann is the Director of Elementary Instruction at Vaughn Next Century Learning Center located in Pacoima, California. She has worked in education since her graduation from California State University, Northridge in 2001.

Talk to Me

3 Tips to Communicate Effectively with Families

As an elementary and high school principal, I noticed the majority of teachers at both levels felt so apprehensive about confrontation, many even ignored classroom misbehavior to avoid making phone calls to parents. To equip teachers with strategies to combat this apprehension, I taught them Kosmoski's and Pollack's (2005) techniques for difficult conversations. When my teachers embraced these strategies, they were able to de-escalate potential issues and work *with* families to support positive classroom behavior. Here are the three strategies that worked the best.

1. Listen and offer to gather more information.

Let's say a parent shows up at the school unannounced and is clearly upset and angry. When dealing with an aggravated parent, a great strategy is to **listen** to what the parent has to say, then **schedule a follow-up meeting** within the next 24 hours. This gives each party time to process and think more rationally. Additionally, the teacher has time to gather more information about the issue and come up with several solutions for a peaceful resolution.

Example response: "Thank you for bringing this to my attention. This is very serious. I need time to process this and get more information. I assure you I will take care of this, and I will contact you tomorrow with some solutions we can decide on together."

If family members feel you are going to take care of the situation, they will most likely calm down and be receptive to working *together* for a solution.

2. Stay calm.

Another great technique for resolving problems is to simply **stay calm**. For example, no matter what the parent says (or how loudly they say it), just listen to the concerns, nod, and say, "I hear what you are saying" in response. This does not necessarily mean you *agree* with the parent. It simply sends the message you **understand their frustration**. We want to engage so badly that sometimes we make things worse. It is unnecessary and unprofessional to respond in anger when in a conversation with a family member. Administrators can defend teachers who make honest mistakes, but it is never acceptable to be rude or disrespectful.

Example response: "Thank you so much for bringing this to my attention. I see you are upset about this, and I can understand why. Your involvement in your child's education is so important, and I hope you will continue to communicate with me any time you are upset. I appreciate you."

When you stay calm and show respect to the parent, you will begin to **re-establish a culture of trust and respect**.

3. Speak softly.

Another great technique for handling an angry family member (who may actually be yelling) is to literally **speak softly** in response to what they are saying. If you can, take notes, and reiterate their comments, such as "What I'm hearing you say is…" When you speak to the parent, keep your voice soft and gentle so they know you are not going to engage in an argument; then implement tip number 1 (listen and gather more information) and tip number 2 (stay calm).

As an elementary principal, I once used this technique accidentally. Because I had a migraine, I responded to a parent's loud complaint softly: "I understand completely. Would you mind if we take it down a bit so we can come up with a solution together?" The parent seemed completely surprised I did not engage in an altercation and immediately lowered their voice and said, "Oh, yes. Of course. I am sorry for raising my voice. Let's talk about a solution."

I encourage each of you to embrace these strategies to de-escalate potential issues and work *with* families to support positive classroom behavior. It will change the way you view communication, and your students will be the ones who benefit the most!

Kosmoski, G. J. & Pollack, D. R. (2005). *Managing difficult, frustrating, and hostile conversations: Strategies for savvy administrators* (2nd Ed.) Corwin.

Tia Agan, Ed.D., Dr. Agan has 32 years of experience in education as an elementary teacher, elementary principal, high school principal, university advisor, student teacher coordinator, and is currently Assistant Professor of Education at Angelo State University in San Angelo, Texas.

T-CARE

Proudly sponsored by

Schools First Federal Credit Union

CSUN | MICHAEL D. EISNER COLLEGE OF EDUCATION CENTER FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

Want to be Published?

Please visit our website csun.edu/center-teaching-learning/publications for more information on how your article could be published!

Once you have submitted an article for review, please keep in mind that this is a peer-reviewed publication and it could take a couple of months to have your article published. You will be contacted by the CTL with further information.

Connect with us:

Board of Reviewers