SCHOOL CLIMATE AND INCLUSION

February 2013
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Schools can co-create more inclusive school communities through the following promising strategies:

1. Expand efforts to include social and physical inclusion.

2. Engage youth in establishing social norms.

3. Embrace the talents and abilities of all students.

4. Use instructional strategies that engage students in building academic, civic, social, and career skills.

5. Create leadership opportunities for all students.

6. Engage students with diverse perspectives and abilities in creating a positive school climate.

Overview

School climate reform, an evidence-based strategy, supports K-12 students, school personnel, parents/guardians and community members learning and working together to promote pro-social education. Done well, these efforts will result in even safer, more supportive, engaging, helpfully challenging and harmonious schools. The U.S. Department of Education, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the Institute for Educational Sciences, President Obama's Bully Prevention Partnership, the US Departments of Justice and Education's School Discipline Consensus project, a growing number of State Departments of Education and foreign educational ministries support and/or endorse school climate renewal as a strategy to increase student learning and achievement, enhance school connectedness, reduce high school dropout rates, prevent bullying and other forms of violence, and enhance teacher retention rate.

School Climate and Inclusion

School climate is the holistic context of the life, vigor and quality of the social connectedness, physical elements, and supportive practices that nurture inclusion and safeness. In order to invest in school climate, one must analyze how his or her individual actions and behaviors contribute to the collective feeling of the school. Students, educators, support staff, families and the community are all key affiliations in co-creating an engaging and inclusive school climate.

Inclusion is a set of best practices and shared values that meaningfully support the diversity that each person brings to the school. Inclusion is more than equitable access, but the mutual

expectation that all students are encouraged and engaged in school activities to his or her fullest potential. Inclusion ensures students with disabilities are provided with the supports necessary for their growth and development, learning collaboratively with their peers, than in a separate sphere.

Each individual has unique experiences, valuable talents and insightful perspectives about the world, which can enrich the quality of the school experience for all stakeholders. This multiplicity of talent and interest generates an inquisitive model of learning and sharing between each member in the community, thus advancing school as "a home" rather than "a place."

At the center of Inclusion is the notion that diversity is an ever-growing phenomenon that evokes a need for the community to cultivate global citizenship in today's students.

> Recent shifts in the speed and global reach of information and communication technologies, an increasingly interdependent global economy, challenges in human rights and social justice, and the impact of international tragedies and emergencies have, for example, created tensions and conditions that require more integrated, worldwide response (Evans, 2013).

In considering the necessity for inclusion, one can surmise that the diversity in thought, opinion, culture, religion, and beliefs constitute many differences that can sometimes conflict with the views of others. However, as students pursue their own personal academic, social and emotional growth, the school environment can support the development of his or her own self-concept. Through this, each person can identify and articulate his or her social justice concerns, thereby augmenting ones' knowledge about the

world. By the virtue of inclusion, we are able to celebrate and respect the many variances that embellish a thirst for learning.

Social Inclusion is built on the philosophy that each of us has a desire to be socially and emotionally connected with the school. A school that is physically inclusive does not alone constitute a wholly inclusive environment. The tangible and sometimes instantaneous change that can be seen through adopting physical inclusive practices can complicate the understanding of social inclusion. Implementing physical inclusion is not unsubstantial, but this can sometimes falsely signal our completion of instituting inclusion. It is equally important for a school to ensure that inclusion happens on all levels of interaction - between students, between adults, and between students and adults. Inclusion must be the expected practice in the very way the school functions.

The intersection between school climate and inclusion can be difficult to distinguish, since these two key ideals rely on each other to produce the greatest impact. To help one conceptualize the unifying bond between them, the questions posed below can be asked to craft a current and future vision of the school community.

Strategies to Guide Effective Practice

When advocating for inclusion, the first undertaking is advancing structural solutions like adapting the physical environment to meet the needs of students' with mobility challenges. This adaptation is needed, as being able to access all parts of the school just like any other student, is not only the right thing to do, it is a basic human right. When these adaptations are neglected, ignored or even uncared for, this can stimulate an exclusionary perception on the inherent value of all who are in the community.

Even though physical changes result in equitable access, we must move our practice beyond the physical environment in order to support an inclusive environment that embraces and celebrates the abilities, perspectives, and contributions each individual makes to the school community.

Questions to Consider for School Climate and Inclusion:

1. Identify the possible inequities of the physical modifications that are needed for individuals with physical mobility needs. Are those areas as clean, welcoming and valued, as the other parts of the school (i.e. are they given equal attention)?
2. Does each student, teacher and support staff feel invested in creating a safe and positive learning environment?
3. Are all students provided with equal opportunities to share their talents, strengths and interests with the learning community? Are these unique abilities and skills celebrated and incorporated into the school life?
4. Are student boards or committees, comprised of students representing the diversity in the school population (i.e. students receiving special education services)?
5. Do students have access to all the various courses offered in the school, to the greatest extent possible (with accommodations in place to support students' ability to participate)?
6. Are all extra-curricular activities and sporting opportunities open and welcoming to students of differing athletic ability and possible physical limitations?

*Strategies for Advancing Inclusion **For** and **With** Students:*

1. Moving past the sole model of physical inclusion, and engaging in the development of social inclusion requires commitment and engagement of all the members of the school community. Vital groups that can be often forgotten or disavowed from contributing are students. Students are the ones who have the power to alter the school climate in either a negative or positive way, based upon their perception of what a school climate should feel like. Students hold the power to make it either socially acceptable or unacceptable to unite with their fellow classmates who have differences.
2. Recognize that without a positive school climate, inclusion will be hard to obtain. Both school climate and inclusion build off of each other to lead to a school and community that ensures every single student feels valued. If a school has a negative school climate due to factors brought on by students (such as bullying), reaching a socially inclusive status will be a daunting task if the students are not accepting of each other.
3. Encourage each class to create a list of social norms, thereby identifying, implementing and celebrating a culture of value for each member in the community.
4. As adults, ask each student to identify what he or she does well or likes to do. Support the student in identifying ways he or she can share those talents with the community. For example, each person can trace their hand on a large piece of paper, with their talents written or drawn. This display of "We are a Community, each with Talents to Share!" will remind all about the assets that the diversity of the school involves.
5. Support teaching and learning strategies that actively engage students to acquire and enhance academic, civic, social and career knowledge and skills such as the Get Into It curriculum offered by Special Olympics Project UNIFY®.

6. Create leadership opportunities for students of all ability and talent to engage in a meaningful role to teach and lead the community rather than focusing on the typical ways one can lead through public speaking or writing. Broaden the thinking to utilizing shared leadership, where each persons' interest and passion is meshed into one, creating a unique blend of ideas, concepts and thoughts.

7. Provide opportunities for students with diverse abilities and perspectives to impact the school climate. Special Olympics Project UNIFY offers a wealth of resources for schools as they activate young people to develop school communities where all young people are agents of change.

8. Implement a school climate assessment that includes students as respondents to create a baseline of the schools' current social inclusive climate and strategies to improve the schools' climate.

Summary

The cross-braiding partnership between school climate and inclusion can support the cultivation of communities with mutual respect, understanding, and equity for each other. Through authentically engaging all students as co-creators for inclusive communities, the benefits are both physically perceived through equitable access and socially felt, by feeling a valued member of the community. Focusing on the worth of diversity and ways to celebrate the talents each person contributes, capitalizes on the norm that everyone has a place in the community to learn, grow, and share.

References

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