Cultivating a Positive School Climate

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September 2017

Second in a Series
12 Dimensions of School Climate

Last month this newsletter noted the difference between "climate" and "culture." The daily habits that make up climate result in what we define as the culture. So if we choose to ignore foul or vulgar language, then we would have a culture of cursing that detracts from the dignity of each person. Likewise, if we establish habits of good manners, we will have a culture of courtesy and reverence for one another.

The *School Climate Research Summary: August 2012*, addresses 12 dimensions of school climate, which are divided into five essential areas of focus: Safety, Relationships, Teaching & Learning, Institutional Environment, and School Climate, the Processes of School Improvement. These categories contribute to an overall experience associated with outcomes.

Safety

Feeling socially, emotionally, intellectually and physically safe is a basic human need. Feeling safe is known to promote student success in learning and overall healthy development (Devine & Cohen, 2007). Three areas of safety schools must account for are Rules & Norms, Sense of Physical Safety, and Sense of Social-Emotional Security.

1. Rules and Norms
In the first week of each new school year, establish rules about expected behavior in every part of the school building. Take a walking tour of each area and discuss expectations, making sure students understand both the rules, and *why* they are to be orderly. Read and explain your discipline policy as appropriate for every grade level. This can be done in three ways: first read the rule, then explain the rule and ask questions to be sure students understand it, then give scenarios in which the rule would apply so students understand, for instance, what "violence" looks like so they understand the consequences for unacceptable behavior. Communicate expectations for physical and verbal abuse, harassment and teasing. Once you have done

this, be consistent in your follow-up when such abuse occurs. Students will test the system to see if the rules and consequences really are in place. If you demonstrate a climate of expecting rules to be followed, then you will have an orderly, respectful culture.

2. Sense of Physical Security
Imagine a school that never has a fire drill. If a fire were to occur and no one knew what to do, chaos and fear would result. Practicing fire and weather drills allows for discussion and practice as a way to feel prepared for emergencies. This is empowering for students and adults and serves to build confidence in the order, structure, and norms in place. These contribute to a sense of safety.

In recent years this has become more important with an increasing number of natural disasters and targeted violence. Knowing there are safety measures in place and following procedures creates a culture in which students and staff feel safe from physical harm at school.

3. Sense of Social-Emotional Security
School should be a place where everyone experiences a sense of belonging. So many times teachers can list all the wonderful activities they do, but it is important to check-in to see what the student is *experiencing.* One good question we need to ask ourselves is, "Do students feel that I care about them?" In order to create a caring culture, we must make sure students feel safe to express themselves. Make sure they feel safe to succeed and to fail. True success cannot happen without failure.

Parents and Pastors
Measuring Climate Beyond School

Using the measures of safety at school, can we apply these dimensions of safety in our churches and homes?

1. Rules and Norms
If we expect students at school to follow norms and policies, adults can also model accountability for their behaviors. Parents can hold family meetings to discuss expectations about physical violence, verbal abuse and teasing at home. Agree as a family what incentives and consequences can encourage kindness and respect toward one another.

Likewise, in parish life, unacceptable behavior can happen on the ball fields and at parish functions. How such rules and norms are established can be the work of committees that focus on family life issues. Setting up a system for grievances can be helpful in resolving disputes.

2. Sense of Physical Security
Family fire and safety drills, having a password in the event of separation at the hands of unfamiliar adults, and establishing a place to reunite are just a few ways to help children feel safe in times of trouble.

Parishes can train ushers to be first responders in the event of an emergency. Have a plan for communicating necessary information to parishioners if the need arises. Also, have people prepared to assist with medical needs, and people prepared to keep the congregation calm in unexpected circumstances.

3. Sense of Social-Emotional Security
Children need a safe haven, and when they feel insecure it is important to provide such a place. Perhaps siblings care for one another when parents are not available. Are phone numbers listed in a prominent place so they can call someone to talk when necessary if disagreements erupt or they feel unsafe? They also need to know they are deeply loved and accepted at home. Parents should cultivate a sense of fairness and mutual respect between siblings.

In parish life, encourage community-building so new members feel welcome and included, and make every effort to offer a variety of opportunities so your parish is a place where everyone feels a sense of belonging. Check the pulse often to make sure people feel connected, and offer ways to grow in faith. Study groups, social functions, and community-wide events

offer parishioners a way to connect and welcome new members. Strong families experience growth within strong communities that offer support for shared values. Establishing a positive culture in parishes, schools, and homes must be intentionally built on daily habits that uphold the dignity of each person. The challenges are well worth the rewards that can result in creating such communities.

Paul VI Fall Class

Begin planning now if your school is interested in attending/hosting a class

Virtue-Based
Restorative Discipline (MT-170)

September 20 - December 6

*Wednesdays
3:30-6:00 p.m.*

This class does not meet weekly, but will have project-based learning designed to meet specific needs within your school and online assignments

Contact Lynne Lang
for questions, or if you would like to host this course at your school
lynnelang@archstl.org

To register, contact Mary Beier,
mbeier@archstl.org