



Caring and Community In School

See Related Fact Sheet on : Service Learning

Resources

- Northeast Foundation for Children, 71 Montague City Road, Greenfield, MA. 01301
<http://www.responsiveclassroom.org>
or e-mail at
info@responsiveclassroom.org.

The Responsive Classroom, a free newsletter for teachers focused on improving elementary and middle schools by helping educators integrate the teaching of social and academic skills, and a practical book on how to implement the Responsive Teacher Model called Teaching Children to Care: Management in The Responsive Classroom by Ruth Charney as well as other books, videos and resources are available from the Foundation.

- Noddings, N. (1992). The Challenge to Care in School. New York: Teachers College Press. This book is a good overall orientation about creating caring relationships in school.
- Sergiovanni, T.J. (1994). Building Community in Schools. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Witherell, C., & Noddings, N. (1991) Stories Lives Tell: Narrative and Dialogue in Education. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University
- Wehlage, G., Rutter, R., Smith, G., Lesko, N. & Fernandez, R. (1989). Reducing the Risk: Schools as Communities of Support. London: The Falmer Press. These two books are also an excellent resource on creating communities in school, especially for at risk students.

Successful teaching and parenting of our nation's children begins with mutual relationships that are built on trust and understanding. We must care for each individual child with the goal of helping them become competent, caring, loving and lovable people in society (Noddings, 1992). Few would dispute such a goal, but recently there has been increased emphasis on the need to create or recreate a sense of "caring" and "community" in schools due in part to the concerns for the apparently alienated students involved in incidents of school violence, and as a foundation for conflict resolution and other strategies (Lantieri & Patti, 1996).

What is "Caring and Community in School"?

Many approaches attempt to identify and support the underlying interpersonal relationships between teachers, students, and parents, and also attempt to identify foundational elements of a school's culture. While a variety of inter-related words and concepts are used in discussions on these topics, we will focus here on two: "caring" and "community".

Historically, our use of terms like "child care" and "residential care" has evolved to simply reflect adult supervision in a relatively safe environment. The use of "caring" here though, is much more specific. In a caring classroom, teachers know their students. It is very personal. This can allow relationships to develop and will be a major contribution to a student's learning. The student trusts the teacher. Nel Noddings defines caring as relations marked by "a commitment to receptive attention and a willingness to respond helpfully to legitimate needs" (Noddings, 1996, p.265 as quoted in Chamberlain & Houston, 1999, p.159). While a positive relationship is critical to caring, caring is much more than simply interacting. It involves mutual respect, honor, trust, and understanding. Some believe that such elements are essential to successful teaching and a positive school climate (Charney, 1991).

Creating caring relationships in school permits students to be more effective academic learners, but also provides a vehicle for emotional and moral development within the child (Katz, Noddings, & Strike, 1992). A safe and caring environment in which the child feels comfortable may be a prerequisite for efficient academic learning. As children learn how to develop and grow caring relationships, their emotional development is also accelerated. They learn how to understand and manage their emotions in order to develop social skills and learn self-control. Such "interpersonal reasoning" or character development is now viewed as an important part of schooling in its own right and has become known as "emotional intelligence" (Goleman, 1995; Noddings & Shore, 1984). Children become able to engage in positive, caring relationships with others such as peers in school or others in the community.

Many have also acknowledged the need to have students and teachers feel a sense of belonging to a community while they are in school (Sergiovanni, 1994; Brendtro, Brokenleg & Van Bockern, 1990). According to Charney (1991, p. 14) "Belonging to a group means being needed, as well as needful, and believing that you have something vital to contribute. Every child can contribute care for others in many ways- by listening and responding with relevance and attention, by showing concern for the feelings and viewpoints of other, by developing a capacity for empathy." Noddings and Shore (1984) state that "...students who feel [that they are] valued members of a community work harder to see that their community is successful." A sense of community may also be a way to overcome cultural differences, and celebrate diversity.

What Do We Know About "Caring and Community in School"?

Because these "caring relationships" and "sense of community" in schools are difficult to measure, there has been little empirical systematic research addressing these topics. While strategies have been suggested to create caring and community in schools,

little is known about whether, or under what circumstances, such strategies are successful. There is not yet sufficient statistical evidence regarding the outcomes of these efforts. However, some elements of these concepts such as parent involvement have been evaluated positively (Comer, 1996; See also fact sheet on Parent Involvement). Nevertheless, there is much anecdotal and clinical evidence to support these concepts as being important elements of successful schools, particularly for students who are struggling or at risk (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko & Fernandez, 1989; Morse, 1994). Clearly, something is wrong when students “don’t care” (Noddings, 1992). Further research is still needed on the role of “caring” and “community” in creating safe schools and positive educational outcomes.

Making Strategies for Caring and Community Work

Many believe that the development of interpersonal reasoning and self-control comes through practical learning (Goleman, 1995). A youth’s daily education should include activities of caring (Noddings, 1992). We learn more about others by not just discussing caring, but by engaging in it. Service learning and other community service may be a vehicle to teach “caring” as well (See fact sheet on Service Learning). The student’s family and the community in which they live should always be a part of our youth’s learning. The book *Teaching Children to Care* (Charney, 1991) lists practical suggestions for teachers to create situations where students:

- Are welcomed into the class each morning
- Are noticed in nice ways (“You really like baseball”)
- Have choices in the course of a school day
- Have fun in school
- Are heard and responded to by teachers and peers
- Are able to talk with friends in school
- Gain competencies, skills and confidence
- Have others know they have certain skills
- Get compliments and give compliments
- Have a warm supportive relationship with adults
- Are able to get and give help
- Are able to resolve conflicts
- Are able to make and keep a friend
- Are able to create partnership teams that include parents, students, and community members
- Are able to make mistakes, break a rule, or act wrongfully; and then make amends, repair, and recover their place in the group

Modeling behaviors such as showing respect for another person’s opinion, showing support for what another person may think without being judgmental, and showing how to accept criticism, are behaviors that students can see. Here students can visualize a connection between what we say, and what the behavior is supposed to look like (Noddings, 1992). Caring education should be viewed as another resource for both students and teachers.

Similarly, Wehlege et al. (1989) have identified essential elements of school membership, attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief, as well as specific strategies which can be used to foster community and a sense of membership in schools including: having a name or unit identity, selection of a motto, create feelings of being welcomed, group nurturing, predictability, consistency, celebration of individual and group success, structure and order, shared unique experiences, etc.

Conclusion

Creating heightened caring and community in school has gained support recently both as a vehicle for improving academic performance, as a way to foster moral development, as well as fostering interpersonal and social skills. School violence incidents have heightened awareness of the potential value of strategies to increase caring and community for re-engaging disaffected youth and preventing violence, although more research is needed on these elements of school climate.

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About the Safe and Responsive Schools Project

The Safe and Responsive Schools Project, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, is dedicated to developing prevention-based approaches to school safety, discipline reform and behavior improvement in schools.

Websites: <http://www.indiana.edu/~safeschl/> or <http://www.unl.edu/srs/> Or Contact:

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