



BETTER STUDENT EXPERIENCES:

Building a Culture of Caring

By Kim M. Smithgall

Here's today's homework assignment: Create optimal learning environments that will motivate students to do their best. If *students* were completing the assignment, they might just turn the tables and offer up a few assignments for their teachers:

- Take the time to get to know me as a person.
- Let me know how I'm doing so I can improve.
- Make learning experiences more relevant and fun.
- Give me the benefit of the doubt (e.g., if I miss class or deadlines or get a low grade).
- Give me another chance (to redo assignments if I get a low grade).
- Do a better job of controlling the class.
- Don't play favorites.

These were some of the top responses to a recent *EdWeek* Research Center survey that asked 13- to 19-year-olds what could be done to make them feel more motivated in school.

Essentially, students indicated that they want a nurturing and equitable place to connect with each other and adults — schools characterized by a caring culture that allows them to take risks, learn, grow, and thrive. “These are very much universal student concerns... and they’re universal human concerns as well,” said Joseph F. Johnson, Jr., executive coach and founding director of the National Center for Urban School Transformation (NCUST).

Many of the most popular survey responses reflect what Johnson sees each day as he works with educators and leaders to both celebrate successful schools and help districts improve outcomes for various student populations.

“Students want to feel valued and appreciated and they want to feel safe — both physically and emotionally safe,” he commented. “And then, they want to feel like they have a reasonable likelihood of success. If these concerns are not adequately addressed, the ability or willingness to expend effort is going to be limited.”

The big question is how to get there.

STARTING AT THE CLASSROOM DOOR

While the universal concerns can be addressed in a variety of ways depending on grade levels, academic subjects, learning styles, etc., Johnson and other experts see the classroom door as the starting point for schools that are ensuring children are fully engaged and motivated.

“First, as students enter the classroom, teachers are smiling and welcoming the kids, acknowledging children by name. Teachers are asking quick personal questions — for instance, “You had a soccer game yesterday; how did it go?” or “You mentioned last week that your mom was sick; is she feeling better?” Johnson said, “These teachers are building connections. They are showing students that this classroom is not a sterile labo-

ratory or environment. This is a place where human beings are coming together because we care about each other.”

Cobleskill-Richmondville Central School District’s director of teaching and learning Scott McDonald would concur. “One of the core beliefs in our district is ‘Building relationships is paramount to our success.’ Every student needs a trusted adult. Every student deserves to have someone who knows their name. That, to me, is most important,” he commented. “Once we build those relationships, other things start to fall into place.”

EXPANDING THE RELATIONSHIPS

Erica Battle, who spent decades as a reading teacher and instructional coach before beginning her latest journey as an educational consultant, built similar relationships with her students — not only making personal connections with them, but encouraging the pupils to get know her, as well.

“Kids want to be known beyond how you see them in their cumulative record. They have hobbies; they have interests,” Battle said, adding that she would use moments of transitional time in her classes to ask students about their lives. “You need to get to know them, but also allow them to know you outside of who you are as their teacher. For example, I would tell my students that although I taught reading, I had to admit that I wasn’t the best speller — but I could use a dictionary. That transparency on my part allowed my students to own up to their deficiencies. It created a type of safety in my classroom.”

For some districts, the culture of caring extends beyond the classroom walls to include adults who may not always be the first ones thought of as top “child influencers.”

“Every adult in your building impacts students in some way. And that means all of us — the cafeteria staff,



the main office staff, ... everybody,” McDonald said.

When McDonald served as his district’s middle school principal, he tapped the daytime custodian to lead a new orientation program for sixth-grade students — yes, the custodian. “It made perfect sense. He has contact with the students every day in every part of the building. He runs after-school clubs. He knows all of the kids by name,” McDonald explained. “It’s important that everybody is invested in the success of our students.”

MULTIPLE VOICES AND MUTUAL RESPECT

Once students feel comfortable and accepted as individuals, true engagement in the learning process becomes easier.

“In very successful schools, we often hear student voices more than we hear teacher voices,” Johnson said. “Teachers are creating opportunities for students to talk in small groups, answer questions and express their opinions. And when teachers invite students to discuss — and sometimes debate — ideas, the students are getting the feeling, “Gee, this teacher wants to know what I think and values what I think.”

At the same time, the teacher is still in charge, exhibiting enough control of the environment to ensure students feel safe, Johnson added. “The students know they’re not going to be teased by their teacher or by their peers because this is a teacher who is not going to put up with that. The teacher has made it

“In very successful schools, we often hear student voices more than we hear teacher voices.”

– Joseph F. Johnson, Jr.

clear that the classroom culture is one in which everyone values and respects each other," he said.

Erica Battle was very intentional about creating this type of atmosphere in her classes. You can hear the pride in her voice when she relays a story about a Hindu student in her class who felt comfortable enough to ask if he could share information about his religion and culture with his classmates when the day's lesson focused on religion. There was a similar sense of pride evident when Battle talked about English language learners bringing in food from their homelands of Guatemala, Honduras, Colombia, and Mexico during celebrations for National Hispanic Heritage Month. "We had mutual respect," she said.

This focus on creating a positive classroom culture led to improvements not only at the classroom level, but also on a larger scale. When Battle started as an instructional coach, the Nashville-based school where she worked was in the bottom ten percent for

achievement. Within two years, it was a reward school for math and literacy.

"That speaks to the intentional things you can do to ensure student growth," Battle commented.

CULTURE OF LOVE

Ithaca City School District superintendent Luvelle Brown might describe the process as shifting into what he calls a "culture of love."

"It's not love in the emotional sense," Brown explained. "To be loving is to be trusting and to be committed and caring. It's taken us years to develop this approach. I will say that it's bold and audacious — but that's the culture we're striving for. And having defined it, we can see very clearly that this culture of love is not the default in schools. It's a struggle. If we were loving by default, we wouldn't have the inequities that we have in schools today."

Brown stresses that to be fully effective, this commitment to caring and

trust — this culture of love — must welcome and empower everybody. "Everyone has to be part of the conversation," he said.

For districts like Ithaca and Cobleskill-Richmondville, this means students have a strong voice far beyond the classroom walls. In other words, the defined or emerging culture is much bigger than interactions between teachers and students.

"We have students sit on our strategic planning teams," McDonald said. "And each time we form a committee — even if it's an ad hoc group that isn't planning to meet for a long period of time — we include student voices on those committees."

Similarly, Brown empowers Ithaca students to have a voice in the district. "We're giving agency to young people and blurring the lines between students and staff. In addition to encouraging students to evaluate multiple perspectives and challenging each other in the classroom, we are doing things like asking students to partner



New York students deserve high-quality reading instruction and assessment.



AmplifyCKLA

mCLASS®

AmplifyCaminos

mCLASS® Lectura

Elementary core curriculum to begin the Science of Reading journey.

Gold-standard universal screening and data to power your instruction.

To learn more visit amplify.com.



Jennifer Fosegan
Sr. Account Executive
jfosegan@amplify.com
585-590-4200

Amplify.

with us to update the code of conduct," he said. "We're on the fourth iteration of that code of conduct and I think it's one of the most impressive documents we've ever produced."

The district is also asking Ithaca pupils to provide feedback on what they're learning. "We're sending out a memo this week to invite young people in to review case studies and projects that are being considered for the curriculum. We're encouraging them to share their thoughts and rate the content using a rubric. And we're honoring their efforts by paying them for their work," Brown commented. "We want students to see their work and efforts changing the environments they're navigating each and every day."

NO MAGIC WAND

Empowering students and enriching their educational experiences clearly motivates them and improves their academic outcomes. But it's a long and extremely difficult process – one that also requires encouraging and supporting educators... so those educators can do the same for students.

"It's not a couple of workshops and 'poof!' the magic happens," Johnson said. "It's about changing school cultures, right? And anytime you're talking about changing an organization's culture, that's a challenging undertaking. It's not something that happens with the wave of a magic wand."

Brown would agree. "It sounds and it feels challenging, and it feels uncomfortable, as well. "But, if we're not uncomfortable, we're not likely engaged," he commented. "In fact, there should be a perpetual state of discomfort. After all, we're trying to eradicate generations of inequities and lack of achievement. We're trying to create a system that's inclusive for everyone."

When Battle works with school districts, she is often helping administrators pinpoint what kind of support educators may need in order to yield those larger systemic changes. "I think we have to recognize that just because

people are dedicated to being a teacher, they may not have the necessary expertise to do so. In the education system today, we're pulling in a lot of second career people to be teachers. They may have been in the business world, for example. They're learning to be teachers while they're teaching," she said.

Johnson has similar experiences in his consulting work. "Teachers will have varying levels of comfort and varying levels of skills when it comes to creating classrooms where all students feel valued and safe and capable of academic success," he said. "So, leaders have to be sensitive to that and sensitive to how they can help teachers create those cultures in which students, regardless of race, regardless of family income, regardless of background or any other demographic characteristic, are going to have a high likelihood of success."

"Leaders also need to provide the professional learning that is applicable to what teachers need," Battle commented. "That learning might be along the lines of effectively running a classroom or having rich and positive interactions with students. Administrators might also pair up new teachers with successful veteran educators or make sure instructional coaches are available."

In Cobleskill-Richmondville, McDonald encourages his teachers to team up and work collaboratively with each other. "The teachers are working together around problems of practice and grade-level content and curriculum," he commented, adding that the educators form strong bonds that ultimately benefit students. "Just by working together with shared beliefs, shared understandings, and even shared nonnegotiables, they are growing and learning strategies to bring into their individual classrooms."

Additionally, both Battle and Johnson advise school principals and

other education leaders to ensure they are giving feedback to teachers. "Sometimes, administrators are doing

... "it's just as important for leaders to know when someone is clearly not on board, when a teacher is not endeavoring to create a positive school culture, they [the leaders] have a responsibility to sit down with that teacher and to help them know what's expected."

walk-throughs, but not following up and providing feedback to teachers on how they did," she said. "Whether the comments are supportive or corrective, we can't discount the power of feedback. How can teachers know if they're interacting well with students or meeting other expectations if no one is giving them feedback?"

And, sometimes, creating a culture of love takes a little tough love.

"When teachers are making progress and creating positive environments for students, it's important for leaders to be the cheerleaders," Brown said. "And it's just as important for leaders to know when someone is clearly not on board, when a teacher is not endeavoring to create a positive school culture, they [the leaders] have a responsibility to sit down with that teacher and to help them know what's expected."

"We're not just pouring knowledge into a machine. We're educating children. We're educating human beings. And our capacity to do that is directly related to our ability to build relationships where children feel valued, safe, and capable of success," Brown concluded.

Could there be any work that's more important and worthy of the efforts involved?

KIM M. SMITHGALL is an award-winning communications specialist and freelance writer, designer, and photographer.

