



CARING COMMUNITIES: LINKING SCHOOL CULTURE AND STUDENT DEVELOPMENT

At Kellison Elementary School in Fenton, Mo., a positive school culture and explicit instruction in social, emotional, and academic skills reinforce each other and children's learning.

"It starts when they walk in the door," says counselor Karen Jones about Kellison Elementary School, a suburban K-5 school just outside St. Louis. "Students have to want to be here and feel like we want them to be here. We talk about relationships all the time. We practice it."

For more than a decade, the approximately 400-student school (about 82% white, 8% African-American, and 26% eligible for free- and reduced-price lunch) has pursued a multi-faceted approach to supporting children's healthy learning and development. It

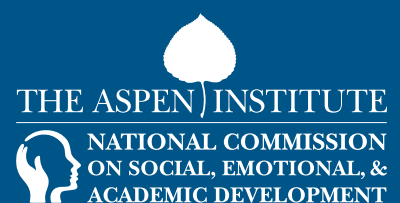
teaches children specific social, emotional, and cognitive skills—such as how to respect and work well with others, set goals, and focus on a task.

It works to build a strong school culture in which students can exercise those skills and create a powerful sense of belonging among students, teachers, parents, and other staff members. And it reinforces those skills through an emphasis on character that threads throughout the school.

Signs of that culture are everywhere: from the hugs and greetings students receive as they enter the building; to the walls festooned with student artwork that reflects the school's core values; to the buddy system that connects older

Making the Case

This publication is the fourth in a series of reports that explored promising practices for supporting social, emotional, and academic development. Find them all at: as.pn/edresources



and younger students and students with teachers; to the focus on cooperative learning in which small groups of students work together learning during academic instruction.

How students and adults experience daily life in school, from the classroom to the cafeteria, matters. Strong school cultures—with safe and supportive learning environments and high, clear, and consistent expectations for students—promote student engagement and are associated with increased academic achievement, including narrower achievement gaps between low-income students and their wealthier peers.

There are many facets that contribute to school climate, including school norms, policies, and organizational structures. But one path educators can take is to focus on the development of students' social, emotional, and cognitive skills as a primary improvement strategy. According to the [consensus statement by the Commission's Council of Distinguished Scientists](#), one of the most enduring, repeated, and substantial effects of programs that teach children social and emotional skills are changes in the culture and climate of classrooms.

That's because children with strong social and emotional skills are more likely to have good relations with others and engage in learning, while schools characterized by warm and supportive relationships between teachers and students



Two students play together as part of the “classroom buddy” program at Kellison Elementary School.

make it easier for students to tackle and persist on challenging academic content.

Indeed, [a recent study by the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research](#) found that principals influence school achievement primarily through changes in the school climate. In schools with positive cultures, the study found: School staff hold each other accountable for the success of all students in the school, not just their own classroom. Staff members at multiple levels continually examine student data of various types.

Adults in these schools believe that high expectations for students' behaviors and academic outcomes are equally important and mutually reinforcing. Expectations are consistent. And systems of student support are universal and opt-out

instead of opt-in. It is not up to students to seek out support. While the work of creating a positive learning environment ultimately occurs at the school and classroom levels, states and districts can play a powerful, supportive role.

The 20,861-student Rockwood School District, of which Kellison is a part, provides resources and training for school employees on how to teach social and emotional skills and create a positive school culture. It annually surveys parents, students, and employees about each school's culture. And it regularly pulls together teachers and leaders from across schools to share practices.

The district and school efforts date back to the early 2000s, when the district became part of a local consortium focused on creating caring communities in schools.

Both Kellison and Rockwood have been recognized as a National School and District of Character by Character.org, a nonprofit that helps schools engage in a school-improvement process focused on 11 core principles, ranging from creating a caring community to offering a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners, develops their character, and helps them to succeed.

At least 34 states have adopted some form of school climate policy or law—which typically involves references to school climate as part of broader policies related to program approval, school accountability or improvement processes, school health and safety policies, or leadership standards. But according to Jonathan Cohen, the president emeritus of the National School Climate Center, too many states continue to think of school climate policy solely in terms of safety, health, or special education, instead of integrating it into broader school improvement efforts. As a result, work on school climate and culture is too often disconnected from other school efforts.

Relationships Are Key

One key aspect of a positive school environment is that every student is known well and has a strong relationship with at least one adult in the building. At Kellison, strong student-to-student and student-to-adult relationships are fostered in a variety of ways.

“Our fourth grade was struggling in the lunchroom a little bit, so we had a conversation about respect and what does that look like?”

*—Kimberly Dickens, principal,
Kellison Elementary School*

Kellison has a “classroom buddy” program in which all older students in grades 3-5 are paired with younger students in grades K-2 for monthly activities, ranging from service learning projects to field games. Through mentoring, older students learn such skills and character dispositions as responsibility, empathy, and leadership. Younger students benefit from role models. Tessa Boulay, a second grader, says having a buddy “makes us work better with others.” Ali Almamori, a fifth grader, adds, “When I was younger, my older buddy was someone I could look up to.”

Teachers also hold class meetings with students, either at the beginning of every day to check in on how students are doing, or on

an as-needed basis for classroom problem solving. “It varies grade level to grade level,” says Principal Kimberly Dickens. “Some do it very routinely; others do it if they have things they need to talk about. Our fourth grade was struggling in the lunchroom a little bit, so we had a conversation about respect and what does that look like?”

Kellison also has structures to ensure students are known well by adults in the building beyond their classroom teacher. For example, the principal and assistant principal hold regular lunch groups with students to check in on how students are feeling about the school and things they’d like to see changed. This year, the school began a mentoring program, in which children in grades three
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Nevada High School's Attention To School Climate Pays Off For Students

For Damonte Ranch High School in Washoe County, Nev., a focus on building relationships with students through advisory groups has dramatically reduced suspensions and increased graduation rates.

In 2005-06, the nearly 1,750-student Damonte Ranch High School was graduating just over half its students and only about 40 percent of its freshmen were earning enough credits to move on to sophomore year. "We needed to do something to help increase our graduation rate and have a positive impact on our culture, overall," says Principal Darvel Bell.

According to Assistant Principal Freeman Holbrook, a closer look at behavior and attendance data revealed that while many students had academic skills, "there were social-emotional learning skills that our kids didn't have."

So, the school began by creating a freshman seminar focused on helping students develop stronger connections with teachers as well as the organizational skills needed to succeed in high school. Based on the success of that effort, Damonte Ranch expanded its seminar program to grades 9-11 in 2012 and began using the School Connect curriculum to directly teach students social-emotional skills and competencies.

The 45-minute seminar class meets at the end of every school day. On Wednesdays, teachers teach the social-emotional learning curriculum. So, freshmen might learn about how to build rapport with teachers and productive study habits, while juniors might focus on interview skills and planning for the future. Members of the school's social-emotional learning leadership team—two social-emotional learning coordinators, the assistant principal, the dean of students, and a counselor—observe classrooms on these days. At least one day a week, seminar teachers also check grades and review missing assignments with students.



Students collaborating at Damonte Ranch High School.

The skills that students build through the curriculum—such as self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision making, and relationship skills—are mirrored in a school culture focused on respect, responsibility, and readiness. This includes respect for people, the campus, and community; being ready to take on challenges; and showing responsibility for oneself and others.

"Students have the vocabulary that pertains to social-emotional learning," says Jami Curtis, a social-emotional learning coordinator at the school, "and that really helps set the tone because wherever the student is interacting—whether it's with office staff, administrators, students, or teachers—the students know the vocabulary and how to bring up a concern or articulate what they're thinking and express themselves. That's the campus-wide piece. That's where the explicit instruction feeds in and keeps that culture progressing across campus."

Knowing Students Well

The high school's focus on knowing each student well extends to the school's use of data. Every week, the central office produces a "spotlight list" for every student in the school that looks at credit accrual and grades, which supports the development of specific interventions for students not on track to graduate. Seminar teachers track students' grades and attendance every two weeks and send a communication home to parents for them to sign and return. The school also uses the results of an annual school climate survey, given to parents, students, and staff, to plan for the coming year.

For example, in 2014, survey results showed a clear disconnect between what students vs. teachers perceived as instructional engagement. In response to this data, the school invited guest speaker and School Connect co-author R. Keeth Matheny to train the entire staff (custodians, grounds keepers, office staff, teachers) on embedding social-emotional strategies throughout the school day and beyond the School Connect lessons taught during seminar classes.

More unusual, particularly in a high school this size, seminar teachers make biweekly phone calls home to parents to let them know something positive about how their child is doing in school. "That's had a huge impact," says Holbrook, the assistant principal. "One thing that we really focus on here is we're all a team and a community, and I think that's laid the groundwork by giving the families a true sense of belonging to the school."

While teachers were initially hesitant about making the calls, over time, it's spread beyond the seminar teachers to other teachers in the school. "So, we have teachers calling about a good day in English or in math," says Holbrook. "It's really opened our eyes: Are we doing everything we can to include parents in the educational process?"

Damonte Ranch also has developed a proactive approach to discipline that it calls "discipline at the door." If a student is having a behavior issue in the classroom, instead of sending him down to the main office and missing instructional

time, the teacher can call the main office and an administrator will be contacted to report to the classroom. The administrator can then take over the classroom for a few minutes while the teacher speaks to the student in the hallway to resolve the problem; the administrator can talk with the student in the hallway, while the teacher continues teaching; or, if the issue cannot be immediately resolved, the administrator can accompany the student to the office.

"Our goal is to make sure we're having these conversations and giving kids these skills and opportunities to resolve problems in real time," says Holbrook. "Instead of kids missing class, the situation gets handled right there. Over time, that really helps the relationship between students and teachers. It turns into a positive thing." Since the program started a few years ago, documented major discipline referrals have declined from nearly 2,000 a year to under 640.

Integrating with Academics

Now, teachers are beginning to incorporate social-emotional learning into the content areas, with the help of a social-emotional learning playbook, developed by the district. The playbook includes 36 strategies for incorporating social-emotional learning into academic content, from welcoming rituals to strategies to include more students in classroom conversations. Teachers can volunteer to have the social-emotional learning leadership team visit their classroom to begin to collect data on how the strategies are being implemented across the school and what's working.

The school's efforts have paid off. Last year, the graduation rate was 93 percent. Equally important, says Curtis, "You see kids who are confident, who are articulate."

Damonte Ranch High School students engaged in class discussion.



“This is our school. We’re a community. We help each other. Our kids get support from whoever is around.”

*—Lisa Finder, teacher,
Kellison Elementary School*

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through five were asked to select five adults at the school with whom they’d like to be buddies. The school then paired each student with one of their top choices. The student and adult exchange letters four times a year and can get together more informally. “I just love the stuff the kids are writing to me about,” says Jones. “There are so many things I assumed they knew about me, and I love learning more about them.”

Teachers also look out for one another and for each other’s students. Kellison’s special education services include an autism center, several resource rooms, and a speech and language room.

The speech and language teacher has created several quiet areas in her room to help students decompress when they need to; students can ask to go to her room or have teachers refer them.

“I believe they don’t have to be mine to be helped,” says teacher Lisa Finder. “Sometimes, you can just be a positive adult in their life without being necessarily tied to them. Honestly, we’re a team. This is our school. We’re a community. We help each other. Our kids get support from whoever is around.”

Data Drives a More Positive Approach to Discipline

Supporting the school’s work on school climate and culture is a Character Team, which meets monthly, and includes a staff member from every grade level and specialty area. The team creates a plan for the character work for the coming year, based on the district’s annual school climate survey and on other data, such as attendance and discipline rates.

A few years ago, for example, that data identified a spike in in-school suspensions from four in 2014-15

to 20 in the 2015-16 school year. Teachers and administrators knew they needed to do something to better understand the reason behind the behavior incidents and what they could do to help.

The entire teaching team read the book *Help for Billy: A Beyond Consequences Approach to Helping Challenging Children in the Classroom* and used the book as the focus for staff meetings for an entire year. At the end of that year, the staff decided they needed to provide students with more direct instruction on specific social and emotional skills—including managing emotions and problem solving. So, they adopted the Second Step program, a PreK-8 curriculum, offered by the district. “I really feel like you have to directly teach the skills to the students before you just assume that they’re choosing not to behave a certain way,” says Dickens.

The school also worked to shift the school culture to focus on a more positive approach to discipline. Now, students can get “positive office referrals” from teachers, not just disciplinary referrals. The teachers write a note about a positive behavior or academic performance they’ve noticed. The principal calls home to let the parents know. And then she visits the classroom to give the students the positive referral personally. A big exhibit in one hallway, titled “I’m a positive role model,” includes photos of students who’ve gotten such referrals and exemplify the

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Chicago High School Transforms With Focus on Culture

At this predominantly Latino high school on the southwest side of Chicago, community partnerships have helped transform the school culture and improve students' social and emotional skills.

In 2011, the approximately 1,000-student John Hancock College Preparatory High School was on probation for poor academic outcomes when it received a federal School Improvement Grant, which had changing the school culture and environment as one of its primary objectives.

The Chicago Public Schools invited the Network for College Success, a nonprofit that works with high schools on whole-school transformation, to become the lead partner for the school. The NCS transformation model supports the creation of a college-going culture with high expectations for all students throughout the school.

Coaches, hired by NCS, work with the school to develop a broad-based social and academic support team that uses data on attendance, behavior, and grades to identify students at risk of falling off track. This includes recruiting a broad array of staff to work as mentors for small groups of students. For students struggling the most academically or behaviorally, the Care team, a group of counselors, teachers, special education teachers, and administrators, meets biweekly to develop and track specific intervention plans.

The 'Hancock Way'

The NCS Coach also works with the school to build the leadership skills of social workers and counselors and empowers them to change the school climate and culture and to build the systems and structures students need to succeed. At Hancock, that culture is known as the "Hancock Way," built on the core values of respect, integrity, and responsibility for all students.

As part of its whole school transformation model, NCS engages a nonprofit community-based



Celebrating Day of the Dead at John Hancock College Preparatory High School.

organization to partner with each high school. Hancock's partner is Youth Guidance, which helps address some of the social and emotional barriers to learning that students experience.

Youth Guidance brings a resource coordinator into the school to help with universal programming, such as organizing schoolwide events to celebrate student success, overseeing the parent advisory committee, and coordinating after-school and weekend activities for students. It also offers counseling programs—Working on Womanhood and Becoming a Man—which help develop students' social and emotional skills so they are ready for rigorous instruction.

Between 2010 and 2013, the percent of ninth graders on track to graduate at Hancock increased from 80 percent to 91 percent, and the number of students enrolling in Advanced Placement and/or International Baccalaureate classes more than doubled. Student attendance also increased by 10 percent. Last year, the percent of Hancock freshmen on track to graduation was 98.2, compared to about 88 districtwide.

"We're trying to figure out how do we integrate this into classrooms and not just have it be a reactive system," Principal Devon Herrick says of social and emotional learning. "[As] part of examining our practice and developing this two-year improvement plan, that's going to be given equal weight to continuing to improve our academic model."

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school's character values. Teachers can also give positive notes to each other, and parents can give teachers positive notes for being part of an "All Star Team."

In addition, the school uses peer mediation and asks students in every grade to complete "think sheets" that ask them to reflect on when and why an inappropriate behavior happened, how they were feeling, and what they could do differently the next time. "That is probably one of the most effective ways to resolve conflicts with kids," says Dickens. "This is an opportunity for kids to talk very openly and honestly with each other."

Teaching Character and Collaboration through Academic Content

Building on its prior work to integrate social, emotional, and academic development with a positive school culture, the school is now focused on extending those efforts into academic content.

On a rainy Monday morning, first grade teacher Christine Rhodes was reading a chapter about Clara Barton, a famous Civil War nurse, to her students, from the novel *Civil War on Sunday*. As she read aloud from the story, she regularly asked students to turn to a partner for help to discuss

what was happening in the novel. Then she asked students why they thought Ms. Barton was referred to as the "angel of the battlefield?" "It's because she's probably caring for a lot of people," volunteered one young boy, Ben. Rhodes then asked the students: "What would you do if somebody asked you to help soldiers who are hurt?"

The school recently adopted Math in Focus, a math curriculum based on Singapore Math, a much different way of approaching complex math problem solving than simply filling in algorithms. All teachers have participated in training provided by the district's math coaches.

In a typical class, students write down their solutions to word problems on small dry-erase boards and then share their solutions with one another, noting similarities and differences. Students then have the chance to revise their work. Signs and posters across classrooms emphasize the importance of a "growth mindset," including having the courage to try new things and to learn and improve through effort.

About 75 percent of Kellison students perform at or above the proficiency level on the state's communications test, and nearly 70 percent perform at or above the proficiency level on the state's math test. In 2017, the elementary school ranked better than 80 percent of elementary schools in Missouri on the exams.



Students at Kellison Elementary School working together in class.



Students are greeted as they enter the building at Kellison Elementary School.

Giving Students a Voice

Even at the elementary level, Kellison emphasizes giving students a voice in their education. At the beginning of every year, and then once a quarter, students in the upper grades set goals for themselves in reading, mathematics, and a more general goal. Parents discuss their child's progress on those goals at each parent-teacher conference.

Students also help develop their classroom's rules at the beginning of the year. And they're assigned classroom jobs, from paper collector to line leader, to teach them responsibility. Every classroom also participates in a service learning project, which this year was to raise donations for the Hope Lodge, a temporary facility where patients can stay when they're receiving cancer treatments. Teachers frequently survey students about their views

and give them choices about topics for classroom assignments.

"It's important that they know they have a voice and their voice is being heard," says fifth-grade teacher Jenise Soyster. "When things don't go right, they have no issues with telling us."

"They're definitely becoming leaders," agrees parent Angela Winkler. "They know what's not right. I think in the back of their minds, they have these characteristics embedded."

Many Approaches to Improvement

While the work at Kellison has been supported by Character.org's school improvement process, there are a number of evidence-based road maps for improving school climate and culture. These include: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning's Whole School Framework, National School

Climate Center's School Climate Implementation Road Map, and Children Aid Society's Community Schools Road Map. What all have in common is an intentional and strategic process that recognizes:

- Improving school climate and culture takes time, including time to build the social, emotional, and cognitive skills of students and school faculty;
- Setting clear goals and priorities, and aligning individual programs and initiatives around those goals, is key;
- Data collection and analysis is paramount to identify areas for improvement, test hypotheses, and iterate based on results;
- Solutions should be arrived at collaboratively, ideally with students, staff, parents, and members of the broader community;
- Having a designated staff person to coordinate these efforts helps.

"We've always had character education goals in Rockwood," says Dickens. "The district has never said you have to have one set program. So, a lot of the things at Kellison are unique to us. I like that the superintendent empowers us to make decisions that are good for our school, and not always having to be the same for everybody."

Students Play Leadership Roles At Connecticut High School

The 500-student Westbrook High School in Westbrook, Conn., has focused on building students' leadership skills and voice to improve school climate.

In 2010, Connecticut passed an anti-bullying law that required all schools to conduct an annual school climate survey of students, staff, and families in every grade. In an unusual step, the superintendent of Westbrook Public Schools asked the district's high school students to collect the survey data from the community and help make sense of the results.

Developing Leadership Skills

Chet Bialicki, the student school climate coordinator at Westbrook High School, says the results from the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory, developed by the National School Climate Center, were "eye-opening." Students realized community members were forming views about their school based on the nightly news instead of on direct communications. "So, students decided we needed to do more with the community," he recalls. This included having students help organize communitywide events and participate in summer jobs programs.

As an outgrowth of work on the survey, the school created several elective courses for students, two on developing leadership skills, such as dealing with social anxiety, taking personal responsibility, and communications, and one on

school climate, based on modifications to the Teen Leadership curriculum. Over the past six years, fully a third of students have taken the classes and become resources for their peers, educators, and students across the district's elementary, middle, and high schools.

This past year, for example, as part of the school climate class, students analyzed the school climate survey and realized that across the elementary, middle, and high schools, students, parents, and staff gave the lowest responses to questions about feeling socially and emotionally secure and the use of social media. "We figured that had direct correlations with social media becoming so prevalent in students' lives," says Madison Liberatore, a sophomore who is also one of two students who sits on the district's school climate committee. "If students are on social media and see something negative about themselves, the next day when they come to school they're not



Westbrook High School students teaching second-grade students about empathy.



Students engaged in a school climate training session at Westbrook High School.

going to feel comfortable. That's where the social-emotional security comes in."

Peer Teaching

So, the high school students have been working with their peers and with younger students on the appropriate use of social media, including doing presentations about empathy to second graders and talking with fifth grade students about choosing kindness when communicating with others as part of the middle schools' language arts curriculum. The students also presented their findings to the school board. And they convinced the board of education to include three high school students on the search committee that selected their current principal.

"As a school, we're pretty tiny, so we all know each other," says Lexi Koplas, another student member of the school climate team. "So, it's really important that all the relationships that we uphold are good and strong with other students."

"These high school students are transforming their schools," says Superintendent Patricia A. Ciccone, "and inspiring others to do the same, to become high-quality, thriving restorative communities where learning and all forms of social endeavors exceed expectations."

"These high school students are transforming their schools and inspiring others to do the same."

***—Patricia A. Ciccone,
superintendent,
Westbrook Public Schools***

About the Series

This is the fourth and final report in a series on various dimensions of social, emotional, and academic development. The previous reports are:

Putting It All Together, showing how schools and educators enhance learning when they teach a curriculum that simultaneously builds students' social, emotional, and academic understanding.

Supporting the Whole Teacher, exploring how developing educators' social and emotional skills lays the foundation for success with students.

School-Community Partnerships, profiling how schools can work with the broader community to support students' comprehensive development.

These materials and many others can be found at aspn.org/edresources.

The National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development

The Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development is engaging and energizing communities to re-envision what constitutes success in our schools. Scientific evidence demonstrates that social, emotional, and academic development are interconnected in the learning process. The Commission is drawing from research and promising practices to explore how to make all these dimensions of learning part of the fabric of every school. Building upon existing work in schools, communities, and states across the country, the Commission is working to identify specific action steps in research, practice, and policy that will help shape and sustain a new era of education that reflects what we know about how learning happens.

The Commission's 25 members are leaders from education, research, policy, business, and the military, and the full Commission team includes a Council of Distinguished Scientists, a Council of Distinguished Educators, a Youth Commission, a Parent Advisory Panel, a Partners Collaborative, and a Funders Collaborative.

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Learn more about the Commission, see our full list of Commission members, sign up for our newsletter, follow us on Twitter at @AspenSEAD, and email us with questions at aspensead@aspeninstitute.org.

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