

Creating a Culture of Respect In Order to Maintain A Bully Free Environment

From Upper Merion Area Middle School
King of Prussia, PA

Upper Merion Area Middle School has come together as a community and a family to create a positive environment of caring and respect. In order to combat bullying it is imperative to develop a comprehensive, multifaceted approach which focuses on the entire school culture. It is a process that takes much planning and collaboration among stakeholders, dedicated leadership and diligence.

Ten years ago, during Strategic Planning, our stakeholders discussed strengths and concerns about our school in order to develop a plan for school improvement. Our goals were to:

- Improve student engagement
- Improve scores
- Improve attendance
- Decrease suspensions
- Decrease bullying
- Improve rapport/relationships between peers, students and teachers
- Increase parent involvement and community partnerships

All of our stakeholders set about researching best practices to improve in the aforementioned areas.

Stakeholders learned that the common denominator for student success in all of these goals was to create a positive, caring, respectful and supportive climate. They studied several research driven K-12 programs and chose Community of Caring to guide the process.

The reader will note that the process begins not with punitive consequences to stop bullying, but with 5 values – *Caring, Respect, Responsibility, Trust* and *Family* which serve as a foundation for positive culture and an umbrella for school initiatives and activities.

The next steps included professional development for all stakeholders to be trained in the 5 components of Community of Caring. These include Social Inclusion of All Students, Student Leadership/Forums, Service Learning, Family and Community Involvement and Weaving the Core Values through every aspect of School Culture and Curriculum.

All stakeholders live and model the values which are seen everywhere throughout the building; on huge banners (donated by Rotary) in our lobby, on student-made bulletin boards, in artwork displays, service learning displays, Library book displays, classroom and hallway bulletin boards, and memorial remembrances.

All three principals are strong, committed leaders who regularly stress the importance of treating everyone with respect, no physical contact, and that students must report bullying immediately to an adult.

In addition to training staff on prevention and intervention strategies about bullying, the principals frequently reinforce these strategies at faculty and grade level meetings.

Professional Learning Communities analyze student data regarding scores, behavior and attendance. Teams develop plans to assist their students to improve socially and behaviorally by researching and applying best practices throughout the year. In addition, teachers collaborate to provide engaging lessons, integrating the values through the curriculum. They facilitate class and team meetings/forums to address citizenship, no-bullying, leadership, problem-solving, decision making, and conflict resolution.

Teachers build a strong sense of community at the start of the school year, discussing Community of Caring and teaching students about community meetings with the goal of students being able to bring frustrations, disagreements, incidences of bullying and strategies for dealing with bullying to the table for group discussion and resolution. Teachers and students develop classroom rules and contracts which are then signed by the students and displayed for reinforcement on the classroom bulletin board. In addition, counselors meet with students to provide pro-social lessons which teach about the dangers of bullying. They assist students who may be targets with strategies to prevent bullying.

Community meetings continue throughout the year with team building and problem solving discussions. Teachers are also immediately alerted to bullying incidences through Bully Buster boxes in the classrooms.

Adults know that in order to stop the bullying it must start with attentive staff members who are listening to what students are saying and who are addressing every incident of disrespect or conflict. It is important to use the common vocabulary learned during the Community of Caring Training. It means being in the hallways, cafeteria and lavatories, being vigilant during unstructured time, and addressing concerns and issues with students before they escalate. Teachers and counselors meet with students to reinforce positive behaviors and to address negative behaviors before they turn to bullying. Following these lessons students write reflections in their journals about experiences they have had being bullied or witnessing bullying and ways to stop bullying in the classroom, hallway and cafeteria. Professional Development is ongoing so that teachers are trained in legal protocol and with the reporting and handling of bullying incidences.

Values Through the Curriculum

It is important that character education is “active education,” that it is documented throughout the curriculum, and that all teachers utilize the same vocabulary, teachable moments, and weave the anti-bullying message throughout the curriculum. For example, students in the 5th grade read The Kid in the Red Jacket. They learn to make everyone feel respected and cared for. Inclusion is important to them. In 6th grade students read Maniac McGee about a bully and discuss prejudice. They make posters against bullying and develop plans about how to stop bullying if they see it. They learn the importance of not being a negative bystander. In grade 7 students read Crash and write No-Bullying Pledges along with daily Public Address Announcements

about Stamping Out Bullying. They also read The Watsons Come to Birmingham and plan how to unite people and celebrate diversity. Grade 8 students read about the Holocaust and discuss tolerance. With each of these Literacy works students take the lead in a movement to promote respect and stop harassment and bullying. Thus the adults are working with the students to actively stop bullying. This is carried through all core subjects and Unified Arts as well and lessons are shared on the web.

Professional Development occurs for staff at the start of the school year and continues throughout the year as the Principals and the Community of Caring Committee review the Community of Caring goals, anti-bullying strategies and work with staff together to plan anti-bullying activities such as forums, assemblies, book talks, service learning/community service projects, and leadership training.

Students lead anti-bullying campaigns through Community of Caring Club and CREATE. CREATE (Culture, Respect, Empathy, Appreciation, Tolerance and Education) is a club formed by students which holds Open Mic events and other activities to provide a forum for students to speak about bullying, rumor spreading, stereotyping, and to promote peace and respect for diversity. Students therefore have voice and choice in resolving problems.

Upper Merion has worked diligently to improve its Character Education Plan over the years and believes that the Character Education Partnership (CEP) and its 11 principles of Effective Education has been a driving force in the school's success by creating a strong sense of family, community and respect and caring for all.

Although every effort is made to maintain a positive and safe environment through our Community of Caring and pro-social teachings, there are consequences for students who break rules and bully others.

There is a District No Bullying Policy that is given to parents and is explained and discussed with students in the beginning of each school year. Principals discuss the policy with students, and teachers then follow up with more discussion. Students sign that they have heard and understand the policy, that there is zero tolerance for bullying and that they understand that the consequences increase incrementally for repeated bullying and depending on the gravity of the action.

Before suspension occurs students may be assigned to Behavior Support to speak with adults about how to change their bullying behavior, to reflect on how to make better choices and may be seen frequently by the counselor.

Police are nurturing and reinforce Community of Caring during Cops and Kids (Grade 5) and D.A.R.E. (Grade 6) providing thorough lessons and discussions about bullying and cyber bullying. They then address the consequences for bullying. Later, if students bully or harass someone the school and police move forward as a team with serious consequences in order to stop the behaviors.

The Upper Merion Police work closely with the school to stop bullying by going to students' homes to send a stern message and then by stopping into school to check in with these students to reinforce appropriate behavior. They work closely with the parents who are important to this process and supportive of it as well.

The school remains in close contact with parents reporting incidences before they escalate and enlisting parental support in teaching their children to treat all peers respectfully as members of our school family.

Parent programs include Making Good Choices, Parent Coffees in which parents may ask questions or supply information about bullying, Internet Safety and Cyber Bullying Programs, Pro Social Programs, Suicide Prevention, Community of Caring Trainings and Diversity Trainings. Parent involvement in schools is encouraged and stellar communication keeps the parents and community informed about all concerns relating to violence, bullying and cyber bullying.

The Student Assistance Team and mentors provide support for students at the first sign of bullying.

Outcomes

It is extremely important for schools to assess school climate. Upper Merion Area Middle School utilizes the CEP Quality Standards Assessment of the 11 Principles yearly as an important tool to use to plan for improvement. In addition, a State approved Safe Schools Survey is utilized as well as data gathered about attendance, suspensions, bullying and other reportable incidences.

Through Community of Caring the Middle School achieved all of the outcomes it has set out to achieve. Student engagement has increased and the Upper Merion Area Middle School has achieved AYP annually, continually improving scores. For example from 2005 to 2010 scores in math increased from 71.37% in grade 5 to 92.8% in grade 8. Attendance increased to 96.20%. Suspensions decreased by 86%. Bullying decreased by 35% between 2007 and 2010. Students earned Good Sportsmanship Awards the last 4 out of 5 years.

Parent and community volunteers increased to over 310 adults and students contributing 2300 hours of service and community partnerships have doubled.

All staff surveyed in 2010 agreed that students and teachers create classrooms in which respect and caring are a standard, where moral development is discussed, and where teachers build meaningful connections with students and conduct themselves as strong role models. Out of 630 students 611 reported that they are advanced/proficient living the core values, and in taking responsibility and helping others.

In summary our students report that they feel safe and they want to come to school. They know to report conflict or bullying to an adult immediately. Parents agree that their children feel safe and enjoy coming to school and when they have information about bullying they call or e-mail the teachers, counselors or principals. In this way everyone is coming together to maintain respect for the school family and community. Without the fear of being bullied students are empowered to focus on their academics and on character, leadership, scholarship and service, the mission of our middle school.