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 needed, 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 discussion 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.

Reece L. Peterson, June 2002

References


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.

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Caring School Community (CSC), formerly known as the Child Development Project, is an elementary school program that seeks to strengthen students’ connectedness to school by creating a classroom and school community that fosters academic motivation, achievement, and character formation and reduces drug abuse, violence, and mental health problems. CSC incorporates elements important in children’s social development, including supportive teacher-student relationships and opportunities for students to interact and collaborate in cooperative groups. The program was designed to be delivered by elem The term school community also implicitly recognizes the social and emotional attachments that community members may have to a school, whether those attachments are familial (the parents and relatives of students, for example), experiential (alumni and alumnae), professional (those who work in and derive an income from the school), civic (those who are elected to oversee a school or who volunteer time and services), or socioeconomic (interested taxpayers and the local businesses who may employ graduates and therefore desire more educated, skilled, and qualified workers). Community-engagement strategies are also widely considered central to successful school improvement by many individuals and organizations that work with public schools. This guidance will help child care programs, schools, and their partners understand how to help prevent the transmission of COVID-19 within child care and school communities and facilities. It also aims to help child care programs, schools, and partners react quickly should a case be identified. Schools should be prepared for COVID-19 outbreaks in their local communities and for individual exposure events to occur in their facilities, regardless of the level of community transmission, for example a case associated with recent travel to an area with sustained COVID-19 transmission. The following decision tree can be used to help schools determine which set of mitigation strategies may be most appropriate for their current situation.