[Preview]

■ Positive relationships among ethnic and racial minority students are integral to a safe school environment.

■ Passive and reactive approaches to promoting intergroup relations are ineffective and can actually increase animosity among students.

■ Successful proactive approaches engage the community at multiple levels, create personalized communities, address intergroup relations as a community, and offer courses that talk about diversity and tolerance.

A Climate for Learning

Intergroup animosity can damage any school's climate, but proactive techniques build collegiality among student groups.

BY SENGSOUVANH SOUKAMNEUTH

Kids group themselves by race and that concerns me because I want tolerance for differences. This issue is important for me to look at...We need to see how we might facilitate (tolerance for diversity) for the kids so that can reduce student conflicts.

—Vice principal, North Vernon High School

Like many principals and administrators, the vice principal of North Vernon High School places high priority on promoting a safe school environment, constantly seeking ways to minimize disruptions. To do this, many school leaders are focusing on improving intergroup relations so students learn to respect one another and feel a sense of belonging. Such a focus can dispel racial tensions that sometimes arise among students of different racial groups and can support the kinds of respect for self and others that characterize well-disciplined schools.

To understand how school leaders create the contexts for positive intergroup relations and a caring and safe school environment, Social Policy Research Associates conducted a four-year study, funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Spencer Foundation, on school-based strategies for addressing intergroup relations at six public high schools in California. Our research indicates that the importance of strong leadership cannot be overstated. Without it, students can feel estranged from one another, their worlds separated by cultural or social borders that limit opportunities for positive interaction among students, foster tension, and inevitably affect student achievement.

Finding a Direction

Many principals are promoting positive intergroup relations as a means of reducing misbehavior and encouraging positive student interactions. In some cases, tensions among student groups can be impediments to improving student achievement, social behavior, and attitudes. These racial tensions range from name calling, distribution of hate literature, gang fights involving weapons, and fatal attacks (Cotton, 2000). Within the schools we studied, intergroup tensions led to student fights, racial epithets, and overt hostilities toward certain racial and ethnic groups. For principals at these schools, creating a positive intergroup climate was important because it prevented such disruptive behavior and fostered trust and understanding among different social and peer groups.

Discipline also includes building respect between teachers and students. Teachers in some schools noted that racial, cultural, and class differences between teachers and students can result in miscommunication and misunderstanding. Many teachers in the study—most of whom come from White, middle-class backgrounds—felt unprepared to address the challenges that their diverse student populations bring to schools. Without adequate training, teachers are unable to develop natural and meaningful relationships with students, which can be the key to promoting discipline.

Within our six-school sample, we found that the schools took three primary approaches— passive, reactive, or proactive—to promoting positive intergroup relations as a means of creating a safe and caring environment. The categories are not rigidly defined, however, because schools are dynamic institutions that change their approaches on the basis of their political, social, and financial context. The schools in our sample were at times both reactive and proactive in their approaches.

The Problem With Passivity

Three out of the six schools in our study used either passive or reactive approaches to address intergroup relations. For example, the principal at North Vernon took a passive approach to intergroup relations, viewing it as low priority. The principal at Matthews, on the other hand,

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[Resources to Improve School Equity]

Equity Center Web Sites

www.edgateway.net/pub/docs/eacn/home.html

The U.S. Department of Education funds 10 Equity Centers across the United States to help public schools provide equal opportunities for students, regardless of their race, sex, or national origin. Each of the centers serves a specific area, although each center posts resources online that can be used by everyone. In particular, the Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium (MAEC), which houses the Mid-Atlantic Equity Center, has several assessments posted on its Web site (www.maec.org) that principals and teachers can download for free and use to evaluate the equity health of their schools and classrooms.

Teaching Tolerance

www.tolerance.org/teach

Teaching Tolerance, funded by the Southern Poverty Law Center, is a clearinghouse of information about anti-bias programs for K–12 educators. Much of their information is posted online for free, and visitors to their Web site can also download lesson plans, sign up for a free monthly e-newsletter, and find classroom resources on teaching tolerance. Sharing cyberspace with Teaching Tolerance is Tolerance.org, another program of the Southern Poverty Law Center that focuses on fighting hate and promoting tolerance in the community.

Promoting Tolerance

www.teachtolerance.org

After one of his students was the victim of a hate crime, educator Joe Moros developed Promoting Tolerance Through Understanding, an elective class he taught at both middle and high school levels. On his Web site, you can find extensive links to organizations that promote tolerance and diversity and information about creating your own tolerance class.
—Michelle Ann McKinley

viewed intergroup relations as a high priority but instituted programs that were short-lived or poorly designed and implemented.

The principal at North Vernon was the only principal in our sample to take a passive approach to addressing intergroup relations. He struggled with how to address the issue and, in fact, felt it was low priority relative to increasing academic achievement. Perhaps as a result of his passive approach, student fights and conflicts occurred frequently on campus. When faced with escalating conflicts and other disciplinary actions, he instituted drastic discipline measures without first seeking student and community input. He cancelled student recess, imposed fines of $400 on students who fought, and installed locked gates to deter violence on campus. Students expressed anger and resentment at these measures, which they saw as punishing all students rather than focusing on the small number of students who were initiating conflict. This put administrators and the student body in an even more adversarial relationship and perpetuated fear on campus.

The principal continued to deny that intergroup tensions existed at North Vernon, despite the fact that 84% of ninth graders reported in a survey that there were mild to severe tensions among students. The principal argued, "We have a cohesive group. I don't see social tensions....Kids get along pretty well." He also felt that engaging in dialogue about intergroup relations was

"a waste of time" and that "teachers are not here for touchy-feely nonsense." This comment suggests that the link between positive school climate and student achievement needs to be made explicit for school leaders to be invested in these efforts.

Similar to North Vernon, Matthews High School had a history of racial strife that stemmed from years of tension between the White, middle- and upper-class residents and the minority, working class residents. Not surprisingly, this tension spilled into the school, increasing the number of student fights on campus and exacerbating the already-tense relations between White students and students of color. School leaders acted swiftly to design and implement schoolwide diversity training called "Breaking the Borders," which included multicultural assemblies, outdoors ropes course, and student-led discussions on diversity issues.

As part of this program, students viewed *The Color of Fear,* a film about racial stereotypes and discrimination. Although the intention of the film was to provoke honest conversations about race, the debriefing from the film was facilitated by students who didn't have the skills to help participants process their emotional reactions to the film. In fact, the film had the reverse effect, worsening the climate for positive intergroup relations. One student said the film "made us even more scared because we were strangers. It made me feel like I should hide with my other White girls." Experts in diversity training warn that poorly organized anti-racism workshops can have the reverse effect on students, placing participants at risk of increased anger if there are no strategies for constructive dialogue and action (Tatum, 1997).

The leaders at Matthews developed this program in response to pressures from parents and other community leaders who felt that intergroup tension was perpetuating campus violence. As a result, the solution was reactive in nature, created without careful assessment of which holistic approaches were sustainable over time and most relevant for diverse students. One approach that may be more sustainable is to modify curricula to teach students about differences among racial groups.

The Proactive Approach

Some school leaders addressed intergroup relations by making explicit connections between intergroup relations and academic achievement. The principals of three schools in our sample adopted preventative discipline practices by communicating high expectations for students' behavior and imposing sanctions on those who cause disruptions. As part of this approach, these principals intentionally affirmed diversity and challenged

racism on their campuses. These leaders valued dialogue about social justice and oppression and found constructive ways to promote intergroup tolerance and cooperation. Teachers in proactive schools consistently held high expectations for all students and were willing to share their personal experiences in negotiating cultural and racial differences.

Although they may not have devised the perfect solution, school leaders at proactive schools were able to communicate a positive vision of community to teachers, parents, and students. These leaders generally adopted four key approaches to addressing intergroup relations: engaging the school community at multiple levels, creating personalized communities, addressing intergroup relations as a community, and offering specialized courses that address diversity and tolerance.

Multiple Levels of Engagement

The principal at Pederson High School used a shared decision-making model and had been practicing site-based management for about a decade. Although the committee structures, objectives, and roles have changed over time, the school site council—composed of parents, teachers, and students—was a key vehicle for parental involvement. The principal attended all of the monthly meetings. He has also developed a Web site and encouraged students to post messages on it. This was an important vehicle for communication for students and parents in the district and also for those outside of the immediate community who may have been interested in the school's magnet or voluntary transfer programs.

As demonstrated by this principal, schools in the proactive stage have strong, visible, committed leadership for intergroup relations. The leaders take time to build support among key stakeholders and involve them when developing programs, including those aimed at improving the racial climate at their schools. For example, the principal at Pederson surveyed parents, teachers, and students to identify schoolwide concerns and priorities. Survey results prompted the development of structured support services for all students, including a multiservice team that included parent advisers and teachers from varied disciplines.

Leaders in one of the proactive schools asked teachers and other staff members to take an assessment of school assumptions and biases that might counter positive intergroup relations and student achievement. Leaders communicated a clear, consistent message about equity and social justice by having honest conversations about the role of race and achievement. Proactive leaders also

take risks—the principal at Mills High School held discussions with teachers about White privilege in the context of the disparity in achievement between White students and students of color. By holding discussions with teachers about educational equity, leaders not only reflected on their own daily practices but also encouraged teachers to transform their practice to support the neediest students.

Similarly, the principal at Mills was proactive about improving student achievement among low performing Latino and Black students. He disaggregated student achievement by race to show teachers the wide disparities in achievement across racial groups. The principal convened multiple meetings with teachers to start the dialogue on race and achievement so teachers would understand the reasons for the disparity and the strategies for narrowing the gap. According to the principal, "Discussing race is very hard, so hard that we're still having the conversation. It'll be an ongoing discussion as long as there is a problem."

Community Relations

Another important characteristic of a proactive approach is to address racial incidents as a community issue rather than dismiss them as the act of individuals. Such conflicts are opportunities for the school community to bind together and reinforce values of intergroup tolerance and respect. For example, Woodrow High School responded

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to racial epithets by gathering students and teachers to create antiracist signs and chants. This approach helped students feel "like family" because they could work with other students to paint over the racially offensive graffiti.

Similarly, the principal at Mills had to think proactively about deterring a potential riot on campus after the Rodney King verdict. Because students were angry with the verdict, the principal decided to convene a schoolwide rally to encourage all students to "speak out" about their feelings on race. Teachers reported that it was "amazing to see the kids respect each other and respond to what people had to say." Another teacher was pleased at how the principal handled the rally: "The principal virtually shut down this campus and opened it to any child who chose to get up and talk." To sustain this effort, the principal developed study guides on holding speak-outs and ways for teachers to conduct follow-up discussions with students.

Personalized Communities

Students in our study were more academically engaged if their school had personalized spaces for them to interact with others. Woodrow and Mills fostered personalization by creating a school-within-a-school structure. For example, incoming ninth graders at Woodrow are grouped in cohorts and share common teachers in English, social studies, and science during the first three periods. This structure provides a sense of community for students, creating a close-knit environment among students and teachers.

According to teachers at Mills and Pederson, safe spaces were needed to make students feel comfortable about sharing their thoughts on intergroup relations. We also found that when school leaders were willing to open up, they created a respectful two-way relationship. For example, teachers at one school incorporated story telling when discussing issues of race because they believed that "through story-telling, kids learn so much because you personalize it." One teacher at Mills said, "It's important for the teacher to be absolutely honest...I admit freely to them that I have to deal with prejudice constantly. I have to deal with stereotypes...I carry my personal baggage just as they do...We try to develop a rapport where we can share ideas, rather than 'I'm the teacher and you're the student.'"

Specialized Courses

Several of the schools in our study offer classes to promote tolerance and improve relationships among students. Mills was one of a few schools that offered Facing History and Ourselves (FHAO), a course that explores current issues of racism through the lens of the Holocaust. In the course, students learned about the Holocaust and the language that they can use to communicate about equity, power, and race. Although the Holocaust was the focus of their study, students also learned about the Cambodian and the Armenian genocide.

The principal supported FHAO from the beginning, believing that the course "would empower Mills students to unravel racist assumptions and work toward interethnic harmony." The principal encouraged teachers from other disciplines to attend professional development workshops on how to integrate the principles of FHAO in their respective disciplines. Many teachers overwhelmingly supported the training and the curriculum. As one teacher said, "There has been an awareness on this campus for a long time that we need to address racial issues not just peripherally but curricularly, that it has to be woven into the fabric of what you do on a daily basis."

Conclusion

Promoting positive intergroup relations to improve school discipline is often a complex and difficult process with no clear cut solutions. The six schools in our study had three different philosophies about intergroup interactions: passive, reactive, and proactive. The proactive approach was the most successful in promoting positive intergroup interactions. We found that school leaders with proactive approaches made intergroup relations a schoolwide priority and closely examined school practices, beliefs, and values. Successful efforts build cooperative intergroup relations that can be sustained over time and require principals to help their students and staff members look at diversity differently and involve multiple stakeholders who help the school community change to improve students' growth and achievement. **P**L

References

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