
CASE STUDY: GIVING STUDENTS A VOICE



RIVERVIEW ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, DENVILLE

K-5 / 400 students / 60 staff

THE BACKGROUND

During the 2015-2016 school year, the elementary school decided to embark on the School Culture and Climate Initiative, a project of United Way of Northern New Jersey and College of Saint Elizabeth. The school had undergone a lot of changes that were causing staff to feel overwhelmed, from new state mandates, to new teacher evaluations, as well as updated curriculum. The Initiative's three-year comprehensive approach to evaluating and improving the school culture was seen as a way to help make staff and students feel more welcome, laying the foundation for teaching and learning.

THE APPROACH

The first step in the process was to engage the entire school community – students, parents, teachers, staff and administrators – in a survey that asked each about its perceptions of the school's climate and culture. At Riverview, the survey proved crucial to uncovering its strengths as well as opportunities for growth.

“Students said they loved coming to school and felt cared for at school,” Principal Tina Theodoropoulos says. “Students also told us they wanted to have more of a voice in their school environment and it turned out to be so easy to fix that. Without getting involved in this project, we wouldn’t have known that.”

A student climate team was established and with the Initiative's consultant guiding conversations among administrators, staff, and students, together they identified some easy first steps to take that would demonstrate to all a commitment to sustainable, positive change.

One of the outcomes was the “morning meeting.” Now, every morning, before tackling the formal lessons of the day, they first spend 10 minutes getting to know one another. Students start by exchanging positive greetings. The discussion can range from talking about whether students feel prepared for a test the next day to how they felt when one student shoved another during recess the day before. And they always end with an encouraging statement for the day. The bottom line: Students get a chance to talk about how they *feel* at school. Much like adult employees who feel valued in their workplace, students who feel safe and comfortable at school are more likely to want to return each day and be excited to learn and succeed.

THE RESULT

Staff morale is up, disciplinary issues are down, and both students and staff report they felt heard on issues that are important to them. Along with the morning meetings, students were given opportunities to speak up and get involved in various school projects and events, including the school culture and climate student team.

“If we know more about one another, we’ll care more about each other,” says Todd McCabe, Riverview’s counselor and anti-bullying specialist. “It’s all about building successful relationships.”

