

Emotional Support and Student Learning

Nancy Protheroe

In caring schools, a critical connection has been made between students' academic achievement and their need to feel safe, accepted, and valued.

Whether you are a teacher, administrator, custodian, or school bus driver, you are helping to shape the character of the kids you come in contact with. It's in the way you talk, the behaviors you model, the conduct you tolerate, the deeds you encourage, the expectations you transmit (Elkind and Sweet 2004).

We all have been in schools and classrooms that “feel special,” where student-to-student and student-teacher interactions are especially warm and positive, and there is evidence everywhere of the high value placed on students as individuals. In these places, a critical connection has been made between a school’s academic mission and a student’s need to feel safe, accepted, and valued.

Obviously, all of us want students to experience school as a safe and comfortable environment. However, in this time of high academic standards and accountability, should special attention and effort be devoted to achieving this goal? The answer is yes, since research tells us that providing students with emotional support helps them focus on learning.

An emphasis on providing an emotionally safe environment can have a particularly powerful impact on students who may be academically at risk. Consider, for example, students who move from school to school due to problems associated with poverty. Helping these students recognize that they are members of a supportive community makes it easier for them to concentrate on learning.

Thus, it is reasonable to consider school efforts to provide emotional support for students—especially those most at risk of failure—a key strategy in addressing the academic gap and raising overall student performance.

IN BRIEF

This Research Report addresses the need to provide an emotionally safe environment for students who may be academically at risk. Research has focused on a variety of strategies, including bullying prevention, staff modeling of care and respect, school structures and routines, high expectations of student behavior, and making sure that every student feels known and valued by at least one adult in the school.

What Does the Research Say?

There is a clear theoretical base for connecting students’ feelings of emotional security and their ability to focus on learning. Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs suggests that students who have their needs for safety, belonging, and self-esteem met—as well as their basic physiological needs—possess an important foundation for building knowledge.

In addition, researchers have identified specific connections with school environments and students’ academic success:

Current work in educational psychology tells us that students’ experience of belongingness in the school setting is linked to important motivational, attitudinal, and behavioral factors that are associated with school success. Specifically, we find that this sense of belonging to a supportive school community is associated with emotional well-being, intrinsic motivation, prosocial behavior, commitment to school, engagement, and achievement (Osterman 2002).

Klem and Connell (2004) discuss the important variable of student engagement with the school community:

Studies show students with caring and supportive interpersonal relationships in school report more positive academic attitudes and values, and more satisfaction with school. These students also are more engaged academically...Researchers have found student engagement a robust predictor of student achievement and behavior in school, regardless of socioeconomic status... Students who perceive teachers as creating a caring, well-structured learning environment in which expectations are high, clear, and fair are more likely to report engagement in school.

Research by Lee *et al.* (1999) addressed a question particularly important to educators working in high-stakes, standards-based environments: Are approaches focused on helping students do well on high-stakes tests and those intended to provide

“...researchers have found that school efforts to connect with students can have effects far beyond the school year in which they are instituted.”

social/emotional support incompatible? These researchers found they were not. Their studies, conducted in Chicago public schools, focused on the relationship between “academic press” and “social support” on student learning and found that schools characterized as “high academic press” and “high social support” experienced the largest gains on both reading and math assessments.

Our findings suggest that when school systems seek to improve student achievement

*by raising standards and expectations for learning and by creating high stakes for academic performance, they should not ignore the social support that may be necessary for students to succeed. For students who may receive little support from home, peers, and community, it becomes even more important that principals and teachers create school and classroom environments that provide personal support for learning (Lee *et al.* 1999).*

Finally, researchers have found that school efforts to connect with students can have effects far beyond the school year in which they are instituted. For example, Hawkins and his colleagues (National Public Radio 2002) describe the results of Project SOAR, in which 800 first graders in five schools were assigned to either intervention or control classrooms. Each year, teachers and parents in the intervention classrooms received training in how to actively engage children in learning while strengthening bonding to family and school. Many of the teacher strategies were “deceptively simple techniques to connect with children—like making eye contact and greeting students in the hallways in the morning” (National Public Radio 2002). In addition, students were taught social skills, such as waiting their turn. Follow-up studies found that the Project SOAR group had higher academic achievement, lower dropout rates, and lower rates of delinquent behavior and substance abuse in high school, and lower pregnancy rates at age 21 (National Public Radio 2002; Social Development Research Group 2002).

Strategies to Build Community

A variety of strategies can contribute to a school’s efforts to build community and demonstrate caring. Most of them are common sense, take little extra time, and often are already part of a school’s day-to-day activities.

First, of course, is ensuring that students feel safe in school. This includes addressing problems such as bullying.

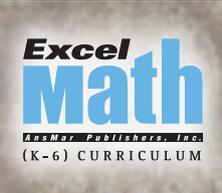
Second, staff should continuously model caring and respect for all mem-



Look Familiar?
Take A Different Approach

Excel Math – Makes It Stick
Get your free sample packet: info@excelmath.com
Or call toll free 866.866.7026

AnsMar Publishers Inc. 13257 Kirkham Way, Poway, CA 92064-7116



bers of the school community. Reitzug and Patterson (1998) shadowed principal Debbie Pressley and observed her ongoing efforts to make connections with students. Her behaviors included calling students by their first names and focusing on a student sent to her office for misbehavior as a person rather than as a problem.

Third, school structures and routines can help build community. For example, some schools begin each day with brief classroom meetings. Others line their hallways with examples of students "caught being good." Still others have implemented instructional approaches such as looping for their demonstrated academic and social-emotional benefits.

Fourth, staff should convey high expectations for student behavior as well as academic achievement, since the positive impact of these has been demonstrated repeatedly (Osher and Fleischman 2005). However, some students may need special help to learn skills critical to acceptance as a valuable member of the community. For example, one elementary school began direct teaching of social skills in the hope that it would decrease the amount of class time spent on discipline problems. The skills were introduced and taught throughout the school at regular intervals in every classroom. Examples of these skills include:

- How to greet someone;
- How to get the teacher's attention;
- How to follow instructions;
- How to make a request;
- How to accept "no" for an answer; and
- How to disagree appropriately.

Finally, every staff member must take responsibility for ensuring that no child falls through the cracks. The literature repeatedly mentions the importance of making sure every student feels known and valued by at least one adult in the school. Such connections are typically most important for students having difficulty in their personal or academic life. Simply knowing that a respected

**"A variety of strategies
can contribute to a
school's efforts to
build community and
demonstrate caring.
Most of them are
common sense..."**

adult cares about his or her interests and concerns may provide such students with the emotional support they need to focus on learning.

In caring schools, a critical connection has been made between students' academic achievement and their need to feel safe, accepted, and valued. Researchers single out "a safe, welcoming, stimulating, and nurturing environment focused on learning for

The Administrative Observer

Document your observations quickly and easily

Being an Administrator just got easier!

Evaluations & observation summaries for any educational category

Your terminology and evaluation criteria go into our software!

On your desktop ...

Or on your handheld ...

Palm and Pocket PC!

Great for Walk-through observations!

Point - Click - Done!



Windows 95 / 98 / ME / 2000 / XP

\$295.00 (Desktop Windows version)

\$99.95 (Optional handheld version)

(Desktop version required for handheld)

***Orders can be placed with Purchase Order,
Credit Card (VISA / MasterCard), or Check***



Preferred Educational Software
221 Rivers Edge Drive - Dept. ES7
Cherry Valley, IL 61016

Toll Free (888) 959-2016
FAX (815) 332-1639
www.pes-sports.com

all children” as one of five key supports for school improvement (Sebring *et al.* 2006). Clearly, by building a schoolwide sense of community educators can help students develop the sense of engagement and connectedness important to their ability to focus on learning. 

References

Elkind, D. and F. Sweet. “How to Do Character Education,” 2004. Retrieved from www.goodcharacter.com/Article_4.html.

Klem, A. M. and J. P. Connell. “Relationships Matter: Linking Teacher Support to Student Engagement and Achievement.” *Journal of School Health* (September 2004), 262–73.

Lee, V. L. *et al.* *Social Support, Academic Press, and Student Achievement: A View from the Middle Grades in Chicago*. Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research, 1999. Retrieved from www.consortium-chicago.org/publications/pdfs/p0e01.pdf.

National Public Radio. “School ‘Bonding’ Effort Shows Lasting Results,” 2002. Retrieved from www.npr.org/programs/morning/features/2002/may/teens/index.html.

“Simply knowing that a respected adult cares about his or her interests ...may provide...students with the emotional support they need to focus on learning.”

Osher, D. and S. Fleischman. “Research Matters: Positive Culture in Urban Schools.” *Learning from Urban Schools* 62, no.6 (2005), 84–5.

Osterman, K. “Schools as Communities for Students.” In *School as Community: From Promise to Practice*, edited by G. Furman. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2002.

Reitzug, U.C. and J. Patterson. “I’m Not Going to Lose You! Empowerment Through Caring in an Urban Principal’s Practice with Students.” *Urban Education* (May 1998), 150–81.

Sebring, P. B. *et al.* *The Essential Supports for School Improvement*. Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2006.

Retrieved from http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/content/publications.php?pub_id=86.

Social Development Research Group. “Welcome to the Seattle Social Development Project,” 2002. Retrieved from http://depts.washington.edu/sdrg/SOAR_LongTermEffects_SPR/TextOnly/index.html.

Nancy Protheroe is director of special research projects at Educational Research Service. Her e-mail address is nprotheroe@ers.org.

WEB RESOURCES

Every Child Learning: Safe and Supportive Schools, a report published by the Learning First Alliance, describes some core elements of supportive school environments and makes recommendations for strengthening school community. <http://learningfirst.org/publications/safeschools/>

A report posted on the Web site of the Consortium on Chicago School Research discusses results of a study designed to assess the relationship of social support and academic press to academic achievement. Specific examples of ways in which schools can provide social support are included.

<http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/publications/p0e01.pdf>

In *What Empathy Can Do*, Ernest Mendes provides examples of ways teachers can build relationships with students.

www.ascd.org (Select this article from the September 2003 issue of *Educational Leadership*.)

A brief article, “The Heart of a Caring School,” by Eric Schaps suggests ways schools can build a sense of community.

www.devstu.org/about/articles/heart_of_caring_school.html

The 2007 Summer Institute on Closing the Achievement Gap

June 24-28, 2007
Nashville, Tennessee

Vanderbilt University’s Peabody College, ranked among the nation’s top five schools of education, offers innovative summer programs for education professionals.

In most school districts nationally, Black and Latino students experience less school success than White and Asian students. This institute will focus on national and state trends in the achievement gap, and examine the many contributing factors with the goal of increasing participants’ knowledge and understanding of this issue, and then working with them to develop solutions.

For additional information or to begin an application for consideration as a summer fellow, view our Web site at peabody.vanderbilt.edu/CAG07.xml or contact us at (615) 343-6222.

For priority consideration, applications are due by March 1, 2007.



ZUMA® & ZUMAFRD™

The next wave in education furniture...catch it!

Fun

ZROCK does what the human body wants to do: it moves. Modest in scale with an appropriately restrained range of motion, it's the furniture equivalent of an encouraging smile. Place it in libraries, break rooms, reading nooks, or alongside the teacher's desk. Also appropriate for special education environments where therapeutic motion is required.



Fit

Students come in all sizes and so does ZUMA®. The ZUMA bucket is proportionally compensated to provide the right degree of flex and support in 13", 15" and 18" models. All three sizes have leg braces and, like the rest of the ZUMA line, meet ANSI/BIFMA standards for strength and durability.



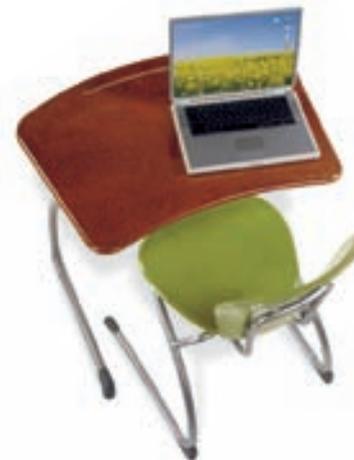
Uplifting

Seat height adjustability is the single most important element of proper ergonomics. Our full line of adjustable ZUMA® chairs provides appropriate support for students of every age whether they're keyboarding, doing lab work, or scanning titles in the media center. Available with or without casters in the full ZUMA palette of 22 colors, these chairs can be bright and agile or subdued and still.



Sustainable

Reprising the flagship separates of original ZUMA® in sustainable materials, the beauty of our new ZUMAFRD™ chairs and desks is enhanced by up to 70% recycled content and a multi-generational service life. This is sculpture for the classroom, an elegant metamorphosis, a change for the better.



Balance

The ZCANT chair and ZDESK poise gracefully at the point of rest between performance and affordability. Both feature an organically curved reverse cantilever design that permits easy access and, in the case of the chair, a gentle flex.



For more information, call us today at

800-813-4150

or visit www.virco.com



equipment for educators™