

Rebuilding School Culture: Supporting Staff and Students Is Key

After tragedy, Newtown, Connecticut, schools focus on learning and helping staff and students find a new sense of normal.

Sandy Hook Elementary School

was much like other elementary schools in December 2012. School officials were concerned about staff turnover and morale, changing curricular and accountability requirements, declining enrollments, and community support across the Newtown (Connecticut) Public School District.

In fact, the district's principals had planned to discuss school culture at a meeting on the afternoon of December 14, the day of the shooting rampage that killed 20 first-grade students and six staff members at Sandy Hook Elementary.

In the three and a half years since the tragedy, each of the schools have had to focus on school culture and building emotional supports as they never thought possible. To share what they've learned with other colleagues, four of Newtown's elementary principals led an interactive session on strategies for rebuilding school culture at NAESP's annual conference in July.

School culture should not be used interchangeably with the term school climate, they noted. School culture is deeper and ingrained; it could be compared to a person's personality, whereas climate is a shorter-term reaction. It takes concerted efforts to change school culture, which was at an all-time low in all of the district schools after the Sandy Hook killings, said Anne Uberti, principal of Newtown's Reed Intermediate School.

The first step for a new principal, she said, is to thoroughly understand the current culture and how it came to be, as well as the history of

the school. Three of the principals took their jobs in Newtown after the shootings, she added.

Christopher Geissler, another Newtown elementary school principal, uses the summer break to plan for the next year. He goes through teacher evaluations and student data, then reflects on the school's stated goals and considers the key players, professional development plans, and other ways to meet those goals and positively impact the school culture. Geissler ensures that his teachers have a voice on school committees, and he asks all of them to join the PTA.

Another elementary principal, Christopher Moretti, advised that principals should know every student's name and get to know parents and families. "Because we were forced to focus on culture, we found that what made us successful was constantly thinking about school culture and ways to improve," Moretti said.

Building relationships by holding continuous conversations with teachers and other staff—and not being afraid to tackle the tough topics—is key, Newtown's administrators agreed.

Kathleen Gombos, who became principal of Sandy Hook Elementary five months after the shooting, said that in her three years on the job she learned that she must show her teachers and staff that she is looking out for them. For instance, when she canceled a standing faculty meeting, she didn't just send a calendar update, she sent a note to teachers to let them know that she decided to cancel because she knew that they needed the extra time for planning.

"Everything must be purposeful," she said. "And I've learned that reactions may not have had anything to do with anything that I say."

The school district is now looking to the future and using extra support staff to help students and staff build a new sense of normal—whatever form that may take—and focus on teaching and learning.

Spotlight on Principal Kathleen Gombos



In 2014 NAESP dedicated the Tree of Life Memorial in the name of late Sandy Hook Elementary School principal Dawn Hochsprung. The memorial honors principals who have made an extraordinary sacrifice teaching, educating, preparing, and protecting our most cherished resource. Contact foundation@naesp.org for more information.



Kathleen Gombos
Principal
Sandy Hook Elementary School
Newtown, Connecticut

Imagine taking the reins of Sandy Hook Elementary School less than six months after the shooting rampage. Kathleen Gombos accepted the job as principal in 2013, and since then has led a school and community through the turbulent process of healing, rebuilding, and moving forward.

Gombos has been reluctant to do interviews on her role or to grant reporters access to Sandy Hook Elementary—she understandably wants to protect her school and keep routines as normal as possible for her students and staff. But she spoke with *Principal* magazine at NAESP's annual conference in July, because she hopes to reach out to other colleagues across the country.

At this point, more than three years after the December 2012 tragedy, school officials are trying to focus on academics and supporting

students' learning as they begin to recover. The extra counselors and support staff who were brought in have begun to dissipate, and Gombos says her students and the community have been remarkably resilient.

This September marks another milestone: The school will move back to a new building on the same site that the shooting occurred, which she expects will bring back emotions and poignant memories for the students and staff who survived.

Before becoming a principal, Gombos taught in inner-city schools in Bridgeport, Connecticut, where she worked with many underprivileged students who saw traumas in their daily lives. Prior to Sandy Hook Elementary, Gombos was principal at Ralph M.T. Johnson Elementary School in the nearby town of Bethel, Connecticut. Here is her story:

Q *Why did you decide to become a principal?*

I've been a principal for 13 years. I started my career in Bridgeport, Connecticut, and I loved every minute of it. I have a master's degree in counseling and a doctorate in education, and I've also been a middle school guidance counselor. I loved teaching, and I became a principal because I love working with adults as much as I loved working with children.

Q *What brought you to Sandy Hook Elementary after the shooting tragedy—did you have a relationship with the school prior to 2013?*

I applied for the job—I was drawn to Sandy Hook as everyone was, in the sense that everyone wanted to do something to help. I felt like I could do something, I had nine years' experience as a principal and my master's in counseling, but most important, I am a mom of four kids.

I was probably not prepared for the position like I would have wanted to be, though I don't know how anyone could have been.

Q *Tell us about your first few weeks on the job. How were teachers and students coping? How did you work with parents and the community?*

I spent time with everyone I could. I asked all of the staff members to come in and introduce themselves and get to know me; I tried to take it all in. I also met with many of the parents and everyone I could in the community.

I realized the work ahead of me was really surreal—I was honored to be doing it, but I was overwhelmed by the emotionality. I decided to take it one day at a time.

There has been some staff turnover—some teachers have left for reasons they would have left anyway, and the recovery process is very personal.

Q *What has been your strategy to rebuild a nurturing and supportive school climate? How have you handled academic needs?*

I think my overall strategy has been building relationships, meeting people where they are, valuing their strengths, and doing whatever I can to be supportive, as well as building networks of support with staff and community. There is a lot of support for Sandy Hook.

But we are treading on this unknown. I've personally reached out to other school principals who have been through [school shootings and other tragedies], and basically everyone says, "faith, trust, and focus on teaching and learning."

In the first year, we continued to have a lot of outside people coming to the school to support the kids. By the second year, we had gone back to the status quo. But we have additional staff to support the social and emotional needs of kids and adults and their families.

Q *The original Sandy Hook Elementary school building was razed after the shooting, and your school moved to a middle school facility in nearby Monroe, Connecticut. This coming school year you will be moving back to a new school on the former site. How do you think the new building will impact school culture?*

We've spent a lot of time focusing on the transition this year—we've worked as a team to support one another and make sure everyone gets what they need. I'm very hopeful, though I would never want to undermine how incredibly hard this has been for many of our staff members and families, who have been unbelievably resilient and have tried to maintain a positive outlook.

Monroe is the epitome of a giving community. They have been an unbelievable neighbor, they have taken us in and cared for us for three years. The fact that our community could stay together was remarkable.

We're so grateful for all the support we've received, and we know the world continues to pray for us and we appreciate it. 📧

—As told to **Joetta Sack-Min**, a freelance education writer in northern Virginia.