



Don't Forget the Staff

Establishing social-emotional initiatives for staff improves whole-school wellness

BY AMY N. SPANGLER

Developing social-emotional competence is one of the most important subjects school staff can teach. But it is just as important for leaders to focus on the social-emotional needs of staff members, too. Staff members have also experienced issues related to social isolation and trauma in the last two years, and they need support.

Creating a plan to increase staff social-emotional proficiencies at my previous school proved difficult, so I used the three protective factors for resilience highlighted in Martin Krovetz's 2008 book, *Fostering Resilience: Expecting All Students to Use Their Minds and Hearts Well*, as a guide. They are:

A caring environment. I adopted a strategy to help staff develop collegial friendships. I increased the frequency and expanded the window for before-, during-, and afterschool activities to provide time in which all staff members, regardless of role, could bond with each other. We hosted poetry jams, board game days, "lunch and learns," yoga sessions, cooking classes, paint nights, study

groups, wellness classes, professional learning meetings, and themed pop-up parties.

As the school leader, I worked to show the genuine love and care I have for each staff member. For example, I acknowledged each person on their birthday and at least two other times throughout the year with handwritten notes. I opened every staff meeting with five minutes of shared gratitude for, or positive observations of, colleagues.

I texted and called folks who were absent to check on their well-being and took action if staff members seemed isolated. I made eye contact with each of my 110 staff members every week. On Mondays, I personally welcomed people back throughout the day. On Fridays, I handed out candy and wished everyone a good weekend.

I mindfully learned the names of staffers' family members and friends, and I asked follow-up questions about things shared with me.

Positive expectations. The most impactful activity I did to create positive expectations was instituting 15-minute debriefing sessions that were open to all staff. Asking for feedback after every school event meant that my leadership was under a microscope. At first, it was emotionally difficult for me to open myself up to such scrutiny, but I realized that by demonstrating an ability to hear and accept feedback, I was reinforcing the idea that identifying and correcting mistakes is central to the learning process.

Debriefing meetings helped staff share in school leadership. After each session, any actions needed to implement the next time a particular event was held were shared with everyone, prompting further discussion. Offering an opportunity for everyone to voice their ideas on what to change cultivated a climate of flexibility, adaptation, and higher expectations.

These activities helped others build trust with me as the leader, and with each other as collaborators. They modeled problem-solving skills and fostered opportunities for more shared experiences, conveying the message that all ideas are valued and that together, we can improve. Staff members were blossoming and feeling supported in making improvements, and many became more open to feedback and coaching as a result.

Participation. To provide opportunities for staff to be more meaningfully involved, I created quarterly bulletin boards in the staff room that encouraged interaction and responses. For

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example, I once posted the question "What are you grateful for?" with notecards encouraging colleagues to post their thoughts anonymously. Then, I shared the responses in the weekly staff bulletin, sparking more of them to reflect. I participated in making the school better by regularly cleaning up, and my actions led others to do the same.

I knew that we had reached a high level of collective agency and initiative when an unexpected snowstorm hit one morning; we were down a custodian, and our snowblower was broken. I made an announcement that anyone who had a snow shovel in their car should bring it inside the school for us to use; we didn't have any on hand. Staff members came outside in droves to remove the snow. Meaningful participation spawns more meaningful participation in schools—especially when it is noticed and celebrated.

Mindfully thinking about how all staff members are feeling at and about work gives them the fortitude they need to face change and to respond to issues proactively with a "yes, and" mindset. What happens on one level in a school gets mirrored and repeated at the next.

We want and need students with social-emotional competence. And the best way to achieve this is to ensure that everyone who serves students has a leader focused on their social-emotional growth, too. ●

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