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The Anti-Defamation League A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE program launched at Normandin and Roosevelt Middle Schools during the 2018-2019 school year. It began with training for students hosted at UMass Dartmouth, during which students practiced public speaking, leading activities, and engaging in conversations on topics like racism, sexism, transphobia, classism, ableism, and more. The result? Close to 60 students ready to spark change at their school through courageous and inclusive conversations.

In the spring, students entered 6th grade classrooms, leading activities about forms of oppression, how culture is like an iceberg - mostly hidden under the surface, and what it means to show respect.

A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE® Institute knows that attitudes and beliefs affect actions, and believes all of us can positively impact the world we live in. The program is designed to help students recognize bias, develop an understanding of diversity, and confront bigotry. (www.ADL.org)

Reflecting on the sessions, one student stated that she overcame her "fear of talking in front of the class," and was able to "spread awareness" about topics that are important to her. Another student added that she learned everyone has something in common.

"I've been hearing a lot of bullying and people making fun of other people. ADL can help kids understand what's going on, and it can change our school."

These students also learned about their identities and themselves. "I learned that I have the ability to talk loudly and now I have more patience for people. I became more open, and helped people feel comfortable." Another student added, "I want to help the environment and society, and learned that I can accomplish something if I try." Kimberly Soto-Hurtado, one of the program’s advisors, stated that students reported feeling anxious, apprehensive, and shy about the work they had signed up to do leading up to the facilitation. But once they finished their first activity with the 6th graders, they felt so empowered that they could not wait to go back in!

"These students are pushing barriers (both personal and socially) and the fact that they feel so empowered and eager, motivates me to continue this work, to help them express their concerns and foster the potential we see in them," stated Ms. Soto-Hurtado.

Next year, Normandin and Roosevelt Schools will recruit a second cohort of students, partially trained by the current peer trainers. Keith Middle School will be training the first cohort of students in the fall.
It’s a Tuesday morning and I am at Normandin Middle School surrounded by thirty or so educators from the NBPS. I am a consultant, hired by the district to help develop and implement wellness programming, specifically mindfulness based. We are in our fourth week of a six week course intended to teach participants about self care, to build a mindfulness personal practice, and to encourage each other as coworkers to develop school communities of wellbeing and care.

There is exciting research on the benefits of mindfulness. Some of this research is being done specifically in the space of education. “Mindfulness helps teachers to better cope with stress on the job, improves the emotional climate of the classroom, and helps make the classroom environment more productive for learning.” Each week we discuss the research, why mindful self care is essential, how it benefits us physically and emotionally, and how it can have a positive effect on our relationships. There is much to be learned theoretically about this practice, however, the real aha moments often come as we stop to just “be.” The majority of our sessions are spent learning to pause, direct attention, and be with what is in our present moment. We learn to focus on our breath in meditation. Watching the rhythm change, noticing how our moods and emotions often follow or mirror these patterns of breathing. We learn specific techniques for slowing down the breath, which is a way to help calm the nervous system. We bring attention to the body in our yoga/movement practices. We gain a sense for where we may hold tension. We become aware of how a relaxed body feels versus a tense one. We are getting to know ourselves a little better each time we practice, learning what wellbeing feels like for us as individuals, building inner resilience.

In this week’s session we are exploring a mindfulness practice which highlights noticing what is positive in our lives. It is a way to deliberately cultivate qualities such as kindness and compassion. We reflect and focus attention on human commonalities and acknowledge the goodness in self, others, and the little things. As I gaze around the room and see thirty educators practicing together in silence, I begin to reflect on their efforts. Each one of these teachers, principals, school adjustment counselors, and wraparound coordinators are taking time out of their summer vacation to not only better themselves but also better their school communities at large, students, coworkers, and parents. I am overwhelmed by their kindness. It is easy to find the positive, to see the good and the compassion that runs deep throughout this room and greater school district. These are the stories that need to be told! As an “outsider” who has been welcomed in, I clearly see how the New Bedford School District is a community that cares. I see so much good happening here. I am honored to be a part of the continuing growth and grateful to support the educators, students and families of this district.

Julie Paquette is the Founder and an instructor at The Mindful Collaborative, an organization which partners with New Bedford Public Schools. The Mindful Collaborative is a Greenhouse Initiative of The Marion Institute.
Involving families in the education of our students is crucial to their success. So when the CBIP leadership team at Pulaski applied for the family engagement grant from the FELT team, it was a no brainer. Assistant Principal Amanda Gonzalez and SAC Brenna Bennett had their work cut out for them, but they were up for the task. They developed a plan that included meetings with other grant recipients and time with a FELT team representative. They scheduled a Professional Development on "Why Relationships Matter" and a second candid round table discussion to hear staff members’ questions and concerns about engaging with families.

"It is important to make connections, invite families in to engage in conversations, and to develop an awareness of each family's needs, preferences and prior experiences..."

To promote family engagement, we must be intentional in learning about the families in our schools and programs. It is important to make connections, invite families in to engage in conversations, and to develop an awareness of each family’s needs, preferences, and prior experiences in terms of involvement with educational systems. Getting the CBIP staff to recognize some of the biggest barriers to family engagement helped to develop the most effective strategies for making the families feel a little more comfortable attending.

The CBIP staff organized two family engagement events, strategically held in the community because most of their families live away from the school. At both events, which included a game and family night at PAACA, and an end of the year cookout at Hazelwood Park, staff engaged in conversation, play, and meals with the students and their families. There purposely weren’t any conversations held about student behavior or academic performance. It was all about building relationships. Students were encouraged to invite everyone in their family and placed phone calls and made personalized invitations. Staff members followed up with reminder calls to the families.

Students, staff, and families interacted positively at these events. Some staff also brought their own children and families to participate, and it made a lasting impact on everyone who attended. One family walked over 45 minutes to attend the end of the year cookout, just so the student could give his teacher a goodbye hug because he would not be returning this upcoming year. If this does not speak to the impact of relationships, I do not know what will.... Relationships matter not only to students and families, but to staff as well!
After a successful year implementing the PBIS system, the students, their families, and the staff celebrated with a talent show, perfect attendance acknowledgement, and highlights of their PBIS system. The students’ talents ranged from comedy, dancing, basketball skills, gymnastics, and instrument playing. All the students who received an attendance award had not missed one single day this past academic year, with one student never missing a day his entire time while attending Carney. Finally, each grade was highlighted for the amount of S.T.A.R’s they received. PBIS focuses on creating and sustaining primary (school-wide), secondary (classroom), and tertiary (individual) systems of support for positive behavior. Schools start implementing PBIS by developing expectations and rules for the whole school.

At Sgt. William Carney Academy, students are to shine like a star:

S: Show Kindness
T: Take Responsibility
A: Act Safely
R: Respect Everyone

The students and staff showed how bright their culture and climate is at Carney with their take on the song "Old Town Road" by Billy Ray Cyrus and Lil Nas X. The staff and students shot their own music video to the song, changing the lyrics to focus on their school-wide expectations and to show what the positive behavior looked liked. The highlight of their celebration was to watch the staff and students sing their expectations loudly and put up their hand symbol for quieting down. Way to go Carney, keep shining like a star!!
I’ve been working as an elementary School Adjustment Counselor (or SAC as we are often referred to) with the New Bedford Public Schools for over 10 years. When I was asked to put together a “Day in the Life” piece, I sort of laughed to myself, knowing full well that no day is the same in this position and that we SACs, as a group, are very diverse and approach our role from all sorts of different angles. There are, however, some absolutes about this job: first, we are here to support the social emotional well-being and mental health of the students with whom we work and second, we are here as a resource and support to the staff and families who are connected with said kiddos. All SACs are master’s level clinicians and the majority hold a clinical license with the state of Massachusetts.

Many SACs are the only mental health professional working in their building, particularly in the smaller elementary schools. In the larger elementary schools, middle, and high schools, there are typically several SACs on staff. I am happy to report that our current administration clearly values the importance of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and as a result, for the first time ever, each school in our district has at least one full time SAC on staff. Having been split between two albeit small schools for several years, I can’t stress the impact this can have on our students’ social emotional well-being and growth. We work collaboratively with our building principals and staff to determine the specific needs in our building.

"I’m happy to report that our current administration clearly values the importance of Social Emotional Learning..."

A big part of our jobs is to collaborate with families and service providers working with our children and to sort of be the go-between with school. I frequently call home to check in about concerns a teacher may have or work with parents when their child is having difficulty in school or, on occasion, reporting that they don’t want to come to school. At times, I feel like a detective, trying to get to the bottom of why a particular behavior is occurring and how we can work as a team to support that student to be successful.

One of the best parts of the job is to be able to do the proactive, supportive work. This includes teaching lessons in classrooms and in small groups to expose students to the tools necessary to navigate through their emotions and the various social situations they encounter on a daily basis. This work is critical to supporting our children to be independent, confident and successful students and community members.

My days are always busy; I am certainly never bored. Our role as counselors is very fulfilling. I live for the "lightbulb" moments when someone (myself included) gains an understanding of why something is happening and then learns to do differently in order to move forward. My whole goal as a counselor is to help the kids around me feel valued, successful, and cared for.
In Other News...

Check out an article written by the Great Schools Partnership on NBPS Family Engagement!

Missed our last Wrap Up newsletter? Visit www.NewBedfordSchools.org and click on "Wraparound/Family Engagement" under Parents/Students for links to previous issues and more!