

## About the Developmental Studies Center

### Our Mission

Developmental Studies Center (DSC) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to children's academic, ethical, and social development. Since 1980, DSC has developed school-based and after-school programs that help children develop capacities to think deeply and critically so they will continue learning throughout their lives and strengthen their commitment to such values as kindness, helpfulness, personal responsibility, and respect for others.

## DSC's Programs Develop Skills and Community

### Programs for use in classrooms

#### **Caring School Community™** • Grades K–6

The Caring School Community (CSC) program is a nationally recognized, research-based program that builds community—in the classroom, across grades, schoolwide, and with families.

#### **Making Meaning®** • Grades K–8

The Making Meaning program is a reading comprehension curriculum that teaches comprehension strategies through read-alouds, collaborative structures, and reflective partner work.

#### **SIPPS®** (Systematic Instruction in Phoneme Awareness, Phonics, and Sight Words) • Grades K–12

The SIPPS program teaches decoding systematically. It is designed specifically for intervention and covers single-syllable decoding, short vowels, simple consonants, complex vowels, consonant digraphs, polysyllabic strategies, and high-frequency sight words.

#### **Being a Writer™** • Grades K–5

The Being a Writer program is a yearlong writing curriculum—the first program of its kind to bring together the latest research in teaching writing with support for students' social and ethical development. (Available August 2007)

### Programs for out-of-school time

#### **AfterSchool KidzLit®** • Grades K–8

The AfterSchool KidzLit program is a literacy enrichment program consisting of terrific read-aloud books, and discussions and activities that help kids make connections between the stories, their own lives, and the world.

#### **AfterSchool KidzMath™** • Grades K–6

The AfterSchool KidzMath program provides academic enrichment using cooperative math games and literature-based activities. Kids deepen their understanding and practice important math skills—and have fun.

#### **Science Explorer** • Grades K–6

Science Explorer is an inquiry-based, interactive program of experiments using ordinary materials that inspire students to explore scientific principles.

#### **Math Explorer** • Grades 6–8

Math Explorer invites children to fly planes, launch rockets, learn card tricks, and make cool stuff to take home—all while practicing the important math skills middle-school students need extra help with.

For more information, please visit [www.devstu.org](http://www.devstu.org) or contact us by phone at 800.666.7270.



**DEVELOPMENTAL  
STUDIES CENTER™**

**Nonprofit. Research Based. Mission Driven. Since 1980.**

10/20/98

**Perils on an Essential Journey:  
Building School Community**

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Students' experience of school as a community -- as a place where they belong and their voices are heard -- is not just an amenity. Research suggests that students' academic motivation, commitment to democratic values, and resistance to problem behaviors all depend upon their experience of the school as a community (Schaps, Battistich, & Solomon, 1997). But even as evidence on the benefits of school community mounts, our work with elementary schools seeking to build community (as part of the Child Development Project) reveals several perils. Here we discuss both the power and pitfalls of building students' sense of community in school.

**What Do We Mean by Sense of Community?**

The Child Development Project (CDP) defines "sense of community" as the student's experience of being a valued, influential member of a group committed to everyone's growth and welfare (Schaps, 1998). CDP is a comprehensive, whole-school improvement program that our organization has developed and evaluated over nearly two decades, in collaboration with selected elementary schools across the United States. CDP seeks to foster children's cognitive, ethical, and social growth in a systematic, integrated way, by helping schools to:

- Provide all students with engaging, challenging learning opportunities, and
- Create a strong sense of community among students, teachers, and parents.

In assessing CDP's effects, we periodically measure students' sense of community in the classroom and in the school at large, using a questionnaire that asks them to agree or disagree with statements such as: "People care about each other in this school;" "I feel I can talk to the teachers in this school about things that are bothering me;" "My classmates care about my work just as much as their own;" and "My school is like a family."

Our research shows that increases in sense of community are *causally* linked to students' later development of:

- intrinsic academic motivation
- concern for others

- democratic values
- skill and inclination to resolve conflicts equitably
- altruistic behavior
- intrinsic prosocial motivation
- enjoyment of helping others learn
- inclusive attitudes toward outgroups
- positive interpersonal behavior in class

Why does sense of community benefit students in these ways?

Motivational researchers believe that autonomy, belonging, and a sense of competence are basic human needs (Deci and Ryan, 1985). A school high in sense of community helps students meet all three needs, by providing students with a "say" in shaping their environment, positive connections with peers and adults, and opportunities for contribution and meaningful learning. In turn, because school meets their needs, students come to care about school and to take its values seriously. Like a good family, a high-community school forges affective bonds that are essential to students' motivation, character and citizenship.

What practices help create a caring community in the classroom? Our studies suggest the importance of routine use of:

- activities that help students and teachers get to know one another as people and build a sense of "unity;"
- class meetings in which children help shape classroom norms and practices, plan future activities, and solve problems that arise;
- collaborative learning that emphasizes respectful, helpful treatment of fellow students as well as challenging academics;
- disciplinary approaches that play to students' desire to do what is right, rather than relying primarily on rewards and sanctions; and
- thoughtful discussion of the ethical issues at the heart of literature, history, and other academic subjects.

In the school at large, sense of community is fostered through policies that promote intimacy, such as keeping a school small or dividing it into "houses," keeping classes together with the same teacher for more than one year, and minimizing tracking and pull-out programs. It is nurtured by providing opportunities for younger and older "buddies" to know and help one another through regular collaboration between their classes, and through programs that boost parents' comfort at school and their involvement in students' learning.

### **Perils on the Road to Community**

A decade ago, we offered unqualified encouragement to schools interested in building community. We have not retreated from our belief in the importance of building community, but we now worry that, if implemented poorly or halfheartedly, community-building will be detrimental to students, or

at the very least will “fail” and be discarded, like so many prior educational reforms. We offer the following caveats.

### **1. “Caring” doesn’t mean “easy.”**

In U.S. schools, “caring” and “challenging” are often seen as opposing emphases. They need not be. Examples from the United States (Lewis, Watson, & Schaps, 1998) and from other countries (such as Japan; see Lewis, 1995) detail how schools can simultaneously be challenging *and* caring. But to make both happen requires attending to both; our recent experience suggests that teachers and administrators seeking to build community may initially neglect academics as they try to build a more friendly, responsive school environment.

Over time, students’ academic motivation should be fueled by their experience of school as a place where it is safe to express their ideas, and where students and teachers alike are rooting for everyone’s academic success. For many years, we were confident that building sense of community would “naturally” enhance students’ academic learning along with their social and ethical development. The logic seemed compelling: The more strongly students bond to a school, the more committed they will be to its norms and goals, including academic achievement.

Today, we advocate a deliberate *dual* emphasis on sense of community and on academic learning. Our studies consistently find that sense of community benefits students’ social and ethical development and their academic *motivation*. But the evidence linking sense of community to academic *achievement* is more mixed. Recently, we studied five schools that succeeded in building school community over their four-year collaboration with CDP. All five schools improved students’ social and ethical outcomes, but only two of the five schools, both in the same district, improved academic achievement. That district strongly pressed for academic achievement as well as student community, and measured academic achievement through means likely to pick up the academic benefits of student community, including performance tasks that required student discussion and collaboration.

### **2. Teachers are Still Central in the Student-Centered Classroom**

Our recent work also suggests that as teachers create more opportunities for students to help shape classroom lessons and decisions, some teachers may move too far from being the “sage on the stage” toward “guide on the side.” Suddenly aware of the great power of providing students with greater autonomy, teachers may withhold too much of their own thinking, and be reluctant to confront or control unacceptable attitudes and behavior. Even strong supporters of progressive, student-centered education like Philip Jackson and colleagues advise:

...the teacher must be acknowledged, and must come to acknowledge himself or herself, as being the single

individual in every classroom whose decisions, opinions, and outlook count the most in giving shape to the environment. ... (W)ithin ... limits teachers must be seen and see themselves as occupying key roles in classrooms--not simply as technicians who know how to run good discussions or teach encoding skills to beginning readers but as persons whose view of life, which includes all that goes on in classrooms, promises to be as influential in the long run as any of their technical skills. It is this extended view of a teacher's responsibility that makes it appropriate to speak of teaching as a moral enterprise. (Jackson et al, 1993, p. 277)

### **3. Schoolwide Change is Essential**

Building community must be a whole-school endeavor, and one that succeeds, in order to have benefits. In our recent work with 12 elementary schools across the United States, we found troubling differences between the schools where about half or fewer of teachers changed their classroom practices as compared with those where a large majority of teachers changed their practices. We did not find a heightened sense of student community in the schools where half or fewer of teachers changed; in fact, those schools looked *worse* than their comparison schools on several student outcome measures. For students, the experience of moving between responsive, supportive classrooms and ones that remain impersonal may be worse than no change at all.

Here we find ourselves in a quandary. We believe in the importance of teachers' free and voluntary commitment to reform. Yet this belief bumps up against the reality of our research findings: A large majority of teachers must get on board and succeed at changing if the results are to benefit -- and not harm -- students' development.

### **4. Examine School Values**

Students in high-community schools are strongly disposed to adopt their school's values. So the content of these values becomes critical. For example, does the school emphasize immediate compliance with authority or discussion of moral issues? Among the comparison schools in our research (schools which serve as "controls" and do not participate in the effort to build community) students' in the relatively high-community schools actually showed *lower* prosocial and moral reasoning than students from low-community schools. Because the comparison schools emphasized teacher authority and extrinsic rewards in the classroom, we suspect that the high-community schools among them more effectively led students to value compliance with authority over independent moral reasoning (Battistich et al, 1997). Walking a line between too much and too little teacher directedness is thus clearly an issue.

### **5. Align Assessment**

Two of the most successful schools in our research -- the only two schools that showed academic gains -- participated in a state-mandated, high-stakes performance assessment. In contrast to the standardized tests used in the other districts, the assessment was consonant with CDP's educational approach, both in its emphasis on higher-order thinking in response to open-ended questions (e.g., to write an essay about the causes of homelessness) and in its inclusion of collaborative group investigations and problem-solving in science, mathematics, and social studies (on which understanding was then assessed individually). For example, in one science performance event, students were given a ramp, stopwatch, and 12 objects, and asked to investigate what kinds of objects roll fastest; they wrote their conclusions individually, answering three open-response items.

Of the six districts studied, only in this district did educators see their community-building effort as a means to promote achievement on mandated assessments. As one teacher described it:

Everything in CDP coincides with everything we are supposed to be thinking about with the state reform. If you were to do a Venn diagram of CDP and the state reform just about everything would be in the middle. Rather than knocking ourselves out trying to do the state reform, we just thought of ourselves as doing CDP.

Another teacher noted that CDP and the state-mandated assessment had the same philosophy, but "CDP gives you the specific materials and techniques to get there." And indeed, on the state assessment across four subject areas, growth in the program schools was significantly greater than in the comparison schools, on average nearly one-third of a standard deviation greater over the three year program period.

In contrast, educators in other districts reported chronic tension between their community-building efforts and achievement assessments. At one school, two teachers said:

The district told us "Don't worry about the standardized test scores, we want the students to be well-rounded." But then in reality when it comes down to it they pass out the standardized tests scores at the Board meeting, breaking them down to show how the students of each third grade teacher scored, each Board member is given a coded copy. I worry about achievement test scores. Mine were low last year and I worry about that. I know it's important for the students to do other things like CDP activities, but what if they score low again?

We must add a troubling epilogue even for the district where community-building and academic assessment seemed to show such synergy: Subsequently,

the state performance events were discontinued, and multiple choice and short-answer items that required no collaboration or hands-on problem-solving were used in their place (Cunningham, 1997). The performance events had been instituted with great fanfare, as exemplifying the very skills that corporate and civic leaders believed students needed (Lindle et al, 1996; Cunningham, 1997). They were eliminated despite studies suggesting they promoted the desired effects on instruction (Koretz, 1996; Lindle et al., 1996). One detailed account of their fate emphasizes the problems and expense associated with using items that are memorable to students (i.e., meaningful) because new items of exactly comparable difficulty must be devised every year. To us, this raises interesting questions about whether the accountability function of assessment should be privileged over its function of pushing education in the desired direction, by emphasizing the kinds of tasks we actually want students to be able to perform.

### **Where Do We Go From Here?**

Despite these perils, we have come to regard the strengthening of community in school as the single most important step that educators can take toward fostering students' character and citizenship. For the large number of students whose path to high school graduation will be derailed by substance abuse, antisocial behavior, or early school exit, it could be the most important *academic* intervention as well.

National newspapers recently publicized a memo written by an inner-city high-school principal who had asked teachers to increase the number of passing grades by 5% in order to keep students from dropping out of school. Offended teachers leaked the memo to the press. Who can criticize a principal who wants to keep youth in school and off mean streets? But on the other hand, who can criticize teachers who want students to pursue high academic standards? Only when we can offer school improvement approaches that emphasize academic development *and* school community will educators be freed from such wrenching choices.

In the United States, great lip-service is paid to the school's mission of building character and citizenship. The value of building community in school is also gaining greater recognition. Yet few of our standards or assessments take either character or community seriously. In Japan, where the National Course of Study for Elementary Schools includes goals of "having a heart that values the public good," and "feeling intimate with the people at school and enjoying classroom life" alongside goals for math, science, and other subject areas, it's hardly surprising that teachers strongly emphasize class meetings, keeping classes together for two years, and schoolwide festivals (Lewis, 1995).

In a caring school community students can experience a developmentally-appropriate version of the just and caring society we hope they will create a generation hence (Dewey 1916/1966). But this essential opportunity will be lost

to students unless we roll up our sleeves and get serious --not just in our classrooms and schools, but in our legislatures and school boards -- about education for citizenship as well as competence. And, in getting serious, we must be prepared to tap the vast potential while avoiding the several perils of building community in school.

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