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 or contact us by phone at 800.666.7270.

DEVELOPMENTAL STUDIES CENTER™

Nonprofit. Research Based. Mission Driven. Since 1980.

COMMUNITY *IN* SCHOOL:
CENTRAL TO CHARACTER FORMATION
AND MORE

White House Conference
On
Character and Community
June 19, 2002

Presented By

Eric Schaps, Ph.D.

Developmental Studies Center

Oakland, CA

In my Center's work with schools, we often survey students and ask them how much they agree or disagree with such statements as:

- Students at this school really care about each other.
- In my class students have a say in deciding what goes on.
- I feel that I can talk to the teachers in this school about things that are bothering me.

These statements reflect the central focus of our Child Development Project (CDP)—helping elementary schools to create a strong "sense of community" in the classroom and the school at large, a community that links students, their parents or other caregivers, and the school's staff in supporting the growth and learning of every student. Through this focus on building community *in* school, CDP helps schools to foster students' ethical, social, and emotional growth, as well as their academic learning

To build community, the CDP program assists a school in modifying its curriculum, pedagogy, organization, and climate *so that the daily experience of school itself becomes the character education program, the social and emotional learning program, and the problem prevention program, as well as the academic program.* CDP's community-building components include:

- *Class meetings* – Used to set goals and norms, plan activities, make decisions, identify and solve problems, and promote reflection, through teacher-facilitated, whole-class participation.
- *Cooperative learning activities* – Students collaborate in pairs and small groups for academic learning and other purposes.
- *Buddies program* – Whole classes of older and younger students pair up. Each older student is paired with a younger "buddy" for the semester or year, to engage in various academic and recreational activities.
- *School-wide activities* – Innovative school events that link students, parents, and teachers in creating an inclusive, supportive school culture.
- *Parent involvement activities* – Structured home conversations, mostly interviews conducted by the student with a parent or other caregiver, that link school learning to family experiences and perspectives.

Taken together, these components are intended to strengthen relationships within the classroom, within the school at large, and between home and school.

When a school becomes a stronger, more caring community, it more effectively meets basic student needs—their needs for physical and psychological safety; for a sense of belonging and connection to others; for a sense that one is a competent, worthy person; and for a sense of autonomy (sometimes referred to as "voice and choice"). Leading theoreticians and researchers (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci, et al., 1985; Maslow, 1954) contend that these needs for autonomy, belonging, competence, and safety are basic to human motivation, to what drives and shapes our thinking, feelings, and behavior.

Finally, when a school helps its students to satisfy their basic needs, *because* it is helping them to do so, it prompts them to "bond"—to become affectively committed—to its goals and values, just as a mother who effectively cares for an infant causes that baby to bond to her and to strive to emulate her (Watson et al., 1989). And just as maternal bonding fosters a baby's healthy development, as we will see below, schools that effectively promote bonding foster healthy learning and growth—of many kinds—and help students to avoid problems ranging from emotional distress to drug use to violence.

Measuring Community in School

My Center uses three questionnaire scales to measure sense of community. Beginning at third or fourth grade, we survey students about:

- *Classroom supportiveness* –by asking them to agree or disagree with such statements as: "My class is like a family" and "Students in my class help each other learn."

- *Classroom autonomy* –by asking them about opportunities to exercise autonomy, such as how often "Students in my class students can get a rule changed if they think it is unfair" and "In my class I get to do things that I want to do."

- *School supportiveness* –by asking them to agree or disagree with such statements as: "Teachers and students treat each other with respect at this school" and "Students in this school help each other, even if they are not friends."

Unfortunately, our research suggests that sense of community is not strong in many if not most schools, and that it tends to be significantly lower for low-income students and students of color than for their Anglo, more-affluent peers (Battistich et al., 1995). Thus, students who are often most in need of a supportive school environment (Tharp, 1989) may be further disadvantaged by the quality of their experience in school.

Evidence of CDP's Effectiveness

The CDP program has been rigorously evaluated in three quasi-experimental studies over the last 20 years. The largest and most recent was a comparative evaluation involving 12 program and 12 matched comparison schools in six school districts across the U.S. In this four-year study, a culturally, ethnically, and socio-economically diverse sample of approximately 14,000 students was assessed at baseline and during each of three years of implementation. In addition, students from half of these program and comparison elementary schools were followed up as they progressed through middle school.

These studies consistently have shown that when widely implemented in a school, CDP significantly increases students' sense of the school as a community and yields a wide range of other positive outcomes without any negative effects. The favorable outcomes include significantly more positive attitudes toward school and learning, more positive attitudes toward the self, more positive social and ethical attitudes and behaviors, and reduced involvement in problem behaviors. Moreover, consistent with program theory, analyses indicate that virtually all of these positive outcomes are mediated by increases in sense of community.

Follow-up findings indicate that former program students maintain their greater tendency to bond to school during their middle school years, yielding continuing widespread, significant effects. During middle school, former program students were found to have more positive attitudes toward school and learning than comparison students, and to have higher course grades and achievement test scores. They were more involved in positive youth activities, and were rated by their teachers as being more engaged in learning, showing more leadership qualities, being more concerned about others, and being less alienated than comparison students. Former program students also were less involved in problem behaviors during middle school, including engaging in less misconduct at school and less serious delinquency than comparison students. Finally, program students had more friends who were also positively involved in school, and fewer friends who

were involved in school misconduct and delinquency. There again were no significant effects favoring comparison students.

Because of CDP's demonstrated effects, the U.S. Center for Substance Abuse Prevention has selected it as a model drug prevention program, and the U.S. Department of Education has recognized it as a promising violence prevention program as well as an "Obey-Porter" (Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration) model. Schools and districts that are interested in learning more about CDP can visit our web site at www.devstu.org.

Conclusion

In summary, the evidence is now clear that strengthening sense of community promotes school bonding, and is central to students' healthy development—ethically, socially, emotionally, and academically. Many of the positive effects of heightening community in elementary school persist through the middle school years. It is also clear that sense of community can be strengthened in feasible and affordable ways.

Finally, the importance of community, "connectedness," or "belonging" in school is also being demonstrated by other researchers, including Resnick et al. (1997), Bryk & Driscoll (1988), and Hawkins et al. (1999). We hope that this growing body of research evidence will prompt wider recognition that a focus on building community in school is central to improving education in this nation and to creating a healthy, humane, and productive society.

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