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## Building a Sense of Community

- I. What are the major issues that leaders should consider when building a sense of community and belonging within their school or district?

As we learned in our last class with Becky Brady, there is a difference between parental engagement and parental involvement. As a leader, one should be especially mindful of this small but important difference. Engagement, according to Ms. Brady, is the partnership between school and family, which is centered on the child. It sounded like her vision of engagement was more about relationships as opposed to activity driven “involvement”, which can revolve around less student-centered activities, such as running fund raisers, or volunteering in the library. By sharing this vision with a staff, and outlining the numerous benefits there are to establishing these relationships, we can begin moving from "my child, my family" to "our children, our family". After all, together we're better. When students believe that their parents and teachers care about them, have high expectations for their education, and provide the support essential for their success, they thrive. Looking for opportunities to build in this engagement with your community should be one of the foremost issues that all leaders should consider.

- II. What do we need to learn as leaders to be able to provide a sense of community for our teachers, students, and families?

Academics are critical, obviously, but fostering the other sides of the child, the social side and the communication side builds life skills. These “residuals” of education count for, in my opinion, more than 50% of the value of school. These lessons usually aren’t taught explicitly as a part of the curriculum, so it is essential that we learn as leaders that there are more important things that happen in a school year than watching test scores improve and watching the clock for the number of instructional minutes used in a day. There are multiple types of relationships that we can focus on developing, in order to establish a healthy and sustainable school climate. In the long run, learning to look for and build these relationships is critical.

First among these would be the teacher-student relationship. When students believe that their teachers care about them, see them as competent, respect their views and want them to succeed, they are almost guaranteed work toward meeting those expectations. Another facet to the community-building is the student-student relationships. Friendships and social relationships with peers in school are an essential part of students’ lives, and one that they surely value as much if not more than their academic development. Creating a positive school environment encourages communication and interaction and does not tolerate harassment or bullying of any kind. Positive relationships based on respect, trust, and support among teachers and administrators also matter. An positive atmosphere influences teachers’ effectiveness, satisfies

emotional needs, and leads to more professional learning. Finally, school-parent-community relationships matter as well. Parents and community members should feel that their school has a welcoming environment. It should be accessible and open to parent participation, recognize parents' expertise and provide opportunities for their contributions. I once heard that everyone you meet knows something that you don't. Remembering this simple fact can create a sense of mutual cooperation between school and home, and can create pathways for communication and collaboration with parents and the community.

III. If you could add one thing that could make a difference in improving a sense of community and belonging in your school or school district, what would it be?

As I've said, I think that relationships are at the core of a healthy and caring school environment. I even was able to share with the principal interview panel for whom I interviewed the video of the heart of compassion. When you can approach all students and parents with that feeling of compassion and empathy, you automatically become part of the community building. Additionally, here are some strategies I've seen used to great effect in developing teacher-teacher relationships as well as teacher-student relationships. First, the implementation of small learning communities or "families", as lower student-teacher ratios promote interaction and promote getting to know students from all different grade levels. Also, teacher "looping", in which a teacher is with the same class for more than one year. This was my experience in my first year of teaching, and it made a huge difference in the school climate. Another easily implemented activity is the lowly classroom meetings, where students share their joys and concerns daily or weekly. Teachers can also teach explicit lessons that build students' social and emotional competencies—self-awareness, self management, social awareness, relationship skills and decision-making capacities. This was a major part of our school's journey towards PBIS.