

Long-Term Planning Project: Bus Ambassador Program

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Identifying the needs of Hillcrest Elementary - a context for the proposed long-term plan

As schools move toward more intensive and rigorous forms of academic instruction, we risk losing sight of the many ancillary ways educators must provide for the development of our children, most notably their social and emotional well-being. Despite the common calls by educators for parents to teach their kids better values, I do believe we must share in that responsibility, especially as it pertains to the relationships among students in the school. Teaching and supporting positive behavior has been a strong part of Hillcrest Elementary - the suburban k-6 school that I have completed my principal internship in - for many years. It explicitly states in our school's guiding mission: "The Hillcrest Elementary School community is committed to the social, emotional, and academic growth of its children."

This social and emotional development has undergone a greater examination in the past five years at Hillcrest. During that time, a collaborative school wide positive behavioral support plan was developed to support our espoused mission. The plan has been effective with students, and welcomed by staff and parents. The structured plan has also allowed staff the opportunity to take notice of the amount and nature of the negative behavior occurring within the school. This examination has produced a perception among many staff members that, while negative behavior was declining overall, and sufficiently addressed with restorative actions, bullying has been increasing and the safety of students compromised.

School bullying has been around for as long as schools themselves. Children bully mainly as a way to gain power over another, a means to gain attention, and as a way to derive joy. Children who are the victims of repeated teasing have been shown to develop impaired emotional health with poor self-esteem, and much higher rates of depression well after their

formal schooling years are over (Olweus, 1995). A failure by adults to disavow the potential impact of bullying can have dire consequences.

In order to address the feeling that bullying is on the rise within our school, we had to uncover the truth about our school climate. Many leaders often cite that “they don’t know what they don’t know” as a common restriction on their efficacy. I believe one of the remedies to this predicament begins with asking the right questions. Costa and Kallick (2000) label “questioning and posing problems” as one of their 12 habits of mind that successful people employ. Upon beginning this inquiry at Hillcrest, it was very important that we gain knowledge of our students’ perceptions toward bullying and not rely on what parents or staff believe. Bullying and safety is not something that can be accurately observed by those who are not bullied or feeling unsafe.

Data Collection

Before selecting specific goals of a long-term school improvement project for the upcoming year, data was collected in order to refine and guide our proposed goals. This data ultimately informed the decision to pilot a bus ambassador program in the current year, which coupled with the original information collected, forms the basis for the 2013-14 long-term improvement plan.

The data was collected through a survey I created based upon a statistically reliable form developed by Stan Davis intended to reveal students’ perceptions of school climate and identify areas for improvement (Davis, 2006). My staff and I realized a limitation on the data might be a wide interpretation of the term “bullying” by students. Many experts define bullying as repeated hurtful actions in which there is a power imbalance between the aggressor and the person receiving the actions (Olweus, 2010). To control for this wide interpretation, we were careful to

limit our usage of the word in the survey, instead relying upon “repeated teasing” as a guide for action. It is my belief that any repeated hurtful teasing constitutes an area of concern as it eventually will result in a power imbalance and possible bullying.

In developing the survey (Appendix A), several focus questions guided the data mining:

- Do students feel safe at Hillcrest?
- Is there repeated teasing taking place in the building? If so, what locations and can it be narrowed to a demographic?
- Do students feel they can approach adults when teasing is taking place?
- What are students’ reactions to teasing?

The survey was administered to 352 students in second to sixth grade using Qualtrics - an online survey program. The results of the survey were generally encouraging. 97% of students reported that they never or rarely feel teased in a hurtful way in the classroom. 95% of students said they always, or almost always, feel safe in the classroom. Other settings, such as the cafeteria and playground, received similar reports that indicated only marginally reduced perceptions of safety. The area of greatest concern was the school bus. 22% of students indicated that they never, or rarely, feel safe on the bus. Nine percent said that they always, or almost always, are teased in a hurtful way on the bus. Furthermore, bus drivers were identified as the least likely adults to listen to students’ concerns about being teased.

While the predominant student response reflected feelings of safety throughout the school, the area of greatest insecurity was unquestionably the bus. It was then decided that building a school climate initiative around our primary area of weakness, the school bus, would subsequently improve school climate as a whole. This initiative took the form of bus

ambassadors who would be the “eyes and ears of the bus,” taking note of negative behavior and reminding students of our school rules when necessary. These trusted students would need to embrace the role of peer leader, yet not overstep their boundaries.

This initiative also institutes structures that limit possible future bullying. While the function of bullying has been shown to result primarily from personal dispositions, reducing instances can be achieved through teacher and principal actions that create welcoming environments for students and interrupt the possible reward structure associated with bullying (Olweus, 2010).

Long-Term Goal

Create a bus ambassador program among 6th grade students in order to decrease the occurrences of teasing on the bus and increase the perception of safety as reported by students.

Assessing Internal and External Readiness

All new initiatives should take into account the readiness of stakeholders who will be affected by the actions implemented. In this case, students, parents, teachers, and bus drivers have a stake in the actions implemented.

After receiving the results of the survey, it was determined that dissemination of the data to teachers and staff during a faculty meeting was appropriate. This sharing of data allowed for staff to understand the need for a formalized program to promote better bus behavior. The announcement of a bus safety program was overwhelmingly seen as a natural extension of the positive behavioral support plan that has been in place at the school, and as further supporting teachers’ efforts to promote accountability among students.

Moving into next year's efforts to bring this program to scale, it will be necessary to have at least one faculty sponsor be the coordinator for the bus ambassador program. This should not pose an obstacle as the support gained for the program thus far this year has been quite good.

Gaining buy-in for this initiative among the students presents a unique challenge. The program will only succeed if the ambassadors on the bus can successfully do their duties. When debriefing the students on the buses of our pilot program concerning the results of the survey, the children were very receptive to the idea of ambassadors. Many saw the survey as an acknowledgement of their concerns. However, selecting the proper candidates to be ambassadors was more difficult. Successful candidates need to possess leadership capacity, the ability to be fair, and the ability to command respect from peers.

We noticed that even the best candidates for the program require development through our pilot program. Furthermore, their positions need to be legitimized by administrators and teachers. This need will be directly addressed in the long-term plan.

Parents of our students have traditionally been very supportive of behavioral plans and expectations that promote safety, as long as they believe the program is being fair to their children. Currently, we have only reached out to parents for permission to have students be ambassadors. In the upcoming year, it will be necessary to reach out through our strong PTA, and use e-mail communication to relay information about the necessity of the program and its ability to keep students safe. With all programs requiring implementation, it is imperative that administration display how this supports our school mission and culture (Evans, 1996). As the new year begins, we will also allow for a small window where parents can reach out with their

concerns about the bus. This information might help us create a new knowledge about our students' needs that benefits a succeeding school (Lambert, 2011).

The last stakeholders involved are the bus drivers. Our pilot program did not yield much success from them. Similar to the defensive behavior exhibited by teachers who believe something is happening to them and not for them, the bus drivers understood the idea of ambassadors as infringing on their territory. This aligns with Evans's (1996) ideas that a change in practice often appears to imply that someone (in this case the bus drivers) is currently doing something wrong.

A successful implementation of this program will need some support from the bus drivers and the bus company. The program must be presented as a support for the drivers and in no way indicative of a failure to perform one's duties. With this need in mind, we will approach the bus company, First Student, next year in hopes of gaining their support. We will also work to have a paid afternoon where bus drivers visit school and participate in a team-building activity with their bus's students. Many students felt alienated from their bus drivers, and we feel building relationship will further our chances of creating a culture of safety on the bus.

Action Plan

Action Plan Step	Timeline Proposed
<p>Action Step 1: Faculty Assistance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Find at least one staff member to help facilitate the bus ambassador program and serve as the immediate point person for the program. 	Late Aug
<p>Action Step 2: Parental Communication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communicate to parents through e-mail and PTO meeting about the formation of a bus ambassador program as it relates to Hillcrest mission. Reach out to parents and bus drivers for support in order to gain collective responsibility and create new knowledges about student needs 	Second week of Sep
<p>Action Step 3: Bus Company Communication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reach out to First Student and let them know of intended plans. Communicate the importance of the program as defined by survey data and determine best way to bring in bus drivers for team building activities. Coordinate schedules and plan specific activities for team building events with staff representative. 	Late Aug. - Mid Sep.
<p>Action Step 4: Student Communication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduce program to students in engaging 6th grade assembly to: gain support, explain the reasons for implementation, answer concerns, and communicate goals to students. Recruit at least one bus ambassador per bus in the 6th grade class using parental and teacher input. Have each student ambassador enter into two week training with staff leader and principal to develop student leadership capabilities and conflict avoidance strategies. 	First week of Oct.
<p>Action Step 5: Initial Implementation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct team-building sessions for students on bus to get to know their bus ambassadors. Team building activities will be 2 buses per session on a weekly basis and repeated in the winter time. 	Late Oct.

Monitoring

The bus ambassador program will be monitored in two ways. Monthly lunches will be held with ambassadors, faculty sponsor, and principal to respond to certain specific needs that arise over the course of full implementation. Ongoing concerns and opportunities to improve the

program will be addressed at that time. A mid-year informal review from staff and students will also occur in which principal will visit classes to gain knowledge of any concerns from students.

Assessment

At the end of the school year, we will present the same survey to students that was given in the beginning of the year with added questions pertaining to the quality of the bus ambassador program. Additional assessment will be ascertained by receiving staff input at the final faculty meeting and through parental feedback through the PTO.

Conclusion

School climate is an ongoing concern for all schools, but it is not always dealt with in positive measures. Hillcrest Elementary is fortunate to have support from guidance counselors, teachers, and parents who believe in the merits of a character development and educating the entire child. The bus ambassador program is a natural extension to the already succeeding positive behavioral support program in place. It addresses the one remaining area of concern according to the students, and provides for additional leadership opportunities to students about to enter the middle school world.

References

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Appendix A

1. I am a

Answer	boy	girl
boy	179	0
girl	0	186
Total	179	186

2. What grade are you in?

Answer	boy	girl
4th	20%	25%
5th	18%	15%
6th	20%	27%
3rd	22%	22%
2nd	20%	12%
Total	179	186

3. How do you get to school?

Answer	boy	girl
car rider	12%	20%
school bus	88%	80%
Total	179	186

4. How safe do you feel in the locations below?

Boy				
	Never	Once in a While	Most of the Time	All of the Time
Do you feel safe in the classroom?	2%	3%	17%	77%
Do you feel safe in the cafeteria	3%	8%	22%	67%
Do you feel safe on the playground?	10%	10%	28%	52%
Do you feel safe on the Bus?	9%	15%	35%	42%
Girl				

	Never	Once in a While	Most of the Time	All of the Time
Do you feel safe in the classroom?	2%	2%	17%	79%
Do you feel safe in the cafeteria?	2%	5%	28%	66%
Do you feel safe on the playground?	3%	11%	45%	41%
Do you feel safe on the Bus?	3%	16%	44%	37%

5. How often are you teased in a hurtful way at the locations below?

Boy				
	Never	Once in a While	Most of the Time	All of the Time
Do you get teased in a hurtful way in the classroom?	85%	12%	2%	1%
Do you get teased in a hurtful way in the cafeteria?	81%	16%	3%	1%
Do you get teased in a hurtful way in the playground?	71%	22%	5%	2%
Do you get teased in a hurtful way in the bus?	60%	30%	6%	4%

Girl				
	Never	Once in a While	Most of the Time	All of the Time
Do you get teased in a hurtful way in the classroom?	82%	15%	2%	2%
Do you get teased in a hurtful way in the cafeteria?	85%	12%	1%	2%
Do you get teased in a hurtful way in the playground?	72%	23%	3%	2%
Do you get teased in a hurtful way in the bus?	72%	21%	6%	1%

6. List all the ways you experience hurtful teasing. You can check more than one box if you want.

Answer	boy	girl
Through words and things said	43%	44%
Through rumors or notes being said about me	16%	19%
Through being ignored or excluded from activities	24%	29%
Through things said online	2%	3%
I don't experience hurtful teasing	49%	45%
Total	225	242

7. If someone teases you or hurts you in any way one time, what would you do? Check off the boxes of all that you would do.

Answer	boy	girl
Tell an adult in the school.	51%	42%
Tell an adult in your home.	40%	42%
Say something mean back to the person.	4%	3%
Ignore it.	53%	50%
Tell the person to stop.	70%	69%
Total	366	366

8. If someone teases you over and over again, what would you do? Check the boxes of all that you would do.

Answer	boy	girl
Tell an adult in the school.	85%	78%
Tell an adult in your home.	56%	64%
Say something mean back to the person.	8%	3%
Ignore it.	31%	29%
Tell the person to stop.	63%	73%
Total	419	444

9. If you are being teased, do you think the adults listed below listen to your concerns?

Boy				
	Never	Once in a While	Most of the Time	All of the Time
Bus Drivers	23%	22%	20%	35%
Teachers	3%	7%	17%	73%
Cafeteria Aides	9%	18%	24%	49%
Playground Aides	9%	13%	23%	55%
Girl				
	Never	Once in a While	Most of the Time	All of the Time

Bus Drivers	22%	23%	24%	31%
Teachers	7%	7%	15%	72%
Cafeteria Aides	11%	14%	28%	46%
Playground Aides	13%	14%	28%	45%

10. Do you think there is a bullying problem at Hillcrest School?

Answer	boy	girl
Yes	36%	31%
No	64%	69%
Total	171	178

11. Do you think there are clear rules for the what happens if someone is bullying another student?

Answer	boy	girl
Yes	84%	90%
No	16%	10%
Total	173	178

12. Do you think the rules about bullying are fair to everyone?

Answer	boy	girl
Yes	86%	91%
No	14%	9%
Total	148	164

13. Would you like to see more workshops and assemblies about bullying brought to the school?

Answer	boy	girl
Yes	49%	47%
No	51%	53%
Total	172	179