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IMPACT OF STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF SAFETY  
ON ACADEMIC SUCCESS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Education

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the Degree of Professional Doctorate in Educational Leadership

By:

Daniel A. Gittins

December 2014

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## ABSTRACT

### IMPACT OF STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF SAFETY ON ACADEMIC SUCCESS

By

Daniel A. Gittins

December 2014

Dissertation supervised by Dr. Rick McCown

A student's perception of safety in a school will impact his or her academic achievement. If a student does not feel safe in a school, he or she will be distracted, and will have a diminished concentration span, lack of focus and increased anxiety, all of which will negatively impact her achievement and academic potential. It is important for educational leaders, therefore, to create cultures that are safe, welcoming, and conducive to a student's academic growth. To do this, educational leaders, at all levels of the school district—from district administrators, to building administrators, to teachers and other staff in a school—must be purposeful and intentional in their actions and plans. This culture is a prerequisite to the learning process. If the environment is not conducive to academic achievement and growth, then academic achievement and growth will not occur. This paper will explore the background of this issue, will define the scope of the problem, will examine the importance of cultures in a school environment, will explore theoretical constructs that support the need for creating safe cultures, and will discuss the role of various educational leaders in the process.

## DEDICATION

To My Family, Karen, Zachary, Julia, Jillian, Christopher. I love you guys. Thank you for all of your support during this time. I know you all sacrificed much for me to finish this, and it is appreciated more than you can know. I hope that I make you as proud as you make me. You all give me a sense of purpose. I hope that you learn to go after the things you want in life. And I hope you learn the difference between: Can I make this happen? And How do I make this happen? One questions the possibility, the other only the process. Those few words allow all things to be possible. It is *all* possible for you. Don't let fear stop you from chasing what you want.

For Mom and Dad, and Richard, Thank you for all of your efforts in getting kids where they need to be while I was busy researching and writing. There is no way I could have put in the time needed without your support. Thank You.

To my Brothers, William, Thomas, Stephen, and Richard. Your support from a distance was much noticed and I am thankful for all of you in my life.

Grandma and Grandpa Devine. Thank you for your wisdom, guidance, and early encouragement in all things; and for pushing the value of education.

I am inspired by each of you. I am better because of each of you.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

One cannot take on a task of this magnitude without the help, support, encouragement, gifts, challenge, push and understanding of many people along the way.

That said, there are some people that should be acknowledged here and now. There are many more involved, and I apologize if I miss you formally here, but please know that I am thankful for your help.

Thank You God.

To my Cohort: Thank you for making me a better, and hopefully more enlightened person. I am grateful for the mixture of personalities that we had in our cohort. It is a gift that I have been blessed with. And I am thankful for all of the help, support, challenge, and encouragement along the way. I think differently because of the interactions I have had with you. The collective wisdom in our meetings was inspiring.

To my Colleagues: Sharon, thank you for all of your support, encouragement, flexibility and understanding. I am fortunate to work with you, and I recognize and appreciate that. To everyone else in the office, thank you for your support and understanding when I was preoccupied, distracted, hurried and otherwise stressed. Under those circumstances I am glad you are with me at this intersection in life.

To Dr. McCown, Dr. Tindol, Dr. Serenko, and Dr. Perry: Thank you for your time, more time, and input that it took to guide me through this process. I understood when I took on this program that it would be a lot of time and work. But I did not really understand what that fully meant. Even during the times of feeling overwhelmed, you each gave me insight and perspective that kept the effort going, even when I felt that perhaps I could not get this done. Your belief in what I was doing was fuel.

I can never pay all of you back for the gifts that you have given me, but I can, and do, through this agenda, strive to pay it forward.....

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction and Scope of the Problem**

*“The secret in Education lies in respecting the pupil”*

Ralph Emerson Waldo

Spiders, snakes, heights, roller coasters, loud noises, dentists, thunder and lightning, mice, water, sharks, pain—each of these can produce fear in many people. And people will react differently when faced with one of these stimuli. Some people will run, some will freeze, some will shake or tremble and some will challenge themselves when facing that fear.

Rejection, humiliation, the unknown, public speaking, being hit, tripped or otherwise physically bullied and intimidated, being laughed at, being alone, failure, violence, sexual harassment, not being enough or not having enough, being disrespected, people of a different race or ethnicity—these too can produce fear in many people. And people will likewise react to these things that produce fear, whether that fear is real, perceived.

To the person experiencing that fear, it is real—even if to others those same things don't produce the same reaction. But to those who are in fear—real or perceived, it will alter their behavior. The person experiencing the fear will have a need to address that fear, in one way or another, with a sense of immediacy and urgency. Sometimes the fear is specific to a given situation, for instance standing in front of a class of peers to give a presentation. Other times, though, it will be a chronic condition that a person must deal with every day over a longer period of time—which may produce a different type of reaction. But either way, it will direct attention, focus, concentration and energy from other things and towards the object or situation producing fear. It will require the person to address it. But that does not always mean it will be addressed

in an appropriate, healthy way. While some will confront and challenge themselves to overcome the fear, others may avoid or run from the fear. Some will be proactive and productive in the face of their fear(s); others will have a reaction that is reactive and not productive. But we will all have fears and we will all need to address them at some point in time.

This paper will take a look at what happens in schools when a person experiences fear—either short acute experiences or chronic fear, and how this may impact his or her achievement. It will do this through a combination of personal stories and interviews—lessons learned through experience and personal involvement with students, teachers, faculty, administrators, parents and community members, review of theoretical constructs that describe and explain the impact of and reasons for a student’s perception of fear, and to the culture it occurs within, and with a review of literature that examines the issue in depth. It will also take a look at the cultures that support or become a barrier to perceptions or safety in a school. It will explain how involved and motivated individuals can make improvements in the culture and systems that will promote students feelings of safety in a school. And it will demonstrate how this gives students a better chance at academic success.

It is divided into two basic sections. The first part is an investigation of the problem; and the second is how that problem can be addressed by making improvements in our systems. Section one, the investigation of the problem will be addressed in Chapters 2 and 3; and Chapter 4 and 5 will address the second section, addressing the problem through improvement ideas.

Chapter 1 will include an introduction, a definition of culture, the importance of being intentional in the planning of culture, a brief narrative of the problem via story, and a review of

the scope of the problem. The reader will examine this information as it pertains specifically to ours schools and our students.

Throughout the paper, the reader will be encouraged to give some thoughts and ideas for designs for improvement that they can utilize in their school culture through deliberate, thoughtful, intentional and purposeful planning. And it will conclude with some thoughts on where one might go from here. That is, how can small improvements become bigger, more impactful, and more generative? Overall it will highlight the need for the intentional and purposeful creation of safe cultures as a strategy for educational leaders, and will invite the reader to learn how he or she might personally and purposefully—whether a part of the school, the academy or the community—help develop cultures that improve the feelings of safety for students within their lives, thus giving them the best chance for academic success.

But first, this paper will look at the breadth and depth of the issue at hand.

### **Defining Culture**

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines culture as: “the beliefs, customs, arts, etc. of a particular society, group, place or time: a particular society that has its own beliefs, ways of life, art, etc.; a way of thinking, behaving, or working that exists in a place or organization....: the set of shared attitudes, values, goals and practices that characterizes an institution or organization” (“Culture”, 2014). Culture thus, is a part of, and a contributing shaping force in the establishment of the particular behavior patterns that exist in any setting where people gather or work. There is culture in homes, in communities, in churches, in workplaces, in clubs, in society and certainly in our schools. And this sometimes unwritten set of beliefs, customs, way of life, thinking and behaving is important in the understanding of some of the dynamics that occur within that given culture. It can be deeply ingrained and resistant to change in a group of people,

but it can be changed. The longer it has been part of a group of people, the more deeply it is ingrained, and the more insulated it is to the concerns and interests of outside influences. In these circumstances, culture can be very difficult to change.

Culture can be positive or negative, open or closed, safe or unsafe, supportive or critical, or any of a number of ways. But it will exist, and it will define the social norms and mores that an individual within that culture is expected to adhere to in order to be a member of the culture. When there are variances, subcultures can and do form. These cultures and subcultures help individuals anticipate and predict how they should behave and act in given situations, sometimes how they should talk, or how they should dress, perhaps even how low members should wear their pants below their waists. Culture may dictate who is ‘in’ and who is not; may dictate what is ‘in’ and what is not; and may define who and how someone is supposed to interact with others in the subculture and the larger culture as a whole. But within these parameters lies risks to those within a given culture. If one is ‘not in’—not skinny enough, does not have a clear enough complexion, not strong enough, too effeminate, not feminine enough, not wearing the ‘right’ shoes or having the ‘right’ phone, or anything else the ‘in’ group defines as expected and ‘right’—there may be social costs and consequences, physical costs and consequences, and may experience other negative effects from an unsafe culture.

While some groups and organizations are voluntary, and thus people can choose to stay or leave voluntarily, others are mandated for and to people and these are sometimes based on one’s location or proximity to others. School is one of these groups and organizations. This is critical because children spend a significant amount of time within the walls and parameters of a school community. If the culture is a safe, positive, supporting one, then this is a benefit to

those within; if, however, the culture is one that is unsafe, non-supportive and less than positive, then this too will have an impact on those within it.

### **The Importance of Intention and Purpose in Creating Culture**

Culture will occur. It will occur and develop on its own, based on the elements or people that choose to define it, or fail to actively shape it; or it can be developed in an intentional and purposeful way. Sometimes it is defined by the formal leaders in a group, or sometimes by the informal leaders. But it will happen, either passively or intentionally. Sometimes, depending on the nature, scope and degree of importance of an issue, it is important to let things develop on their own and see how it turns out. At some of those times there will be important lessons learned from how things progressed—or didn't. However, when the stakes are high, when the outcomes are important, or when people's very future depends on it, then leaving things to chance—to 'see how it turns out'—may not be the best strategy to employ. Rather, in those situations, being intentional, purposeful and proactive may lead to more desired outcomes than being reactive as a plan. The importance of intention is noted in the story below.

### **A Tale of Two Trees**

I walked onto the meticulously designed and ornate patio where plants, flowers, shrubs and small trees were perfectly placed in positions that seemed to be made specifically for each. There were soft smells, rich colors and variations of textures, heights and foliage. There was a bird feeder hanging from a tree branch, a bird bath with a soothing splash of water from the fountain in the middle, and a statue of St. Francis standing in one corner, with an arm outstretched as if to hand feed the birds who would fly in for a closer look. The birds did not seem afraid here. They sang, and jumped from plant to plant looking for any spilled seed that may have fallen from the feeder. They seemed to have no apprehension about us standing here.



They just seemed content to be in this environment, safe from the predators who may wish to advance upon them. Here they seemed to sing a joyful song. And they too brought life to a little stone patio in the corner of the yard of this apartment in a complex in one of the middle of the city's largest urban housing development. As I continued to stroll around the patio taking in the beauty and inspiration of this porch oasis, something odd seems to stick out in one corner of the patio. In one of the largest and fanciest, most ornate urns on the patio stands a tree that does not shine. It stands out in its lack of healthy growth and color. And while it still has a few green leaves on the ends of the branches, it looks unhealthy when compared to the identical tree and planter sitting opposite it. What I notice most is the glaring reality that here are two identical trees in matching large, fancy, ornate urn planters, yet with two separate and distinct growth charts. One tree appears strong, healthy, lush, with bright green soft, pliable leaves thick and full on the tree branches; the other with smaller stalks and branches, large bare spots where no growth occurs, and a few sets of leaves growing off of a limited number of weak branches. Yet even the leaves that are 'alive' and green appear brittle to the touch and look fragile, as if the slightest breeze might knock them off of their branch. This seems odd in an otherwise plush garden culture.

To an outsider, this area is in the heart of what is perceived to be a poverty stricken, high crime area. One might easily miss the potential for beauty, warmth, safety and culture in this part of town. No, outside of this protective and protected little alcove the buildings are tall, crowded and dirty. Many of the hallways are splattered with litter, and some stairwells have the rank smell of urine or mold. To maneuver around within these buildings is to walk around a maze of broken concrete. Poverty is evident, with torn, broken and discarded couches strewn randomly about. Crime rates are high, and suspicion greets outsiders.

But inside this oasis, one feels free from the outside stress. This patio and the culture it creates allow one to relax, to focus and to retract from the outside stressors that are ever present. It makes one feel safe and creates a quiet atmosphere that has a calming and almost transforming, reflective effect on those who enter. It feels protective. It boasts a wide array of colors and smells, and can have the power to transform someone from a dark place to a place of hope, beauty and growth. Yet it is in the heart of an area where people tend to see hopelessness, pessimism, and fear on a daily basis.

So I ask my host about her garden. How did she get inspired to create this zone? How did she pick the flowers, shrubs, bushes and trees that she did? How does she keep them so healthy and thriving in an environment where most feel hopeless and helpless? How does she find the creativity and energy to make this happen? And what about that lone tree in the corner planter? The one with the dry leaves, in one of the fanciest planters on the porch. Why does she leave this 'mostly dead' tree in amongst the beauty?

She explains.

“My husband and I have lived here for a very long time, well over 30 years. When these apartments and buildings were new,” she said, “it was an exciting time. They were new and it was exciting to live in a vibrant community where people had hope.” “Yes”, she said reflectively, “those were exciting days. People would come outside and neighbors would have barbecues with each other. There was a fun spirit, a positive feeling, a feeling of growth and optimism. There was this feeling that things were positive and one could make their dreams come true. It was, you know, contagious. People felt a sense of pride and they felt safe and strong. We felt like we mattered, and that people cared.” “But through the years the normal

wear and tear in the buildings was not kept up with. It just wasn't kept up with. Walls began flaking, and no one came to fix it. Plumbing broke, no one fixed it. As those who were behind the projects here moved on to other areas of interest and those who came behind them didn't seem to really care about what was happening here. The City, Community and State leaders would come do a walking tour and talk about the 'fixes' that needed to occur here. They talked about the broken concrete and plumbing; they talked about the increase in drug use and crime that came with it. They made promises that they would fix it, but they turned out to be empty. Still, once in a while, usually in response to a more highly visible crime, or near election time, an occasional local or state politician will come in and check things out. They bring a newspaper crew, or local TV crew with them to tout all of the "good things" they will do for us, like fixing the pipes, cleaning the graffiti, increasing police presence, and stuff like that. And in front of the TV or newspaper people, they make promises and talk about how they will upgrade and do this or do that. But as quickly as they leave, it seems we are forgotten, like out of sight, out of mind. It just seems like things are out of control, and there is little we can do about it. I get so sad, frustrated, even scared at times. So my husband and I decided that we would create our own little tranquil space where growth would surround us...where we could take control and create a growing, peaceful environment that was good for the mind, good for the soul, good for the creative spirit, good for us to continue to grow and learn...good for us to be".

"And that is how we got the idea to create this. Our kids would do their homework out here and not be distracted by the outside world. They were safe and surrounded by life and positive things."

What a place, I thought to myself. Peaceful by intention, peaceful by design. Peaceful on purpose.

“I can’t help but notice those two trees.” I said. “They look the same type, they are in the same size and type of planter, and are in the same general location, but one is lush and full of growth and life, while the other looks brittle and not healthy. It is kind of out of place and stands alone amongst all those beautiful plants throughout the room. And it seems odd to me that with all of the care, attention and focus you put into this garden, that a ...”

She chuckled as if this was on the Frequently Asked Questions list. “That”, she explained, “is a simple reminder to me and my husband every day. We live in this complex. We have to walk through it every day. We have seen some good times here, and there will be many more. And we have seen some bad. It is not always the safest place to be, even for those of us who call it home. But it is home. It is where we live, and it is where we will live until we are carried to our glory. And within this greater complex, we have our home. It is but a small place in this massive concrete group of buildings. But it is what we have, and we take pride in it. And, we decided that just because we can’t control all of the outside variables, we can control inside our home, including this here patio. We have done our best to control our environment and to make it peaceful, relaxing, beautiful, creative and that leaves one with a feeling of safety and feeling protected. It is where we raised our kids, and we wanted them to know that even in the big world where one does not always have the ability to control things, you can choose to control your environment...rearranging the room within the house if you will. And so we set out to make this that kind of place. A place where our kids could retreat from the streets, where they could do their homework without interference, and play with other kids without fear. Yes, we have had many of good things here. But that tree—the one with the dead leaves, with the brittle leaves and shoddy growth—that one is a reminder to us and to our kids of what can happen if we fail to put effort into things. We purposely neglect and underwater that tree—kind of leave it to

its own. If you notice, it is in a different location than the other, it has too much shade for it, and we just don't take care of the soil like we do the others. It is not tended to as well. And the results are there to see. The results are there to remind us that if we don't put intention and effort into things, then they will not grow right. If we are not diligent and if we are not purposeful in what we do, then we will not get the results we want. That is true of this tree, and that is true in life. That is true in education and the things we wanted to teach our kids. That tree reminds us every day that if we do not put effort into that tree, give it the right amount water, or right amount of sunlight, or if we don't fertilize the soil—generally if we fail to meet its basic needs—then it will fail to grow like the others. So far it has lived, but you can see for yourself that it is not growing like the others. The effort you put into it, into making sure it has all it needs to grow, will impact its growth. Put in the effort to prepare the soil and give it the right conditions to grow, and it has a better chance to grow; neglect it, and the growth is left up to chance. We protect and nurture these plants *except* that one tree. And our actions—good, bad or indifferent—make all the difference to each plant here, including those two identical trees. And so it is with our kids...”

As it is with this story, it is with education. If we do not provide the basic needs for our kids, if our kids do not feel safe in schools, if they are not taken care of, and if we as members of the school, the academy and the community fail to put in the necessary effort to “fertilize the soil” of our schools, then the growth of our students will be limited. If kids do not feel safe, if they do not feel wanted or welcomed, or if they do not feel like they, or the education they get matters, then they will be distracted, will necessarily need to spilt their attention between the need to feel safe and the need to do their school work, and will have less incentive and ability to fully concentrate on their educational growth. And like the tree, they too will fail to grow to its

fullest potential. This is the necessity of creating cultures in schools that allow students and teachers to feel safe in their environment. If we intentionally prepare the environment and put effort into making sure the needs are there for educational growth to occur, then there is a better chance for educational growth to occur; Fail to secure this, and the growth is left to chance.

### **Scope of the Problem**

160,000 a day!

If this number represented the amount of money a person made *every day*, many of us might think that this is some sort of injustice, or an amount made in a scandalous way. Many might see that number and think it is outrageous; an amount of money too large to comprehend, and one that could not possibly be deserved. Many would think we need to change that, because somehow it must represent a matter of social injustice (i.e., must have made it on the ‘backs of others’).

If this was the number of calories a person consumed *every day*, many people might think there is something sickening about that, something unhealthy for the entire body system. Further, if many people were eating that much *every day*, surely it eventually would have an impact on the society as a whole. And many might think that changes need to be made for the good of the individual, and for the good of society as a whole. This might even command our immediate attention. Indeed, we might encourage and educate people to change their diets; lawmakers might even make regulations that mandate change. That might even include limiting the size of drinks one can purchase, or limiting the choice of certain things on a menu, such as salt.

If this was the number of American lost in a war every *day*, members of the media might be screaming the headlines that exact tremendous pressure on politicians to make significant changes to put an end to it immediately. Certainly it would be too large an issue to ignore.

And if this was the number of crimes that occurred *every day*, we would form and implement task forces and focus groups to discern the problem and develop solutions. We would pull in key stakeholders and community members, parents, churches, anyone else who this impacts (when it could be argued it impacts everyone); and we would debate, define, investigate, and challenge ourselves to find ways to lower that number.

This number is large. And sadly, it represents a situation that impacts our young people *every day*. To make this more concrete, it would take two sell out, full seating capacity games at the Dallas Cowboys new football stadium—with a seating capacity of 80,000 fans—to equal the number of kids that skip school *every day* in this country. That number represents the loss of formal classroom education time and opportunity due to students not being in school EVERY DAY. This number—160,000—is the estimated number of students who skip school *every day* because of the fear of being bullied. (McNiff, 2010)

Despite the knowledge of this reality, and some of the issues contributing to it, we have failed to make significant improvement in this regard in our school districts. In an era when it is not uncommon to hear teachers, unions, administrators, students, parents and politicians all say that “our schools are failing”, it seems that major changes need to occur. There is one common theme that all seem to agree on—schools are not living up to the expectations of them.

## **Defining the Issue of Safety on School Achievement**

The number of students skipping school is too large. This is an atrocity. It is something that needs to change. It is a situation that needs to improve. We need to improve it because it is a situation that is stealing a rightful, adequate formal education from too many young people. Every day that a student skips school, it is a day that formal academic learning will not occur. It is a day that educational potential is stymied. It is a day that the student will miss an opportunity in school. It is a day that the student will learn something taught outside of the school, and as this continues to occur, it is a situation that impacts each and every one of us. It affects our children, our schools, our communities, our businesses, indeed, even our futures and our way of life. If our children are afraid to go to school, it will have a far-reaching effect on all of us. This issue is not just limited in impact to those within the school, or to those with children in the school. Indeed, it impacts all of us in that it impacts the community as a whole. If students are skipping school, one might reasonably presume that most are not skipping to go to work. And if a student skips school enough days, it will have a negative impact on their academic success—even impacting graduation rates. And if students do not graduate, and are not work ready, then future employment options for them decrease. This affects people even when they do not have a student in the school age range. And when the situation exists to the extent reflected in the 160,000 figure, it must be a reflection of, and a contributing factor to, issues in our larger school culture. Yet, there are things we can do to make improvements in this situation. There are strategies that educational leaders can implement that can help students feel safer within the boundaries of their school community. There are strategies that leaders in the Academy can implement that can help prepare the next generation of teachers to understand the need for, and develop the tools to, create cultures in their classrooms that are intentional and planned to help



all students in that classroom feel safer in it. And there are strategies for members of the community that can allow them to contribute to the creation of cultures that help students take ownership in, and participate in the improvement of classroom, school and community activities.

Culture will happen. Every group setting will develop a culture for and of the members within that setting. Culture will develop on its own—for good or bad—or the leaders in a given setting can purposely and intentionally shape the development and growth of the culture. When the culture we are discussing though, has to do with the safety and order of a community that we mandate our children to participate in, and when we realize the amount of time and influence that this culture has on our children, then it is to everyone's benefit that time and effort be placed to be purposeful and intentional when defining and developing this culture. Our schools are an example of this. It is important that we not allow school culture to develop in a haphazard or random way. It is important that we do not allow the culture in schools to be defined by a select few students who have power—whether that power is by physical strength, emotional maturity, or social capital. It is important that leaders lead. And it is important that this is done in a well thought out, and consistently implemented way.

The next section will explore the importance of culture in our school systems and identify how it impacts our students on a daily basis.

## **Chapter 2: The importance of Culture in Schools**

In this Chapter, there will be an examination of the importance of the concept of culture in schools, and will review and examine variables that impact culture in a school community, including student engagement, financial resources, the importance of time spent in the classroom and that time out of classrooms. This Chapter will also show how Adolescence has changed over time, why Educational leaders must be familiar with, and actively involved in the development of the school's culture, and how one's fear—either real or perceived—influences behavior. The final sections in this chapter will examine the importance of evaluating the current school culture—along with factors to be considered in that evaluation, and finally the consequences for failing to provide a culture of overall safety in a school system.

### **The Importance of Culture in Schools**

*“That is true culture which helps us to work for the social betterment of all”*

Henry Ward Beecher

Every school will have a culture. This culture will influence the day to day experience at the school. It is important to know how to assess and define the culture in a school. Educational leaders will either know how to assess and define the culture in a school—thus being able to shape it in a planned and intentional way—or they will leave culture to define itself. The latter is often more random, a reaction to fads and is short-term focused, thus lacking the morals and principles needed as a foundation for a strong education.

It is imperative that we create positive and safe school cultures that enhance, promote and support student learning in an intentional and purposeful way. While the creation of a specific culture does not guarantee high student performance –no more than good fertilized soil

guarantees a plant will thrive—a failure to provide a safe and positive environment will impact achievement in a negative way.

Obviously a school needs to focus on the academic nature of its purpose. Learning is, after all, the identified reason for schools being in existence. But it must also be realized that academic content is only one aspect of the bigger picture. In addition to the curriculum taught, there are also two other aspects to the school, student life, and the administrative/business pieces of the system. All three of these elements contribute importantly to the outcome of our schools. And just as a seed, in and of itself, is not enough to bring a plant to its full potential, academic content alone is not enough to bring a student to his or her full potential. In order for a plant to fully mature and grow, it must have good soil to root in, and must have sufficient light and water. A student must have support also; in order for full student growth to be achieved, there must also be a climate that is conducive to that growth. It is the responsibility of educational leaders, teachers and other school personnel to create this environment. Engaging students in the process is important for their growth.

*“Every System is perfectly designed to get the results it gets”* Gerald Langley

### **Importance of Student Engagement**

Student engagement is an important factor in achievement, and engagement is not only the responsibility of the student, but also is the responsibility of the administrators and leaders of a school. In an article on the issue, co-authored by a researcher at the University of Pittsburgh, “While engagement was long thought of as simply showing up to class and listening intently, a new study ... looks at student engagement through a new lens. Looking beyond completed assignments and attendance, this research looks at other measures of student engagement, including a student's emotional and cognitive involvement with course material, to tell a different

story”. The article continues, “When we talk about student engagement, we tend to talk only about student behavior....But my coauthor and I feel like that doesn’t tell us the whole story. Emotion and cognition are also very important.... The results suggest that student engagement is malleable, and can be improved by promoting a positive school environment” (Wang, 2013). This research adds to the information that supports and suggests that the climate and environment of a school impact student achievement and learning. While not directly limited to the perception of safety, the research noted here suggests that how a student views the school climate will have an impact on his or her engagement and achievement there. And while the Academy has long established the need to address Student Life, i.e., the time out of the classroom, as an important factor in the learning process, this has been a less identified and addressed issue at the elementary, middle and high school levels. Yet it is critical for us to consider this factor, especially as one of the goals of the traditional school process is to prepare students for Higher Education.

To support a student in all aspects of his or her education, the ‘system’ must provide structure and support in three areas: academic, business, and student life. At the University level, these areas are nicely divided into distinct administrative and structured divisions. Significant time, planning and intentional thought are put into the development of student life and to the business ‘side of the house’. This includes the need for student well-being, and the recognition that attention needs to be given to developing the domains of physical, emotional, cognitive and social (including moral) areas. It is important for administrators and educational leaders to recognize and address the need to create a culture and environment that are conducive to and supportive of, the growth of the ‘whole’ student. Focusing solely on academic content areas is just not enough. With only an academic focus, we are not getting the results we need. A

system is not fully and adequately preparing students for post-secondary or work-ready skills if we are only to focus on academic content. This approach is not sufficient. Focusing on pruning or training a plant is not enough for the plant to reach its full potential if the plant does not have water, if the soil is ‘bad’ or there is not enough sun light as a starting spot. Likewise, giving a student facts, or content material, without addressing other developmental areas, does not allow for the optimal growth of that student.

### **Importance of Financial Resources**

Financial resources are important for the functioning of a school and the growth of the students within that school. If a school district does not have the financial resources to provide books for all students, adequate learning tools and devices, i.e., computers and internet access, or the ability to recruit and maintain solid teachers due to financial resources, then this will impact the functioning and outcomes within that school system. Tending to the business aspects of the system (i.e., money and resources) is therefore, a necessary component in providing a culture and environment that is conducive to the full growth of the student and the system. No student should be penalized, or experience a lack educational opportunity simply because of the neighborhood in which he or she lives.

Yet, money alone does not ensure success. While it adds benefits to the district, and can make it easier for a district to acquire new and up to date equipment, adequate supplies for each student, new football fields, higher pay scales for teachers, and a host of other ‘things’, it does not in and of itself lead to academic success. On a global level, while the United States of America “spends an average \$10,995 in public dollars on each US elementary and secondary student... other countries spend less and get better reading, math and science test scores. Japan

spends \$8,301 per student and South Korea spends less, at \$6,723, but both outpace US academic performance” (Lips, 2008).

Even within the United States, increased per pupil spending does not necessarily equate with improved academic achievement in and of itself. As noted in an article entitled, *Does Spending More on Education Improve Academic Achievement?*, authors, Dan Lips, Shanea Watkins, Ph.D., and John Fleming note that even though spending amounts per pupil have nearly doubled between 1970 and 2005, student’s reading scores at three age levels remained relatively flat in that same time period. (Lips, 2008) These three authors illustrate their point in the figure below using data collected from the US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress. (Lips, 2008)

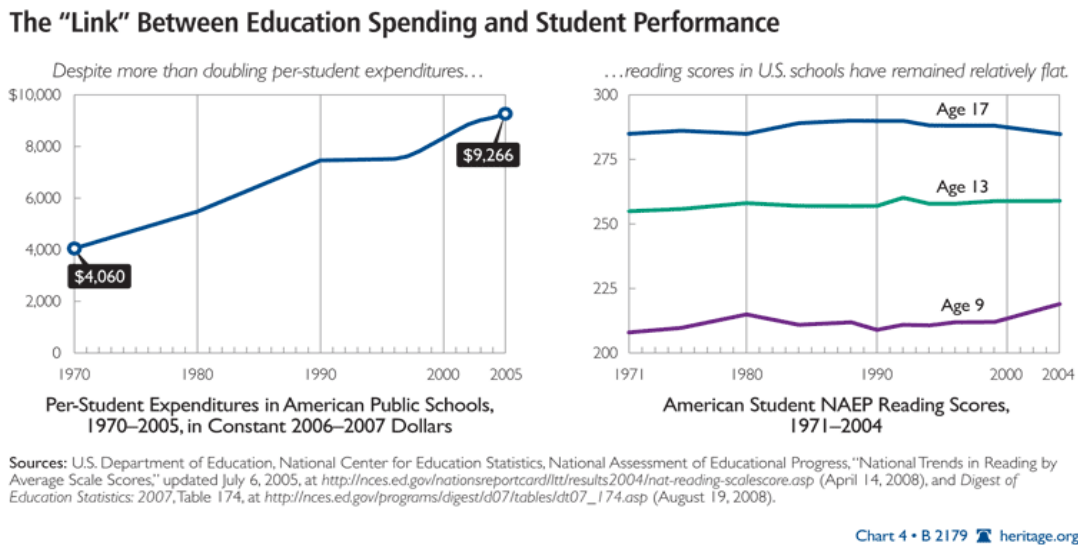


Figure 1.1 The Link Between Educational Spending and Student Performance (Lips, Watkins & Fleming 2008) Used with permission.

As shown in this chart, increased spending in and of itself is not *the* factor in educational achievement and growth. The political rhetoric of “needing to invest more money in our education” is not the singular answer. More money can make circumstances a bit easier, can

increase teacher salary, can purchase new equipment and “fields”, but more spending for the sake of increased spending is not enough to make significant improvements.

There are barriers and factors that interfere with this at many points of contact. Disparity in resources from neighborhood to neighborhood become problematic. For example, in Crisis in American Institutions, Jerome Skolnick and Elliott Currie (2011) share a story about a young girl named Alliyah, who lived in an area in New York City where the Board of Education spent approximately \$8,000.00 a year on a third grade student, but if you would have relocated her to a school district within a fairly typical white suburb of New York, the amount spent would have been closer to about \$12,000.00; and if she went to one of the wealthiest white suburbs of New York she would have received about \$18,000.00 of public education dollars (Skolnick, & Currie, p. 300). And, if she was in the last school noted, her teacher would be paid up to \$30,000.00 more than the teacher she would have had in the Bronx. Given these circumstances, it is hard to compare the education she would receive in each district. Teacher recruitment, teacher readiness, student safety, and overall circumstances (i.e., resources) of the school will more likely be barriers to success in the first school mentioned. These variances demonstrate that this is a matter of social justice. Clearly there are variables in the institution of education that provide more (resources and support for example) for some students, while minimizing the needs of other students. And it is important to see that these variances are often in effect merely because of where one lives. The economic differences in neighborhoods lead to significantly different school experiences. In a discussion of the “Pipeline from school to prison”, it was noted and observed that “For most students...inadequate resources in public schools, overcrowded classrooms, a lack of qualified teachers and insufficient funding for ‘extras’, such as counselors, special education services, and even textbooks, lock a student into a second rate educational

environment. This failure to meet educational needs increases disengagement and drop-outs, increasing the risk of later court involvement”. (“Crime”, 2008))

Clearly there are needs in other areas that are equally important in the overall improvement of schools, and in creating a culture of safety within them.

It is a combination of the three areas—academic content, student engagement/student life, and business (money and resources)—that must intersect to allow for the optimal growth of the school system and the students within it. By addressing these three areas fully, educational leaders are establishing cultures and climates that best support the academic success of the students within that system. And as we improve that system and the students within it, this will have a predictable ‘spread’ effect on the greater community. Financial resources are important and a basic threshold level is necessary for the support and functioning of a school, but it is only one ingredient in the overall success of a school system.

### **Importance of Curriculum and Out of Classroom Circumstances**

Curriculum is the core of the school day, and the driving force of all else that goes on within the school system. It is imperative to challenge students with a curriculum that supports and fosters learning with the goal of graduating students, and in preparing them for higher education and/or for job readiness. A strong curriculum is important in this process. Graduation and/or job readiness is the visible outcome part of the system. If we provide the curriculum, climate, culture, support, structure and conditions necessary as a foundation, and add in teacher preparation, innovative teaching and learning strategies and the personnel necessary to address the complex needs of today’s students, then great things can happen. But if these elements are missing, the task of learning for the student becomes more challenging. Each school district has



its own unique set of circumstances that provide both challenges and opportunities to improve student perceptions of safety in the school.

In defining the circumstances of student life, we must look at the transitions and time periods in school that are outside of classroom work—the broader school community circumstances. This includes the intersection of all the aspects of the student and the schools that are non-class related. While this area is highlighted and addressed as an important part of the University experience, with most Universities having a specific ‘division’ to address these areas, it is less emphasized at the school levels from elementary to high school. There are many factors that fall under student life and/or student engagement. It should be the expectation that a student’s parents and the student’s home life address personal development. And it is that a student’s home culture will impact that child in all areas of their lives. And, as students move from younger grades to older ones, the social influence of peers increases in significance. By the time of middle school, a student is often significantly impacted by the social order of a school (pecking order), the social environment and culture that is created, and by the protective factors—or lack thereof—that contribute to a student’s perceptions of personal safety. And, while it is most appropriate to expect that parents will address parenting, values, personal civility and the issue of ‘student life’ outside of the classroom, there remains an important and critical role for school teachers, administrators and other school personnel in this equation. The personnel in a school will often set the tone and model communication patterns to the students who observe them day after day. Students will observe how teachers, bus drivers, office workers, cafeteria workers, and other members of the staff manage conflict, how they manage frustration, how they communicate respect (or not), and how they handle a wide variety of other behaviors. Students learn things just by observing the adults in their school culture.

Indeed, many students spend more time with their teachers than they do with their parents. In an article entitled, “Surprisingly, Family Time Has Grown”, by Tara Parker-Pope (2010), she notes that, “Before 1995, mothers spent an average of about 12 hours a week attending to the needs of their children. By 2007, that number had risen to 21.2 hours a week for college-educated women and 15.9 hours for those with less education.” Yet even with this increase, which is spread out over 7 days, it still falls short of the approximately 35 hours that a child is in school each week during the school year. Thus, there is an opportunity for teachers and other school personnel to help students succeed academically, while also supporting, with deliberate intention, the student life/student engagement aspect of the educational process. Some students will get this through participating in sports, which remains a viable option for many adolescents, but is not for everyone. Other needed options such as theatre and music programs are often seeing budget cuts. Further, in addition to cuts in extracurricular programs, there are also some school districts across America that are going to a 4 day school week. As reported in an article in the Huff Post Education section, “Across the country, 120 school districts had, as of October (2011), moved to four-day school weeks while others are canceling field trips, shuttering after-school programs and charging students to play sports. “ (“School”, 2012) Those cuts impact students directly-with little input from them. In that same article, students were asked about the cuts, and how they would prioritize necessary funding adjustments. When students were surveyed, it was reported that, “Most telling is the discrepancy between what students think schools should cut versus what school officials have on their to-do lists. The top three items students said schools should cut are school newspaper or broadcast outlets, summer school and field trips -- in that order. The last items on students' "should-cut" lists, starting from the bottom, are teachers, administrators, guidance counselors and sports -- all items that schools

have shown to most commonly choose to cut first“ (“School”, 2012) The areas identified by students are areas that contribute and support academic and student support/engagement—the student life aspects of the school day. Students will often do better in an atmosphere that includes structure, consistency, and in which they experience at least some sense of self-control/self-determination over outcomes (predictability of action and consequence). And despite, or perhaps because of, changes in the nature of adolescence over time, this need for structure, consistency, and a sense of self control/self-determination—ownership in one’s future—remains an important factor for many children and adolescents. And indeed the parameters around the period of adolescence have changed over time. This next section will review and identify some of these changes.

### **Changes in Adolescence Over Time**

If we, as educational leaders, fail to address some of the needs of the students in the context of development, we can assume this will have a negative influence on the students within the school. Students, communities, and the concept of adolescence have changed over time. While adolescence was once a relatively short period of time, it has now stretched much longer. This change has not only expanded the time range defined in adolescence, but has also included significant changes in the community, roles and expectations of students, options available to students, cultural values and priorities, and shifting family dynamics that have altered the landscape for these young people.

According to Ronald Dahl, M.D. (2006), from the University of Pittsburgh, adolescence is defined as “that awkward period between sexual maturation and the attainment of adult roles and responsibilities.” (p. 9) In Dahl’s article, he shares information about adolescent changes

from ‘traditional’ societies compared to ‘contemporary’ ones. One of the glaring changes involves the time frame between the onset of puberty and the age of first marriage. He cites Schlegel and Barry’s anthropological study of 186 traditional societies and notes that, “among girls, marriage occurred within two years of the onset of puberty in 63% of societies studied; for males in traditional circumstances, 64% were married within 4 years of puberty....By 1970 the average age of first marriage for girls was 21, and 23 for males, but by 2000, this had changed to 26 as the average age of first marriage for females and 27 for males. Currently, the average age of menarche is 12 while the age of marriage is 26 ....(thus) Adolescence has expanded from a 2 to 4 year interval in traditional societies to an 8 to 15 year interval in contemporary societies” (p. 14). This describes a situation where sexual maturity (from a biological perspective, not necessarily an emotional one) begins early—while many young girls are between elementary school and middle school—yet the transition and navigation through the phase of life called adolescence has increased in duration. And while these changes are occurring in the physical/social domains of development, there are also a myriad of other factors that are influencing youth in this age range. More children are being raised in single or blended households, are left for longer periods of time unsupervised (as single or both parents must find work), and do not have the same opportunities to find sustaining career paths right out of high school, as the work landscape has shifted from a manufacturing culture where good paying jobs were more plentiful (i.e., steel mills in the Pittsburgh Pennsylvania region) to career opportunities that require an advanced degree. This combination of factors has, on one hand, allowed adolescents more time to ‘grow up’, but on the other hand has increased the significance and importance of the high school experience in preparing students for the university or to enter the workforce.

Most recently, this current generation of students presents a challenge that is new to the classroom through the use of mobile devices such as cell phones and other electronic devices. There are many questions about the impact of this-whether it is a positive or a negative-but one thing is for sure, it is a current dynamic that today's teachers must address. While some teachers are comfortable with the technology and the use of it, others are less familiar and are not sure whether to embrace or punish the use of such devices. Yet it is a part of adolescence today that our students bring to the classroom. Robert Earl (2012), in his article, "Do Cell Phones Belong in the Classroom?" notes that "many high school students have grown unaccustomed to reading anything longer than a 140 character tweet. And they've grown more dependent than ever on letting machines solve even the simplest of problems." He goes on to add that "half of teens send 50 or more text messages a day according to a Pew study...Older teen girls, ages 14 to 17, average 100 messages a day." He concludes that "cell phones distract students from school work and class activities...What's clear is that students must be taught to love learning" (Earl, 2012). This identifies a part of current culture that must be addressed in the context of 'student life' and student engagement. Student life and student engagement issues are foundational in nature, meaning that if they are not adequately addressed, then a student will be less ready to learn in the classroom, which of course will impact his or her achievement. When students are not engaged, when students do not feel safe, or valued, or wanted, then they are less likely to optimize their learning opportunities. Some may 'tune-out' in the classroom; others will avoid the entire system.

### **Educational Leaders Must Be Actively Involved**

*"It is the responsibility of leadership to provide opportunity, and the responsibility of individuals to contribute". William Pollard*

160,000 students skip school a day! If there are 6 hours of education daily, That is ***57,600,000 minutes of education lost—of opportunity lost—for our kids every school day in the United States of America.*** At that point in time, under these circumstances, it doesn't matter how much money we pump into education; if students are not present in school to learn, they will not learn in school. And if the culture does not exist to support and encourage student learning, then learning is less likely to occur.

The roles of 'teacher' and 'learner' have been examined and debated in the context of implementing the most effective path to academic success. There is a logical and necessary place for these discussions. Clearly there are teachers who have developed an inappropriate (and criminal) relationship with students. This adds to the debate as to the boundary lines between the interactions of a student and his or her teacher. We must always be first and foremost diligent in protecting children from these atrocities. We need to define and secure boundaries and structure that protect these children; we need to implement hiring practices that add to the security and safety of our students; and we need teachers who will be active in standing up if they see teachers in inappropriate situations rather than being a 'loyal to a fault' colleague. And, we must be purposeful and intentional in our efforts to work with students to strengthen both their personal and academic development by creating a culture that allows for optimal success. This culture will, by design, include an engaged relationship between student and teacher.

Educational Leaders must be present and involved in the process of educational improvement at all levels. Leaders in the educational system, from the School Board members (policy makers) to District Administrators, to Building Administrators to teachers, must all play an active role in developing and maintaining safe cultures for student learning to occur at optimal levels. Without this in place, it is predicted, student success (measured by attendance, graduation and/or job

readiness) will decrease. If leaders are not active in the process, then one of the consequences may be that the perceptions of students are that the administrators are absent and/or perhaps don't care. When this is the case, there is the risk of students feeling that no one is taking control and can result in additional fears—real or perceived—on their part. And as we will examine in the next section, fear is one of the strongest motivators of behavior.

### **Fear Influences Behavior**

Fear motivates and drives behavior. As we have seen recently in a variety of tragic incidents throughout the country, when a person's (or a community's) safety is in question, little else can get done until that sense of safety is returned. At the moment of the event, and in the aftermath, tremendous effort and resources are put forth to address that threat to safety. This effort often comes at the expense of other activities. For example, when there was a tragedy involving a young man entering a New Jersey elementary school and becoming an active shooter in that building, academic learning stopped. All efforts were placed on establishing the sense of safety for all involved—the students, the adults and the community. The names of state capitals, work on fractions, or naming the presidents of the United States of America lost immediate priority. Immediate efforts and concerns were placed—as they needed to be—on evacuating and securing the building to reduce the extent of damage done. Efforts were placed—as they needed to be—on saving lives and helping obtain medical care for those injured, while also tending to the recovery of those who had lost their lives. In the aftermath, healing needed to begin to address the lingering safety (emotional levels) of those directly involved, as well as those who shared that emotion from a distance. And almost immediately after the physical safety needs were secured, 'we' began looking for the 'reason' this happened, and finding ways to 'make sure this never happens again'. We did this at the local level in the community where the terror

occurred. We did this in local communities across the country. We did it in a national debate about the security of ‘our’ children. We debated the ‘silver bullet’ reasons that this would occur and suggested many reasons—from gun laws (not enough; not enforced; inadequate ones in existence) to a review of the mental health system and the persons in it (do we provide enough money, support and resources to it?; do we communicate diagnosis in consistent ways?; do confidentiality rules, laws and standards get in the way of necessary notifications?). Schools and communities made it a priority to review and update their safety policies and procedures, and even the security equipment and systems in place to see if they were adequate.

More recently, when a bomb rocked Boston, Massachusetts during the running of the 2013 Boston Marathon, the collective mindset and efforts of the individuals present and in the wider community immediately went into safety mode. That is, all efforts and systems went forward with the immediate goal of protecting the community from the very real threat to personal safety. These efforts included almost unprecedented levels of closing down a major American city while the search for the perpetrators continued. This went on for an extended period of time until both identified suspects were apprehended and/or killed. Once the known perpetrators were neutralized, the perceived threats to safety for Bostonians were lowered, and it allowed for a return to a level of more normal behavior and focus. People returned outside from being locked in their homes, and there were even reports of spontaneous outbursts of applause and appreciation for the responders who put themselves at risk to pursue, confront and apprehend or kill the perpetrators of this violence. These feelings—both of the fear and of the joy—were shared by many outside of the immediate risk area of Boston proper. In short, the human need for feeling safe superseded all other things at that immediate time, and all efforts needed to be



put forth to address that need, even at the expense of other areas of need. School work, homework and business affairs all shrank in priority below that of the need to secure safety.

Clearly these were events of a large magnitude, each resulting in casualties of many people. Each was severe at levels that caught the attention of the nation. Each impacted those who were directly involved in the immediate proximity of the tragedy, and those who were indirectly involved through their personal identification with the events that transpired. These were large scale events that commanded around the clock news coverage. They were irregular in the scope and magnitude of the carnage and the fear and terror that they created.

But, they are not irregular in the feelings that people share in regard to the response to fear. People share certain human needs, and it is consistent across settings that some are more immediate than others. Feelings of safety are a basic foundational need. If someone does not feel safe—physically and/or emotionally—then he or she will need to devote their energy to securing that feeling of safety. When a person experiences a real or perceived threat (to safety), the automatic response of ‘fight or flight’ kicks in. This fight or flight response is an automatic, internal reflex of the body. It is a physiological, survival mechanism that serves to protect us from that which threatens us. It creates physiological changes in our body that impact both physical and psychological areas. It gives us a boost of energy triggered by the release of adrenaline in the body. This physiological response, first noted by Walter Cannon in his book, *The Wisdom of the Body*, starts with the perception of a threat, which triggers those physiological responses in our bodies (Cannon, 1932).

As noted in the (adapted) chart below, the responses start with a change initiated in the hypothalamus, which creates a variety of other body and mind responses that prepare us to deal

with the threat (Layton, 2005). This chemical change, and the burst of energy and strength from it, has aided in our survival. This chemical change and the corresponding body changes, will keep the body on ‘edge’ and ‘battle ready’ until such time that the threat has passed. There are two different ways to deal with that threat—to stay and fight or to flee. When and only when, the threat is reduced and the need for safety is satisfied, then the person can go on to expend energy on higher level activities.

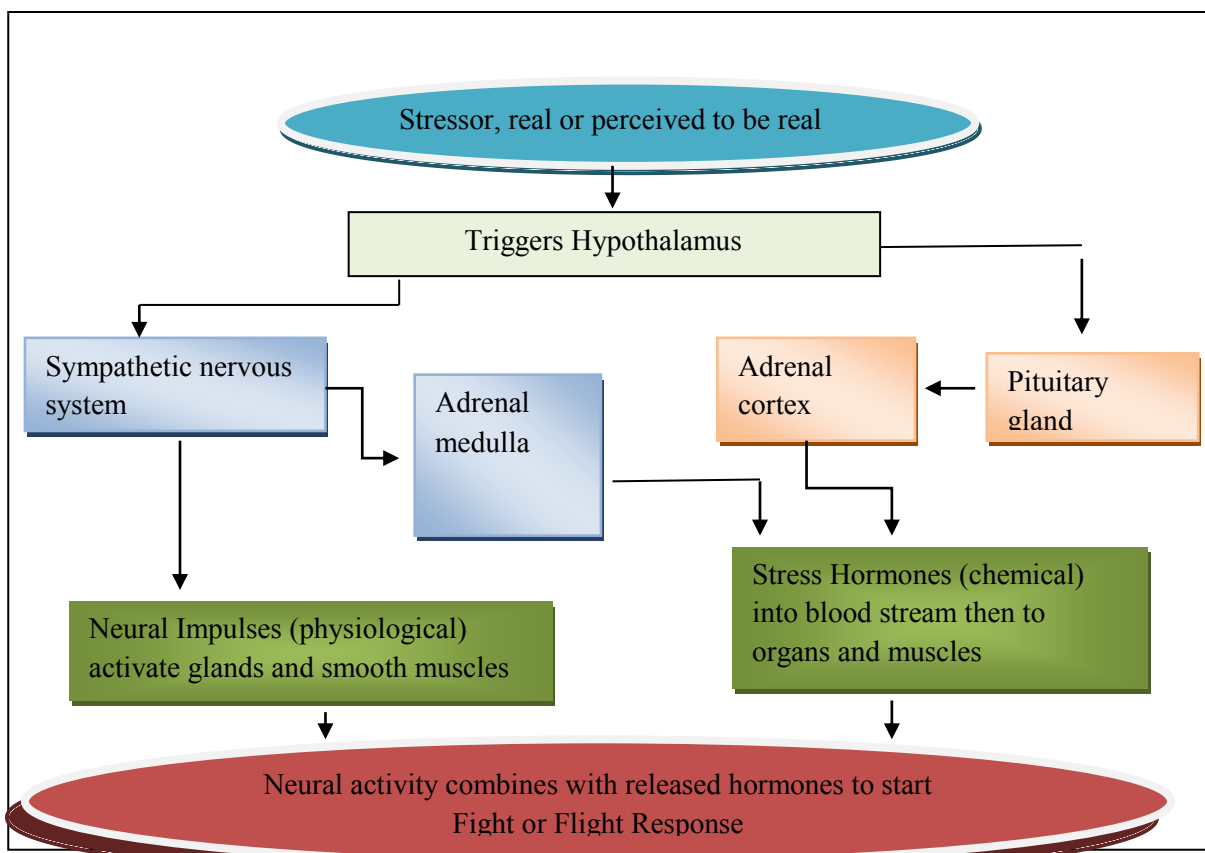


Figure 2.1: Fight or Flight Response: adapted from Julia Layton, HowStuffWorks, 2005

According to the Julia Layton, the 30 or so different hormones that are released will cause changes in the body that include:

- heart rate and blood pressure increase
- pupils dilate to take in as much light as possible
- veins in skin constrict to send more blood to major muscle groups (responsible for the "chill" sometimes associated with fear -- less blood in the skin to keep it warm)
- Blood-glucose level increases
- muscles tense up, energized by adrenaline and glucose (responsible for goose bumps -- when tiny muscles attached to each hair on surface of skin tense up, the hairs are forced upright, pulling skin with them)
- Smooth muscle relaxes in order to allow more oxygen into the lungs
- Nonessential systems (like digestion and immune system) shut down to allow more energy for emergency functions, and
- Trouble focusing on small tasks (brain is directed to focus only on big picture in order to determine where threat is coming from) (Layton, 2005)

All of these have a direct impact on the person involved, but the last one is particularly relevant when it comes to attention span, concentration, and focus—all of which are necessary for learning to take place. So while this is essential and beneficial for our safety and survival, it is not as productive in regard to sitting and paying attention in class.

One confounding variable in this equation is that we cannot always fight or run when we are threatened or feel a threat to our safety. In a classroom, for example, a student may not

always have the opportunity or chance to be physical or to run away. Thus he or she experiences the physiological responses of this phenomenon without the ability to adequately deal with it. The result can be persistent stress and angst in addition to the symptoms noted above. This is true across situations (in homes, schools and workplaces), and is certainly evident in our educational settings across America, where academic achievement is defined as a “higher level” activity. In many of today’s school settings, it is an expectation that students sit at their desk and concentrate on material presented to them. The body reactions involved in the fight or flight response are not consistent or conducive to sitting quietly at a desk.

This is significant because, while we are indeed fortunate that these mass casualty incidents are rare in our country and in our schools, there are every day, numerous, ongoing, under the radar, harassing and bullying incidents occurring in schools that leave students afraid. This is an unfortunate and unproductive circumstance for our school systems, especially when a great number of these incidents can be reduced in frequency, intensity and severity by improving the culture and environment of the schools our children attend. So it is critical that school administrators and educational leaders continually assess and address the culture in their school and/or classroom.

### **Importance of Evaluating the School Culture**

“Education is not received, it is achieved” Albert Einstein

While it is true that fair and equal are not always the same thing, it will be more conducive to the learning environment if we get to a point where all students (and teachers) feel that they are being treated fairly, even if not exactly equal. This requires a level of commitment and accountability from all members in the culture of the particular school. In the lens of critical constructivism, it is within the interactions between student and environment that a child must

define their experience, and it is within this definition that their behavior will ultimately be driven and defined. It is because of this that it requires purposeful and intentional efforts to create cultures that allow students, staff, parents and teachers to feel safe within the boundaries of the school.

Behavioral problems are an ongoing issue confronting many teachers and school districts. Some of these issues are slightly below the surface, bubbling under the levels of visibility of teachers, but very visible to the countless numbers of students affected every day. To some of these students, hallways between classes, locker rooms, playgrounds and recess, lunch rooms, and the bus ride to and from school can be a terrifying experience. These experiences can make a student anxious, sick, avoidant, and even suicidal. This has been a documented concern in schools for a long time and one that has been addressed in some research based programming. One of the leaders in this field was Dan Olweus. In the 1970's Dan Olweus initiated the first systematic research study regarding these issues at the school level. The results were published in a Swedish book in the early 1970's. Later in that decade, 1978, the results were published in a book in the United States entitled, *Aggression in the Schools: Bullies and Whipping Boys*. In 1983, three adolescent boys in Norway committed suicide, presumed to be most likely the result of severe bullying by peers. This led to a national campaign against bullying in the schools. This was the first version of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (Olweus, 2007). That program was carefully evaluated in a large scale project involving 40,000 students from 42 schools. It has since been replicated in five additional large scale projects in Norway. During the 1990's Dr. Olweus began working closely with several American colleagues to implement and evaluate the program in the United States, primarily at Clemson University in South Carolina. Since that time, hundreds of schools in most every State in the United States have used the program. The

results have been strong enough that “the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) is one of the few programs that has been identified as an evidenced based program, recognized by the Blueprints for Violence Prevention initiative as a quality violence and drug prevention program with a high standard of effectiveness (Cecil. & Molnar, 2011). Some of the results include:

- Average reductions by 20 to 70% in student reports of being bullied and bullying others. Peer and teacher ratings of bullying problems have yielded roughly similar results
- Marked reductions in student reports of general antisocial behavior, such as vandalism, fighting, theft and truancy
- Clear improvements in the classroom social climate, as reflected in students’ reports of improved order and discipline, more positive social relationships, and more positive attitudes toward schoolwork and school (Olweus, 2003).

According to the Olweus Bullying Prevention Website, “Students deserve to feel safe at school. But when they experience bullying, the effects listed below can last long into their future:

- Depression
- Low self-esteem
- Health problems
- Poor grades
- Suicidal thoughts

To students who experience this aggression at school, Monday mornings can be nothing less than misery”. And as Olweus noted, these results can last, and can have negative impacts long into

the future of these young people. This can impact their relationships, school achievement, school outlook, graduation rate, and perceptions of the educational system as a whole. If a child does not have a positive or favorable experience in school, is it a reasonable expectation that they will go on to university? Will that child pass on a love of school or love of learning to their child(ren)? When they get called by the principal to go to a meeting for their child, will they be willing and eager to go? Will they trust the school administrators who they link with the people who failed them?

It is important to understand that this issue crosses over the boundaries that separate schools, academies and the community. It crosses over the boundaries of time and generations. The impact of one of these will directly influence the other, and therefore must be viewed through a multi-disciplinary lens. If we try to view this in a vacuum, or to separate these three entities, we fail to see the entire picture. It is the responsibility of the Educational leader to set the tone and direction of the school community in which he or she works. It is a best when this tone is defined as part of an overall vision that includes a proactive, intentional, well stated mission statement. And it is the role of the leader to define and set the mission, and to focus and reflect on that mission when making decisions that impact the entire school community.

The targeted victim is not the only one who is impacted by perceptions of safety issues. Observers of the behaviors—the bystanders—are also impacted. And students certainly are watching. Hazelden claims in the Olweus website that, “Observers of Bullying ... (those) students who see bullying happen also may feel that they are in an unsafe environment. Effects may include feeling:

- Fearful

- Powerless to act
- Guilty for not acting
- Tempted to participate”

In a report in the Journal of Early Adolescence, researchers Kris Bosworth and his colleagues examine this issue. They report that “Among 558 middle school students surveyed in 1995, only 20% reported no bullying behavior” (Bosworth, Espelage & Simon, 1999). These behaviors lead to statistics that are alarming. According to Evelyn M. Field, FAPS, on her website, Bully Blocking:

160,000 + children miss school every day, due to fear of attack or intimidation by other students; 20% of students carry weapons to school to feel safer ; 50% of students knew of a student who had switched schools to feel safer; 40% of suicide victims had been bullied at school; the National School Safety Centre, USA estimates that 525,000 "attacks, shakedowns and robberies" occur in an average month in public secondary schools; Two thirds of school shootings were conducted by victims of bullying; more than 50% of teachers report being bullied at school ; and the National Education Association USA reports that every day 6,250 teachers are threatened with bodily harm and 260 are actually physically assaulted. (Field, 2007)

This reality was illustrated in an article from a CBS affiliate station in Philadelphia in February 2012. According to the report:



A Mount Airy middle school teacher was taken to the hospital after he was assaulted by a student. It happened in a classroom at the Leeds Middle School...the eighth grade science teacher ....got into an argument with a student, and the student attacked the teacher. The president of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, Jerry Jordan, released a statement following the incident: ‘There is absolutely no place for violence in our schools. It is unacceptable under any circumstance for a student to lay a hand on anyone, but especially a teacher or school employee. Schools must be safe for students and staff.’ He went on to say, ‘With the elimination of support staff—classroom assistants, non-teaching assistants, nurses, counselors and school police--the district has reduced the adult to student ratio and the ability for remaining staff to control school climate adequately. The district is moving in the wrong direction when it comes to school safety. Schools are safe because of the steps we take proactively-because we have appropriate staffing levels in schools, we use proven anti-violence and anti-bullying programs, we provide training so that staff can work effectively with disruptive children and because we offer appropriate alternative placements for disruptive and violent children...(and the continued cuts to the staff assigned to schools to make them more safe shows me that the district hasn’t learned the lessons it should have learned five years ago this month, when a Germantown High School teacher’s career was ended by a brutal student assault. Teachers and staff have to know that support personnel are available when they need it. (“Philadelphia,” 2012)

As noted here, financial resources and staffing patterns are important factors to school safety, and an area where the 'haves' have a distinct advantage over the school districts that 'have not' the same financial resources, tax base, political influences and allocated funding.

Even teachers are experiencing the impact of fears for safety in the school setting. How can this be productive and create an atmosphere conducive to learning? If even the teachers are fearful, can they fully protect the students? According to Public Agenda President Ruth A. Wooden, "Time and again, Public Agenda research has shown that a safe, orderly school environment is a fundamental concern of parents and teachers. This is the cross-section of the school, academy and the community, yet this issue has been given short shrift by policy makers and by the very schools of education that send new teachers out unprepared for the realities of today's classrooms" ("Teaching," 2004). This source goes on to point out that:

More than 1 in 3 teachers said colleagues in their school had left because student discipline was such a challenge, and the same number personally considered leaving. Many complained about being more in the crowd control business than in teaching.... More than 6 in 10 teachers (61%) and parents (63%) strongly believe that strictly enforcing the little rules sets a tone so that bigger problems can be avoided. Another 30% of teachers and 25% of parents support this idea somewhat. (Total support: 91% teachers; 88% parents).... More than half of teachers (57%) and 43% of parents also especially liked proposals for establishing alternative schools for chronic offenders, with another 30% of teachers and 32% of parents liking this idea somewhat. (Total support: 87% teachers; 74% parents).... 70% of teachers and 68% of parents strongly supported the establishment of zero-tolerance policies so students know they will be kicked out

of school for serious violations, with another 23% of teachers and 20% of parents indicating they supported this idea somewhat. (Total support: 93% teachers; 89% parents). (“Teaching,” 2004)

In regard to the student report recorded above, not only do teachers and administrators in this school acknowledge these types of behaviors to be a problem, Wooden (“Teaching,” 2004) goes on to say in her report that, “The vast majority of teachers (94%) believe that treating special education students just like other students, unless their misbehavior is related to their disability, would be an effective solution: 65% of teachers say this would be a very effective solution, while another 29% consider it somewhat effective. But teachers said this is not happening now: 76% of teachers agree that special education students who misbehave are often treated too lightly, even when their misbehavior has nothing to do with their disability”(“Teaching,” 2004). It is important that rules are clearly stated and explained, understandable, and enforced consistently for them to be effective. Part of the issue is in the understanding—or misunderstanding—of what a child’s IEP diagnosis is, how it translates behaviorally, and to what extent are involved decision makers aware of, consulted with, and unified in the implementation of a behavioral plan. When the discrepancies between what behavior is part of the disability, and what falls outside of the parameters of behaviors related to that disability are large, then the enforcement of the rules also get confused and boundaries blurred. This may be an unintentional reality, but one that might be better managed. If we are effective in managing this, then we may be more effective in creating cultures that are more conducive to increasing a student’s attention span, concentration and focus, thus allowing a better chance of academic success. An additional benefit may be a classroom with more structure, consistency and order, and less behavior management problems.

Indeed, there are valid, solid reasons for the allowance of variances in expected behaviors due to one's medical conditions, however, if this becomes without parameters then it can create more problems than benefits. Within this system, it is imperative to balance the needs of each student with the needs of all students and the learning environment. At some point, it must be noted, realized and addressed that there is a threshold of minimal behavioral standards and expectations. And that when that threshold is crossed, this might lead to the need for a change in the situation, up to and including the change of placement of a particular student. That threshold line is the line of safety—physical and emotional. Each situation though, deserves individual attention and review. And there are varying degrees of severity that may require a stronger behavioral intervention. For instance, a student may engage in a single act of violence or aggression that leads to the need for a changed placement due to the safety issues for all involved (while still acknowledging the educational rights of that student); or on a second level, a student may display a chronic pattern of moderate behavioral concerns that are disruptive to the educational rights of the 'whole' over an extended period of time.

While controversial in nature to some, the premise of this agenda and paper is that in order for learning to occur at the highest levels, there must be a climate and culture that is fertile and conducive to the educational growth of the entire student body, and to the teachers in the school. This will necessitate at times, changes in placement of a student who—either in the immediate, or who has a chronic pattern over time—interferes with the growth and rights of the whole community. And we must have the courage to recognize that, and to deal with it in appropriate and fair ways.

## **Factors to be Considered in Evaluation of School Culture**

As we look to evaluate the success of our schools, we need to include the examination of school culture on the overall educational experience of our children while there. Nick Smith and Paul Brandon, in their book, *Fundamental issues in Evaluation*, note four areas that should be considered when we conduct effective evaluations (Smith, 2008). It is important to examine schools, and the functioning of the people within the walls of that school, in various areas. The theoretical framework in which a school operates is an area that should be reviewed through the process of evaluation; the methods in which the administrators of a particular school choose to “run” the operations should be reviewed and evaluated at least as to the culture and climate instilled; and the implementation of ‘practices’ is a critical element.

More directly, the overall evaluation should include a review and analysis of

1. The current political climate and conditions
2. The resources,
3. The ambiguity of roles and
4. The changing ‘field conditions’.

And, the professional role each member of the school community plays—the definition of our work, our ethics, and our responsibilities as professionals leading schools— should all be part of an overall context in which the effectiveness of the school should be examined (Smith, 2008).

These same factors are important and consistent with the examination of this particular problem of practice in the review of the culture of a particular school. For instance, it is important to look at the context of the school environment within the larger picture of immediate

societal issues, the accountability standards that are in place *and* enforced, and the improvement or lack thereof from year to year. Some questions that arise in the process of evaluation might include, To what degree do staff and students feel safe? What are available resources to staff and students? How are they being utilized? What is the culture of engagement with students? Do teachers feel supported and valued? Do students feel supported and valued? What social issues and variables are present and how are they impacting the situation? And in regard to the practical questions, what are the immediate concerns for making a positive difference in and for the lives of the children in a specific system? Further, when an evaluation identifies the potential benefits of change in a particular system, does the school have the capacity, confidence and commitment to make those changes?

### **Consequences for Failure to Provide a Safe Culture**

*“What if the cure for cancer is trapped inside the mind of someone who isn’t afforded an education?” Anonymous*

If our goal is the improvement of education, then we must make decisions and actions that are intentional, consistent and structured over time. Further, we must make decisions and actions that are important to and for our students, not just what is important to and for our politicians and/or administrators. And we must use assessment and evaluation to help us identify those areas that are essential to each specific school district. This is where leaders become can be effective. A failure to create a school culture that is, and that is perceived to be, safe for students, teachers, staff and administrators will result in missed opportunity for students to learn. Because if a student or staff member does not feel safe, then they will be distracted and less focused on their academic pursuits. And for a large number of students, a failure on the part of

the school to provide a safe culture will result in class and/or school avoidance. And if a student is not afforded the context in which to fully learn and academically grow, then the opportunities for that given student become limited. Further, one of the risks of this is that someone who has great potential to change the world—or someone’s world –through his or her ideas, knowledge and academic growth may miss the opportunity to fully provide generative impact on and for others. When we fail to provide the culture where growth can fully occur, then society runs the risk of losing valuable knowledge, lessons, and resources of the next generation of students. So there clearly are educational risks for students within a school as a result of the culture within it. But there are also behavioral, safety and perhaps legal risks present. These will be briefly examined in later parts of this paper. In the next Chapter, theoretical constructs that demonstrate the importance of understanding and addressing a students’ perception of safety in a given school culture will be examined and discussed.

### **Chapter 3: Theoretical Constructs in Viewing Perceptions of Safety in the School**

A student's overall success and achievement in school is impacted by his or her feelings of safety within that school culture. It is the responsibility of educational institutions and educational leaders to provide an atmosphere and culture that is safe and conducive for teaching and learning for all students, regardless of where they live. In a society where there are wide variations between school districts in regard to the allocation of resources that help define and construct the culture in which that district dwells, when these disparities are determined, at least in part, by outside controllable factors, including the systems, people and networks of power that have significant and direct influence of, and in these institutions (such as political and financial institutions), and when it is, by design, at least in part impacted by the State dictated and designated money allocations directed to schools and communities, then this issue can become a matter of social justice. In the United States of America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is inexcusable that where a student lives is often a major influence and factor in the quality of the education and educational experience he or she receives.

#### **The Neighborhood Factor**

A student's ability to feel safe within the walls of a school should not be determined by the neighborhood in which the school lies, or the economic level of the parents who live in that neighborhood. Students who are born to parents who have financial wealth are no more deserving of a 'safe school' than students who are born to parents of less financial means. A student's worth or worthiness is not determined by the size of their parents' bank account, or by the lack of one. (If that were the case, should a child whose parents lost a business or went bankrupt suddenly be dealt off to a school district where the majority of student's parents have



lower income levels?) And, just as a student's sense of worth should not be dictated by these arbitrary measures, their right to be educated in, and to feel safe in, a school should not be dictated by the financial resources of the community or the people living in it.

None of these factors dictate the character of these young people; they do not dictate the intelligence of these young people; they do not dictate the passion, love, quality, nor dignity of these young people; and neither should they dictate the quality of education they deserve to receive.

In an article entitled, "What Does Research Say About Inclusive Education?", Dr. Kathleen Whitbread (n.d.) pointed out that, "In the Supreme Court ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, Chief Justice Earl Warren, referring to segregation of children by race stated:

Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments ...it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him adjust normally to his environment. In these days, it is doubtful any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity...is a right which must be made available on equal terms. We conclude that in the field of education, the doctrine "separate and equal" has no place. (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954)

Dr. Whitbread (n.d.) goes on to say, “these same arguments, originally applied to race, have been repeated on behalf of children with disabilities, many of whom continue to be educated separately from their non-disabled peers despite legislation mandating otherwise.”

In a parallel frame of view, one could propose that these arguments, “originally applied to race”, then applied to disabilities, might further extend and be applied when talking about students living in resource disadvantaged communities. Many students learn in circumstances that are clearly separate, and only equal if one stretches the imagination and defines education in the broadest of terms. And since these resources are often influenced and determined by systems, people, and networks of power, and by the state regulations and resource allocation formulas outside of the influence and control of the individual school district—hence highlighting the imbalances of power and dominant and subordinate cultures—then it can, and should, be framed as a matter of social justice. It matters. It matters to students. It matters to administrators. It matters to school leaders. And it matters to community members. This is true whether or not they have children attending the particular school in their neighborhood. What happens in the school impacts the broader school community. If there is a lot of truancy and/or poor school performance in a given community, then one might anticipate a higher school failure rate, higher unemployment in the area, and an overall negative impact on the community. Higher school failure rates may not be the cause of violent crimes in a community, but one might suggest there is a correlation between higher school failure and dropout rates, and higher crime rates in a community. In fact, an article from *School Library Journal* (SLJ) noted that “dropouts are 3.5 times more likely to be arrested than high school graduates and more than eight times as likely to be incarcerated...across the country, 68% of state prison inmates don’t have a high school diploma” (“Crime linked to drop out rates, 2008). And conversely the article goes on to

note that, “a 10 percentage point increase in graduation rates has historically reduced murder and assault rates by approximately 20 percent” (“Crime”, 2008). Further, some statistics claim that while one third of high schools in the United States have graduation rates of 90% or more, there remains “a percentage of schools that retain students at much lower rates, 60% or fewer ... (and while) in the past decade the number of these schools has declined, there are still more than 1,400 in the US (with graduation rates at less than 60%). In 2011 one quarter of all African American students and 17% of Hispanic students attended a ‘dropout factory’ (those with a graduation rate of less than 60%), compared to only 5% of white students” (Davis, 2013). Clearly one’s neighborhood impacts his or her education.

And since the issue of financial resource distribution and disparities impacts our kids, the current system of financial distribution to schools has been presented and challenged in court. The results may surprise many people who would argue for equal distribution of funding in schools across the board. In *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez*, the issue of dealing with equitable and/or adequate state funding of education was examined. The basis of this case was that, “In Texas, public schools were financed primarily through a system whereby property taxes were imposed by local school districts. Because property values were higher in some districts than in others, substantial disparities across districts in per pupil spending arose. The disparities in spending among public school children triggered a Fourteenth Amendment Equal Protection challenge to the constitutionality of the system” (San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez, 2014). This case was debated in the Supreme Court, and the discussion and decision found that the taxing system, and thus the resource allocation to schools, would legally stand ‘as is’ “Because neither a suspect classification (class action suit) nor a fundamental interest is implicated here, the rational basis standard of review applies. Unlike with

past cases concerning laws that discriminated against the poor, this case does not involve the characteristic of poor people not being able to afford, and therefore enjoy, some important governmental benefit altogether. An interference with a fundamental right guaranteed by the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment does not arise merely because some people can obtain relatively more of a desired benefit than others... Moreover, insofar as the system promotes local control and decision making in school financing affairs, the system is rationally related to a legitimate governmental interest of providing a basic education for the children of the State. As such, the program permits each locality to tailor local programs to local needs.” (San Antonio Independent School district v. Rodriguez, 2014) Basically the court declared that while the allocation of financial resources in schools may be unequal, as some areas will have more resources based on property tax collections above the minimum level of funding from the State level, it falls within the limits of the constitution and therefore, cannot be altered on this challenge. The result of this is that there will continue to be a differentiation in financial resources in individual school districts from community to community. The case was not tried on whether it is ‘fair or unfair’ or ‘beneficial or not’ to the students in a particular school district, but rather, whether the system of current school funding is constitutional under the Equal protection clause cited in the Fourteenth Amendment. And while the apparent intent of the law was to allow more local control of spending and financial decision making at the local level, there are unintended consequences to it. This disparity is highlighted in the next section.

### **30 Miles and Yet a World Away**

Through the dual roles as professional and parent, I have witnessed, in regard to resources in schools, that just by the community in which one lives, students can live “30 miles and a world away” from each other. By this I mean that as a parent I have had the blessing to

live in a family home in a “wealthy” community that invests in schools in significant ways— money and parent involvement being just two; and I have had the blessing to work with students in communities where a significant number of the families live in poverty, and have seen the struggles and challenges faced there. Even in our home community, I witness and live the divide between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’, and have seen firsthand how this divide impacts my own children. On many evenings, while I sit in a small coffee shop writing this paper, there are students working with paid tutors at tables scattered throughout the shop, while parents observe from a distance, sipping on their preferred specialty coffee drink. In our district, it seems as if it is *culturally presumed* that most children live in a two parent household, with the luxury of one parent being able to stay at home with the children. In this district, where most families have computers (note the plural tone here) in the home, and internet access, the school district issues Apple Workbook laptops to each student in grades 9 through 12 for their personal use. These students, most of whom live in a situation where the family is able to provide this equipment for them on their own, are given these laptops to use during their entire high school careers. Further, they are assigned an individual computer in grade 6 to use while at school, once reaching 9<sup>th</sup> grade, they are able to take these computers home with them. In many school districts, there are not even enough computers for each student to use one in the school. Yet, in this wealthy community, the students, most of whom already ‘have’, are given more, while students in poorer districts are limited to the use of group computers. This norm is incorporated into the fabric of the school system. It is evidenced, in part, by the fact that Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings are held on Wednesday mornings at 9:30 am. If one has a traditional working day job, it is not possible to consistently attend these meetings. This influences, at least in part, the direction of the school from the parent perspective. Issues dealt with by this group are limited in

the amount of input they get from single, working moms or dads who, because of their work schedule are unable to attend. This is not to say that the individuals who are not present do not care or do not have valuable input, they just cannot attend the meetings in a consistent manner. And although, it would be nice to assume that there is an intentional and specific consideration given to the needs and wants of the entire student population, human nature might suggest that these parents are considering the needs of their children and circumstances first. It is a small cultural norm, yet with potentially impactful results. Often I have seen these parents attend the meetings, then walk their dogs as a group and wind up at the coffee shop where the tutoring occurs regularly...complete with watering bowls outside for their four legged companions. Yet, thirty miles away, in schools where I have consulted, most families could not afford to hire a tutor, and even free ones are underutilized. Many students do not have an individual computer at home, and may be without the internet if not in a public 'wi-fi' spot. Many fine parents have to work to make the ends meet without the luxury—but not without the desire—to be at home with their children. Attending meetings for many of these parents would not be easily done. Sadly the attribution often is that parents who fail to show for these meetings are disengaged or disinterested, which serves no justice to them or their child(ren). But truly the culture is very different in different locations, and must be accounted for when considering the success of our schools. It is imperative to consider context when we are looking to improve the quality of our schools and the education within. And one's neighborhood, and the available resources in it, is the foundation of one's context.

### **Through the lens of Constructivist Theory**

“You cannot tailor make the situations in life, but you can tailor make the attitudes to fit those situations” Zig Ziglar, Motivational speaker

In his work in Constructivist Theory, Jerome Bruner suggests that, “a major theme in theoretical framework...is that learning is an active process in which learners construct new ideas or concepts based upon their current/past knowledge”. (Bruner 1960) This introduces a strand of Critical Constructivism theory where it is identified that a person learns as an interactive process between him or herself, the teacher, *and* the environment in which that learning takes place. A student must construct their experience and learning within a context, not in a vacuum. Obstacles and challenges will be part of the experience for all involved in the educational process. Some of these obstacles and challenges will seem overwhelming and can be a barrier to a student’s progression and achievement. Thus, it is important for us to engage students in the process of problem solving and perseverance. It is important that as teachers, community members, and responsible adults in a child’s world, we teach students how to deal with frustration, how to appropriately manage being told “no”, and how to deal with seemingly insurmountable challenges. The members of a community and the resources within that community are part of this context. People know what they know, and they don’t know anything else. It is important for student’s to understand that while they do not need to know everything, it is to their benefit to know how to access resources to help them find information that they do not know. This is a critical part of the learning process. While Bruner also highlights principles in the instruction process (i.e., “readiness”, “spiral organization”, and “filling in gaps by going beyond the information given”, Bruner, 1960), one might suggest that ‘readiness’ *must* include a student’s perception and experience of safety. That is, if a child’s experience and frame of reference does not include the feelings of being safe in, or in transit to or from that school, then their constructed reality will include, at the very least, a divided focus between watching their back and topic content. This will necessarily impact his or her achievement in learning academic

content. After all, if I am expending time, energy and worry on ‘am I going to get beat up ?’, or ‘picked on?’ or, perhaps worse, ‘humiliated?’, then I will have less energy, focus and concentration available for science, or math, or whatever topic area I am studying. Personal Safety is a more immediate and pressing need to address than fractions, the location of the Mojave Desert, or the name of the 22<sup>nd</sup> President of the United States. If a student by him or herself, does not feel safe, or does not know how to enhance their feelings of safety, then they must be able to access resources in the school that can help them feel this.

It is clear then to see the importance of creating environments and school cultures that are conducive for learning. This includes a student’s feelings of being safe, wanted, welcomed, supported and encouraged. Through the lens of Constructivist Theory, it is suggested that a student is going to build, expand and define new experiences to the collection of life experiences and knowledge that they already possess. If they have a positive base and set of experiences to start from, then, it might be presumed, they have a head start on success and achievement. On the flip side of that coin, if their starting spot is one of devalued education, unsafe school environments, and a lack of encouragement or identified reason to succeed (motivation), then this will be a very different starting spot.

The optimistic viewpoint of this theory though, is that we can alter and influence the environment so that a student can experience—either by his or her current knowledge and skill set, or by accessing new ones—success regardless of the starting spot.

## **B=MC<sup>2</sup>**

Another way this can be viewed is through the lens of a behavioral theory I have developed to examine, explore, and address behavior change. Specifically this theory is called



$B=MC^2$ . In this equation of behavior analysis, a person’s Behavior is a product of his or her Motivation, Circumstances, and the (real or perceived) Consequences for that behavior. If school attendance is the “behavior”, then that is defined by that person’s motivation (example, the defined value of attending school), the circumstances involved (examples include but are not limited to, the culture of the school; parental involvement and value; student resilience and intellect; the resources allocated, teacher attitudes, abilities, and support for students, etc. ), and the consequences (real or perceived) for that student attending school (will I get “jumped”?, bullied?, humiliated? , will I be “wrong” or teased for “liking school”?, will it be a positive experience? ). Thusly, if there is to be change on an identified and targeted behavior, then we must alter something on the other side of the equation. (Gittins, 2014)

<b><i>Behavior</i></b>	<b>=</b>	<b><i>Motivation +</i></b>	<b><i>Circumstances +</i></b>	<b><i>Consequences (real or perceived)</i></b>
		(examples)	(examples)	(examples)
(School attendance)		culture of school	Parental value on education	Will I get jumped?
		<i>Is it worth it?</i>	<i>Community value of education</i>	<i>Will I be humiliated?</i>
		<i>What’s in it for me?</i>	<i>Student resilience,</i>	<i>Will it be a positive experience?</i>
		<i>Is there value in going?</i>	<i>Intellectual abilities</i>	<i>Am I safe?</i>
			<i>Social gains or costs</i>	<i>Will I be bullied today?</i>
			<i>School resources, value,</i>	<i>Will I be in pain if I go?</i>
			<i>Is it safe? Climate?</i>	<i>Will I be accepted?</i>
			<i>School &amp; community culture</i>	<i>Will I be rejected?</i>

Figure 3.1:  $B=MC^2$ , Gittins, 2014

And, this can also be examined in the light of Postmodern Critical Theory (as defined in work by Thomas Lindloff and Bryan Taylor) and perhaps even Civil Rights theories, when viewed in specific circumstances. According to an article on STOPBULLYING.Gov entitled “When Bullying May be a Civil Rights Violation”, “A school is responsible for addressing harassment incidents about which it knows, or responsibly should have known about” , and suggests that if a school fails in this regard, it becomes a matter of Civil Rights. Indeed, in a “Dear Colleague” letter, distributed by the United States Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, it is noted that, “Education has long been recognized as the great equalizer in America. The U.S. Department of education and its Office of Civil Rights (OCR) believe that providing all students an educational environment free from discrimination is extremely important” (Ali, 2011). While this particular letter is specific to sexual harassment and sexual violence, it, in its content and recommendations, strongly emphasizes the responsibility of a school and the administrators therein to provide a safe environment free of discrimination and harassment. In other words, the Office of Civil Rights within the Department of Education recognizes the need for *all* students to receive an education within the confines of a safe culture and environment, noting on page 2 of the letter that, “The Department is deeply concerned about this problem and is committed to ensuring that all students feel safe in their school, so that they have the opportunity to benefit fully from the school’s programs and activities” (Ali, 2011).

But due to financial concerns and other staffing resource issues, some schools choose to monitor and address certain behaviors more closely and intentionally than other schools do. There are factors involved in this that cross the planes of the community (such as the lack of community tax base and resources), the academy (how we prepare teachers to understand the importance of ‘relationships’ and ‘intentional and purposeful engagement’ with students) and the

schools (such as the critical constructivism theory that suggests that learning is an interactive process that involves engagement of both the learner and teacher to obtain optimal results).

It is at the intersection of these factors that we see the culture and climate of a school district, and can begin to address the process of academic achievement within this context. And particular to my Problem of Practice is the need to intentionally and purposefully define and create a climate and culture across these three planes—the Academy, the School and the Community—that allow each and every student to feel safe, welcomed and valued in a school as a foundation to their success. If we fail at creating this safe culture, then this will negatively impact the students we are charged with serving. The following story illustrates how single events can shape a person’s outlook and perception on life.

A young boy in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade had a very good friend who was caught in a feud between his older brother and an ‘enemy’ of his. The second of the two, in a scene that is hard to believe to this day, built and delivered a ‘homemade explosive canister’ and left it on the porch of the young boy. At 12 years of age, this peaked the young boy’s curiosity, as it was built in a gas can device with a Lantern on the top of it and a hand crank on the side (explaining that turning the crank would turn on the light). The young boy followed the instructions and it exploded, killing him. For those who knew this boy, and the bubble community in which it occurred, this was a life changing event. Youthful innocence was lost. The bubble had burst to a certain extent, and lives were changed in a seemingly senseless situation. The very personal nature of the community had been altered. I presume that no one who knew of the situation would leave unscared, or perhaps unscarred.

I believe that sometimes we shape events, and sometimes events shape us. This event was shaping. There was a fear that stunned our bubble community in ways that were not there before. It impacted so many things, and at the time, school achievement fell far from an immediate priority. In the aftermath of such traumatic events, including school shootings, the priorities of the community, and the members in it, change. It becomes clear that during that immediate time period, and for some identified time frame thereafter, the emotional, physical and general well-being of our students and community become paramount. It is far more important than the academic classes planned for that day. The educational process freezes, our hearts change, and we become fearful. This fear response may prove to be productive, or unproductive to us. Some people may freeze, become overwhelmed and not be able to (figuratively and at times literally) move, while others will jump into action and address the issues straight on. For those who are propelled into action, there may be a call for change and an investigation into ways to make sure that “this never happens again”. This group may falsely believe that there is a single reason, an un-passed gun law, a breakdown in the mental health communication system that we missed (i.e., someone knew something but failed to let others know), or any of a myriad of other reasons that we believe we can control. This group may mourn individually and collectively. And search to make sense of the un-sensible act. This group may show and share common emotions, knowing it will take time to heal. And then the media outlets run the stories. Sometimes they are in such a rush to be the first to report, that they sacrifice verified facts to be the first to report. And they repeat the story over and over; they show pictures of parking lots, and school busses, and children crying in fear. These images are real. Those of the children and the anguished parents are real; they show the deep and immediate pain and grief. But then it becomes about creating a story line rather than giving news updates.

Interviews with distant relatives, and “the Pittsburgh connection”, and with childhood friends of the shooter (even if they haven’t talked with that person in years) become the story. And the politicians weigh in. They meet with parents and school personnel and community members; they show they care; and they feed into the news stories looking for the single factor they can legislate. They talk about gun laws; they talk about cuts in education; faults in the mental health system. And they make promises. All in all, there is an intensive media coverage that convinces some that our schools are not safe from these types of events.

Yet, schools, despite these very real tragedies—and they are very real—remain very safe from this type of tragedy for the majority of our students. The risks of being the victim of a shooting at a school are very small. In fact, “according to the CDC’s School Associated Violent Death Study, less than 1 percent of all homicides among school-age children happen on school grounds or on the way to and from school. So the vast majority of students will never experience lethal violence at school”(Darling-Brekhuis, 2012). Yet, when a shooting occurs, it brings those fears immediately to the surface and presents a sense of heightened fear that brings learning to a standstill. The odds of being in a school or location where this occurs is low; but, if one is in that community, then the results and impact are large, immediate, and significant.

Despite this specific type and level of trauma being rare, there are many other circumstances in schools that promote fear in students on any given day. These fears are often in response to behaviors less severe than a shooting, or an explosion, yet are enough to have a daily impact on students. These fears felt by students are real; they are impactful. And we cannot dismiss them. While visible to students on a daily basis, these behaviors remain under the radar of many adults in the schools and in the community. Sometimes they are mislabeled as “well, boys will be boys”, or downplayed by the misguided thought that “they (the target) just need to

toughen up, everyone goes through that”. Sometimes these behaviors are invisible to the adults around them. But they are there just the same. Students see them. And we must understand that these behaviors can impact a generation of students. It shapes them. It affects them in the day to day perspective, and it affects them in the way they view the world. Truly it can be devastating, lasting, and can have impact far beyond the immediate time frame. Indeed, according to an article entitled, *What FBI profiles tell us about school shooters and how to prevent the next one*, “... 75 percent of school shooters felt bullied, persecuted or threatened by others”. (Darling-Brekhuis, 2012). Darling-Brekhuis goes on to describe the “typical” shooter as, “a young white male, who feels an aggrieved sense of entitlement, is bullied by others and has easy access to guns.” Within this description is a symptom, and a contributing factor to, the feelings of safety within a school culture—the impact of bullying within that school culture. And in some cases, it was a sad reality that some of the perpetrators of these shootings may have believed that they were “failed” by other students, administrators and teachers in the school by not being protected against the relentless abuse by those that could have—should have—stepped in to protect them. These mass school shootings, of course, are thankfully relatively rare and are at the far end of the spectrum.

However, while this level of and type of behavior is infrequent but severe, there are incidents occurring every day in schools that are less severe, but far more frequent. And there exists cultures in schools and the surrounding communities that prevent many children from fully accessing the education they deserve.

It is hard enough to deal with the day to day issues in school without having to worry about one’s safety. Living in fear-whether that fear is in the home, in the community or in the school-will require a person to focus his or her energy on getting safe in the immediate rather

than having the luxury of focusing on the future. Fear motivates behavior. If a child is bullied, verbally, physically or in the context of relationships (i.e., “shunned”), or is in fear of being hurt, then they will have an underlying feeling of anxiety and/or worry that will interfere with their ability to focus on their school tasks and assignments. Even if they are not directly involved, the perception that they might be in danger is enough to block them from fully focusing on their academic work. If a student is worried about getting ‘beat up’ on the bus or at the bus stop, or is in fear that when they get home they will be beat, then this too will interfere with their functioning; And if a student does not have confidence that the adults in the school can-- or perhaps worse, will—protect them, then they will be expending energy in “watching their back” rather than focusing on achievement. Before a student can focus on making the connection between their current school work and their success in the future, they must feel safe. Priority must be given to basic needs first.

### **Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs**

*“Things which matter most must never be at the mercy of things which matter least.”* JoHann  
Wolfgang von Goethe

While there are some things that are important ‘for’ students, and other things that are important ‘to’ students, safety is an issue that is both important ‘to’ and ‘for’ a student in order to have a foundation that allows them the best chance to learn. In, Toward a Psychology of Being, Abraham Maslow (1970) discusses a psycho-social theory of motivation and behavior that supports this claim. He suggests that all humans have the same basic needs. And he places these needs in a pyramid shaped chart that has 5 levels. The most basic needs are at the bottom of the pyramid and higher order needs at the top. He asserts that the most basic needs are the foundation and must be satisfied before one can move to the next level. Maslow claims that all humans want to reach the top tier level of needs-which he calls self-actualization. But in order to

reach that level, an individual must first satisfy the needs at the lower levels. Failure to meet the needs at one level will prohibit a person from moving to the next level; all energy and attention will need to be expended on fulfilling that need. In effect, the person would be stuck at that level until the needs there are satisfied. The most basic level of need is physiological in nature. This includes the need for food, water, air and shelter. Once those needs are met, then a person can focus on the next level, which is security and safety. If a person does not feel safe and/or secure, then they are not able to move to the next levels. His or her energy must be spent on securing safety. Once a person feels safe and secure, then they can put efforts into the next level of love and belonging. And then, and only then, can one pursue the top two levels of self –esteem, and at the top of the pyramid, self- actualization. The diagram below shows the pyramid.

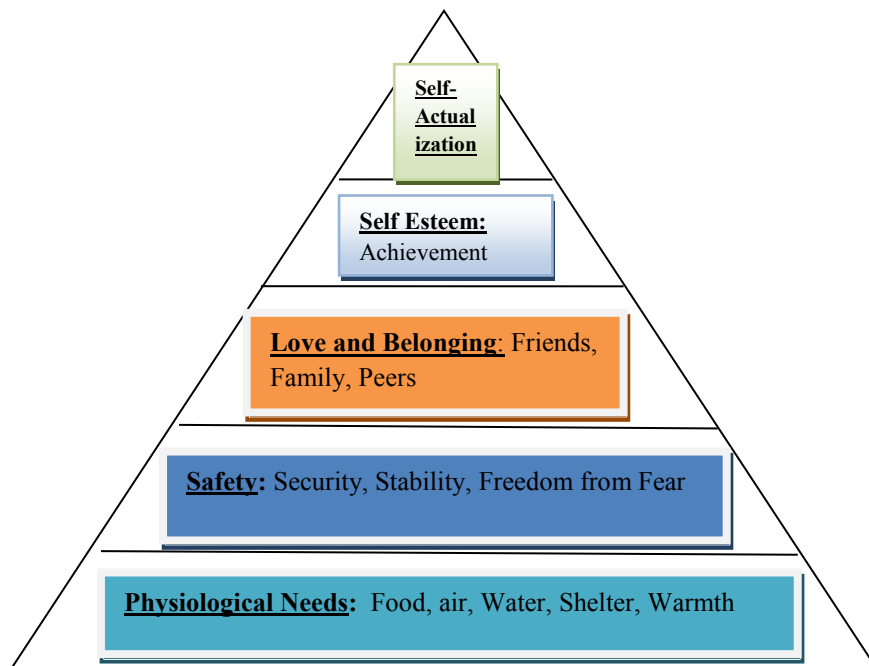


Figure 3.2: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1982) Adapted

Following this theoretical framework, if our students do not feel safe and secure in their school or community, then they do not have the ability to significantly move beyond that. When



the institutions of learning are not equal, when there are discrepancies in schools based on socioeconomic factors, and when there are inequitable structures based on power –of political influence, of financial resources, or human resources- then there will students who are ‘stuck’ trying to get the lower levels of need met, while students in other school districts may have the luxury of being able to focus on the upper levels of the pyramid. Sadly, sometimes this has to do with the economic resources of a community rather than the abilities of the students within that community. In these cases, there is not an ‘equal playing field’ when it comes to educational resources and opportunities.

Because of the inequities based on political influences, economic status, and financial realities, this issue becomes a matter of social justice. As noted in an article on the American Civil Liberties Website, (“Out-of-School Suspension and Expulsion”), when addressing the issue of the ‘School to Prison Pipeline’, “Where a child attends school, and not the nature of (an) offense, is the greatest predictor of a student’s receiving a disciplinary referral” (“American”, 2003). This reality challenges arguments that suggest that there is fairness in our overall education system as it currently exists. And it highlights the importance of recognizing that a child does not live or learn in a vacuum, but rather through the ongoing interactions between the student and the environment around them, including culture, language, support, and resources.

*“Jamaal, why are you back here again?”, I asked.*

(This was the third time he had been in our 90 day, minimum secure, court ordered treatment facility in the 2 years that I had been working there. And I also knew that it was not ‘easy’ for him to get here. He typically needed to steal between 4 and 6 bikes to get his probation officer’s attention, and he had to be called into seeing his probation officer 2 to 3 times before appearing

in court; and he had to appear in court a minimum of two times before he would be sanctioned to our program.)

*“Dan”, he replied, “I really don’t know if you get it”.*

(Here I was being “taught” by a fourteen year old juvenile in Worcester Massachusetts on some important “life circumstance” realities; lessons I didn’t learn in my textbooks in undergraduate or graduate school—or at least ones I needed to Live to understand; maybe at that point in life I really didn’t ‘get it’ at all.)

*“See, when I’m here, things are wicked different.....I mean, you care about me, most of the other staff care about me, I get to sleep on a good bed, I get three meals a day....I get to go play some basketball in a real gym—rims with nets and all, I get to learn school stuff, and really learn it, and no one is shooting at me....I mean yeah, there are some fucked up rules that I don’t like, and there is other stuff that I don’t like, but its better here. ”* (Jamaal, personal communication, 1989)

This is an example of a student expressing the concepts in Maslow’s theory and explaining his motivations and interactions with the world in his immediate world. He wanted to be successful in school and life, but his home and community life were barriers to his success. He wanted to function in the higher levels of the pyramid, but because his most basic needs of housing and food, safety, and love and belonging were not met, he was unable to focus on the higher level endeavors. So he took action steps to achieve that. Should a young man have to resort to theft to have those basic needs met? Yet clearly he was demonstrating the lessons he learned in the context of his environment. This is where Bruner’s Critical constructivism,

Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and Gittins'  $B=MC^2$  theories combine to explain what is happening to some youth in our educational system.

This idea is further illustrated in the next example (taken from a counseling session with a young African American male—age 15—in the “fruit belt” of Buffalo, N.Y.):

*“You know Dan, I really like coming here and talking with you. I get a lot out of it, and I learn a lot...I can figure some things out when I talk with you...”*

*“Well that's good to hear, I like talking with you too...you have a lot to add to a lot of people....”*

*“yeah, but, you know, I can come here and talk, but if you ever come to my neighborhood, you're going to get jumped, just because you're white....and if I'm standing there, I'm not going to be able to help you....in fact, I'm going to have to kick you...I'll try not to kick you in the head or too hard, but I'm gonna have to do what I have to do....”<sup>1</sup>*

In this case, this young man was describing how he experiences his neighborhood. He was not talking about me, he was talking about him. Specifically he was talking about his safety and the hierarchy of needs. I would be an outsider in his neighborhood, a suspicious visitor, and despite the relationship we had, it could not supersede his *need* for safety. In that scenario, I represented an outsider, and perhaps would be viewed as a threat to his ‘group’. And loyalty and safety dictated that they had to watch out for each other. If he was not perceived as being ‘with’ his friends, then he would be viewed as ‘against’ them. And he was not in a position to be against them for fear he would not be safe. Another instance of Fear influencing behavior.

*“I mean” he said, “you just passing through, I have to chill here”*

## **The Intersection of Basic Needs, Culture, Fear and Education**

As noted in this example, the intersection between the variables in this young man's life shaped his narrative and view of the world. He needed to balance his personal safety considerations of his environment against his desire for growth and development. He had real fears on a day to day basis. It doesn't seem fair that he should need to have to focus on his safety as a primary defining issue. Yet this issue is precisely what many young students are faced with. Many students do not feel safe in schools. Some fear violence; some fear bullying; some fear humiliation; some fear the scope of drug and alcohol use in schools and what that brings (i.e., "dealing") and some fear the times of transition to and from school. But sadly, one of the biggest concerns is when a student faces aggression and other threats inside the very halls in which they are mandated to be. When teachers feel helpless to intervene, and student bystanders feel powerless to stop the actions, those who are targeted often have nowhere to turn; and they sometimes sense there is little that anyone can, or will, do to help them. When students are in a school culture that does not work to make them feel safe, then this intersection of basic needs, fears (real or perceived), and the educational culture in which the school operates can be a barrier to that student's success. Ideally improving the culture to help one feel safe includes a clearly identified and consistent set of rules, expectations, and accountability/follow through over time. If we fail to provide this set of circumstances, then the inconsistencies hurt the culture in terms of safety and credibility.

This is what makes this issue so important to deal with. If we are able to successfully address the issue of safety in school—if we are able to demonstrate *improvement* in these areas,

then we are able to help many students during their time in the school system. These improvements make it better for students in both the immediate time period, and for their futures. This is important to and for a student. It is important for his or her academic achievement and/or job readiness skills. It is important for his or her personal growth. When we succeed in creating this culture and climate in the school, it has direct benefits to the student. But, if we fail at this task, then it will also directly impact students.

One area that seems to get confused in the implementation vs intent of stated goals involves the area of Individualized Education Plans for a student with a disability. Sadly, it appears that at times students with a disability have a different set of rules than students with no identified and/or labeled disability. This can be confusing for those involved directly or as an observer. And it appears that at least part of the time, this is because of misunderstanding of the intended Congressional Act.

### **A Brief Discussion of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)**

“Before the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was enacted in 1975, US public schools accommodated only 1 out of 5 children with disabilities” (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2014). The Education for All Handicapped Children Act, and its updated version, The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA) were enacted with the intended outcome that all students with a disability are provided a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). The specific purpose of this (Public Law 108-446-Dec 3, 2004) is to:

*(1)(A) to ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education that*

*emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living;*

*“(B) to ensure that the rights of children with disabilities and parents of such children are protected; and*

*“(C) to assist States, localities, educational service agencies, and Federal agencies to provide for the education of all children with disabilities;*

*“(2) to assist States in the implementation of a statewide, comprehensive, coordinated, multidisciplinary, interagency system of early intervention services for infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families;*

*“(3) to ensure that educators and parents have the necessary tools to improve educational results for children with disabilities by supporting system improvement activities; coordinated research and personnel preparation; coordinated technical assistance, dissemination, and support; and technology development and media services; and*

*“(4) to assess, and ensure the effectiveness of, efforts to educate children with disabilities (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2014).*

This law is just and needed in schools in order to support the rights of all students regardless of whether or not they have a disability. However, it seems that the implementation of this law is not always consistent, is sometimes misinterpreted, and sometimes becomes confusing for school teachers, students and administrators. While there is nothing in the law that specifically restricts schools from disciplining children with disabilities, it is not always clear

whether a student's problem behavior is a manifestation of the child's disability, or if it is a separate issue. Without adequate knowledge, training, support and direction over these issues, teachers and administrators are sometimes hesitant to address behavioral issues head on.

According to Kevin Dwyer, Assistant Executive Director of the national Association of School Psychologists (NASP):

IDEA was amended to better ensure that children with disabilities whose behavior blocks learning have those behaviors addressed within their IEP (Individualized Education Plan)...Although this was expected practice...it was seldom implemented; children with such needs were underserved and punished and too frequently dropped out of school." He adds that "the amendments also balance intervention with safety, allowing school staff to remove children from their school for possession of a weapon or drugs. One remedy allowed by the IDEA '97 is placement in a 45 day alternative placement. Other options can be tried, including parent-supported change in placement and IEP. More complex is the removal by hearing examiner of a child when there is a preponderance of evidence that maintaining the child in the present placement is substantially likely to result in the injury to the child or others." (Dwyer, 1997)

This definition and the processes involved, however, are not always easily understood, and at times, the protections for the identified student, the other students and the school community are lost in translation. With the burden of proof needed for an alternative placement high, it can become time and energy consuming for teachers and building administrators to take this path. Additionally, it is not always clear cut what behaviors are a manifestation of the

child's disability, and those that may be due to other factors. If those behaviors include aggression, this can easily lead to frustration on the part of all involved.

An example of this issue is illustrated in the following passage. It involves a student with an IEP, an issue of safety, and a 'target student' feeling bullied, victimized, helpless and without teacher support. It is taken from a counseling session I conducted and shows the frustration of one of the students involved.

*"But Mr. Gittins, I just don't understand why I am here. I mean, Billy (names have been changed) doesn't get in any trouble when he chokes someone, but here I am just for tapping my pencil. They make me feel bad, like I'm bad just for doing stuff like that."*

*"What do you mean, 'he chokes people'?"*

*"Yeah, when Billy walks by people he will jab us with his ruler, he, like, blurts out in class, makes some weird noises, and sometimes he will just grab someone by the neck and start choking them."*

*"What do the teachers in the room do?"*

*"Well he has his own aid there, so teachers often leave it to them to take care of, but they don't always stop it too fast."*

*"Does your teacher see it?"*

*"Oh yeah."*

*"What does she say about it?"*



*“She just tells us that Billy has an ‘anger’ problem, and that we just need to understand that.”*

*“That doesn’t seem right, because if it is true, I could see where you’d be pretty mad about it. Do you talk with anyone else?”*

*“Oh yeah, we talk with the guidance counselor, and Ms. Simpson (the principal), but they just say they can’t do anything about it, and we should be nice to Billy, because He has an anger problem (said with emphasis).”*

*“What does your mom and dad say?”*

*“ They say that ‘Billy has problems’ and that even though he has problems and I get mad about it, I can’t hit him. And that his problems are not mine, so I still have to ‘behave’. But it isn’t fair. I mean, like, he can go around and call people names, hit them, and choke them, and I get in trouble for ‘fidgeting’ and tapping my pencil. Makes me not want to try, I just get so mad about it. I know I could take him, so I’m not afraid of him, but I think some other kids get mad about it and don’t do as well as they could. But like, sometimes it makes me not even want to try. I mean if I am going to get in trouble anyway-and he’s not- I might as well have some fun. Better to get yelled at for something good than something dumb, right?” (Billy, personal communication, 2005).*

Sadly, this situation is not rare. Discussions with teachers and administrative personnel in this School District confirmed and validated the above report. For many, students who are identified within special needs categories who have Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) are perceived to have a separate set of rules than for other students. Most students, those without IEP’s, may not recognize the specific rules, guidelines and laws that dictate these variations in

rules, and they may not understand the purpose of them. What they do see is that there are differences in the way students are treated, and they often verbalize their feelings that it is not fair. Sometimes they might not feel safe when others seem to get away with acts of aggression without adequate adult intervention (as they observe and define it). Having two sets of rules for students is confusing and frustrating to them. Real or perceived inconsistent and/or lack of enforcement of the stated rules and structure negatively impacts them. And yet, under the Zero Tolerance policies, a student with no such IEP can be suspended for a ‘prop’ he or she has as part of a Halloween costume. This is evidenced in the two following headlines:

- Two-inch LEGO gun gets 4<sup>th</sup>-grader in trouble; parents left fuming after principal threatens the boy with suspension (Staff writer, 2010)
- Kindergartner to head back to school after being expelled for carrying toy gun to school (Stewart, 2013)

These are just two of many examples of situations where the Zero Tolerance policy has had unintended consequences on children, families and communities. In the second case above, the child was suspended from Kindergarten for a month before the suspension was lifted. (MidlandsConnect.com, 2013) This concern has even been noted and addressed by the Attorney General of the United States. In an article posted on the ABC News website, Attorney General Eric Holder noted that under the Zero Tolerance policy, “Ordinary troublemaking can sometimes provoke responses that are overly severe, including out of school suspensions, expulsions, and even referral to law enforcement and then you end up with kids that end up in police precincts instead of the principal’s office” (“Government”, 2014).

There clearly are needs for rules, policies, regulations, and laws. But there can be no mistaking that these laws and policies are not always fairly implemented, nor are they always clearly defined or interpreted.

The next section will look at the culture of discipline in the form of suspensions, alternative placements for students, and some risks for educational leaders if found to be failing to take appropriate actions in certain situations.

### **A Culture of Suspensions, Alternative Student Placements and Risks**

In the ABC News article quoting Attorney General Eric Holder, it was stated by Holder that, “In American schools, black students without disabilities were more than three times as likely as whites to be expelled or suspended, according to government civil rights data collection from 2011-2012. Although black students made up 15 percent of students in the data collection, they made up more than a third of students suspended once, 44 percent of those suspended more than once and more than a third of students expelled.” (Government, 2014) If you look at suspension rates for Black students with disabilities, it is noted that “Black students represent 19% of students with disabilities served by IDEA, but 36% of these students who are restrained at school through the use of a mechanical device or equipment designed to restrict their freedom of movement.” (Rights, 2014) Further review shows that when you look at the comparison, nationally, of suspensions and physical restraints between students with and identified disability and served by IDEA vs. students with no such categorization, there appears to be significant differences in the rates. For instance, while “five states, reported a four percentage point or smaller gap in out of school suspension rates between students with disabilities and students without disabilities (North Dakota-2%, Utah-3%, Idaho, Mississippi and Wyoming each with

4%)....five states (including DC) reported a ten percentage point or higher gap in out of school suspension rates between students with disabilities served by IDEA and students without disabilities (Florida-15%, Nevada-14%, District of Columbia-13%, Wisconsin-11%, and Louisiana-10%).” (U.S., 2014) And overall, while students with disabilities (served by IDEA) represent 12% of the student population, they represent 58% of those placed in seclusion or involuntary confinement, and represent 75% of those physically restrained at school.” (U.S., 2014)

The situation raised in these statistics begs to ask many more questions: What specific behaviors are leading to these suspensions and/or restraints? Are teachers and administrators using this consequence appropriately? Do they have experience and expertise, training, or even enough knowledge of other options? Are the behaviors resulting in consequences a result or manifestation of the disability? Or part of some other behavior pattern with these students? Do the behaviors represent disruptions in classroom and learning opportunities for others? Are the specific behaviors dangerous to self or others? These are just some of a range of questions that could use further in depth examination. Sometimes these consequences may be due to a pattern or mild behavior problems, while others may be a one time more severe episode. Some may be dangerous, while others may be problematic and disruptive but not dangerous. Some may just fall under the Zero Tolerance policy, yet not be particularly disruptive or dangerous. Yet these are issues that are significant enough they must be addressed.

One major question is, who best is able to examine and respond to specific issues at the local level? This is not always a clear cut answer.

And for better or worse, sometimes it is up to the court(s) to make decisions on how these laws and regulations impact the day to day functioning and actions of a district. This is because people can look at the same issue from differing vantage points and see very different things in what they are viewing. And as with the Zero Tolerance Policy, or with the Americans with Disabilities Act, the implementation and review of a school's actions will often be questioned. This is true in regard to actions of commission and acts of omission.

If we examine the terrible events that occurred at Virginia Polytechnic Institute (Virginia Tech), we can see such a case. In review of the situation, there are differences in the way people see the events, interpret events, and attribute motivation, actions and responsibility about the events. After the shootings occurred, after the initial shock and trauma occurred, after the day to day life at Virginia Tech moved forward, and after the families involved tried to make sense out of the senseless, speculation began. What happened? Whose fault was it? What else could have been done? And in regard to outcomes and responsibilities, was the school negligent in their actions by not alerting the general student population after the first shootings occurred early on that sad morning? For this final question, there are really two sub-questions involved: 1. could have they done anything to stop the initial violence? And 2. could they, should they, have done more after the initial violence but before the second shootings occurred?

For some of the families of the victims, the answer seemed to be that the school administration had fault and responsibility in the violence and deaths of students by not warning the general Virginia Tech University community and student population after being aware of a threat or danger from a "third party". The question here, for the link to and purpose of this paper, is whether the university administration members had an obligation to take more wide spread action in a duty to warn situation, based on the question if they had knowledge that the

campus community and student population were in significant (perhaps lethal) danger from a third party. The legal discussion centered on the timing of the incidents between the first shootings and other lethal ones that occurred approximately 2 hours later. Did the university administrators have knowledge that there was foreseeable harm to the students on campus based on the first set of shootings? And if so, did they fail in their obligations to the student population based on the “special relationship” they had with them, based on the imposed duty to provide a safe campus? Based on the *Virginia Supreme Court decision on Va. Tech*, “the jury was told that if they found that the university employees should have reasonably foreseen that injury arising from the criminal conduct of a third party might occur but failed to warn students, the Commonwealth should be found negligent. The instruction also stated that the jury should find in favor of (families) if that failure to warn was the proximate cause of the alleged injuries” (Lac, 2013).

In brief, the questions surfaced based on the following set of circumstances. “On the morning of April 16, 2007, at approximately 7:30 a.m., the Virginia Tech Police Department received a call that an incident had occurred in the West Ambler Johnston Hall dormitory but the specifics of what happened were unknown. When officers arrived they found two gunshot victims: a female and a male clad only in his boxer shorts” (Commonwealth of Virginia v. Record No. 121717, 2013). And even though the police from Virginia Tech were the first to respond, there were three police departments involved, and the Blacksburg Police department led the investigation. The State Police was the third force involved. During the investigation it was thought, based on a series of facts that were discovered, that this was a specific targeted situation that was a domestic violence event—basically that the boyfriend was a person of interest and had fled the scene --involving three people, the two victims and the shooter. This was based on the

evidence obtained of no signs of forced entry or robbery, the location was in a hidden area that might not be noticeable to persons not familiar with the area, and learning that the girl's boyfriend was a gun enthusiast. Thus, it was determined at that point in time that there was no real foreseeable "general" danger to the community or other students and therefore no need for a general campus lockdown, nor need for a general notification (i.e., duty to warn) at that point in time. Within two hours the police had located the boyfriend and were interviewing him (approximately 9:45 am) when the call came out that there were "active shots" in another residence hall. According to the document of the Supreme Court Decision, "at approximately 9:45 am the mass shooting at Norris hall began. At 9:50 am a... campus wide email blast was sent stating that a gunman is loose on campus. Stay in buildings until further notice. Stay away from all windows" (Lac, 2013).

Did the School act appropriately given the information they had? Did they have enough information to act on "foreseeable information of a threat from a 3<sup>rd</sup> party" that put other students and the community at risk? What obligation did the school have in this situation?

Yet, if we look at certain laws and policies pertaining to the use of an individualized education plan at the K through 12 school level, we must face some questions about liability to schools and administrators. If a student who has an identified disability that includes anger outbursts and/or aggressive behaviors, and is placed in a mainstream classroom, does this pose an issue for building administrators and the district personnel? If school district personnel are aware of the potential of aggressive acts of a child, do they have a duty to warn or otherwise protect the general student body from that threat potential? Would this be considered a "foreseeable risk" that warrants special safety consideration? Under these circumstances, when it appears that there are two sets of rules (or at least sets of consequences), one for the student

with the IEP and the other for students with no such plan, does this have liability concerns for the school administrators, principals and/or district?

This issue impacts not only the students who are the perpetrator of the behavior and who are the targets of said behavior. It also impacts all who are present, the witnesses who watch or observe the behavior.

Witnessing acts of aggression or violence will influence behavior and attitudes for students. And as previously noted, students will watch and observe the environment around them to help shape their “norms” about how to behave in that environment. And if the student with the IEP does act out aggressively within the school boundaries toward an adult or another student, and if the school knew of the potential of this, and if teachers are limited in being able to intervene in a fight or other escalated situation, and if the target of that outburst gets hurt, does the school have a legal responsibility in this? Are there grounds for legal intervention from the victim or the victim’s family? Clearly there would have been documented evidence of the disorder, thus the administrative personnel would have foreseeable knowledge of the potential of harm from that student. When we intersect these two premises, the disabilities act as implemented, and the law in regard to warning students from a “foreseeable danger”, does this put school administrators in a bind? This seems to raise questions that may not have answers that are clearly defined. At what point do the needs and rights to an education of one student supersede the needs and rights of others? When, if ever, does a student lose the privilege of learning in a mainstream classroom? Is there a point when it becomes necessary for an aggressive student who, while indeed having the right to an education, losses the privilege of having that education in a mainstream setting?



These issues and the issues of dealing with the “foreseeable risks” are not always clearly defined. In the case at Virginia Tech, there were many thoughts on this. Indeed, in the initial court cases, the families won the law suit against the school under the idea that the school should have provided a warning to the community after the first shooting. It was determined that due to the relationship between the school and the students, it was the responsibility of the University to provide a safe campus, and the decision not to warn students after the initial shooting, impacted the outcome. In jury instructions, the jurors were told “that if they found that university employees should have reasonably foreseen that injury arising from the criminal conduct of a third party might occur, but failed to warn students, the Commonwealth (University) should be found negligent. The instruction also stated that the jury should find in favor of the Administrators (defined as the families in the court records—the school was identified as the Commonwealth)...if that failure to warn was the proximate cause of the alleged injuries. The jury returned a verdict in favor of the (families) awarding \$4 million to each family” (Commonwealth of Virginia v. Record No. 121717, 2013).

Part of the discussion in the case was the “relationship” between the University and the student. In this case the students were defined, in one of the jury instructions, as business invitees of Virginia Tech. Their attendance at the University was voluntary. But what about the K to 12 system where students are mandated to attend? Does the involuntary nature of this attendance require even more action on the part of the school administrators in that system? While there are legal differences between these issues at the University level as compared with the K through 12 school system, these issues must still be attended to. A view of the *in loco parentis* (in place of the parents) guidelines for the K through 12 system is discussed in brief later in this paper. But, as professionals, parents, teachers, and members of society, we look to the rules (i.e., laws) and

consistency of enforcement of them to guide the majority of our behaviors. And the issue for this paper—in regard to creating cultures of safety—calls for an intentional, purposeful and deliberate debate and attention given to the discussion.

We generally have rules and laws for two major reasons: safety and order. Without them, we fear, there will be chaos and a failure to stop or suppress anti-social behaviors of others. This, we deem, is unacceptable, unsafe and unrealistic if we are to have a civilized society. We can continue to draft and adopt more laws and rules, but if we fail to consistently enforce the ones we have, then they serve little purpose. We want others to be held accountable to the same standards as we are. And while we recognize and understand that exceptions need be made, there are limits to those exceptions. And those limits include that we do not have the right to violate the personal boundaries of others. We have laws that make it a crime to touch other people in specified (sexual) ways without their consent. And, as a society, we expect that those who violate these rules and standards will be held accountable for that behavior. We expect that structure will be put in place to lower the risks that they behave that way again. And, in certain cases, when it seems improbable that the person can refrain from the behavior, we protect society from them by forced separation (incarceration). Yet, in schools, sometimes these same considerations are lost in translation. Students may not be able to understand the reason for the variations in expectations of behavior and accountability dictated by an IEP, but they observe these discrepancies; and they learn from them.

But, is what they are learning what we want them to learn? The result for some students is that they get discouraged, frustrated, and mad. Others may join in on bullying behaviors in an attempt to lower the risk of becoming a victim to it (i.e., if I can't beat it, and I won't be protected from it, then I might just well join it). In some cases they withdraw and give up. Some

will turn to alcohol and other drugs to help them cope or alter their experience, and, as noted by the astounding number at the beginning of this paper, many students just fail to show up. In some cases, situations that might be labeled as bullying, or even assault if the behavior was perpetrated outside of the school situation, are viewed and identified as ‘special cases and circumstances’ under special education laws. In these cases the consequences are often minimal when compared to the behavior, expectations and accountability of the student without an IEP. This serves to benefit only the student with the IEP. In order to better serve all students, and to create and sustain cultures that are conducive to further academic success, we must make rules that are clear, understandable, fair (which is not always the same as equal) and consistently enforced. And we need to consistently enforce the rules that are already in place. In the litigious society that we live in today, we must also look at the rules, policies and enforcement in terms not only of the natural consequences that bullying or other fear inducing behavior brings, but also to look at legal issues that can develop for the students and district as well.

A closer look at the purpose behind the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act may help us to better understand some of these circumstances and consequences, intended and unintended.

### **A Closer Look at Discipline Under IDEA**

Under the guidelines of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act there are parameters for disciplining students with identified disabilities. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EHA) “created a specific affirmative right to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment for kids.” (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2014) There have been several updates to the Act over the years

since it was introduced, each with the goal of improvements to the services these children receive. For example in 1990, the EHA was replaced by the IDEA with an emphasis to be put on the child as opposed to the disability he or she has. In this regard, plans were individualized for each student to address the specific circumstances of that child, rather than treating all kids within a category of Autism or another disability the same way. That Individualized Education Plan becomes the ‘blueprint’ for that student’s time in school. This plan “specifies the services to be provided and how often, describes the student's present levels of performance and how the student's disabilities affect academic performance, and specifies accommodations and modifications to be provided for the student” (Johnson, 2007). It also gives specific direction and guidelines regarding a Free Appropriate Public Education, the right for the student to be in the Least Restrictive Environment, and about parameters of discipline.

If a child on the Autism Spectrum Disorder, for instance, who is sensitive to loud noises, suddenly yells or runs out of a classroom in response to popping balloons or commotion excessive noise in a classroom because of sensory overload, any discipline involved must consider the child’s disability (circumstance). Clearly a discipline using anything with a loud noise would be inappropriate. Trying to keep the child in that placement is the moral and right thing to do for that student. He or she, in this case is not endangering him/her self or others.

But what happens when the behavior does include a potential harm to self or others? The answer to this is somewhat unsettling to some students and parents. Under the Act, “if it is determined that a student’s behavior is a manifestation of his or her disability, then he or she may not be suspended or expelled. However, under IDEA 2004, if the student brings a weapon to a school function; or knowingly possesses, uses, or sells illegal drugs or controlled substances at school or a school function, or causes ‘serious bodily injury upon another person’, he or she may

be placed in an interim alternate educational setting (IAES) for up to 45 days” (Yell, 2006). The intent of the Act is to protect students with a disability from being unduly and inappropriately and/or overly discipline. This intent has had many positive outcomes and ‘consequences’ for students and classmates. But, there are also unintended consequences. Sometimes, perhaps because of confusion on the regulations or specifics of the law, ignorance of the boundaries of the law, lack of training of what behaviors are a manifest of a particular disability, or lack of knowledge of how to handle the situation on a teacher’s part, and/or perhaps even lack of energy to take all of the necessary steps, the translation sometimes leads to overlooking some behaviors that can be hurtful and create fear in other students. This is evidenced in stories like some of the interviews noted above. It occurs at times that the decisions are to instill no discipline rather than risk ‘going too far’ with a reaction. This is how, at times, it appears that the rights of a student with a disability supersedes the right of the other students in the class. And while reasonable people understand the need for tolerance and flexibility in working with all students-with or without a disability-one unintended consequence may be that some aggressive behaviors are tolerated rather than directly and immediately dealt with. There are numerous references in literature reviews to ensuring the rights of the student with the disability. However, there is far less to be found about the specific rights of other students to be protected ‘against’ the aggressive behavior of a student with a disability. Thus we must continue to work, and be intentional and purposeful in addressing the safety issues in our school cultures.

One of the areas to consider are the standards that teachers, building administrators and district administrators have in the care of our children while at school. This is identified in the idea of “in loco parentis”. This concept will be reviewed in the next section.

## **In Loco Parentis**

The idea of ‘in loco parentis’ has shifted since its original definition presented by Sir William Blackstone back in 1769. The term that literally means “in place of the parent”, originally “asserted that part of the parental authority is delegated to schoolmasters...the powers of restraint and correction” (DeMitchell, 2012). Today, instead of schoolmasters, however, the term has meant to basically define the school staff and administrators. “Schools assume custody of students and, at the same time, the students are deprived of the protection of their parents. In effect, the schools act in place of the parent or instead of the parent—in loco parentis.” Further, “This status is legal and not just descriptive. For example an appellate court in New York, in *Garcia v. City of New York* (1996), held that schools, once they take over physical custody and control of children, effectively take the place of their parents and guardians” (DeMitchell, 2012). This responsibility needs to be considered and taken seriously by district administrators, building administrators and teachers. DeMitchell points out that in addition to the authority they have over the students, “they have the duty to act like the parent when protecting students from foreseeable harm” (DeMitchell, 2012). This would suggest that the school personnel are required to at least recognize the potential of “foreseeable harm” and that they have some responsibility for this if and when they might know that another student may pose harm to other students—regardless of a disability that may be present. This is where the intersection of responsibilities to and for students can get confusing. How does one balance the discipline of students who may have aggressive behaviors—perhaps verbal or physical—with the need to protect other students from it? If a teacher does not know what behaviors are specific to a disability, and is trying to maintain the parameters and guidelines of working with the disabled

student, does this interfere with the rights of other students to be protected from the potential aggressive behavior? For example, if a student is on the Autism Spectrum Disorder, and due to the condition does not understand or follow physical boundaries of other students (i.e., touches, follows, stares/glares, comments, does not ‘back off’ when asked to do so, perseverates on aggressive and/or threatening talk or behavior, thinks he may be ‘in a relationship’ with another student who does not reciprocate those feelings), how might the teacher discipline that student? How does the teacher work with the non-disabled student who is the object or target of the perseverating behavior? Is that student expected to merely accept and tolerate the behavior? What if the student has a disruptive behavior disorder with impulsive acts that sometimes include hitting other students? How is that to be handled in the immediate and long term? Is the object or target of the hitting or aggressive behavior just supposed to accept and tolerate it as noted above in the story? What role does the administrator have in protecting all students—those with the disability and those without a disability?

There are not always clear cut answers. And to create a culture that is ‘safe’ we should be focusing first on clinically appropriate interventions rather than jumping to punishment first strategies. But we must also look to protect the rights and needs of all students. While a review of the literature shows numerous articles on the rights of the student with disability, there are many fewer on the rights of the student who may be the object, or who might have their learning process disrupted by the behavior of the student with the disability. Most educators want to do the right thing, make the right decisions, and protect and help all students involved. Hence the need to be purposeful and intentional in creating a culture and climate that reassures all students that their safety is always considered and addressed to the highest level possible. This issue should not be handled in a haphazard, reactionary way. Purpose and intention are necessary to

create a culture. Human dynamics include that not everything is predictable, nor can be stopped, but we can do many things to anticipate, plan for, and implement strategies to create safer cultures when we are deliberate in our efforts.

To this point in the paper, through the first couple of chapters, we have spent time addressing the first of the two major sections identified that is, conducting an investigation of the overall problem. The next two chapters will address the second major section as noted in the introduction. This includes the overall process of addressing the problem through improvement ideas.



## **Chapter 4: Towards the improvement of School Culture: Action**

Purposeful and intentional climate control is important in every school setting. If we want to make improvements in our school culture, there is a formula that must be considered. That formula is: Consistency, discipline, structure and follow through over time. If we want to make changes in behavior, and shape these changes in positive improvement cycles, then it must be done with deliberate action steps. There are a series of things that must be done in the assessment and preparation of plans for change. Some of these are outlined in sections above. The more structured this process is, the higher likelihood of success in creating improvement. It involves a variety of steps of assessment, evaluation, review, planning, and strategy implementation. This cycle will repeat itself in order for improvement to occur over time. One time changes do not tend to make lasting differences. Rather it takes consistent effort, delivered in a structured and consistent manner, with stated and visible follow-through OVER time to exact change.

And this plan includes roles for various key stakeholders in the community. It includes looking at specific dynamics and identifying specific behavior changes that will be targeted for change. It involves looking at protective and risk factors that sustain current behavior patterns; and identifying alternative protective and risk factors that may motivate and sustain change. It involves recognizing that there are factors and variables that are in one's control and those that are not in one's control. And it involves concentrating and putting efforts on the areas that are controllable while working within and with the factors that cannot change. For instance, financial resources may be a factor that one does not control, and yet is one that certainly influences the climate. But we must work with within the parameters and with the resources that are present. To 'give up or give in' because one does not have all of the money desired is to fail

to reach full potential. Money is a real issue for schools; but the lack of money is not an adequate excuse for mediocre results. Rather it is far more productive and beneficial to rely and utilize the strengths in that given system. And that is where the creativity at the local level is critical. And it is also why a ‘one size fits all’ approach is inadequate.

Further, trying to make everyone happy in a given system is not an attainable goal. Rather it is better to try to make everyone feel respected, wanted, valued and appreciated in that school.

“I don’t know the key to success, but the key to failure is trying to please everybody” Bill Cosby

It is necessary for local school districts and administrators to have control over the day to day functioning of their individual school. And it is important for them to work at that local level to meet the needs of the ‘community’ that they are trying to improve. While educational content standards must exceed a certain minimal level outlined by the Department of Education, a one size fits all approach to the operations will not be fully successful because the needs across communities are so varied. The needs of students in inner city New York City, or Baltimore, may be very different than a rural school district in Greene County Pennsylvania, or Miami Florida, or on a reservation in New Mexico. The needs and resources in these areas vary; the needs and resources of families may be very different in these areas; the needs and resources of communities in these areas also vary. Does it make sense, then, for a school to be treated, measured, rated and operated like every other school in the country? Is it appropriate to try to manage all schools in the same format? When we try to please everyone, we will surely fail. Rather, we must consider the individual needs and dynamics of a district and/or community

when purposely and intentionally creating the specific culture and environment within that school district.

While there is an argument in favor of there being guiding general policies crossing the board and boundaries of the educational system nationally, there are unintended costs and consequences to this approach. An example is the issue of Zero Tolerance. Some would dispute the benefits of the zero tolerance policy based on the unintended consequences that this brings to the school environment. Part of this argument includes the thought that when zero tolerance is strictly implemented, there is no room for a particular school's administrator to utilize common sense interpretations to rule violations. A recent example of this was highlighted in an article in **The Blaze**, which is an online news, information and opinion site. According to the report, "a suspended seventh grade student in Virginia Beach, VA, could be expelled for the rest of the school year for shooting an airsoft gun with a friend in his yard as they waited for the bus to come" (Howerton, 2013). Two students, one of them aged 12, "were suspended for possession, handling and use of a firearm because they 'shot' two other friends who were with them while playing with the airsoft guns" (Howerton, 2013).

In this example, intent and context is critical in looking at the situation. The boys were not at the school, nor yet on the bus. But rather they were waiting for the bus, and thus this was defined as a school activity. Perhaps under the Zero Tolerance policy, the school felt as if they needed to respond in this manner. But it seems that schools should be able to make some decisions at the local level, rather than the one size fits all approach of Federal school policies. Does this incident rise to the level of an expulsion? Does the consequence in this case help promote safety in the school? Does it reduce threat? Does it improve climate and culture in the school?

“As our students know that we are willing to reach them intellectually, morally, socially, emotionally, they will be open to deeper learning. They will know we don’t want them to be better students, we want them to be better people” **Maurice Elias**

The significance of addressing this issue cannot be over-stated. It is a matter of the future of our students; it is a matter of the future of our communities; it is a matter of the future of our schools. It is a matter of social justice. And if we are able to adequately address this problem—to help students feel safe—then we are able to help them succeed. They will have the foundation to put their energies into learning and achieving, and will better position themselves for the future. If we are able to address these issues in a significant way—to make improvement in them—then we are able to help shape the future of not only the individual, but also the condition of the schools, academies and communities. We are able to make not only better students but better people.

### **Purposeful, Intentional Climate Control:**

Would you rather be a thermostat or a thermometer? While this may seem like an odd question, for an educational leader, a teacher, a staff member in a school, or a parent, it is a question of whether one would like to be the controlling variable, or the reactionary variable. If one acts like a thermometer, then he or she is just reacting to the circumstances in the environment, raising or lowering based on the temperature in the room. However, to be a thermostat, means that one not only measures the temperature and climate in a room, but also then sets off to control it. The thermostat is a much more proactive and active part of the process. And thus, it has influence and control in the room.

As an effective educational leader, it is imperative to be active in the process of measurement, assessment and in making changes to the climate when it falls short of the set

expectations. The educational leader, like a thermostat, can choose to measure the conditions in the room and adjust to set the tone. There are many factors in a given setting and circumstance—in a school—that a teacher or leader has little control over. However, there are also many factors and variables that one can control, and efforts to manage those effectively could be a priority for those who want to have more control.

It is imperative that we provide environments that are safe and that provide the physical and emotional circumstances that allow our children to focus on their classwork; that they be afforded the opportunity to learn without fear; that they be given the opportunity to succeed without fear; that they be given the hope that hard work is encouraged and wanted. And it is only when the basic foundations are provided to our children in school that allow them to feel safe and secure in their travel to and from school, within the halls of the school building, within the cafeterias, and within the playgrounds, that they will have the foundation to be able to focus and learn. We must not give up on this task. If we do not protect and provide for our children, who will?

### **Role of All Educational Leaders in a School**

“If you want to make a permanent change, stop focusing on the size of your problems and start focusing on the size of you!” T. Harv Eker

To address this problem in a meaningful way, there is much work that needs to be done. It is clear that a student’s perception of safety is a factor in their ability to focus and “attend” to the academic work that will raise the chances of success for that student-both while in school and in their future. A baseline requirement for feeling safe and secure in school is the existence of a culture in the school that is supportive, encouraging, challenging, and protective. It is the

responsibility of all of the educational leaders in a district to create that culture in an intentional, thoughtful and purposeful way. These variables in and of themselves are not enough for learning to take place. There are many other factors that are critical to the learning process—quality teachers, adequate preparation, self-discipline, basic cognitive functioning, adequate resources and time to teach, among others. But if we do not provide an atmosphere that fulfills the basic needs outlined by Maslow’s theory—of physiological, safety and security, a sense of belonging—then a student is unable to reach the higher levels of human needs where the most significant learning can take place (Self-esteem and self-actualization levels of the pyramid). We can control and change the culture and behaviors by changing certain circumstances, external motivations (i.e., for accountability of students) and consequences.

These are general roles of all leaders (all staff in a school) in a given district. There are also specific roles that others will play.

### **Role of the District Administrator**

The role of the administrators at the district level—those that make and implement policy, such as the School Board, Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent—include setting the initial overall tone and goals of the school. The district administrators must be up to date on the legal issues involved in the educational process and educational law. They should be active in setting and reviewing progress on clear district goals. It will be most beneficial if there is active communication between the board members—or at least the Board President—and the Superintendent. A major role of the district leaders and administrators would be to take fiduciary responsibility and ensure the provision of responsible budgets. They should provide oversight that regulations and laws are being followed and deal with the relationships with Community and State and Federal authorities so that the Building administrators, teachers and other staff can feel

guided and supported in the day to day operations of the school day. Major policy decisions should be handled at this level. It is imperative for school system functioning and improvement for these leaders to be active and involved in the process. It is hoped that they will also be aware of and attentive to the culture in the school at the building level—even if they are not to be active in that day to day function.

### **Role of the Building Administrator**

One of the key things an educational leader at the building administrator level must do is get an honest sense of how his or her students feel in the school community when it comes to safety. There are a variety of surveys that the leaders in a school can use to gather the data from students on their personal perceptions of safety. But for this to be effective, the leader must be willing to review the data with an open mind and use the results to target efforts of improving the perception of safety for his or her students. There is a certain level of courage that must be demonstrated in being willing to assess areas that do not support students, and to make changes to improve these areas. And this must be done by the Educational Leader who has the power to influence tone and behavior of staff members, teachers and others in the school. As each school has its own set of dynamics, this assessment must be done at each school to get accurate readings that are school specific. The effective leader must be willing to share those results with those he or she is accountable to (the Board, the Community), and those who are accountable to him or her (teachers, staff members, students). If we want to change Behavior, then we must change variables involving Motivation, Circumstances, or real or perceived Consequences for that behavior. And for the leader to be most effective, he or she must have credibility—which comes with the previously stated formula of consistent, structured, discipline and follow through over time.

When we are able to accomplish this, then an improvement in learning can take place. In his book, *On Purpose: How Great School Cultures Form Strong Character*, Samuel Casey Carter claims that some of the strongest schools in the country have cultures that demonstrate an “extraordinary commitment to strong character development and the teaching of the whole child” (Carter, 2011). In his review, when serving as a senior fellow at the Center for Education Reform, Carter looked at well over 3,500 schools looking for examples of schools that were known for being “successful”. Narrowing it down to 350 schools known as “high performing schools that instill strong personal character”, Carter and his colleagues sifted through the materials to see what makes these schools such high quality, and to see what traits could be copied by every school in America. Eventually his team narrowed and focused on 12 schools that represented a sampled variety in resources, size based on number of students in the school, the socioeconomic status of the students and families in the school, public versus private schools, and across the spectrum from kindergarten to grade 12. “All of these schools beat the competition in their local areas as far as academic and other student achievement is concerned. All of them far exceed the national performance levels for the populations they serve. Nine of the twelve would rank superior on any national ranking of any kind...and they prove what is possible for every school in America” (Carter, 2011).

Carter makes the claim that there are four traits that cross the boundaries of each of these schools and that ultimately they have in common. They are:

- A strong belief that culture determines outcomes,
- A nurturing but demanding culture,
- A culture committed to student success, and,
- A culture of people, principles and purpose. (Carter, 2011)



Throughout his examples, Carter shows images of students eager and motivated to learn because, in part, of the excitement of the teachers to teach, and because of an emphasis of teachers, staff and adults in the school engaging the students in proactive, protective and supportive ways. Content is not the only lesson being taught. Rather, character and personal development are important variables that are addressed every day in those schools. Principles are important lessons in life, and are embedded in the “culture” of these schools. Therefore, students are accountable for their behavior and interactions with others. To address issues of bullying, many of the schools not only teach about the perpetrator and the victim but also spend time teaching the bystander ways to step up and thwart unwanted, inappropriate behaviors. Teaching common language and expectations are significant parts of the learning process. There is an understanding that the bystander is the largest group of students and therefore can exact tremendous power and influence in the school. Therefore the development of culture addresses this group, and holds them accountable for the emotional safety and security of the students in the school. This approach allows for a foundation of feelings of increased safety and belonging of the students, and therefore can allow for further achievement to occur.

For the Educational leader at the building level, the ‘circumstance’ factor in the  $B=MC^2$  is important to review. This is an area that can and should be addressed at this level. It is at this level where the differences, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and barriers can be viewed and analyzed. This area includes the things outlined in developing climate and culture. It includes exploring the current and then setting a tone that allows students to experience feeling cared for, valued, welcomed, wanted and protected. It includes educating students and teachers on the areas of conflict resolution, accepted and expected behaviors, social norms, appropriate language, assertiveness knowledge base and skill set development, and expectations of effort and

academic integrity and achievement. It is the tone that says “how do we solve problems?” rather than “can we solve problems?” That slight word change is the difference between the belief that we can do things, as opposed to questioning whether we can or can’t. It is confidence in the system, in the teachers, in the staff, and in the students. It includes setting rules and ensuring all know what those rules are and what will occur should they not be followed. It includes making people relevant. And it includes the need to develop, implement and follow through on discipline through the use of rules and policies.

Discipline and consequences are best served at this level. In this definition there is a difference between discipline and punishment. For the purpose stated here, discipline is a process in which the persons involved are given the opportunity to learn and grow from the experience; whereas punishment is merely the delivery of an unwanted outcome. But, this involves the enforcing of rules. It is important to enforce rules in a consistent manner over time. It matters that this is consistent across all student subgroups. It should not be different for one set of students than for another. The consequences should be intentional, appropriate, effective, and at an implementation level consistent with the rule infraction. For credibility, it is important to consistently implement regardless of ones’ color, socioeconomic status, athletic ability, or other factor that separates students in ways that are real or perceived to be real. However, to balance that out, it also means consequences being consistent and appropriate for the infraction made. It also allows for creativity and flexibility on the part of the leader. Detention, Suspension, Expulsion should be only a few options in the Leader’s tool belt. Efforts to discipline and engage a student can be done in the same action. But this too takes intentional thought, effort and purpose to accomplish effectively.

If rules are being enforced in an inconsistent manner that is not understandable or logical, then building administrators leaders may rightly be challenged. If students are reporting that there are issues on the bus that are impacting their feelings of being safe-which will impact their achievement-then credible leaders must look into it and handle it accordingly.

Downplaying or minimizing these behaviors will negatively impact credibility and the perception of safety. And, in light of the previous discussion about ‘foreseeable risks’, an educational leader and/or administrator must look at these aggressive behavioral issues in regard to the impact it has on student achievement. He or she must also look at it in regard to legal implications it may have for the parties involved.

### **Role of the Teacher**

*“It always seems impossible until it is done.”* Nelson Mandella

This review shows that improvement can be made across the variety of schools regardless of size of student body, location of school (urban, rural, suburb), private vs public status of the school, age of the students, and socioeconomic status of the community. One of the key elements repeated throughout this paper is that it is important for a teacher to make the commitment to knowing who each student in their class is so that they can connect with them in unique ways and engage the student’s particular learning style and motivation. To the extent possible, this may include knowing the community and the parents of the students. Teachers play a critical role in the life of students. They are watched closely by their students, and are judged not only on their knowledge of content area, but also on how they treat students. Many people remember their teachers’ influence on them long after they leave a classroom under the leadership of a particular teacher. Adults may not remember any specific content that a teacher

taught them while in school, but many remember the way the teacher made them feel. They remember if they were valued, appreciated, supported even if they do not remember a single math problem they were taught. Indeed, teachers may even have the ability to influence the future of a student—for better or worse. If a teacher is inappropriately critical of a student, if they embarrass a student in front of others, if they ignore them, if they humiliate them, or if they fail to protect that student, it can have a powerful influence on that student.

Conversely, if a student feels welcomed, wanted, valued, appreciated, supported and protected in a classroom, they are more likely to learn in that environment. While a teacher cannot be expected to know every little detail of a student—what immediate stress a student is feeling, what is going on at home for a student, for example—they can be aware that something is different, or distracting, or that the student is dealing with ‘something’. When this is the case, when a teacher /leader is attentive to his or her student, then he or she is more likely to be flexible, tolerant and workable with that student. But this takes effort on the part of the teacher. It is not enough to merely teach content if a student is to reach full potential in growth. A teacher/leader should have a variety of tools to work with students. Proactive responses tend to work better in creating positive safe culture than reactive ones.

But, as with the building leader, there is no set ‘one size fits all’ approach to dealing with students. The effective teacher/leader will continue to grow him or herself. And he or she will focus on the whole child and context, not just on the academic. They will be a thermostat setting the climate in the room, rather than a thermometer merely reacting to it. Outcomes will be result from how a teacher leader conducts him or herself in the classroom, not just on the content of what they teach.

If a teacher is struggling with this in his or her classroom, they can likewise gather an assessment of the culture in their room, review that information, develop strategies to address protective and risk factors and implement those strategies for improvement. And for improvement to occur, for behavior change to occur, this must too be a process of consistency, structure, discipline and follow through over time. And they should have the energy, commitment, capacity and support to do this in a supportive environment as dictated from the Building leader.

One of the issues for the teachers who want to be the leaders in making improvements is how to get started. Obviously not everyone is going to be motivated to buy in to this approach. Some teachers are strong in their ways. Some teachers are tired and do not want to try new things. Some teachers do not see the need to make adjustments. Some are burnt out and do not have the energy nor motivation to try new initiatives that they may view as outside of their roles. Thus, it might make sense to start smaller with the idea of improvement in smaller circles. Change throughout the entire system is unlikely to happen all at once. Indeed, substantial and ingrained cultural change may best occur in a series of smaller successes. As these successes begin to show results and others take notice, they too may choose to implement some ideas, strategies and changes in their own classrooms, hallways, cafeterias, schools and communities. Thus improvement may come about through the law of attraction rather than forced change. If teachers who are using these strategies as a model experience improvement as measured by a decrease in problem behaviors and student- to -student, and student -to- teacher conflicts in the classroom, then it would be anticipated that other classroom teachers may note the changes and want to explore the possibilities of questioning, learning and implementing the strategies specific to their own classrooms. And as these teachers see change and improvement, they too might

decide to try a few new things. As they try new things, see positive changes, adapt new strategies, and share the results, then others too may want to try some new things. The result as improvement communities grow, is that there can be an increased positive impact that spreads across the system.

There are generally two ways a river will change its course. One is the slow, natural, unaltered persistent and consistent pressure of the water slowly eroding, and thus shaping, the channel in which it flows. The other is the result of a more immediate major, forceful event—such as raging flood water that tears through the path with reckless abandon, often just running over and forever changing everything in its path. The first slowly changes the landscape a little at a time, finding new crevices, rocks and barriers, winding through, over, or under them, slowly shaping and building on the changes from yesterday, and setting the stage for shaping changes tomorrow. The second is usually more sudden, often the result of a single storm, or series of events that build on each other to create conditions that make rapid impact, often shaping change through destruction. Each starts with what is there and works from that spot. In each the power and force of the water creates change. In the first, water exerts slow, consistent pressure over time, eroding barriers in the path, thus shaping that environment. The second comes blasting through with uncontrolled power. But since there is no control of the power surge, much damage can be the result. Through consistent, yet soft pressure over time, or through the uncontrolled sudden rage of a wall of water, the soft yielding properties of that water can defeat the hard unyielding properties of rock—that which is harder and more solid. Change is best controlled when the power used to shape and change it is controlled and disciplined. When the power of the water is controlled and harnessed in an intentional, purposeful and planned way, that power can generate additional power. This is a third way of creating change.

If one can purposely and intentionally harness, manage and control the flow of the water, then one can create new energy that can literally change a world. That is generative in impact. Likewise, if a teacher can purposely and intentionally harness, manage and control the collective power in a classroom, then the power that is generated can literally change the world. This too is generative in impact.

Change in a school system can occur as a result of various conditions, circumstances, and consequences generated from patterns of behavior that, by their repetitive nature create a culture and norm in the school. Or change can occur necessitated from an acute, usually traumatic incident that happens on the school grounds. The first has to do with the general culture and social norms within the given culture. It tends to reflect and is reflection of the mores, norms, and cultural habits that persist in the environment over time. Each person within the school contributes to, and is impacted by this culture and the norms associated with it. The second can be an immediate powerful act perpetrated at the school or in the school community that creates change through trauma, fear, and the immediate need for safety. This is often created by one or a small handful of people who inflict aggressive acts on the people or culture of the school. A school mass shooting would fall into this category. But as those incidents are rare, it is still the underlying social environment, mores and norms that are most defining of a school's culture.

Here is where the  $B=MC^2$  formula can be utilized. For an educational leader, this can be a useful, but certainly not the only, tool to alter behavior. A leader can use this formula to identify target behavior that needs change and can systematically, intentionally and purposely address those behaviors in a proactive way. When one works targeted behavior through this formula, change can occur. A teacher can then assess the behavior change in the construct of an improvement cycle. That is, once a teacher identifies the behavior that is targeted, then he or she

can look at the other side of the equation and examine motivations, circumstances and the real or perceived consequences that support, reinforce or fail to deter behavior the behaviors from occurring. He or she can then make purposeful plans and changes for improvement. Once implemented, the teacher can then monitor, measure and assess improvements (or lack thereof). In areas that show improvement, the teacher can continue to implement the factors that support the change. Those that do not work initially can be reviewed, and analyzed to identify the factors that failed to show success or improvement. Other ideas can then be generated. This is a process that can be produced, repeated and changed as part of an improvement cycle. In a best case scenario, several teachers from the same school building may try various strategies and share the results. As improvement occurs, it is natural that others will notice. This might even motivate them to buy in to the process in their own classrooms.

Interested teachers can make this happen. There are these teachers in every school building across America who may see a need for improvement in his or her classroom. They are the ones who are open to looking at new ideas and strategies, to understanding the unique learning styles of their students, and yet who are confident in their approach and role in the classroom. They are the ones looking for new strategies and ways to improve and enhance their classroom experience on an ongoing basis. They go to workshops and expect to come home with usable ideas, not merely going to a mini-vacation with a meeting or two mixed in. And they are willing to collaborate with others to discuss ideas, and challenge the “it’s the way we always did it” approach. They are not afraid to try things due to a fear of failure. Indeed they view failing experiences as learning opportunities and accept the idea that it is OK to fail, as long as one doesn’t give up at that point. And they teach this lesson to their students. Fall seven times, stand up eight.



In many cases, these teachers will self-identify. As they attend workshops on this issue—whether at school based in services or at professional conferences—they will be attracted to the concepts and ideas presented. They will be self-aware and realistic about the climate in their classrooms, and will be searching for ways to enhance student achievement. And they will be willing to be vulnerable to the extent that they will accept new challenges, allow for peer review and adjust styles and strategies as needed. These teachers will tend to be student focused as a principle, and will have at least some understanding that student engagement is an important variable in the learning process. Yet they will also always have as their priority the recognition that the mission of the school is to prepare students not only for the time period the student is in school, but also for the preparation for higher education and/or the readiness to enter the workforce.

Once identified, this teacher or set of teachers can employ strategies within their classroom to create safe cultures that, when implemented effectively, will allow a student to increase his or her attention span, focus and concentration because those students will be free to do so. In Maslow's hierarchy, these teachers will be ensuring that the needs on the bottom of the pyramid are being met—at least during the time the student is in that classroom. While they may not be able to control factors and issues in other parts of the school or in the community, they do have the power to structure, control and create climates within their space. The awareness of how students feel is a major factor that should become a known variable. While some teachers may believe that they are aware of how their students feel and think and that they know what going on out of eye and ear shot, they may be surprised if they ask.

Perhaps there are many teachers and building administrators who fail to understand the culture and reality in the lives of their students. This too will limit their ability to intervene in

complete ways. If one is to make improvements in t changing the climate and culture in a school is to become aware of the factors and culture that the students experience. Student to student interactions and culture will probably be quite different than student to teacher interactions and culture.

A teacher who wants to improve the culture and climate in school, therefore, must become aware of the current experience for students. It cannot be based on the writing of this author, or based on their own perceptions as each of those may be limited in vision and scope. And this can start in a single classroom, with a single teacher, and a single classroom of students. It can start with one teacher or one administrator who notices that students are not reaching their full potential and who want to address this issue. It can start with one teacher or administrator or other educational leader who notices that graduation rates are not at acceptable levels, and who wants to improve this. It can start with teachers talking in the teacher's lounge. It can start as a result of attendance at a workshop, or a discussion in the community, or at an open house, or at the grocery store. It can start with any teacher or leader who recognizes that we can do better for our students if we are willing to commit to a process of improvement. It can start with a group of teachers who believe in their students, believe their students deserve to be in school, deserve to be safe, and deserve to attend school in a safe zone. There are a variety of strategies a teacher might employ. But it means becoming purposely and intentionally aware of a combination of factors, often that fall outside of obvious awareness.

As an example of this, look at the picture/diagram below. Count the total number of squares in the picture.

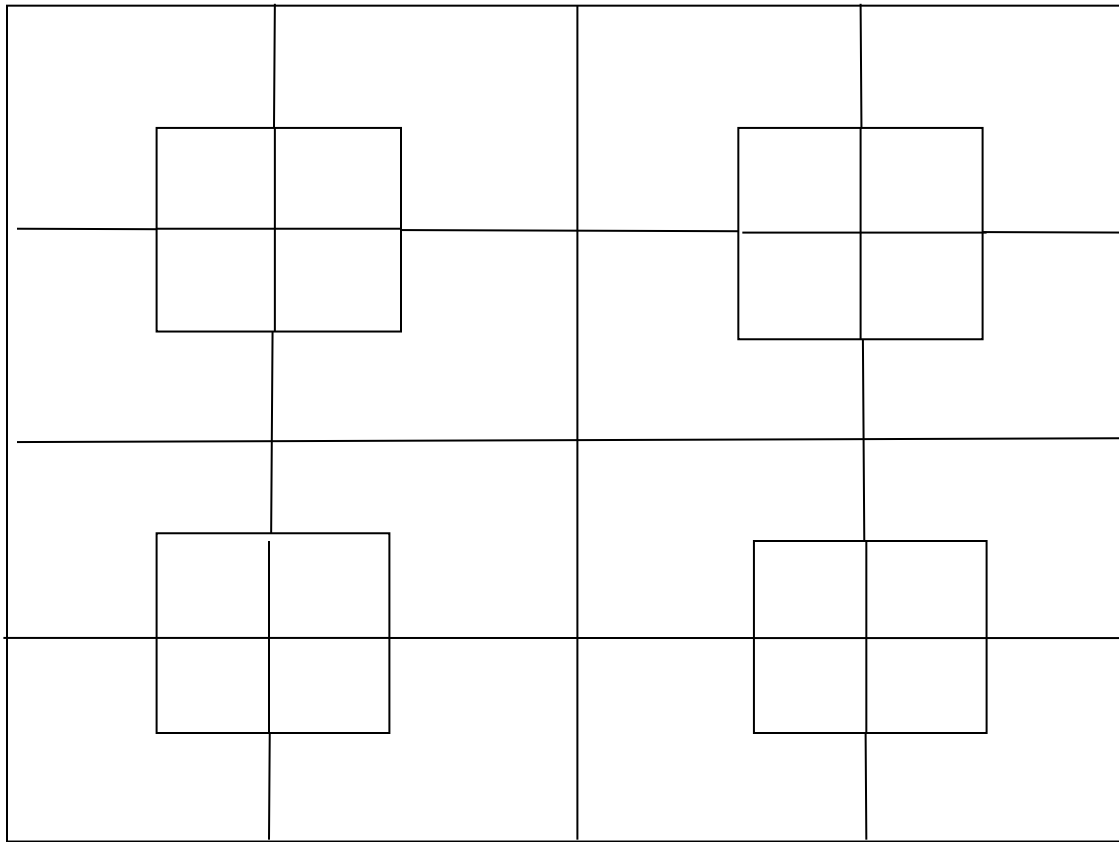


Figure 4.1: Counting Squares

Assuming that these are all parallel and equidistant lines, how many did you count? 27? 32? 36? 40? If you counted any of those numbers, you are correct. There are 27, 32, 36 and 40 squares in the picture. But you would not be seeing the entire picture. There are actually 50 squares there, but we often do not see the entire picture, only pieces of it.

This is true, likewise, when we are observing behavior. There is often more going on than is easily seen. It is important that we make attempts to see the greater picture and see all of the squares.

It might be most beneficial for the teacher to work with the building administrator and discuss the climate, structure and culture as they see it. They may identify some target behaviors that they would like to see improved. From there, the teacher might conduct a listening group or

project, or might use an inventory/survey that students can complete either anonymously or with their names to collect information on the viewpoint of, and from, the eyes, ears, and hearts of the students. What students see, hear, and feel are all important elements in this process. This current collection of information—the students’ perceptions, along with the structure in the classroom, classroom discipline/conflict management styles, make-up of the students in that particular classroom, rules, perceptions of and from the teacher and principal, expectations, curriculum—all are part of the circumstance (in the equation).

Motivations are particular to the individual student. Motivations include both internal and external variables. While a teacher may be able to intervene on the external variables, it is much more difficult to directly and immediately impact the internal motivations. However, it may be advantageous to the teacher to attempt to discover the things that motivate a particular student. Once known, then the teacher may better be able to control consequences to reinforce or deter particular behaviors. Ultimately a teacher does not control behavior. But they can control the consequences and motivators to encourage students to behave in certain ways over another. Shaping behavior can be done this way. And this can be started in a single classroom, monitored, measured, and shared with others who may be watching the process to see how it works for that teacher. And a teacher must understand that he or she is critical in setting the tone in the classroom. Making sure that a student does not “lose face”, pride or dignity is a primary condition and circumstance for a healthy classroom.

Investing in the whole student, not just cognitive development, adds to the overall success and achievement in a range of areas. It is important for teachers to understand student physical, emotional, social and cognitive developmental dynamics. Teachers need to be attentive to students consistently throughout the day, and must supervise transition areas (hallways,

restrooms, cafeteria and bus lines) with diligence. Teachers must know for themselves, and must know how to teach, assertiveness skills, problem solving, conflict management and frustration tolerance skills, as well as helping students learn to ‘hear’ and appropriately deal with being told ‘no’. We use phrases like bystander apathy and assertiveness, and we encourage students to use those skills and to be empowered by that. However many people, including many teachers cannot describe what it means, or how to ‘be’ assertive. This is not a fault, as teachers are not often taught this themselves. But in order for a school to provide a safe and secure atmosphere, these skills must be part of the everyday culture. And students must be able to watch and observe teachers and other adults in the school model these skills when dealing with others—whether that is with other students or teachers, or other adults they come in contact with. And teachers must be able to implement effective behavior management techniques in the classroom and hallways. Here again, teachers will better do this by providing consistent expectations, structure, discipline and follow through over time.

And as loud as their words speak, a teacher’s actions may speak much louder to a student. If a teacher says one thing, and does another, his or her credibility will suffer. If they are inconsistent in how they act or respond to a student, then they will not be viewed as reliable or trustworthy to a student (or to other adults in the building). It is to the best interest of students and teachers if the teacher selects his or her words wisely, act in a way that their behaviors are consistent with their words and messages, and that this is consistent over time. Trust and respect are critical factors for a teacher to earn from their student. One of the strategies to consider is what is called the CRPUT model. This model of communication postulates that if you put these five elements in a relationship, that relationship will improve and will be a working relationship.

The 5 elements are (showing):

- Consideration
- Respect
- Patience
- Understanding
- Tolerance (Gittins, 2014)

If you put these five qualities into a relationship, the relationship will be a workable and productive one. If one is considerate to others through their words, actions and behaviors, this will set a tone of acceptance. It is a first and important factor in relationship development. It says to a person that they are noticed and that they matter. If one shows respect to another, then this lowers defensiveness in that person, and allows all involved to maintain dignity and pride. It also supports the initial measure that the person matters. Feeling ‘disrespected’ is one of the most significant reasons for interpersonal conflict. When we are patient with others, it delivers the message that we are attentive to the needs of that person. Not everyone works at the same pace, nor ‘gets it’ (i.e., math lessons) as fast as others, thus it is important to support the message of respect with the factor of patience. Understanding of the persons is also important. In addition to supporting the first three variables, it shows an appreciation of and for differences. People are people. We all enter relationships with a history. These personal narratives and history make up who we are to that particular point in time. If we are able to consciously understand that others all have a history including challenges, fears, pain, relationships, etc, then this can support the message of respect for those differences and lowers the pre-judging that often is a barrier to effective communication. And lastly, if we are tolerant of others, then we can work with them effectively. Sometimes people get into the habit of expecting more of others than they do of themselves. Sometimes people have expectations of others that are unrealistic and are bound to

lead to disappointment and frustration. But, if we understand that others have history, are respectful of that history, and are considerate of what others might be going through at any one moment, then we are better able to be patient and tolerant of them, even when they are not living up to the expectations we have of them.

Notice that ‘like’ is not one of those required elements. One does not have to like their co-workers to have a working relationship with them; one does not have to like their teacher, nor the teacher needs to like the student for the relationship to be productive; students do not have to like each other to be able to work together. As long as the above 5 criteria are in place, the relationship can work.

Again, in a parallel analogy, while moving a potted plant to a sunnier location may be an easy step, changing the acidity level in that soil may be a longer process. And for those plants that are in the ground and not in a portable container, movement may not be possible as an option at all. We do have to work with what we have to work with. In some cases, changing the soil to the correct balance may take a process over a couple of years. In these, changes may need to occur in steps rather than an all at once. And rather than an immediate and full solution, improvement steps are probably a more realistic strategy. As we learn from the steps taken—do, assess, adjust—improvement can be steady and consistent allowing for more solid and complete growth to occur.

### **Role of Community Key Stakeholders**

Many stakeholders will have roles in this improvement idea. But what might those roles look like for community members?

It will look different with each district and community because each district and community is unique. Each will have its own strengths, weaknesses, challenges, opportunities,

and personalities. And each will need to develop its own plan to respond to the unique dynamics in its community. Each may start at a different spot. So assessing each unique scenario will be important.

In this regard, it will be important to identify a small group of stakeholders who believe that a change might be needed and beneficial to the system. Identifying key stakeholders who believe it is necessary to create change and improvement AND who will be willing to try a new approach will be a good starting spot.

It is necessary for the stakeholders to take ownership in changing the climate in the overall school community. And other than the students, they are the persons who are most familiar with, and who will have the most to gain or lose in the process of successes and failures. The educational leaders—whether that is a teacher in his or her classroom, an administrator of a building, a district superintendent, or a member of the academy or a member of the community—who are invested and motivated to see change can use some strategies to make improvements in a consistent manner. However, getting capacity and commitment to change on a broader level is not always easy. At every level, not everyone will jump on board from the beginning. This is true with community leaders as well as in the school system itself. Some may reject the need for change, or reject being asked to be the role of the agent of change. Some will be open to the possibility that changes in overall community climate can improve school achievement, but will wait to see the results before joining in. And some will be on board from the beginning, recognizing the room and a need for improvement.

But how does one work to secure commitment to change from the agents of change in a group? In *The Improvement Guide*, Gerald Langley and his colleagues talk about the guidelines for getting commitment to change. Langley and colleagues note that “guidelines have proven



useful in helping people minimize resistance to change and get the desired commitments of those affected by change.” (Langley, 2009) According to Langley, et. al., these guidelines are:

- Create the will in the organization to adapt to change. The leaders in the organization can help people with this by communicating in four ways
- Dissatisfaction. People need to be unhappy about the current situation. If happiness within the status quo isn't there, create it
- Direction: Relentlessly communicate what the change is, why it is necessary, and what people ought to be doing right now with as much clarity as possible
- Overconfidence: Express excessive faith that the change will succeed and will be worth the pain, time and money in the end. Create a self-fulfilling prophecy, regardless of the success rate anywhere else
- Embrace the mess. Accept that there will be errors, setbacks, miscommunications, frayed nerves, and frightening rumors when an organization tries to do something new, no matter how well the change is planned
- Provide information on why the change supports the purpose of the organization
- empathize with the anxiety created by the change (but do not expect to eliminate it)
- show how change supports the purpose of the organization

- Put the change in historical perspective
- Link the change to the outside customer
- Reframe the change as an exciting opportunity, not something being forced on people
- Offer specific Information on how the change will affect people
- use results from testing cycles to share visual displays of data and results
- Discuss how the job will benefit people, that is, how it will make their job easier
- Be prepared to discuss questions, requests for clarification, and ideas about change
- Study rational objections to change and be prepared to address them
- Get consensus on solutions, resources and other necessary support to implement change
- Decide on a plan of action with defined milestones and dates
- Ask leaders and key people in all parts of the organization to show their support
- Express confidence in the ability of those who must carry out the change
- Publicize the change: use symbolism (stories, analogies, pictures, staged events)
- Summarize all key points and arguments made

- Show appreciation for the efforts of everyone who was involved in the development and testing of the change
- Take advantage of significant events and tie the implementation of the change to those events.” (Langley, 2009)

While not each of these guidelines is specifically relevant to this particular targeted problem, these guidelines can help focus discussions and target direction for improvement. These guidelines can be used by the educational leader whether he or she is situated in the school, the community, or the academy. “Using a cycle of improvement model known as PDSA (Plan, Do, Study, Act), agents of change can target behaviors, plan action steps to change, do something to implement strategies of change, study (assess) the impact of changes, and act on adjustments needed based on the process of the cycle.” (Langley, 2009)

Each time one goes through a cycle, learning will occur. As additional people notice and are wanting to try their own cycles, each can share and build on the ideas and work of others. Then, as agents of change continue to share and discuss with others, interest will grow, more people will develop and share their cycles and stories, the information about improvement will grow, and improvement will happen. This impact will be generative in scope. And it will be done throughout the principal of attraction, rather than through forced promotion. That is, people will be attracted to the improvements and will be self-motivated, rather than prescribed what to do, and only working on it from an externally motivated place. Community Key Stakeholders can be the *driver* to initiate this change towards improvement. The more community members are involved in the overall educational process in the community, the stronger the school and process is likely to be. Community Key stakeholders can hold district and building

administrators, and teachers and other school staff accountable to the welfare of the children in the community. But this too involves cooperation, participation and knowledge of the processes in place. If members are active and involved in a sincere way strong bridges can be built between the school and community. If efforts are critical for the sake of being critical, and are not sincere in efforts to make improvements as a team, then it is more likely to result in resentment, distrust, and may have poor effects on this process, thus becoming a barrier rather than a support.

### **Role of the Academy**

Teacher preparation, selection and development are also important variables. This is why it is important for the Academy to be involved. The Academy is where the next generation of teachers, educators and leaders will be developed and defined. Ineffective practices at this level will lead to eventual ineffective practices in the school building and classroom.

It is important for the Academy to prepare teachers to deal with the ‘whole student’, and not just prepare them to teach content. Effective preparation might include classes and preparation in curriculum and content first, but will also include lessons on classroom management, behavior management, conflict resolution, child development and communication skills, among others. One way to look at it is that the preparing teacher’s education could include developing a complete tool box and skill development in engaging and working with the whole child as part of the ongoing overall preparation. Of course content is the priority as that is what school is primarily about. But as is what is presented in this paper, effective teaching that allows for full student growth involves much more than mere content. The more effective a culture the teacher can create, the more learning potential and opportunity can occur in that classroom. And this really formally begins with the future teacher’s preparation in the Academy.

Knowledge of a student's developmental stage is a consideration in this. For instance, the needs of students in early elementary levels are different than the needs of middle school students and those of high school students. Gathering information and increasing awareness of 'where the students are' begins to give the teacher a roadmap to improvement in the culture of the classroom. Once gathered, the information can allow the teacher to make improvements in the culture for students in the classroom as needed. Some ideas and strategies will work quickly, others will be slower, and some may not work so well the first time through and thus will need to be evaluated and adjusted. There are a variety of strategies, techniques and tools that a teacher can use to collect this initial data. It does involve effort and planning. And it involves a teacher being motivated to become aware of the culture of the classroom from the students perspective.

Teacher and administrator preparation needs to occur at the academy level; and this must include improved knowledge and skill development in problem solving, conflict resolution, classroom and behavior management, and knowledge of adolescent development and cultural influences. Bystander awareness and intervention, problem solving, and assertiveness skills must be incorporated in teacher preparation. School teachers and administrators must know the difference between passive, aggressive and assertive responses, and how to control for each. The academy must teach these concepts and stress how they impact student learning and growth. And the academy must teach the skills necessary to implement and teach these skills to future teachers as tools to use in the classroom. Awareness is not enough if we do not give the tools and skills to fix the issue. A mechanic's awareness that a car needs new brakes is limited in impact if they do not have the skills and knowledge of how to repair those brakes.

## Chapter 5: Conclusions

### Building Cathedrals

In his book, *The Cathedral Within: Transforming Your Life by Giving Something Back*, author Bill Shore uses a metaphor to discuss how the architectural visionaries who built the ancient Cathedrals knew that even though they had a great vision, goal and final idea of what their life's work would look like when completed, they also knew that the work would take far longer to complete than the years they would have to work on it. (Shore, 2001) His book noted that the magnificence, beauty and grandeur of a Cathedral is not built overnight. In fact, he suggests, this will take many, many workers, a very long time to build. Shore posits that indeed, most of the visionaries who started the work would not be alive to see it to its completion. But that did not indicate that it was not a good reason to not start. Rather, he suggests, this is more of building a legacy that lasts far longer than the architect or the builders. And, when done completely, the finished product too will last for a very long time (barring any purposeful destruction of it). In the process of building, there will be many workers, each with an important role to play. And each responsible to add the bricks that they are able. Each can contribute to the outcome. And through the efforts starting at one, and building outward from there with the efforts of others who joined in the construction the Cathedral emerges in all its glory and intention. If each just adds a few bricks where they can, then each contributes to the final product. This, I think, is a metaphor that describes the process of making improvement changes in our schools as discussed in this paper. It will take years, maybe even generations, to get to the point where all students feel safe in their schools on a nationwide basis. The changes needed will not occur quickly. The finished product will take time. And it will take the efforts of many people together to finish the task. But it can start with one. It can start in each school with one

visionary architect who thinks that there can be something magnificent built within his or her reach. And as others see the vision and work, they too may be recruited to work on the project. They too may want to be part of that finished product. And that is where it can begin. That is where the work described in this paper begins. One person, one vision, recruiting others to follow—not necessarily by promotion, but perhaps rather by attraction, people seeing the success and wanting to be a part of it—laying one brick at a time towards the finished product that may take longer to complete than one has to live. But in the process, one can give. And in this case, that one, and those ones, can give to students, schools, communities and the society. Feeling safe matters.

### **Lessons I Have Learned From Professional Practice**

Throughout my working career as a Counselor & Child and Family Therapist at outpatient and residential treatment programs, Chief Operating Officer of a Behavioral Health Agency, Program Director, Crisis Counselor, and Founder and Executive Director of a private practice dealing with anger management issues, I have had many encounters with clients who were dealing with the issue of safety in their lives. It has had sad and negative impacts and consequences for many of them. And these consequences were not always only from the results of, or fear of, one's physical safety. While I have worked with many people dealing with the issue of physical aggression and sexual violence—both the victimized and the victimizer—my work has also included the issues of psychological, emotional and social safety as well. When a person, regardless of age, continues to hear that they are “worthless, unwanted, undeserving, unvalued”, it can have a tremendous impact on their emotional psyche and their behavior. I have witnessed this with kids in juvenile lock-ups, foster placements, schools and other social arenas where I have worked. Not only is it sad to watch, but it is also noticeable that being subjected to

this treatment consistently over time affects these children. When they are told this over and over, when they hear it from people who are supposed to know about, and care for them, then it is very possible that they begin to internalize this belief. Sometimes they even internalize the beliefs as their personal narrative. I have seen it happen with children, adolescents and even adults.

I have worked with a 50 year old man who was constantly berated by his 75 year old father to the point that he felt—even at that age—worthless and not wanted. He felt incompetent and that he was really not able to do things that others around him were able to do. It took several years of counseling to get him to understand and internalize a new narrative—one that gave him independence, confidence and the courage to take risks to try and succeed.

I worked with a 33 year old male who spent 15 years incarcerated in the Pennsylvania State prison system. As if this would not be enough to impact someone's confidence and belief that he could be successful, those particular 15 years occurred at a time that I would define as perhaps the biggest change in the world in the previous 200 years, if not more. He went to prison in 1987 and came out in 2002. When he went in, there were no cell phones, no substantial number of personal computers, and certainly no widespread use of the internet. When he came out of prison, he felt intimidated. Not physically, as he surely could 'handle himself' from a physical perspective. But rather, he was intimidated on social and psychological levels. He did not know the world anymore. It had changed significantly in the time he was incarcerated and it was foreign to him. And with the particular record he had, he did not have much support, nor many supporters around him. This left him feeling alone, isolated, and scared. He did not have the wherewithal to survive in this new culture and environment, and did not feel safe and wanted in it. His goal, within a year, was to re-enter the prison system, even with the knowledge that it



would be the ‘third strike’ and meant that he would die in prison. The failure to feel wanted and safe—psychologically, socially (cognitively) and emotionally—had such an impact on him that he gave up and wanted to avoid society. Clearly these feeling impacted his achievement and potential.

And I have witnessed this in children and adolescents. I have seen them be so scared at and about school—the climate and culture there—that they would prefer to avoid that scene, despite the consequences this may have on their future. I have worked with school aged students who would get physically sick over the thought of going to school on any given day. I have witnessed kids do very self-destructive things so as not to have to face the reality of the conditions in their school. I have seen kids self-sabotage to get suspended from school, just so they wouldn’t have to go there. I have worked with kids who have carried weapons to school, not with the intent to be an aggressor or a perpetrator, but rather out of a fear for their own physical safety within the walls of the building where they were mandated to go. I have worked with kids who have very clearly stated that they would skip school if they were made to go; use drugs to avoid the pain and/or anxiety associated with it; threaten to jump out of a second story window if made to go to school; and I have worked with kids who would prefer to change schools just to get out of a situation that was bad for them.

Perhaps most sadly, I have worked with educational leaders who minimize the degree of fear and anxiety these students have. I have talked with administrators who believe the specific child just needs to “toughen up” and work through it. Educational leaders who project attitudes that “boys will be boys”, that every child needs to go through this, it is a rite of passage, and who wear selective blinders in regard to the dynamics going on in their school. I have worked with teachers who are careless with their words and have told children things like, “if you want

to be a writer, you might as well buy yourself a van and live down by the river because that's all that field will ever amount too" (actually told to my daughter who is considering a degree in literature). There are the numerous stories of teachers who have had inappropriate sexual contact with their students; coaches who have belittled and degraded their players or who have turned their heads to instances of "athletic hazing" in school locker room—including physical and sexual aggression. And I have worked with teachers who have not been taught to, or who fail to recognize the importance of their role in engaging students in aspects of their lives beyond curriculum content.

While it is not a teacher's role to "raise" their students, it is critical that they recognize the importance they have in the lives of their students—for good or for bad. For many students, during the school year, they will spend more time with their teachers and in school than they do interacting with their parents. These realities are important for all educational leaders to recognize and address in the intentional planning and development of culture in their schools. When students do not feel safe—physically, emotionally, cognitively or socially—then this will affect the development of the potential of the students in that school. If one is scared, then he or she will have difficulty in his or her concentration, focus and attention span. This in turn will impact his or her learning potential and if continued over a period of time, achievement.

Why should we care? Why does that matter for a student? Why does that matter to a student? Why does it matter to the school community? Why does it matter to me?

It matters because if a student does not feel safe, then he or she loses some of his or her focus, concentration and learning potential. Lost learning potential is lost opportunity. And lost opportunity steals futures. Even one lost future is a sad thing.

Indeed, in the words of American Poet John Greenleaf Whittier, in his poem Maud Muller, “For all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these, It might have been.” (Whittier, 1897)

### **Lessons Learned From This Research Project**

As noted throughout this paper, our schools can do better. Our students and children deserve for our schools to do better. Current graduation rates and/or work ready skills are not at a level that they could be. We can make improvements in these areas. We can make our schools a better and safer place for our students to grow. We can create cultures that are physically, emotionally, socially and cognitively safe for all students within the parameters of a given district. We need to create cultures that promote growth and engagement to more fully serve our students. But this is not always easy. It takes effort, energy and planning. It takes a proactive approach that is purposeful and intentional on the part of District Administrators, Building Administrators, teachers and staff within a school. But change most often occurs gradually over time. In reality, change is most likely accomplished in small steps of improvement, in small cycles, often done by individual teachers and other leaders who will try new things. And as these small groups of people create change and experience success, others will notice. Others will notice and see the benefits of the change improvements. Some of these others will be moved to create their own change. And when enough of these leaders make small changes, and learn and build from each other, greater change can occur. These smaller improvement cycles can be the drivers for others to try new things to improve the culture in their districts, in their buildings, in their classrooms, in their communities.

It is important for this to occur for our students to be able to learn in cultures that are supportive and safe for them. It is important for our students to see that the benefits of education

far outweigh the costs of not getting that education. It is important that our students see that there are personal, social, interpersonal, financial and emotional benefits of education. And it is important that they are provided the necessary conditions in which they can fully grow. This takes the effort of many individuals to make these broad cultural changes to the climates in schools. Members of the community must feel trust and confidence in the other players around them.

As examined in the first section of this paper, this problem is long standing, deeply and culturally engrained and perhaps resistant to change. The research has demonstrated that a student's perception of safety will impact his or her achievement. It can't help but to impact it. If a student is scared, then his or her attention, focus and concentration will be necessarily divided between the academic goals and the student's need to feel safe. This has been supported by the presented research, theoretical constructs and narratives described throughout this writing.

This paper has also shown that there are key stakeholders that are important in, and to the process. The culture will have the best chance at improvement if these stakeholders are active, engaged, intentional and purposeful in their roles. Our students depend on them for guidance, support, structure, consistency, predictability and, as the baseline, helping to create climates and cultures where students can feel safe. If we are able to provide these conditions, then it gives our students a stronger opportunity to grow and achieve.

District Administrators must support, guide and create climates and cultures for Building Administrators to lead at their level. It is important for the building administrator to be aware of the day to day dynamics of his or her teachers and students, and to support the educational process by setting the tone in an individual building. And it is important for our teachers to be

aware of the dynamics and the culture that the students experience on a day to day basis, and to create cultures that support their ability to focus, concentrate and learn without fear.

As this culture improves and students feel safer, then it will be predicted that their attention span, focus and concentration all can increase as anxiety decreases. Small improvements should be recognized, analyzed and shared with other teachers who notice and express interest. Shared stories between teachers, improved achievement, decreased classroom conflicts, being able to spend more time on learning and less on discipline are all improvement measures that can have a generative impact. Indeed, if a student becomes more successful, and has a good experience in school, that value may also be shared with peers, may allow them to succeed in higher education and/or the workforce, and may be passed down to the next generation. Generative indeed.

As highlighted in the second section of the paper, the community also has a distinct and important role to play because it is there that a student lives and attends school. And each community has its own distinct culture and climate. This too directly impacts the student in regard to his or her perceptions of safety and support in the community and school. If a student believes that an education is not valued or valuable, he or she may not outwardly show motivation for academic achievement. If a student is ridiculed for being successful in school, or if there exists a social cost of school success as part of the culture, this too may negatively impact a student. If a child is in fear of going home because he or she might get beat, or abused, this will impact that child's focus, attention and concentration within the classroom. As noted in Maslow's hierarchy, if a student does not feel safe, then he or she must work to get that need fulfilled before moving on to higher levels of functioning. If the child has no food in the home, or is left to take care of younger siblings, his or her attention may be divided, and those other

areas will take priority over school work. In an ironic twist of fate, the very education that may help to improve the student's personal future, and may help them improve his or her overall quality of life, may be of low priority to that student at the time in life when it is available to, and required for the student. As noted previously, things that are important *for* the student may not be important *to* the student. Thus it is important for all educational leaders—from the community leaders to District Leaders, to Building leaders to classroom leaders--to consider this also as a circumstance in the student's life that will help or hinder the future.

These are some of the learning opportunities that have been presented and supported throughout this paper.

### **Where the Work Goes From Here**

It must be recognized, understood and included in the planning that change does not happen overnight. Ideas, even good ones, are not always accepted and implemented by everyone in a given environment. Some members will be accepting of new ideas and willing, even eager to try some new things. Others may be open to hearing about the ideas, but might decide to sit back and wait to see the results of others' efforts before making the efforts needed to create improvement change. And for some, there will be resistance to anything new. This is a long term agenda. It is best viewed in that light. This is an agenda that will be improvement by practice. That is, as one practices, assesses, alters and adapts, improvement will occur. From this cycle, one might see positive results through the practice, but must also continue to assess, alter, adapt and evaluate. Others then may view the results and replicate in their own practice, creating their own cycles of improvement change. As each creates cycles of improvement, and share and build on each other's' practice, this work can become generative in scope.

But there remain many questions and room for new thoughts, ideas, strategies, and implementation steps that must be addressed.

For example, are we adequately preparing teachers? In regard to creating safer cultures and climates for students, do teachers have the knowledge and skill sets to adequately handle the behavioral issues they are being faced with? Do they know how to create a culture and classroom environment that is safe and secure? If so, what are those skill sets? How can we help other teachers acquire them? What skills and/or resources do teachers need that they do not have now? What are the different skills that teachers need for different levels of students? What needs and developmental issues are present in an elementary school that differ or from a high school? Does a one semester student teaching assignment adequately prepare a teacher to deal with some of the issues they are faced with? These are some questions that leaders in the Academy might ask when they are focused on educational improvement.

For there to be a comprehensive and transformative model of education, all educational leaders—those with titles, and those without those titles—must work together. The academy needs to teach and instill the importance of consistency, structure, discipline and follow through over time.

In recommendations made by Attorney General, Eric Holder, “all school personnel are trained in classroom management, conflict resolution and approaches to de-escalate classroom disruptions. Among other recommendation (he adds), it should be ensured that school personnel understand that they are responsible for administering routine student discipline instead of security or police officers...draw clear distinctions about the responsibilities of school security personnel...and provide opportunities for school security officers to develop relationships with students and parents” (Government, 2014). His suggestion is that all district personnel must

know how to mediate conflict, manage behaviors effectively and quickly in the classroom, set standards and expectations, live them and model them. Teachers need to be the leaders in the classroom and not “pass that on” to the building administrators. In many cases, teachers might spend more time with students during a school year than any other adult in their lives. Teachers must also realize the critical role that they play. They should be taught the importance of, and connection of, safety in academic performance. They should be taught that part of their role is to be an active bystander and to intervene and teach appropriate responses to infractions when necessary. They must not minimize the behaviors as merely teasing, or things all kids have to go through. But this takes a knowledge base. When and how should a student be expected to stand up for him or herself as opposed to seeking out and receiving help in dealing with these issues?

Leaders must too, be aware of the climate in the school, and the reality of the pecking order society of schools. They cannot just merely back those they like. There should be an understanding of the importance of visibility and presence of adults to enhance the feelings of safety and supervision in a school. And academies should not expect that these skills just come naturally to a teacher. Teachers might also be afraid or avoidant of conflict and choose not to get involved, to minimize, or deflect. This is not acceptable. Effective classroom management skills, student management skills, conflict mediation skills may not come natural to all people, so must be taught to all. It is better that some receive a review of the information rather than miss out on it altogether. And a semester or two of field placement may not enough for many teachers.

“Example is not the main thing in influencing others, it is the only thing.”      Albert  
Schweitzer



Perhaps many of us can see that it is important for a student to perceive that his or her school is a safe place, one in which they are valued, wanted, welcomed, important—one where they matter. Perhaps many of us can vision that it is important to all of us what happens to the least fortunate of us. Perhaps many of us can see that people are valued and deserve dignity because they are, for no other reason than because they are people. Maybe some of us understand that many of the students in poor financial areas aren't so poor in heart, in spirit, in integrity, in character, in honesty, in love. Maybe some of us see that all students matter and deserve a solid education and to know that they are valuable just because they are. Maybe some of us recognize that a person's character is not defined by what they have, or what they drive, or the thickness of their wallet. Maybe some of us see that many of these young people value and want an education, want to help others, want to survive AND thrive, want to show the honor they feel. Maybe some of us see that all students have a right to an education.

Indeed, even in the non-school workplace, companies are beginning to realize the importance of engagement of employees to boost productivity within their ranks. According to a Gallop Poll noted in the State of the American Workplace Report, "Organizations that successfully engaged employees saw a 240% BOOST in performance-related outcomes" (Sorenson, 2013). This is a large improvement in productivity. It is one that can be noted as too large to ignore.

But not everyone has that vision. Not everyone will agree with that. Perhaps some people will view the failures in the school on the students themselves, suggesting that they are not motivated nor interested enough to want to succeed. Maybe they think that students in areas where poverty is high, crime rates are high, drug use is rampant, and where there is high unemployment as areas where students just don't care, or that they would rather be home, maybe

doing drugs or stealing. Maybe they think that the government shouldn't put effort or energy into these areas under the guise that 'it will just get wasted anyway.' Maybe some people will blame the school district, the teachers, and the administrators. Maybe some people will just blame anybody or anything just because that is what they do. Maybe people will not want to change, or will want to go 'back to the way things were'. And maybe some people are too hurting themselves, or too self-absorbed to care. Maybe some people have no direct connections to a school and therefore are just not invested in it. Maybe some people are unaware of the size and scope of the problem. And maybe some people know that something needs to be done, but don't have the knowledge, energy, confidence or other motivation to get active in this. Indeed it is not easy.

### **Obtaining Compliance Can Be A Challenge**

And even for those who recognize the critical nature and importance of creating a culture and climate that is safe for all persons within the school community, compliance is not always that easy. Even for those who have the knowledge base and stated commitment to address the issue, getting compliance and follow through over time is not easy.

In his book, *Better: a Surgeon's Notes on Performance*, Atul Gawande (2007), a general surgeon, notes that,

"Each year, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, two million Americans acquire an infection while they are in the hospital. Ninety thousand die of that infection. The hardest part of the infection-control team's job, Yokoe says, is not coping with the variety of contagions they encounter or the panic that sometimes occurs among patients and staff. Instead, their greatest difficulty is

getting clinicians like me to do the one thing that consistently halts the spread of infections: wash our hands.” (Gawande, 2007)

Here is an example of people (surgeons and other hospital personnel) who should know that washing hands is an important part of everyday practice. It is easy. It is important. It saves lives. The procedure is understood. In short, there are no good reasons that hospital personnel fail to complete the practice of washing their hands on a consistent basis when that mere act can save lives. Yet, compliance is not as easy as understanding and/or awareness. In the hospital this referenced, posters had been placed on walls as reminders and visual cues, sinks had been repositioned for easier access, new sinks have been installed for convenience, some sinks have even been automated to allow for an easier “no touch” process. Yet compliance was lacking. And this issue continues in hospitals to this day. In an article in *The New York Times*, entitled, “With Money at Risk, Hospitals Push Staff to Wash hands”, Anemona Hartocollis (2013) notes that “Studies have shown that without encouragement, hospital workers wash their hands as little as 30 percent of the time that they interact with patients”. The article goes on to say that, “With drug-resistant superbugs on the rise, according to a recent report by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and with hospital-acquired infections costing \$30 billion and leading to nearly 100,000 patient deaths a year, hospitals are willing to try almost anything to reduce the risk of transmission.” (Hartocollis, 2013) And it quotes Dr. Bruce Farber, Chief of Infectious Control at North Shore Hospital (Long Island) saying, “This is not a quick fix; this is a war,” . (Hartocollis, 2013) So in response, “motion sensors, like those used for burglar alarms, go off every time someone enters an intensive care room. The sensor triggers a video camera, which transmits images halfway around the world to India, where workers are checking to see if doctors and nurses are performing a critical procedure: washing their hands.” (Hartocollis, 2013)

One might ask, why when something is so overwhelmingly helpful and known, and easy to do, and convenient, and important, and even life saving, would getting people to comply be such a difficult thing to do? And while there may be many stated “reasons” people do not do this—dry skin, too busy, thinking about too many other things, the tedium of it, resistance to being told what to do, it would seem that there are very few acceptable reasons.

Likewise, creating climates and cultures in schools that make a positive difference is not a quick and easy fix. It takes the commitment and action steps by the school building administrators, the teachers the guidance office workers, the front office staff, the bus drivers, the cafeteria workers, the physical education teachers (and in this case, this is a critical area because of the wide gap in skills and the reality of a pecking order in schools that are often displayed in gym classes), the custodians—ultimately every adult member of the school community.

### **Culture Matters**

If we teach students that no one really cares, no one has time for them, no one is invested in them or looking out for them, then they will learn that no one really cares, that no one really has the time for them, that no one is invested in them or looking out for them. This is an important role of the school, academy and the community. Perhaps if this is what our children learn, they will not do so well in reaching their fullest potential.

*Effective educational leaders and administrators must have the courage to have difficult ethical and moral discussions with the teachers, support workers, staff, community members and other key stakeholders surrounding the specific issues within their school buildings and communities. And they must have the courage to make difficult decisions even if they are not popular ones.*

And it is important that the educational leader in any community engages and attracts followers in this process, rather than forcing it on people. This attract, engage and follow format allows team players to have ownership in, be part in the development and implementation of, and be responsible for some of the results of the improvements in education will empower those players in their choices. This in itself can instill pride and lead to those players wanting to share their excitement and results with others. As this continues to occur, growth happens at many places at a time. These teachers, administrators, community members, and members of the academy can all plant seeds that can grow into trees. Over time, as more seeds get planted, and as more trees, grow, one might soon see the makings of a forest. And forests do a lot for each and every one of us. Effective, fully realized educational opportunities for all students can equally do a lot for each and every one of us.

### **More Lessons To be Learned**

But there are many more lessons to learn. This is an initial step in a long term agenda. In this research paper, there are not solutions for all situations, events, circumstances that occur. Hopefully it has been defined that each setting is different and thus a one size fits all approach is not sufficient. The needs of a school district in Alaska will be very different than those of a school in Texas or Florida. What works in a rural school district in Vermont may not work as well in an urban school in New York City. The cultural differences in communities of a Native American school district will be different than those of a school in Southern Mississippi. And each must evaluate their own culture and district individually.

Issues of legal liability have been touched upon, but not in depth. In the very litigious society in which we live, these concerns cannot be overlooked.

Issues of discipline variations between students that have an Individualized Education Plan vs those that do not have been explored here, but this could clearly be an area of focus in and of itself.

Teacher preparation at the Academy level has been touched upon, but again, this area could be reviewed, researched and questioned as an individual project. Are our teachers prepared well enough? If not, what else can we do?

How can one more effectively engage students, teachers, and parents in the process? How do we continue to work on compliance? What creative learning styles can reduce the conflicts in a classroom? How do we intervene to help students and other bystanders of an ‘unsafe’ environment feel more energy, ownership, confidence and able to help those who need it? Are there differences in reactions or student perceptions of safety when the fear originates from a one time, severe event (such as a shooting) versus if it is a chronic exposure to more moderate levels of behaviors?

And as we explore and find some effective solutions and improvement strategies, how do we make them generative in impact? Each of these could be its own research topic.

### **A Final Call To Action**

Members of the School, Members of the Academy, and Members of the Community, it is important that you question this issue. It is important that you learn. It is important that you teach. This is an invitation to dive into the problem. Our schools, our children are hurting. If we fail—and make no question about it that there is a potential for failure—we hurt all of us. We hurt our children, we hurt our families, we hurt our communities, and we hurt our future. These changes must begin with us. They can start with one or two people who are committed to the improvement of education in our schools. Every person can ‘add their own bricks to the

Cathedral’. But we cannot build the Cathedral overnight. Nor do we need to. What is important is that we start. One person with one vision who is willing to try to make some improvements has the ability to make improvements. And this has the potential to recruit others to do the same. And when there are enough people making improvements, then generative impacts will occur. It does not take changes at the macro level to create improvement at the local level. Change and improvement can start anywhere, anytime with committed and caring individuals. As noted in the words of the late US Anthropologist, Margaret Mead, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” (Mead, 2009)

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