An Ounce of Prevention

IMPROVING JOB CORPS CENTER CLIMATE AND SAFETY

The MTC Institute was asked by leaders of the Education & Training Division to research evidence-based strategies for improving student safety. A review of the literature shows that students are safer in a positive school climate. This paper outlines best practices for improving school climate, examines lessons from three struggling schools that improved student safety through school climate improvement initiatives, and concludes with recommendations for MTC to implement a comprehensive center climate improvement plan.

PREVENTION IS THE BEST MEDICINE

When it comes to the safety and security of Job Corps students, prevention is the best medicine. While plans for responding to immediate threats to students' emotional and physical safety are vitally important, creating a more positive center climate will prevent many threats to student safety from occurring in the first place.

School climate improvement involves all staff and students working together to define and reinforce positive behavior. It also involves all staff and students working together to create an inviting campus where each student feels safe, supported, and fully engaged in their learning. Positive school climate is associated with:[1]

- Higher levels of academic achievement
- Increased graduation rates
- Increased teacher satisfaction
- Closing student achievement gaps
- Fewer disciplinary problems
- Reductions in violence

For several years now, schools and districts across the nation have been implementing school climate improvement plans, including many schools experiencing high rates of violence and disruptive behaviors. Several of these schools have seen significant improvements in school climate and safety, including schools with demographics and challenges similar to those of many Job Corps centers. This paper outlines the common elements of successful school climate improvement, highlights the results of some schools that have seen significant improvements to student climate and safety, and concludes with recommendations for MTC Job Corps centers to develop and implement school climate improvement plans.

WHAT DO SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL CLIMATE MODELS HAVE IN COMMON?

The elements of successful school climate improvement are outlined in a report by the U.S. Department of Education (DoE) entitled *Guiding Principles: A Resource Guide for Improving School Climate and Discipline*.[2] The report synthesizes existing research on improving school climate, discipline, and safety into a set of guidelines for schools seeking to improve their school climate. Some of the guidelines from that report that can be adapted to Job Corps centers include:

- Setting achievable and measurable center climate goals

MTC Institute

- Implementing multi-tiered positive behavioral supports
- Promoting social and emotional learning to complement academic skills and encourage positive behavior
- Training and evaluating all staff on sound strategies to motivate and engage students in learning

Setting Achievable and Measurable Center Climate Goals

The development of measurable and achievable goals should involve a comprehensive needs assessment that captures data on the behavior and perceptions of both staff and students. There are several important measures of school climate beyond the number of disciplinary infractions or violent incidents. There are several evidence-based assessment tools available to help schools measure school climate in a more holistic way and identify areas for improvement. One common assessment, the Inviting Schools Survey, measures how the "five P's": people, places, programs, policies, and processes foster a safe, supportive, and engaged learning environment.[3]

In a Job Corps setting, center climate goals would be tied to existing performance results, such as: the OMS and Student Safety Survey results. It would also include looking at disciplinary separations, AWOL separations, and student resignations as an indicator of student engagement and center climate. Collection of these school climate data would take place within the current data tracking systems, eliminating the need for new data tracking systems.

In addition to existing measures, MTC is currently developing a student engagement survey to be use at all Job Corps centers. The survey, along with regular focus group feedback, will help center directors assess areas in which centers can improve their student engagement and center climate efforts.

Implementing Multi-Tiered Positive Behavioral Supports

Schools can improve climate, reduce the need for disciplinary action, and improve social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes for students by implementing a positive behavioral supports system. This system includes:

- **Universal supports** – primary, school-wide supports and interventions that set and model expected behavior for all staff and students; establish clear and logical incentives and consequences; and are incorporated into all center settings and activities
- **Targeted supports** – secondary supports and interventions used for students with mild to moderate misbehaviors or who are displaying moderate risk factors. They may include peer mentoring, group interventions, and team building
- **Intensive supports** – tertiary supports and interventions for students with the most severe misbehaviors or trauma. They provide individualized responses and may include intensive behavior management or mental health treatment

It is best to include staff and students in the development of universal supports and interventions, including expected behaviors and consequences. Universal supports and interventions set the tone for the culture and climate the school wants to develop. In addition to setting the norms for appropriate

behavior, the most effective universal supports and interventions teach students skills such as self-awareness and self-management so that they are well-equipped to make appropriate choices. When effective universal supports are in place, it is much easier for staff and other students to identify those in need of targeted and intensive interventions.

Examples of behavioral supports at MTC centers

Many of MTC's Job Corps centers already have many of the pieces of a multi-tiered behavioral supports system in place. The positive normative culture approach is one example that has been used in some MTC centers. Positive normative culture sets clear expectations for all staff and students and reinforces those expectations in a positive way. Positive center culture is stressed in all settings—in classrooms, in residence halls, and on the worksite—providing strong universal behavioral support. Examples include center norms on dress, language, cleanliness, respect, classroom participation, and more.

MTC is currently developing a program called PEACE, in concert with Job Corps' Y2Y anti-violence initiative. The program focusses on five main areas: People, Environment, Actions, Community, and Excellence. This program provides all Job Corps students a chance to proactively build the type of school climate they need to more fully engage in their learning.

MTC is also currently working on a comprehensive safety and risk assessment initiative that could help identify students in need of targeted and intensive interventions. The risk assessment currently being developed would use multiple channels to identify students in need of intervention. Students would be referred to appropriate supports based on the level of risk their behavior poses.

Promoting Social and Emotional Learning

Social and emotional learning includes the development of vital non-cognitive skills students need for success, such as self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, resiliency, and responsible decision-making. Higher mastery of these skills can increase safety of Job Corps centers and create a better living and learning environment.

Students must have a chance to learn and practice strategies to develop and master these skills The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) provides a list of evidence-based methods for teaching social and emotional learning. They include[4]:

- Helping students develop empathy by teaching them to recognize how their behaviors affect themselves and others
- Providing students opportunities to learn and practice conflict-resolution skills
- Allowing students to practice group decision-making and setting classroom rules
- Teaching cooperation and teamwork through team sports and games
- Deepening students' understanding of current and historical events by having them analyze the event through a problem-solving model (i.e. define the problem, determine causes, offer solutions)
- Pairing younger (or newer) students with older student mentors to build self-confidence, a sense of belonging, and improve academic skills

- Providing opportunities to practice reflective listening in pairs or small groups

Training All Staff on Sound Strategies to Motivate and Engage Students in Learning

The climate of a Job Corps center reflects, to a large extent, the level of teacher and staff engagement. The National Center on Safe and Supportive Learning Environments reports that teachers who experience strong relationships with students report that their students are less likely to avoid school. They also appear more self-directed, more cooperative, and more engaged in their learning.[5] The effective teaching of vital non-cognitive skills has been shown to prevent disruptive behaviors and contribute to a safer school climate.[6] Job Corps must adequately train all staff who interact with students on the best strategies for teaching and modeling positive behavior.

Social and emotional learning is most effective when it takes place across multiple contexts: in classrooms, in dorms, in recreation areas, and on the work site. Teachers, instructors, counselors and social development staff all need to be trained on how to help students use social and emotional learning skills in everything they do. The more opportunities they have to practice these skills, the more they will become second nature and will positively affect their engagement, the center climate, and their learning.

CASEL has compiled a list of evidence-based strategies to better involve teachers and staff in social and emotional learning. These include: [7]

- Modeling and providing students opportunities to practice social and emotional learning in the classroom, in residence halls, during recreation, and at work sites
- Using participatory instructional methods that draw on students' own experiences
- Using social and emotional learning in teaching academics and career technical training (i.e. teachers and instructors look for teachable moments that allow students to demonstrate self-awareness, use good decision-making, and practice good problem-solving skills)

Training of teachers and staff on social and emotional learning must be engaging, comprehensive, and ongoing. Staff must also be evaluated on and held accountable for the effective use of these strategies.

SCHOOLS HAVE IMPROVED SAFETY BY IMPROVING SCHOOL CLIMATE

Schools have implemented school climate improvement plans to address a variety of needs: improving academic performance, engaging marginalized groups of students, decreasing bullying, improving discipline, and decreasing violence. Several of these schools have seen significant improvements in school climate and safety, including schools with demographics and challenges similar to those of many Job Corps centers. Highlighted below are the results of three such schools.

West Philadelphia High School—Pennsylvania

West Philadelphia High School was known for many decades as one of Pennsylvania's most troubled schools. The school is located in an extremely economically depressed neighborhood where 100% of the student body qualifies for free lunch.[8] For several years, the school was included on the state's

"Persistently Dangerous Schools" list—meaning that the school had numerous dangerous incidents per year (i.e. arrests for weapons, assaults, sexual offenses, robberies, or homicides).[9]

Teachers and staff felt they were focusing all of their efforts on discipline and maintaining order, leaving little room for learning.[10] In 2008, school administrators began a school climate improvement plan with a model called restorative practices. One year after implementation the school saw the following results: [11]

- Assaults on students dropped by 60%
- Assaults on teachers and staff were down 76%
- Incidents of disorderly conduct were down 72%
- The number of students suspended from school dropped 24%

Key to West Philadelphia's Success—Restorative Practices
Teachers and staff attribute the improved safety to the restorative practices model. The fundamental hypothesis of restorative practices is that people are happier and more cooperative when those in position of authority do things *with* them, instead of doing things *to* them or *for* them. The model also emphasizes building and restoring relationships. Students and staff participate in both formal and informal "restorative circles" that encourage those involved in a conflict to engage one another in a positive way to resolve the conflict and restore the relationship. [12]

Another key element of restorative practices is observing fair process. This means engaging students in the decisions that affect them, explaining the reasoning behind every decision, and setting clear expectations for future behavior. [13]

All of the elements of the restorative practices model are woven into a multi-tiered behavioral supports system. At the universal supports level, all students engage in informal restorative practices, such as learning to state feelings in response to the positive or negative behaviors of others, asking questions to challenge the negative behavior of others, and holding impromptu conferences to resolve lower-level conflicts. At the targeted and intensive supports level, more formal restorative circles or restorative conferences involving administrative staff take place.

The restorative practices model provides students with rich opportunities to engage in social and emotional learning as they learn self-awareness, empathy, problem-solving, and teambuilding. Teachers at West Philadelphia noted that after implementing restorative practices, students were showing greater levels of empathy, remorse, and respect. Students were taking more responsibility for their actions and were involved in making their own corrections when they made mistakes.

> "In the classroom, it's about getting to a state where we can work, rather than seeing how much punishment we can heap on a student. The more kids understand that, the more they're willing to own their actions and become productive members of their class." Saliyah Cruz, Principal, West Philadelphia High School

The school had tried tough and punitive measures for years, but with little effect on improving the school climate. According to Russell Gallagher, the school's assistant principal, the goal was to "change the emotional atmosphere of the school." While metal detectors will stop students from bringing weapons, they won't stop them from "bringing fists or a poor attitude."[14]

West Philadelphia has continued to see improvements in safety and student engagement. It is no longer on the state's list of Persistently Dangerous Schools. The success at West Philadelphia shows that improving school climate can have enormous impacts on safety, even among the toughest students.

Westview High School—Oregon

Westview High School in Beaverton, Oregon is a large suburban high school. Like many schools across the nation, Westview has struggled with racial disparities in academic performance and disciplinary referrals. During the 2004-2005 school year, 24% of Black students and 28% of Latino students were suspended at least once during the school year. During that same year, only .9% of Black students and 1.9% of Latino students were enrolled in AP classes. The school sought to address these disparities by implementing a comprehensive school climate improvement program that engaged all groups of students.[15]

After one year of implementation, Westview's school climate improvement plan already yielded impressive results in increasing safety and reducing disciplinary problems:

- Fighting and assaults were down 34%
- Bullying and harassment decreased by 50%
- Defiance and disorderly conduct dropped by 28%
- Vandalism was down 85%[16]

Key to Success at Westview High—Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports
The case of Westview High provides an excellent example of a multi-tiered positive behavioral supports system. The school climate improvement plan used by Westview is called Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). At the universal supports level, clear and consistent expectations are taught and effectively communicated to all students through Westview PRIDE (Personal Responsibility, Respect, Integrity, Daily Effort, and Embrace Community). All students are also given opportunities to be engaged in leadership, in a wide variety of clubs, activities, and student leadership. All staff and students receive cultural competency training.

Targeted supports and interventions at Westview include cultural leadership groups for minority students, academic helps sessions, and counseling groups addressing issues such as anger management,

attendance, and girls' self-esteem. Intensive supports include individualized interventions for students with persistent behavioral or academic problems.

Westview has continued to reap the benefits of their school climate initiative. While safety, discipline, and academic achievement have improved school-wide, the racial achievement gap is also narrowing. By the 2011-2012 school year, only 13% of Black students and 8% of Latino students had been suspended at least once. Academic achievement also soared for these groups as 28% of Black students and 20% of Latino students were enrolled in AP courses.[17]

Community Service Foundation and Buxmont Academy—Pennsylvania

Community Service Foundation and Buxmont Academy (CSF Buxmont) operates six alternative schools for adjudicated delinquents and at-risk youth in southeastern Pennsylvania. Referrals to CSF Buxmont schools come from juvenile probation, school districts, and child and youth services. Most of the students are between 16 and 18 years old.

CSF Buxmont schools are geared toward a hard-to-serve subset of the type of students served by Job Corps: youth whose behavior made them unsuccessful in traditional schools and may have even led to involvement with the criminal justice system. CSF Buxmont schools take these hard-to-serve youth into a positive climate that improves their chances for success. Like West Philadelphia, CSF Buxmont uses the restorative practices model. This model holds students accountable for their actions while they are given the social and emotional support necessary to make positive changes.

Key to Success at CSF Buxmont—Supportive Climate

Dr. Craig Adamson, executive director of CSF Buxmont, says that at CSF Buxmont schools "students are surrounded by a supportive treatment model that includes counseling and peer support, which creates many opportunities — all day long — to enrich what students are learning…"[18] Dr. Adamson believes that this supportive school climate enhances the effectiveness of treatment for students with severe behavioral problems.[19]

This sentiment is supported by a recent study by the EPISCenter at Penn State University. The EPISCenter is a collaborative partnership between Penn State and Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency to research evidence-based practices and programs for implementation within the juvenile justice system. EPISCenter examined the effectiveness of Aggression Replacement Training. This is a research-based cognitive behavior for aggressive youth that teaches social skills, anger control, and moral reasoning.[20]

In the study CSF Buxmont students participating in ART were compared with youth participating in other Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency-funded ART sites.[21] CSF Buxmont youth who participated in ART showed greater improvement in attitudes and behaviors when compared to the other youth who participated in the training, including:

- A 26% reduction in acts of aggression
- A 20% improvement in attitudes, behaviors, and social skills[22]

The experience of CSF Buxmont demonstrates that the effectiveness of any intervention meant to improve student behavior is greatly enhanced by the presence of a supportive school climate.

RECOMMENDATIONS: PLAN TO IMPROVE CENTER CLIMATE AND STUDENT SAFETY

Nearly every MTC center has implemented some elements of a comprehensive center climate improvement plan and many centers have had success in improving their center climate, student engagement, and student safety. While no effective program or practice should be thrown out, it is important for MTC to develop a consistent framework for improving center climate. This framework could be adapted to meet the needs of each center, and would help MTC better communicate with policymakers and National Job Corps Office staff in a consistent manner the efforts the company has taken to improve safety, student engagement, and student outcomes. The guidelines adopted by MTC should include the following components:

Center leadership, staff, and students work together to set measurable and achievable center climate goals by:

- Identifying OMS measures in need of improvement and setting center climate goals that will improve those results
- Reviewing student safety surveys, incident reports, and separation data to identify behavioral measures needing improvement
- Conducting student engagement surveys and focus groups to identify areas where students feel less engaged or feel unsafe

Centers develop a multi-tiered positive behavioral supports system, based on the measurable center climate goals identified:

- All staff and students are educated on the universal supports and interventions established upon arrival to the center
- Center norms are reinforced in all settings: classrooms, work sites, residential areas, and recreational activities
- MTC's risk assessment initiative identifies students in need of targeted and intensive interventions, helping to prevent serious incidents

Centers implement a social and emotional learning program:

- Students learn and apply the skills necessary to make positive choices and motivate their peers to do the same
- Social and emotional skills are practiced in all settings: classrooms, work sites, residential areas, and recreational activities

All staff are trained and evaluated on sound strategies to motivate and engage students in learning

- Staff consistently and fairly apply positive behavioral interventions
- Staff provide students opportunities to engage in social and emotional learning
- Staff are evaluated on and held accountable for the effective use of these strategies

These guidelines for improving center climate provide a prescription to boost the protective factors that contribute to a safer center: higher levels of engagement, positive behavior, and higher levels of academic achievement. The safer students feel, the more fully engaged they will be in their living and learning environment. In turn, they will develop traits they need to succeed and excel in their education, their careers, and their lives.

---

[1] US Department of Education. (2014). *Guiding Principles: A Resource Guide for Improving School Climate and Discipline.* Washington, D.C.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Purkey, W. (1999) *Creating Safe Schools through Invitational Education.* ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Student Services. Greensboro N.C. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED435946.pdf

[4] Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (n.d.) *Frequently Asked Questions about SEL.* Retrieved from http://www.casel.org/social-and-emotional-learning/frequently-asked-questions

[5] The National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments. (n.d.). *Teachers.* Retrieved from https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/training-technical-assistance/roles/teachers

[6] US Department of Education. (2014). *Guiding Principles: A Resource Guide for Improving School Climate and Discipline.* Washington, D.C.

[7] Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (n.d.) *Frequently Asked Questions about SEL.* Retrieved from http://www.casel.org/social-and-emotional-learning/frequently-asked-questions

[8] US News & World Report. (2016). *West Philadelphia High School: Student Body.* Retrieved January 28, 2016 from http://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/pennsylvania/districts/the-school-district-of-philadelphia/west-philadelphia-high-school-17241/student-body

[9] Pennsylvania Department of Education. (n.d.) *Unsafe School Choice Option.* Retrieved January 28, 2016 from http://www.education.pa.gov/Teachers%20-%20Administrators/No%20Child%20Left%20Behind/Pages/Unsafe%20Schools/Unsafe-School-Choice-Option.aspx#.VqpO0_krKM-

[10] Lewis, Sharon. (2009). *Improving School Climate: Findings from Schools Implementing Restorative Practices.* International Institute for Restorative Practices. Retrieved from http://www.iirp.edu/pdf/IIRP-Improving-School-Climate-2009.pdf

[11] Ibid.

[12] IIRP Graduate School. (2011). *SaferSanerSchools™: Whole-School Change through Restorative Practices.* International Institute for Restorative Practices. Retrieved from http://www.iirp.edu/pdf/WSC-Overview.pdf

[13] Ibid.

[14] Lewis, Sharon. (2009). *Improving School Climate: Findings from Schools Implementing Restorative Practices.* International Institute for Restorative Practices. Retrieved from http://www.iirp.edu/pdf/IIRP-Improving-School-Climate-2009.pdf

---

[15] Lynass, Lori. (January 7, 2013). *Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports in Pre-K-12 Schools in Oregon.* From Chalk Board Project Website. Retrieved January 28, 2016 http://blog.chalkboardproject.org/early-learning/positive-behavioral-interventions-and-supports-pbis-in-pre-k-12-schools-in-oregon/

[16] Westview High School (n.d.) *PBIS Data 2005-2007.* Retrieved January 28, 2016 from http://www.pbis.org/common/cms/files/pbisresources/A7_Westview.pdf

[17] Lynass, Lori. (January 7, 2013). *Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports in Pre-K-12 Schools in Oregon.* From Chalk Board Project Website. Retrieved January 28, 2016 http://blog.chalkboardproject.org/early-learning/positive-behavioral-interventions-and-supports-pbis-in-pre-k-12-schools-in-oregon/

[18] Mirsky, Laura. (September 12, 2014). *Study Shows Youth are Less Aggressive with Restorative Practices.* Restorative Works Learning Network Website. Retrieved January 28, 2016 from http://restorativeworks.net/2014/09/aggression-replacement-training-csf-buxmont/

[19] Ibid.

[20] Aggression Placement Training Website. Retrieved from http://aggressionreplacementtraining.com/

[21] Mirsky, Laura. (September 12, 2014). *Study Shows Youth are Less Aggressive with Restorative Practices.* Restorative Works Learning Network Website. Retrieved January 28, 2016 from http://restorativeworks.net/2014/09/aggression-replacement-training-csf-buxmont/

[22] IIRP Graduate School. (2014). *Improving School Climate: Evidence from Schools Implementing Restorative Practices.* International Institute for Restorative Practices. Bethlehem, PA. Retrieved from http://www.iirp.edu/pdf/ImprovingSchoolClimate.pdf