



Morristown, NJ: New Jersey Collaborative Helps Middle School Students Feel Safer, Happier

Intro

When community leaders in Northern New Jersey set out to explore why the topic of middle school kept appearing as an education area that needed to be addressed, they found that many of the issues could be traced to challenges with school climate and culture. A partnership formed between the United Way of Northern New Jersey and the Center for Human and Social Development at the College of Saint Elizabeth set out to tackle the issue with great success by developing an innovative, collaborative approach to changing school climate that they linked to new, state-wide, anti-bullying legislation.

Background

Across the Hudson River from New York City, the area served by the United Way of Northern New Jersey resembles the suburbs of many large cities. A generally wealthy community that encompasses five counties, it is an expensive place to live. Although median salaries are well above the National average (ranging from \$71,086¹ – \$179,878² depending on the county), as in many wealthy suburbs, there are pockets of poverty (2%³ – 7%⁴) and a number of families who have an annual income above the U.S. poverty line but have limited assets and income constraints (5% – 33%⁵). A large area of 1,700 square miles,⁶ it includes over 100 school districts. It is also home to a large number of businesses, including the headquarters for 50 Fortune 500 companies, the Atlantic Health System, and the College of Saint Elizabeth.

Story

When the United Way of Northern New Jersey decided to create an education program in the mid-2000s, they gathered over 60 representatives from community groups, businesses, schools, parents, and other stakeholders to explore where they should put their energy⁷. Middle schools consistently appeared as a place that needed additional attention, so the United Way set out to learn why. After surveying students in five middle schools and hosting a youth summit that consisted of focus groups with middle school students throughout the region, the coalition found that no matter what their socio-economic background, students didn't feel safe, didn't know where to go for help,

Focus on School Climate

School Climate is an umbrella term that has been used by communities to include all the different pieces that make up the school environment and the quality and character of school life. This includes safety, relationships, respect, health, learning environment, and connectedness, among others. According to the [National School Climate Center](#), “a positive school climate is associated with academic achievement, effective risk prevention efforts and positive youth development.”

¹ United Way of Northern New Jersey. “About Us: Our Communities. Warren County.” Accessed: <http://www.unitedwaynnj.org/aboutus/ourcommunitieswarren.php>

² United Way of Northern New Jersey. “About Us: Our Communities. Morris County.” Accessed: <http://www.unitedwaynnj.org/aboutus/ourcommunitiesmorris.php>

³ United Way of Northern New Jersey. “About Us: Our Communities. Milburn-Short Hills.” Accessed: <http://www.unitedwaynnj.org/aboutus/ourcommunitiesmsh.php>

⁴ United Way of Northern New Jersey. “About Us: Our Communities. Warren County.” Accessed: <http://www.unitedwaynnj.org/aboutus/ourcommunitieswarren.php>

⁵ United Way of Northern New Jersey. “ALICE in New Jersey.” Accessed: http://www.unitedwaynnj.org/ourwork/alice_nj.php

⁶ United Way of Northern New Jersey. “Our Communities.” Accessed: <http://www.unitedwaynnj.org/aboutus/ourcommunities.php>

⁷ The National United Way had recently undergone a strategic restructuring and were asking local chapters to develop programs that benefited their communities in addition to being a pass-through for funding local non-profit organizations.

experienced negative peer pressure, and wanted more adults in their lives. To address these findings, the United Way created the Youth Empowerment Alliance, a grassroots effort to provide “schools with the support they need to help prepare our children socially and emotionally for the future.”⁸ Now a multi-pronged program with partnerships with the College of Saint Elizabeth, Atlantic Health, and more, the first step consisted of a year long discovery process that involved the original 60 representatives conducting a wide-ranging exploration of the barriers and root causes of pre-teen discontent and identifying best practices and research-based solutions. Teams from these groups were paired with area middle schools to hold additional focus groups with students. The findings were similar across the teams: students wanted more personal guidance, connections, and emotional support through their school. By going out into the community and attending state-wide and national meetings, the manager of the United Way program was put in touch with the Developing Safe and Civil Schools work being done out of Rutgers University and, ultimately, with the Center for Human and Social Development at the College of Saint Elizabeth.

The Center for Human and Social Development at the College of Saint Elizabeth was developing research and programmatic tools for social and emotional learning skills in the classroom at the same time. In 2012, the two organizations merged their efforts to help schools in the United Way of Northern New Jersey area. The partnership supports a monthly meeting of school personnel to talk about initiating school climate approaches in their schools called the School Support Network, annual student summits for middle school students in the area, and The School Culture and Climate Initiative. The College of Saint Elizabeth not only provides expert guidance to the schools, it analyzes the school culture and climate survey data in their School Climate and Assessment Lab, and, with Rutgers University, offers online certificate programs for teachers and school leaders on integrating and implementing SEL initiatives into the classroom and school. The partnership has continued to work with families and other community organizations to improve school climate, including Atlantic Health Systems, a network of hospitals and health-care providers in the area.

School Success Story

At Lincoln Park Middle School, initial survey results showed that students didn't feel they had a voice when it came to school-related issues, so when the student team first formed, the consultant encouraged the staff advisor to let the kids set the agenda. After reviewing survey results, the student team decided to create four, school-wide, intergrade “houses” that compete against each other throughout the year in fun and unique ways, from all day “house days” to small events. Students and teachers credit the activities with a decrease in the impact of cliques, fewer fights, fewer kids being ostracized, an increase in socializing among students in different grades, and more student involvement in classroom activities. Teachers claim that the atmosphere has also improved for them and they enjoy coming to school and supporting their students and each other, while families talk about the welcoming environment and decrease in social and academic stress.

“I wanted to improve [school climate] and make parents, teachers, and students happier. It made sense and we could get positive outcomes faster by making everyone happier rather than just focusing on test scores. We could make quick gains.”

Middle School Principal

The School Culture and Climate Initiative is a process in which a consultant works with a school for a three-year period to create a sustainable, positive school culture and climate. Starting with a series of exercises and analyses of school-wide assessments, the Initiative provides support and professional development as schools develop a staff team, a student team, and customized plans to create a safe and supportive environment. The Initiative helped to increase school participation by connecting their efforts to the 2011, New Jersey Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights (HIB), which included specific provisions to focus district attention

⁸ United Way of Northern New Jersey. “United Way Youth Empowerment Alliance.” Accessed: http://www.unitedwaynj.org/ourwork/ed_youthempower.php.

on bullying. Among other items, the Bill mandates that districts hire an anti-bullying coordinator, implement an anti-bullying policy, provide for staff training, and address and assess school culture and climate as a means of preventing bullying⁹. Starting in 2015, the School Culture and Climate Initiative is supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and as of February 2016 is in 16 school districts, reaching over 25,000 students.

“It’s not just the schools. The school is part of the community. It’s all the different elements of communities – we want everyone to realize the importance they have and that they all contribute to it. We need a community environment where neighbors and store owners demonstrate that they trust kids as well.”
Coalition Member, School Culture and Climate Initiative

Keys to Success

- Linking the Initiative’s work to state legislation to encourage school participation and use of mandated structure and personnel
- Engaging the community and students
- Strong partnerships
- Time, patience, and networking
- Understanding and respecting student and school needs
- Being open to new ideas and ways of framing and doing things, while staying true to the mission

Conclusion

With middle school students from all socio-economic backgrounds feeling unsafe, insecure, and unsure whom to turn to, this community came together to explore innovative solutions. The United Way of Northern New Jersey and the Center for Human and Social Development at the College of Saint Elizabeth have developed a successful approach that has been recognized as a 2014 Promising Practice by Character.org. By connecting the Initiative to state mandates, it is rapidly gaining traction across the region. The partnership created a strategic Action Team and connected to the existing Policy Environment, both crucial components of the [Partner Build Grow](#) action guide, in order to ensure sustainability of the Initiative. To encourage more schools to take part and to see even greater long-term success, it will be important for the initiative to keep abreast of the constant changes in state policies and regulations, continue to retain and grow valuable stakeholder relationships, and develop communication goals in order to strategically connect with target audiences and potential allies.

This case study was supported by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to identify approaches that diverse communities from around the country are using to maximize opportunities for long-term funding and policy support for child/youth development initiatives conducted in partnership with schools. The study is based on a conversation held with members of the coalition in the spring of 2015 and follow-up conversations with coalition leaders.

⁹ Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying (HIB) Compliance Checklist. Accessed: <http://www.nj.gov/education/students/safety/behavior/hib/checklist.pdf>