



Northern New Jersey

Collaborative Helps Middle School Students Feel Safer, Happier

Intro

When community leaders in Northern New Jersey set out to explore why middle school continued to be a difficult time period for students and families, they found that many of the challenges could be traced to school climate and culture. In response, the United Way of Northern New Jersey and the Center for Human and Social Development at the College of Saint Elizabeth partnered to tackle the issue. By developing an innovative, collaborative approach to improving school climate and linking it to state anti-bullying legislation, the partnership has had great success.

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 and 100 school districts, it is an expensive place to live. Although median salaries are well above the national average, there are pockets of poverty (2% – 7%) and a significant number of families with limited assets and income constraints even though their annual income is above the U.S. poverty line (5% – 33%)¹. 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 (CSE).

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 energy². 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 for middle school students from the entire 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, experienced negative peer pressure, and wanted more adults in their lives.

To address these findings, the United Way created the Youth Empowerment Alliance, an effort to provide "schools with the support they need to help prepare our children socially and emotionally for the future."³ The original 60 representatives to

spent the next year conducting a wide-ranging exploration of the barriers and root causes of pre-teen discontent and identifying best practices and research-based solutions. The findings were similar across the region: students wanted more guidance, connections, and emotional support through their school. By engaging with the community and attending state-wide and national meetings, the manager of the United Way program was connected with the Developing Safe and Civil Schools work occurring at Rutgers University and, ultimately, with the Center for Human and Social Development at CSE.

Focus on School Climate

According to the [National School Climate Center](#)⁵, school climate refers to the many factors that influence a school's environment and the quality and character of school life. It includes safety, relationships, health, learning environment, and connectedness, among others, and has been associated with academic achievement, risk prevention efforts and positive youth development."

The Center for Human and Social Development at CSE was developing research and programmatic tools for social and emotional learning skills in the classroom during this time. In addition, they analyze school culture and climate data in their School Climate and Assessment Lab and, with Rutgers University, offer online certificate programs for teachers and school leaders on integrating and implementing social and emotional learning initiatives. 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 School Support Network where school personnel talk about improving school climate, annual student summits for middle school students in the area, and The School Culture and Climate Initiative. The partnership has continued to work with families and other community organizations, including Atlantic Health Systems, a network of hospitals and health-care providers in the area.

The School Culture and Climate Initiative pairs a consultant with a school for a three-year effort 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. Participating schools credit the program with improving school atmosphere, decreasing the number of fights, and increasing student engagement in classroom activities. The Initiative helped to increase school participation by connecting its efforts to the 2011 New Jersey Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights (HIB).⁴ Starting in 2015, the Initiative is supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and, as of February 2016, is in 16 school districts, reaching over 25,000 students.

About this Project

This study illustrates the principles in [Partner Build Grow](#), an online tool that helps schools, community groups, health care providers, and others develop plans to sustain and strengthen school-based social and emotional development initiatives and mental health supports to help children flourish. A four-pronged strategy—Building an Action Team, Mapping Assets, Connecting to the Policy Environment, and Communications—the Action Guide includes tools, templates, examples, and resources.

Partner Build Grow was developed by [The Center for Health and Health Care in Schools](#) (CHHCS) at the George Washington University Milken Institute School of Public Health. CHHCS promotes child wellness and school success by working with schools and communities to bridge health and education so that kids are happy, healthy, and motivated to learn. With support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, CHHCS explored promising practices in school-community partnerships. The study is based on a conversation held with members of the community coalition in 2015 and follow-up conversations with coalition leaders; quotes that are not cited are from these conversations. For an in-depth look at these and other communities and to learn more about the approach, visit Partner Build Grow at www.actionguide.healthinschools.org.

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 students and schools
- 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 alone, 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 created a successful program that was selected 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 ensuring sustainability. Using Partner Build Grow will provide the Partnership with the tools to add more schools and to see even greater long-term success by helping them to keep abreast of the constant changes in state policies and regulations, continue to retain and grow valuable stakeholder relationships, and develop strategic and targeted communication plans.

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

—Middle School Principal

¹ United Way of Northern New Jersey. Accessed: <http://www.unitedwaynj.org>

² The National United Way had recently undergone a strategic restructuring and was asking local chapters to develop programs that benefited their communities in addition to being a pass-through for funding local non-profit organizations.

³ United Way of Northern New Jersey. “United Way Youth Empowerment Alliance.” Accessed: http://www.unitedwaynj.org/ourwork/ed_youthempower.php.

⁴ Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying (HIB) Compliance Checklist. Accessed: <http://www.nj.gov/education/students/safetybehavior/hib/checklist.pdf>

⁵ National School Climate Center. Accessed: <http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/>