

Positive relationships enhance school safety, climate

One of the common threads of many school safety incidents is that the students involved did not have a positive relationship with any adult in the building. By engaging students, staff, and parents to build relationships, you can take steps to improve school safety and climate.

Key points

- Assess school climate during student arrivals, passing times.
- Understand student challenges by visiting homes, community centers.
- Engage staff, bus drivers, custodians to build relationships. ■

“You can look at the discipline data, but to get a good feel about school climate and safety, you should be in the hallways during arrival times, when classes change, and have a presence in the cafeteria,” said Timothy Mallory, chief of safety and security

for Richmond (Va.) Public Schools. “You can find out so much about what’s going on in the building by observing students in the hallways and spending time in the cafeteria when students are socializing.”

That helps SROs and administrators get a better view of school climate and the relationships that students have with adults in the building.

Mallory identified the following ways to build relationships to improve school climate.

- **Take a big picture view.** To build relationships, it’s important to know your students’ backgrounds and interests. “For example, we have some students from low-income and high-crime areas,” Mallory said. “A student may not have the support structures at home, but if you don’t know that information and the student comes to school and acts out, we tend to respond to the behavior instead of looking a little deeper to find out what is causing it.”

- **Understand the causes of behavior.** Ask the building leaders to look more closely at students with high discipline rates. “We took our school security officers and administrators to knock on doors before the school year began to find out what is going on at home,” Mallory said. “It can be something as simple as not being able to afford a good haircut or the right clothes to wear. Part of it is looking past behavior and finding out the reasons.”

- **Get staff on board.** Staff engagement should come from the superintendent and building leaders. Ultimately, relationship-building starts during the interview process. “For instance, when you’re interviewing SROs to work in the school, just because they’re police officers, that doesn’t mean they have the ability to work in that environment,” Mallory said. “The successful police officers in schools are involved in school events and are part of the school fabric.” Encourage staff to ride the buses on occasion and see where students live. That helps staff understand where the students are coming from and some of their challenges, Mallory said.

- **Don’t overlook support staff.** Custodians, cafeteria workers, and bus drivers all play critical roles in improving school climate and building relationships with students. “They’re probably some of the most important people, but in too many cases, we tend to forget about them,” Mallory said. “Bus drivers are so important because that’s social time for students. If something is going to happen, the bus drivers have to listen and report because kids are going to talk, and typically they’re oblivious to the bus driver being there.” Empower your support staff, and let them know their importance. For instance, custodians are regularly in the hallways of the school. “They build relationships with the entire student body,” Mallory said. “Teachers may only know a segment of students, but the custodians see all of the kids.” Also, cafeteria workers can build relationships with students because they hear and observe students in social settings.

- **Engage your community.** Develop strong relationships with social services, religious institutions, courts, and the police department to boost their awareness of how you’re creating a positive school climate. “For instance, we have relationships with public housing in our community because some of our students come from there,” Mallory said. “Build relationships with the local courts and the district attorney. Engage them in regular collaborative meetings so that everybody is on the same page.”

- **Assess success.** Send surveys to students, parents, and staff about school climate on a regular basis. Ask questions about how safe they feel in the building. Ask for their input and suggestions to improve school climate. Address their concerns in a timely manner.

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