

Successful Learning Communities: Changing the Face of Education One School at a Time

Each day when the nation's children go off to school, we entrust them to those schools, and the men and women who staff them, for academic, social and moral development.

However, the wide social diversity in public schools, among teachers as well as students – differing cultural backgrounds, divergent social and religious beliefs, varied socio-economic status – present special challenges to teachers and students each day. While this very heterogeneity contributes to a rich cultural experience, it can also make sharing core values difficult and often leads to sincere differences in understanding of social conventions making it possible for bullying, fighting, disrupting classes, stealing, sexism, racism and disrespecting others to prevail.

But, there is good news too. Research shows that when young people are strongly connected to their schools they experience greater academic success, engage in more pro-social behavior, and are more likely to graduate. And, when students engage less frequently in disruptive behaviors such as disturbing class activities, bullying, fighting, using drugs and alcohol, and vandalizing school property, the school becomes a *learning community*, a place where all – students, staff, parents, community members – want to be.

Among the many school improvement programs available, strong character education initiatives have grown up, initiatives that emphasize shared social norms and moral understanding within the school community. As a result of these initiatives, schools have experienced reductions in anti-social behavior along with high levels of academic success.

Successful Learning Communities

The place we all want to be

Good communications among students and teachers

Shared school norms and core values

Collaborative teaching and learning strategies

High levels of student achievement

Pro-social behavior where students make good decisions because it is the right thing to do

Focus on intrinsic motivation rather than reward and punishment

Minimize student problems with bullying, cheating, class disruptions, fighting, etc.

Schools of character are linked to the factors *of successful learning communities* where a collaborative learning and working environment is evident; where students have input into their schooling, engage in problem-solving, engage in high level discussion, and exhibit good character without extrinsic rewards. In these schools staff and students share a sense of belonging, respect and trust among teachers and students is the norm, both adult and student learning is supported, and a sense of partnership among parents and school staff is apparent.

Specifically, research evidence demonstrates:

- High staff morale with a strong sense of purpose,
- Administrative support for staff and students,
- Increased numbers of students scoring proficient or advanced in reading and math,
- Improved school safety, decline in bullying behavior, fewer office discipline referrals, and
- Greater sense of students' feelings of belonging, feelings of autonomy, and their seeing the school as a community.¹

Over the past several years, our team has implemented an evidence-based character education initiative in four states, in hundreds of schools – urban, suburban and rural – creating *successful learning communities*.

¹ Marshall, J. C., Caldwell, S.D., & Foster, J. (March 2011). Moral education The CHARACTERplus Way®. *Journal of Moral Education*.