

Supporting Social and Emotional Wellbeing in the Classroom

Barclay Elementary – Baltimore, MD | Baltimore City Public Schools

WHY SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING?

Creating a safe and supportive school environment for students is a priority for Barclay Elementary, as affirmed in their school district's Wellness Policy. Ensuring that the school climate is not only "culturally proficient, engaging, inclusive, and youth driven" but also promotes social, emotional and physical health, is a key strategy pursued by Barclay to enable all students to succeed. School staff have actively utilized evidenced-based prevention and intervention strategies to support student social and emotional wellbeing. This includes robust implementation of a Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) approach to their work. PBIS creates a system that supports students' social, emotional, academic success and well-being through a range of practices that create a positive school environment. PBIS views school discipline through a positive, collaborative, and holistic framework, one that is student-centered and proactive in preventing "problem" behavior through de-escalation and behavior management skills.

Through its PBIS work, the school recognized the importance of promoting self-calming practices to support student resilience. This awareness culminated in an innovative initiative at the school establishing "quiet corners" in all classrooms. When students respond to stress with unhealthy or disruptive classroom behavior, quiet corners aim to foster restorative instead of disciplinary practices. Allowing students to have access to relaxing, safe spaces encourages healthy coping strategies.

ACTION STEPS

With the support of a Thriving Schools Action Plan Grant, the project kicked off with an announcement of the new initiative at a school-wide staff meeting. The goal of this session was to build buy-in among teachers for quiet corners, and communicate the importance of this intervention in addressing students' social and emotional health.

DEMOGRAPHICS

- PreK-8 grade
- 486 students
- 96% of students qualify for free or reduced price meals

ETHNICITY

- 87% Black/African-American
- 5% Latino
- 3% Asian
- 3% White

The initiative also aimed to build teachers' healthy classroom management skills, and in turn help to reduce staff stress.

With agreement from teachers, the planning team worked to clear out a designated quiet corner space in each of the school's 16 classrooms. Next, materials for the quiet corners were selected and purchased: bean bag chairs, small rugs, relaxation music CDs, CD players and headphones, canopy curtains to create a sense of privacy, and meditation posters. After the quiet corners were set up in each classroom, the school's Community School Coordinator trained staff on the purpose of the quiet corners, how to properly use the equipment, and strategies for facilitating use of the quiet corners among students. The trainings prepared teachers to respond to students during periods of stress, upset, or unhealthy classroom behavior. By encouraging healthy coping strategies, such as self-calming techniques, teachers de-escalated negative classroom behavior and supported students to regain focus and re-engage in classroom lessons. The school also held parent meetings to disseminate information on the quiet corners to families.

CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

The planning team faced an initial challenge in engaging teachers to regularly use the newly assembled quiet corners. To overcome their resistance, professional development sessions facilitated by the Community School Coordinator ensured that teachers were appropriately trained to implement this new restorative strategy. The Community School Coordinator worked closely with staff to address questions and concerns about the new initiative.

IMPACTS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The quiet corner initiative marked an important shift from the school's standard practice of giving verbal warnings and office referrals for negative classroom behavior. Instead, teachers were provided tools and training to offer alternatives to disciplinary action. Instituting classroom quiet corners has helped to decrease discipline referrals, and ultimately suspensions, by mitigating potentially disruptive behaviors during school. The Community School Coordinator noted that the project has resulted in a more positive, less stressful school environment for students and staff, resulting in a strong culture of learning and enhanced social and emotional outcomes for children.

ADVICE FOR OTHER SCHOOLS

Pursuing funding through programs such as the Thriving Schools Action Plan Grants has strengthened the school's capacity to provide positive behavioral intervention and supports. Gaining buy-in from teachers and staff has been critical to the success of this project, highlighting the link between student social and emotional wellbeing and success in the classroom.

"...A quiet corner is a positive place that rewards students for keeping their emotions in check and uses calming strategies so that learning can occur. This initiative has been exciting for both students and staff in creating a welcoming space that both students and teachers can utilize."

-Community School Coordinator

For More Information:
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The Thriving Schools Action Plan Grant Program is funded by Kaiser Permanente and implemented in partnership with the Alliance for a Healthier Generation's Healthy Schools Program. Action Plan Grants support schools to create healthy school environments for students and staff. This case study was developed based on the school's responses to the Action Plan Grants year-end survey.

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