

Snapshot #39

Improving Elementary School Climate

**Bonneville Elementary School
Pocatello, Idaho**

Kathleen Cotton

Research Findings

Staff of Bonneville Elementary School in Pocatello, Idaho based their plan for improving their school's climate on research findings presented in the first edition of *Effective Schooling Practices: A Research Synthesis* (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory 1984).^{*} These include

1.11 Personal Interactions Between Teachers and Students Are Positive

- Teachers make sure they let students know they really care.
- Students are allowed and encouraged to develop a sense of responsibility and self-reliance.

1.12 Incentives and Rewards for Students are Used to Promote Excellence

- All students know about the rewards and what they need to do to get them. Rewards are chosen because they appeal to students.
 - Parents are told about students' successes and requested to help students keep working toward excellence.
 - Awards are set at several different levels of performance, providing all students with opportunities for success and recognition.
 - Incentives and rewards are appropriate to student developmental levels, are meaningful to recipients and are structured to build persistence of effort and intrinsic motivation.
-

Situation

Together, Pocatello and nearby Chubbuck are home to nearly 60,000 people. The 14,000 students in the Pocatello School District attend fifteen elementary schools, five junior high schools (including an alternative school), and two high schools. Bonneville Elementary School has 435 students, including a Montessori preschool for children three to five years old.

Bonneville's student population is extremely diverse. In addition to children from the school's immediate, working-class neighborhood, the student body also includes children bused in from a trailer court at the edge of town and from the affluent Sagewood Hills neighborhood. There is a 30 percent student mobility rate at Bonneville, due in part to the fact that many students are the children of temporary residents who come to Pocatello to attend Idaho State University. Many children come from single-parent homes.

Bonneville's student population is 81 percent white, 12 percent Hispanic, 2 percent African American, and 2 percent Native American, with the remainder being Asian or Pacific Islander. Sixty-three percent of Bonneville's children are eligible for free or reduced lunch. The schools staff and students call themselves the Bonneville Bees.

Context

Inception and Implementation

Marjean Waford became Bonneville's principal in 1986. With her extensive background in staff development and strong belief in its importance, Ms. Waford worked with her staff to identify areas of need for training and set up a staff development program.

In 1988, in response to an invitation from the Pocatello district superintendent, Ms. Waford attended a meeting to introduce Pocatello administrators to NWREL's Onward to Excellence (OTE) school improvement program. Finding OTE's approach compatible with her convictions, Ms. Waford engaged her staff in the steps of the OTE program, which began with establishing a leadership team, learning about research, and developing a school profile.

When it became time to formulate a school-wide goal as called for in the OTE process, Bonneville staff focused on the disturbing results of administering the "My Class Inventory" (MCI) to students. An instrument used to measure levels of cohesiveness, friction, (academic) difficulty, (overall) satisfaction, and competitiveness in elementary classrooms, the MCI revealed unacceptably high levels of friction and competitiveness.

These findings came as no surprise to many Bonneville staff members, who were troubled about the negative effects of competitive activities in the school's program. Many students, for example, found participation in the schoolwide Spelling Bee and Geography Bee extremely stressful—so much so that some responded by crying or throwing up. Likewise, the annual Science Fair was structured in such a way that student winners received ribbons and accolades and gave presentations on their projects, while the efforts of other participating students were virtually ignored.

Another area of competition was the school's Field Day. Structured much like the Science Fair,

Field Day activities led to ribbons and glory for the most athletic youngsters, who frequently added insult to injury by lording their success over other children.

In recounting Bonneville's competitive activities, staff members spoke of the infamous lunchroom competition of former days. Under this system a teacher's aide observed the lunchroom behavior of students, rewarded well-behaved classrooms of children with a "whale" or other "good" animal symbols, and gave "pigs" or other "bad" animal symbols to classes exhibiting less desirable behavior. Classes that had amassed the most "good" animals were then permitted to go to lunch first, while others followed, with the recipients of the most pigs or other "bad" animals going to lunch last. Staff members say that the friction this system caused among students was nothing compared to the friction it produced among teachers, many of whom wanted to go first and have a longer lunch break, and subsequently became involved in petty bickering.

Staff members assert that competition at the classroom level also had a divisive effect on students, with top academic and behavioral performers consistently winning and gloating, and other students being visibly distressed over repeated experiences of failure.

Together, the MCI findings and staff perceptions led Bonneville staff to formulate the following goal:

Student attitudes should improve regarding the levels of friction and competition by lowering toward the mean over the next two years as measured by the School Climate Inventory Instrument.

The plan undertaken to achieve this goal included many elements—elements intended to enhance student self-esteem as well as reduce friction and competition. Key changes included the following:

- Some staff studied the work of educational consultant Alfie Kohn, a leading educational researcher and writer, on the negative effects of competition and beneficial effects of cooperation in schools. Kohn's book, *No Contest: The Case Against Competition* (Houghton-Mifflin 1986) helped to shift staff's thinking away from competitive activities.
- The schoolwide, compulsory Spelling and Geography Bees are things of the past. They have been replaced by lower-profile versions, in which participation is elective, and the events do not take place before the entire school.
- The Science Fair, now called "A Celebration of Science," no longer involves designating winners and losers. Instead, each student who develops an exhibit receives a participation ribbon and gives a presentation of his or her project to special guests from outside the school, such as county commissioners and columnists from the local newspaper.
- The school Field Day is now comprised chiefly of noncompetitive games, many selected from *The Cooperative Sports and Games Book: Challenge without Competition* (by Terry Orlick, Pantheon Books, 1978). Such competitions as there are—tug-o'-war, sack races, relays, etc.—are "just for fun," says Ms. Waford, and do not involve awarding ribbons or prizes.
- The lunchroom competition now takes an entirely different form. For one thing, students in grades four through six, who tend to eat faster, now go to lunch before the younger children, who are more likely to dawdle, become distracted, and require more time.

Within each group (K-3 and 4-6), classes take turns going first, second, and so on. The teacher's aide continues to observe behavior and award the coveted whales, dreaded pigs, and animals in between; but acknowledgment of good lunchroom behavior occurs chiefly at the classroom level, where teachers might offer the incentive of a popcorn party when the class earns ten whales. The only interclass competitive element is that the class awarded the most whales earns the right to have "Willy the Whale," a stuffed animal, in their classroom for a specified period of time.

- Instead of pitting children against one another, Bonneville's academic awards system extends "Super Top-Notch Bee" status to all students meeting prespecified standards. Recipients are honored with a certificate, a picture of him/herself on a classroom bulletin board, and often other acknowledgment, such as being first in line.
- Other means of acknowledging excellence or improvement in students' achievement or behavior include displays on the "Wall of Excellence," the provision of "Positive Kid Tickets" when staff observe students behaving in positive ways, quarterly schoolwide recognition ceremonies that include acknowledgment of good citizenship and attendance, and an array of classroom-level recognition strategies.
- Teachers received Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement (TESA) training to increase their awareness of the ways teachers' behaviors toward students can inspire—or deflate—their motivation to learn and excel.
- Staff have implemented a cross-age tutoring program to help younger students learn and to reduce their apprehension around older students, as well as enhance the self-esteem of older students.

Subsequent Years

In the years since Bonneville began its efforts to improve the school's climate, staff have gone on to establish and pursue other school-wide goals using the OTE process. However, in addition to their successful improvement work in language arts and, more recently, in mathematics, they have maintained and expanded their efforts to improve school climate.

One such addition is the "BEST" (Building Esteem in Students Today) program, whose overall goals include improved school climate, development of student character strengths, and enhanced student self-esteem. Among the unit themes in the BEST program are courtesy, responsibility, caring and sharing, goal setting, honesty, feelings, health and prevention, and esteem.

The mutual caring theme is further reinforced through the "Kids Care" program. Ms. Waford remarks, "We have some 'tough' kids here—kids we need to work with continuously in areas related to caring. The Kids Care program is helpful in teaching and reinforcing caring behavior."

In a "Shoot for Grades" program involving the local Kiwanis Club and athletes from Idaho State University, students meeting certain academic standards have their names entered in a drawing, with winners receiving prizes such as going out for pizza or attending an ISU basketball game. ISU students also work with Bonneville students in a mentoring program that, depending on the wishes of the classroom teacher, might include homework help, tutoring, or helping children develop social skills.

The Present and Future

Since recent MCI survey results show an unacceptably low level of cohesiveness among Bonneville's students, the school's current work in building a positive school climate focuses on this area. Ms. Waford spoke of several new and planned activities aimed at increasing cohesiveness. One of these is to implement activities from *Developing Capable People* by Jane Nelsen, Lynn Lott, and H. Stephen Glenn (prima publishing, 1993), which are designed to teach children how to deal positively with conflicts and other interpersonal problems. Several Bonneville teachers attended an inservice activity presented by Stephen Glenn in the fall of 1995 and shared their learning with other staff.

Efforts are also underway to establish and make use of a school Impact Team, which can help to identify and make appropriate community resource referrals for children from drug- or alcohol-affected homes or other dysfunctional environments. The school counselor and one of Bonneville's teachers participated recently in an Impact program training and are working to engage staff interest in implementing the Impact Team concept.

Other activities focus on increasing the use of democratic processes in classrooms and helping teachers to increase their repertoire of nonpunitive methods for dealing with children. "It's difficult," muses Ms. Waford, "to move out of a punitive mode. Implementation of school activities requires modeling from teachers—increasing democratic processes. We are working hard to get teachers to see that their approach to dealing with problems teaches an approach to dealing with problems."

"Only so much can be accomplished through the use of rewards," she continues. "Especially with older students, we need to work harder on building the values of sharing and cooperation at both the classroom and school levels." Since, as Ms. Waford notes, "these values cannot be successfully taught by people who do not model them," the school counselor and others are developing activities to increase staff commitment to key features of Bonneville's code of ethics: listening attentively to children and each other, treating students with respect, working to enhance the physical and psychological well-being of students, and being open to student input into school and classroom operations. Additional training in classroom management will be offered, and a TESA review is also planned to keep teachers focused on communicating high expectations to their students.

Practice: In the Classroom

Grade 1: Ms. Kelly

A visit to Ms. Kelly's first grade class revealed teacher and children holding a class meeting and reviewing the agreements they had made as a class:

- I will love myself and others.
- I will work quietly so I can learn.
- I will be nice, kind, and friendly so we can have fun.
- I will obey all adults.
- When mistakes are made, I will forgive or apologize.
- I will do what works best.

This review included several key concepts for learning and reinforcement. Ms. Kelly emphasized that everyone makes mistakes sometimes, including herself and other adults. Much of the discussion focused on the importance of keeping agreements. At Ms. Kelly's prompting, students told personal stories of times when others broke their agreements and how this made the children feel, as well as times when they broke an agreement with someone else. She then discussed with the class what a "vision" is and engaged them in developing a vision around the concept, "How will our school be if everyone keeps their agreements?"

Based on a classwide decision made at the beginning of the school year, "Bee Buttons" were given out to those children who had kept certain prespecified agreements. "This is my way of thanking you for keeping your promises," said Ms. Kelly.

Grade 4: Mrs. Crooks

A BEST program activity was underway in Ms. Crooks' class—one that involved a discussion of symbolism as it applies to the state of Idaho and to Bonneville school. A question-and-answer session established that a symbol represents/stands for/means something else and is often used to express pride in whatever the symbol represents. Children identified the state flower, seal, bird, tree, gem, and so on, proceeding on to identifying symbols of their school—its song, colors, flag, motto, and mascot.

Next, Ms. Crooks engaged the children in folding large sheets of paper so as to make a "magic book," each page of which would be dedicated to one of the Bonneville symbols. Like published books, these books were to be laid out with a cover picture, title, author's name, and page numbers. As this activity proceeded, Ms. Crooks circulated around the room, praising children's work and offering help as needed.

Teacher Interviews

Two teachers—Virginia Kelly and Pauline Lyons—both of whom have worked at Bonneville since before the school climate improvement goal was established in 1988, shared their perceptions of the effort and its effects upon students.

According to Ms. Kelly, a former OTE leadership team member, "it takes a whole school to change a climate. When teachers compete with one another, it teaches kids to be competitive." For this reason, Ms. Kelly has removed her name from "Teacher of the Year" competition, believing that it encourages an inappropriate focus. "I don't have to do the best; I have to be my best, and that's the outlook I take into my classroom." She also reports having her students develop and say personal affirmations in the form of a "self-pledge" that focuses on doing one's best.

Ms. Kelly teaches her students that "the 'winner' [in an academic activity or game] is the person who learns something new." She emphasizes that learning is not to be regarded as a race or other kind of contest. "I don't ask my students if they're finished with an activity; I ask them if they're working hard and learning something they didn't know before. On their papers, I correct wrong answers without marking them 'wrong'."

Asked what changes she's observed as a result of Bonneville efforts to improve school climate, Ms. Kelly asserts that the amount of physical conflict among students has decreased. Like

others on the staff, she has observed a marked decline in student stress since the previously high-profile competitive activities have either become low key or been eliminated. The school's cross-age tutoring program has, in her view, improved relations between older and younger students. Finally, she notes that whereas posters, student products, and other items on display often disappeared from the walls or were destroyed in times past, such things now occur much less frequently.

As she was leaving to rejoin her class, Ms. Kelly shared a final thought: "The more we as teachers grow in our self-esteem and appropriate use of power, the more we can enhance learning and social experiences for our children and the school as a whole."

For her part, Ms. Lyons noted a dramatic reduction in the level of conflict on the playground as a result of Bonneville's efforts to improve its climate. She credits work done at the classroom level to build students' self-esteem for much of this change. "You don't need to fight and compete with one another to feel good about yourself. You need to be the best you can be."

As an example of the harmful effects of competition, Ms. Lyons said that the intense Science Fair competition of former years actually *reduced* student participation. "It was so stressful for them," she said, "and the parents sometimes did the projects themselves so that their children would win. The kids seem to enjoy it a lot more the way it is now."

Remembering the effect the original MCI findings had on the staff, Ms. Lyons said, "It basically made us more aware. I don't think we realized how much the competition was affecting the children and their parents. I just hope that we are helping them build strong enough self-esteem to deal with the competition that they will face when they go on to junior high school."

"My Class Inventory" Data

Because of changes in the instruments used to measure classroom climate, it is not possible to make strict year-by-year comparisons of findings. In general, however, the data show positive effects on children in first through third grade, particularly on measures of cohesiveness, satisfaction, and difficulty of academic work. Outcomes for fourth through sixth graders, however, are mixed. While overall satisfaction ratings remain high for these students and some increases in cohesiveness were noted, friction and competition scores, in particular, remain unacceptably high.

Ms. Waford speculates that, because these older students are often involved in sports and other competitive activities outside of school, they introduce a competitive mood into the school environment. In addition, she notes that the nature of the student population has changed in the years since the climate improvement program began, with a considerable increase in children from low-income and single-parent homes and an increase in student mobility.

Neither Ms. Waford nor her staff, however, see these factors as reasons to relax their efforts to improve Bonneville's climate. Indeed, additional elements are being introduced to raise student self-regard and enhance cohesiveness—elements supported by research on building cooperative school cultures. In the meantime, both student data and staff perceptions indicate real progress in several areas and, as Ms. Waford observes, "it's so nice not to have to worry about winning all the time."

More information about Bonneville's program is available from Marjean Waford, Principal, Bonneville Elementary School, 320 North Eighth Avenue, Pocatello, Idaho 83201, (208) 232-2872.

* While this document has been updated twice, in 1990 and 1995, I have preserved the wording and numbering of the 1984 document, since Bonneville staff used that version for their planning.