

WELCOMING, CARING, RESPECTFUL & SAFE

I prefer this definition: In order for students to be successful in their program of studies, schools must be places where students and staff feel welcome, respected, cared for and safe. Schools create this by weaving respect for diversity into the fabric of their environments.

Kathy Muhlethaler, Principal, ME LaZerte

Welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning communities foster multicultural and multiracial diversity as well as respect for student differences. Such inclusive attitudes allow students to feel understood and cared for, and build a deeper connection to the school community. A healthy, positive sense of citizenship is built on an inclusive attitude, where every student contributes. The school environment feels like a family environment.

What is the impact on students?

Students in a school with a culture that respects diversity engage in conversations that have local, national and international importance. The students' world accepts and embraces multicultural and multiracial views and ways of living. Students' lives are not only enriched, but they are lived in a safe and caring environment. Students feel accepted and understood. Their perspectives are appreciated, and they feel connected to the curriculum.

Respectful learning communities teach students, not outcomes. Michelle Blair says, "Before this [flexibility enhancement] project began, our student satisfaction survey highlighted that our students felt teachers did not care about them as learners. Recent survey results suggest that the percentage of students who feel their teachers care has risen dramatically, as have our numbers who feel a sense of belonging. This is because we are focusing more deliberately on our students' needs than on curriculum."

Kathy Muhlethaler says, "At our school, the impacts on students have included a decrease in discipline issues; improvements in attendance and a [decrease in] lates; increased course completion rates; lower drop-out rates; a greater feeling of connectedness among students, who continue to hang out at our school both before and after school in clubs, on teams and as games spectators; increased student accountability; and a positive school culture that celebrates diversity."



What is the impact on staff?

Diversity exists in every classroom. By embracing the diversity, staff can draw upon multiple talents, perspectives and ways of knowing. The curriculum is enhanced. Students teach one another about their differences and in the process develop citizenship and character skills that will serve them in the community as well as throughout high school. Staff enjoy the respect and appreciation of their peers and concentrate on building positive environments where leadership and understanding are demonstrated every day.

Kathy Muhlethaler says, “Staff have developed strong inclusive classroom practices. They are more involved in clubs and teams. District survey results show that our staff feel safe in school, feel supported by admin and respected by students. Implementation of a pyramid of protocol for behaviour has provided support for teachers – they are more positive about their work and enjoy coming to work.”

Michelle Blair says, “When teachers were challenged to narrow the gap between our students’ perceptions of our level of care and concern for them, and our own perceptions of our level of care and concern, the focus moved to students as individuals, which is the basis for the foundational principles of the flexibility enhancement project.”

In Wanda Gerard’s school, one teacher commented, “My role as a teacher has shifted from that of a lecturer and deliverer of information to that of a facilitator. Students are expected to become more independent and take their learning into their own hands. This has allowed me the opportunity to focus more on helping individual students as opposed to seeing the students as one single entity with a specific method of learning. I can also engage students more effectively because they are able to proceed at their own pace if they so wish. This increases student motivation and reduces behaviour issues that would have been caused by boredom and lack of meaningful learning. This method of teaching does require a different skill set, which I am developing in myself. Managing students who are each proceeding at a different pace requires great organizational skills, and dealing with students on a more individual basis requires a deeper understanding of the different methods by which students learn.”

In welcoming, caring, respectful and safe schools:

- student voice is valued, listened to and acted upon
- high expectations are held for all students
- students demonstrate respectful speech and actions
- students and staff are mindful of others
- shared responsibility is expected
- teachers are responsible for all students, not just those they teach
- diversity is celebrated.

“The goal is to improve student learning for all. Through empowering schools and teachers to make professional decisions that directly relate to students in such matters as tailoring instructional practices, grouping students, and flexing each student’s program, as a system we are better able to meet the diverse needs of all learners. Providing each student with multiple ways to connect and engage with the program of studies enables us to personalise the educational experiences of all students. It is about finding what works to have each and every student reach their potential.”

Trevor Mitchell, Principal, St. Francis, and Administrator, St. Mary