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Positive School Climate, Student Wellness, and Improved Academic Outcomes: Bringing Out the Best in Students and Schools

Remarks by Terry Molony, PsyD, NCSP

Good morning. My name is Terry Molony and I want to express my gratitude for the opportunity to talk with you about an important topic: Enhancing student wellness in schools and how school psychologists are leaders in this endeavor. I have been a school psychologist for 10 years. I work in three elementary schools in Cherry Hill, New Jersey. I am on the Executive Board of the New Jersey Association of School Psychologists. I also serve as the New Jersey Delegate to the National Association of School Psychologists, and I chair NASP's Positive Psychology Special Interest Group.

As a school psychologist, I believe that enhancing well-being in children needs to be a top priority in our schools. The mission of schools is not just to teach children how to read and write, although these are essential skills. Our broader purpose is to help families raise competent, productive, responsible, and hopeful adults who can contribute to the many strengths of our nation and perhaps even solve some of our most intractable problems. Challenging curricula, quality instruction, and high expectations drive effective schools. However, children—and the environments in which they learn—must be safe, healthy, and resilient if they are going to succeed.

That's why I have focused my practice of school psychology on enhancing student wellness. I, like most school psychologists, understand the awesome responsibility with which we are charged. We respond to that mission by reading the research, engaging in action research in our schools, and ultimately shaping those best practices that generate positive outcomes for students. I'm here to talk with you about some data driven, research supported strategies that are easy and inexpensive to implement, strategies that can have a profound impact on the lives of children. These strategies help to develop the whole child.

I'd first like to briefly describe positive psychology, a force with great potential to help schools and parents improve children's learning and wellness.

For the past 10 years in the field of psychology, there has been a great deal of research in the area of positive psychology, or the study of what is right about people. Traditional psychology has focused on pathology and attempts to heal psychological pain. But what if we could prevent that pain and use our energy to enhance wellness? Research demonstrates experiencing feelings of gratitude, using our unique signature strengths, and developing optimistic ways to perceive situations can lead to well-being.

Similarly, when individuals experience positive affect, they are able to engage in flexible and creative problem-solving. By positive affect, I simply mean being in a good mood. When a child feels good, happy, comfortable, he or she is able to open up different channels of his or her attention capabilities and figure out how to solve difficult problems of all different types. Much of learning entails both academic and social problem-solving.

Positive feelings also help individuals to broaden their repertoires of skills, which in turn helps them to build their competencies over time. Think about it: When you feel anxious, you usually cannot think quickly and accurately. Most people actually constrict their behaviors and shut down. Now think about when you feel joy. For most people, the positive feelings elicit active behaviors that can help develop skills. Let's apply that to schools. Children who are bullied will undoubtedly have some kind of negative response. They might feel anxious or angry. These feelings would likely result in behavior that would be a problem in schools and in society in general. The anxious child withdraws. Attention and focus may be problems, and he or she may not be emotionally available for learning. The angry child might strike out and develop behavior problems. And what about the children who act as bullies? Imagine if we could channel those leadership skills into productive outcomes.

Positive psychology clearly distinguishes simply having fun from being genuinely happy and optimistic. People who are focused on hedonistic activities often report feeling momentary happiness, however long-term happiness and life satisfaction are strongly correlated to engaging in meaningful activities. In fact, there appears to be a major difference between simply boosting children's self-esteem and helping them to develop self-efficacy. Boosting self-esteem in isolation often falls flat with children, because it often involves praise they did nothing to earn. Helping children to develop self-efficacy, however, allows them to become realistic about their skills and talents. It often involves children actively setting goals for themselves and developing academic, cognitive, social, and emotional competencies.

Drs. Martin Seligman and Karen Reivich at the University of Pennsylvania have been leaders in the positive psychology movement. School psychologists are now bringing the research, which started with adults and has since moved to adolescents and children, into schools. These basic principles inform a number of programs and strategies available to schools and that support learning.

One program that is showing widespread success in schools is positive behavior supports, a research-based program that allows schools to develop cultures of caring and connections between children and teachers. This facilitates positive affect. At the Joyce Kilmer Elementary School, where Mr. Morton is principal, we are in the fourth year of a positive behavior support—or PBS—program, and we have seen improvements in our building, specifically fewer behavior problems in recess, quieter hallways, and dismissals.

PBS involves teaching all students universal expectations at the beginning of the year. Often these lessons are based on school climate survey of parents, staff, and students to help identify both strengths and problems within the school environment. When the lessons are taught, the children actively participate in developing the expectations. As an example, I usually teach a lesson on cafeteria behavior. I ask the children if there is anything about the cafeteria they do not like. They usually say that it's too noisy because people are shouting, or it is sloppy if people don't clean up after themselves. We come up with three to five short rules. Then

throughout the year, we catch children following the rules and give them Kilmer cub coupons that are placed in a weekly drawing for each grade and a bigger monthly drawing. The children who win the drawings get to choose a prize for that week. The most popular prize is 15 minutes of extra recess to which they get to invite two friends.

There are other programs like PBS that are also helpful for schools. Maurice Elias, a professor of psychology at Rutgers University and co-developer of the Social Decision Making/Social Problem Solving Project has developed the DSACS program (Developing Safe and Civil School Program) that also focuses on enhancing a school's climate

PBS and DSACS work because it is a positive, strengths-based, and skills-building approach. There is significant research data that supports the idea that adults and children who identify their strengths, and who have opportunities to use those strengths in their everyday lives, continue to develop competencies. As adults, they report feeling high levels of satisfaction with life. This is the foundation of *Fishful Thinking*, a program developed by Dr. Karen Reivich and sponsored by Pepperidge Farm as part of their long-standing corporate commitment to promote children's wellness. The program provides free information to parents on how to help children develop skills of resilience and optimism. Children who are resilient are better able to control their emotions and behaviors and bounce back from adversity. This leads to feelings of confidence and self-efficacy, or being able to accomplish what you set out to accomplish. Again, these are skills critical to academic achievement, and NASP is partnering with *Fishful Thinking* to help bring the strategies into elementary schools.

Building on this at Cherry Hill, I've teamed up with our art teacher for a fifth grade self-portrait project. The children are going to take a signature strengths survey to determine their unique qualities. Then they will develop their self-portrait in relation to their strengths. One of our fifth grade teachers is going to follow up this activity with academic tasks that will allow the children different options to use their unique signature strengths to complete an assignment. It's important to note that signature strengths, as described in the work of Seligman and Peterson, are different than talents. Signature strengths are characteristics that are good for society. For instance, humanity is a signature strength that describes someone who believes in social justice and equality for all people. This is different than simply having strong interpersonal skills and possibly using them to persuade or take advantage of people.

The last strategy I am going to discuss today that can enhance well-being is promoting gratitude. Research suggests that people who experience gratitude often and intensively report the highest level of satisfaction with life. Gratitude is a prosocial behavior in that it evokes positive feelings in the benefactor, beneficiary, and onlookers. NASP has initiated *Gratitude Works*, a program in which school psychologists work with teachers to develop activities related to gratitude, such as having the children write a letter to someone who has made a difference their lives.

NASP's Gratitude Works program has inspired me to start a positive psychology club this year for any interested fifth graders. It started with four special education children a few months ago. They invited their friends, who invited their friends. At this point, we have to hold it in a classroom instead of my office because there are about 25 fifth graders who come each week. They are so enthusiastic. They want to come every Monday at lunch to discuss the plans for the week and then come back on Fridays at lunch to talk about how the activity went. Every

month we focus on a new strategy and, with guidance, the students decide what activities they will work on. The activities are always linked to academic skills and are easily incorporated into existing curriculum.

This month our focus is gratitude. We've made a bulletin board and every week the fifth graders put up new statements from different children reporting what they are grateful for so that everyone will get theirs posted. The club also decided to notice how many times people are expressing gratitude to others and report the numbers to their classes. One of the group members, Hailey, suggested that we bring the message of gratitude to the younger children in our school, so some of them are planning 5-minute presentations for the first and second graders about gratitude.

It is important to note that all of the strategies described above can serve as bridge for effective family–school partnerships. They focus on children's strength, which parents welcome, and entail concepts that can easily be implemented at home.

In conclusion, I'd like to make one last point. I could have the best ideas and training in the world, but I would not be able to do what I do if it were not for the support and leadership of my principals, in this case Mr. Morton. His belief in our students, his staff, and my skills makes all the difference. I cannot overemphasize how critical collaboration like this is and I am extremely grateful.

I am also grateful to have the opportunity to talk about these ideas that I believe are essential in our school communities. I also want to thank the National Association of School Psychologists for disseminating information and providing resources that make it easier for school psychologists to do our jobs. I hope that the ideas I've discussed make it clear how school psychologists, teachers, other educators, and mental health providers can model, facilitate, develop, and inspire activities that enhance student wellness.

Thank you.

Terry Molony, PsyD, NCSP, has been a school psychologist for the past 10 years and currently serves three elementary schools in the Cherry Hill Public Schools, NJ. Dr. Molony collaborates with teachers and parents in developing academic and behavioral interventions to comprehensively meet the needs of the whole child. These interventions have included positive behavior supports (PBS), Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), the PREPaRE curriculum, counseling techniques, and positive psychology. Prior to working as a school psychologist, Dr. Molony worked in hospitals, schools, and private practice as a licensed clinical social worker. She is a member of the Executive Board of the New Jersey Association of School Psychologists and the NASP delegate from New Jersey. In addition, she is the coordinator of the NASP Positive Psychology Special Interest Group. Dr. Molony is also an Adjunct Professor at the Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine, where she teaches in the school psychology program.