

## **Congressional Briefing November 10, 2009**

**Sponsored by the National Association of School Psychologists, in cooperation with Senator Lincoln (AR), Senator Cochran (MS), Representative Loeb sack (IA-2), and Representative Ehlers (MI-3)**

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

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Good Morning! It is with great pleasure that I stand before you today! I would like to thank the National Association of School Psychologists for allowing me to speak with you today. I came here today from Cherry Hill, New Jersey, where I serve as the Principal of Joyce Kilmer Elementary School, to discuss the importance of a positive school climate from the administrator's perspective. I will also focus on overall school safety, bullying prevention, positive behavior support, and how all of these things correlate with academic achievement. Finally, I will discuss the role that school psychologists play in helping to support the previously mentioned initiatives.

You might have heard many people make the claim that they love children. I am a man who truly loves children. Every aspect of my life reflects that fact. I am the proud father of 9 children, ranging in ages from 14 years of age to 1 year of age. My wife and I are living the American dream. Four years ago we left very good positions in Brooklyn, NY, to move into South Jersey in search of a great school experience for our children. We were told that we were crazy for making such a move. I was serving as the first neighborhood grown (I grew up in Brooklyn), African American appointed as an Assistant Principal at a relatively good elementary school. Although I was only 29 years old, I proved to have a knack for the job, the root of which was my love for kids and commitment to see and bring out the best in them. Leaving was hard, but we were in search of a particular type of school culture for our children.

Prior to my post in Cherry Hill, I took a post as a turnaround specialist principal in Philadelphia, PA. A turnaround specialist principal is one who is assigned to one of the lowest performing schools in the district with the hopes of "turning around" the school. As you can probably imagine, my school featured many of the dysfunctions we read about in urban schools. There had been six principals in six years at the school. The staff turned over at a rate of 40% per school year. There was high student absenteeism. There were hundreds of students suspended per year. There were many serious incidents reported. Local law enforcement frequented the building. And as you can imagine the children were not learning. The population of the school was 98% African American, with 90% of that population eligible for free and reduced price lunch. The ultimate goal was to create an environment in the school that would allow the school to make adequate yearly progress (AYP); the school had never made AYP since the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act. In fact, standardized test scores indicated that more than 80% of the school's population were reading below grade level and were performing below grade level in mathematics. The school's culture and climate were dismal.

My earlier work in New York served me well in my post as a turnaround specialist principal. I had spent 10 years working in the New York City Department of Education. I served seven years as a teacher at a pre-K-8 school building, and three years as an Assistant Principal of a pre-K-5 school, the post I left. Both schools were located in a tough section of Brooklyn. In my first year of teaching, I was placed with sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students who were supposedly out of control. What I encountered were children who were longing to be appreciated for who they were, and understood based on where they were coming from. It quickly dawned on me as a 22-year-old first year teacher that I would get much more productivity out of the students if they believed that I genuinely cared for them. As a result of this

understanding, I spent a great deal of time and energy establishing relationships with my students. I talked with them frequently; I embraced them on a daily basis; I learned about their family structure; I learned their strengths and their interests. Ultimately, what I established was a caring, trusting relationship with each of my students. These relationships allowed me to then educate my students unlike they had been educated in the past. Students who had previously not shown any evidence of learning before were now experiencing academic success. Moreover, their behavior was better. They were happier. This taught me that, for many students, a prerequisite to learning is a classroom culture and climate that emphasizes a relationship founded on trust, compassion, and caring.

As I said, my early experiences as a teacher created my educational philosophy as a school leader and shaped my work at my school in Philadelphia, where I worked diligently on establishing relationships with my students and staff. I created an open door policy where staff and students could freely come to discuss concerns that were of importance to them. I established a student advisory council that was responsible for meeting with me and implementing change that was representative of the students. I held grade level meetings with all of the students and teachers on a weekly basis. We held monthly celebrations to reward the students for academic progress and/or improvement. We recognized staff members who were going above and beyond for children. We hung pictures of our children all around the first floor of our school and in my office. I interacted with the children on a daily basis. Most importantly, all staff members aligned with a vision and mission that embraced all of our students and provided them with the individual support necessary to help them to improve.

As a result, in two short years our students made significant academic gains that resulted in increases in standardized test scores in literacy and mathematics. At the same time, we saw a reduction in behavior problems and a 70% reduction in suspensions. The positive school climate that I had worked with my staff to create played a critical role in this success. Moreover, the strategies used to create a climate of respect and caring where all students and staff work toward a common vision also improved efforts around bullying prevention and school safety. Children who are connected to their school and the people in it take an active role in meeting behavioral expectations, particularly when we provide the concrete skills and reinforcements they need to succeed at doing so.

Now I love to garden, and I believe the climate of a school is much like a garden in that if it is not addressed adequately weeds may grow. You have to tend it regularly, add nutrients, water, remove the weeds, till the soil. This is a continuous day-in and day-out process that holds true for schools as well, in terms of our values, practices, and relationships with students, staff, and parents. The work must be intentional, rich in content, and infused with love.

I was once asked to write three words that I would want to be etched in stone in the front of my school building. I was told that the words had to be representative of what I wanted individuals to feel when they entered your building. The three words I identified were: Love, laugh, and learn. My experience and my studies have revealed that students must feel a sense of love, trust, and caring if they are going to be able to best perform in a school setting. It is incumbent of all school staff to treat students in a manner that recognizes and supports their individual needs. Secondly, school must be enjoyable for students to maximize their experience and develop a love of learning. It is incumbent on the school to create a climate that allows students the opportunity to engage in fun activities that enable them to develop a love of learning. We can only maximize learning when students feel a sense of love as they can develop a trusting relationship with school personnel.

At Joyce Kilmer School we have a dedicated faculty that is focused on providing our students with a caring school experience. I am extremely fortunate to have the opportunity to work with a true child advocate in our school psychologist, Dr. Terry Molony. Dr. T., as I call her, is an integral part of our school leadership team. As a school psychologist, she typically bears the brunt of much teacher frustration when a student begins to experience difficulty. While I am fortunate to be present with you today, I would not be here if it were not for the level of respect, love, and admiration that I have for Terry and the work she does with our children and staff. Terry interacts with our student population on a regular basis to provide the academic, behavioral, and emotional support that our students need. She is

quick to offer guidance and support to our faculty as well. She is the guiding force behind our school wide PBIS program, our school's pilot of the RTI process, and the newly formed positive psychology club. I have the pleasure of listening to our student population speak fondly of earning "Cub Coupons," which are part of the PBIS program, or meeting with Dr. Molony and the positive psychology club for lunch. I frequently talk with Terry about the needs of individual students as well as school-wide and classroom issues.

As I read the description of what a school psychologist does on the NASP website, I felt compelled to share with you how lucky I am as a principal because I have a school psychologist who exceeds the expectations outlined in that description. Through Terry's work, our school culture and climate is very caring, warm, and trusting; our faculty has a tremendous resource to help work through problems and bring out the best in our students; and our students are learning to apply their strengths to their school experience—And are enjoying doing it.

Unfortunately, Terry, like many other school psychologists, is stretched very thin. School psychologists often are assigned duties that, although they may be important, do not allow them the time necessary to have the broad impact on student achievement and school climate that their training encompasses. Terry, who serves three schools, is unable to devote all of her time and energy to Joyce Kilmer School. In fact, she typically has to put things off (her paperwork) in order to be an active part in our school. I do understand that school districts must distribute their funding in a manner that will allow them to meet all of their mandates. However, I would be remiss if I didn't say that the role of school psychologists, when employed to their real potential, is critically important in assisting school administration in moving a school in a positive direction.

It is my hope that we are able to increase the supply of school psychologists and allow them to work with the broad, general population of the school, as well as individual students with individual needs. Finally, my early experiences in education as a teacher and administrator lead me to believe that the primary role of a school psychologist was to ensure the school was compliant under IDEA laws by testing students in a timely fashion. I am proud to say that Dr. T. has enlightened me to the possibilities that exist when you bring your school psychologist on the school leadership team. So, I say thank you Terry Molony, and thank you NASP for your support of this very important work and raising awareness of these issues with our federal policy makers!

*Mr. Kwame Morton, Sr., MEd, is currently the principal at the Kilmer Elementary School in the Cherry Hill Public Schools, NJ. Prior to beginning at Kilmer Elementary School, he was principal of an elementary school in the Philadelphia School District and an assistant principal in Philadelphia and Brooklyn, NY. He began his education career as a public school teacher in Brooklyn. Mr. Morton holds a MEd from the College of Saint Rose and a BS in Business Administration from Clarion University. He is pursuing an EdD in Educational Leadership from Northcentral University. In addition, Mr. Morton participated in School Turnaround Specialist Training at the University of Virginia's Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education.*