INTRODUCTION

Good morning. My name is Alison Serino. I am the principal of A. Mario Loiederman Magnet Middle School for the Creative and Performing Arts in Silver Spring, Maryland. Loiederman was founded 7 years ago and was initially launched by a federal magnet schools grant to reduce the socioeconomic isolation of our students. We serve 800 students that matriculate from over 40 elementary schools. About three quarters of our students live in the neighborhoods around the school and one quarter of our students are accepted through a lottery from the county at large. Eighty percent of our students have been eligible for free or reduced meals at some point in their educational careers. Forty-five percent are Latino, 25% are African American, 18% are White and 12% are Asian. Thirty-five percent of our students are current or former English speakers of other languages (ESOL) students. We are a whole-school magnet, which means that the students who live across the street are in the same algebra, science, dance, and film classes as those who travel many miles to us.

As a relatively young school, we have been working to define and refine our work. One of the most valuable endeavors we have pursued is the positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) program for the last five years. I’m tremendously proud of the Gold Award we earned from the state of Maryland in 2010 but acknowledge that we are a work in progress.

OVERARCHING POINT

As a school principal, I devote a great deal of attention to ensuring that teachers are well prepared to teach. Countless hours are spent coaching teachers on how best to meet the academic needs of our students using high quality academic instruction. However, over the years as an educator and school principal, one thing has become clear: If students do not feel safe in school, they will not be available to learn. As such, we must provide schools with the resources to meet their students’ needs and maintain a safe school environment.

I have learned that there are multiple, critical components to creating positive conditions for learning related to safety and well-being that are universal to all students, regardless of their backgrounds. Some examples follow.

KEY SUPPORTING POINTS

1. Excellent collaboration and communication among staff, students, and parents is essential to maintaining a safe and supportive learning environment; so much so that it constitutes the second of our three school improvement goals. Collaboration helps to create a sense of community, connectedness, and empowerment. Each year we look at our school climate data in comparison to previous years and to other schools. We also look for an overlap in feedback from students, staff, and parents. Our analysis has resulted in the
implementation of a variety of programs. One of our most promising initiatives involves classroom circles to build a sense of community and to solve problems.

On the first day of our preservice week, I asked the staff to spend half a day in a circle. I thought this was quite a risky move since teachers would be anxious to get themselves settled in their own classrooms. However, it was symbolic and communicated the value of this classroom structure. If I wanted staff members to create opportunities for student voice and to build relationships with and among their students, I knew that we had to collectively practice and internalize the circle approach ourselves.

2. **Uniform, consistent, and positive behavior approach to discipline** are critical for the entire school. This entails a unified approach from all staff to respond consistently and fairly to student disciplinary concerns. This also requires shifting the focus away from punitive responses and more toward teaching, modeling, and rewarding positive, prosocial behaviors. We teach students how they can repair their community when they have violated our code of conduct through school-wide and classroom lessons and role playing to encourage positive behaviors. We define universal expectations and reward positive behaviors with PBIS coupons. Consistency, predictability, and fairness in discipline helps students feel safe and supported at school.

3. **Data analysis and action is key.** We regularly share our discipline data with staff and with students so we can recognize (and learn from) our patterns. It has become quite apparent that African American students are overrepresented in negative behavior categories at our school. We are delving beyond the school climate survey data and pursuing more qualitative feedback through focus groups with students. We have found students to be specific and constructive with their input, and including them in this process has increased their ownership of the problem.

4. **Access to school-based mental health services to help promote student wellness and positive behavior is critical to student success.** There must be a cadre of skilled professionals in the building trained to handle students’ mental health needs. As described in today’s briefing and by years of research, student mental health needs are growing, and it is our duty to build the school’s capacity to respond to those needs. Our ability to teach our children and to provide them with the skills needed to succeed and be happy is dependent on this. While all school staff have a responsibility to support the mental health needs of the students, professionals such as school psychologists, school counselors, and school social workers are vital to meeting this need.

I can recall my first year as principal, 7 years ago when it was my policy that students could not be removed from any part of math, English, ESOL, reading, or special education classes to receive mental health services or attend counseling sessions. That left a very small window to work with students. Now, after accumulating 7 years of principal wisdom, the mental health professionals have carte blanche to confer with students. Our students’ academic needs are no less pressing, but I now recognize that their mental health needs take precedence. Helping kids feel safe, helping them develop their self-concept, and helping them find their voice trumps anything we can do academically. I am certain that academic success will follow when students feel safe and secure.
**HOW LOIEDERMAN MIDDLE SCHOOL ADDRESSES THE KEY POINTS**

As the school principal, I empower my staff to lead many of these initiatives and activities to ensure consistency and sustainability. It is my belief that everyone has a right and a responsibility to be a leader in our community—including teachers, school staff, parents, and students. We all must accept responsibility for the quality of the learning environment we provide for our children.

One of the ways that we have improved services to students is by employing community conferences that bring students in conflict with one another into problem-solving circles alongside their family members and friends. Another thing we are doing in our school is implementing PBIS systems. Each classroom displays consistent signage about behavioral expectations. Further, administrators host discussions with students that reinforce the universal language for the school.

Lastly, we meet regularly to design and refine support networks for our students. All of the key players—from counselors to teachers to school psychologists to administrators—meet with parents to fully understand a student’s needs and to customize our response. I recall a severe truancy issue with a student that we just could not solve, regardless of the number of letters we sent, phone calls we made, and in-person conferences we hosted. We tracked the student’s data. We designed a contract that included very student-friendly rewards. However, it wasn’t until our school social worker drove Mom to and from a few meetings that a trusting relationship began to emerge. The social worker also determined that the student was not motivated by contract rewards of candy or stickers or movie passes. She wanted to be able to earn grocery coupons for the family. That was the key! With a personalized approach, we were able to get the student reconnected with school and rewarded her in a way that made her feel proud of the help she could provide to her family.

**HOW SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS AND OTHER SPECIALIZED INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT PERSONNEL ARE CRITICAL TO ESTABLISHING POSITIVE CONDITIONS FOR LEARNING**

General educators are not typically trained to tend to a student’s mental health needs. We often have high levels of motivation but lack the resources and the knowledge. This is why we need full-time school psychologists, school social workers, and school counselors in schools. We need to have mental health practitioners who know how to provide interventions and supports to students that are relevant to the school context. This is a critical area of need in our schools.

These practitioners are also needed to develop the capacity of staff. Many of the behavior issues that we encounter could be avoided or at least minimized if staff members had ongoing access to such school-based professionals who can provide training, consultation, and professional development that enables us to work effectively with students. Having on-site experts allows staff members to learn how to become better teachers—teachers who know how to develop relationships with students and provide safe, supportive conditions for learning.

**CONCLUSION: WHAT CONGRESS CAN DO**

So what can you do for us? It is critical for federal legislation to ensure that every student has an environment where they can be successful. The resources you can provide enable us to do that. Given the complex needs of students today, and the relationship between mental well-being and learning, it is important that mental health be considered in everything you do. And it does not have to fall just on the schools. The issues that we are dealing with today in our schools are issues for the community. Everyone must take part in the solution. The national policies should reflect the importance of access to the all of the resources a student needs to be successful—academic as well as emotional, social, physical, and psychological safety. We need your support to ensure that we have the tools in the field to do the work and develop our next generation of successful, healthy leaders.

Thank you for your time and commitment to our children.