Safe, Supportive Conditions for Learning: Making Connections for Student Success

Statement of June Lucas Zillich, School Psychologist, Montgomery County Public Schools, MD

District Overview

Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) is the largest school system in Maryland and the 16th largest school system in the United States. We have more than 200 schools and serve approximately 147,000 students from a wide range of cultures, language groups, and racial and ethnic populations. We embrace our diversity with progressive equity initiatives (Report on Disproportionality), strong parent and community outreach, emphasis on use of multidisciplinary teams addressing both instruction and behavior, and data-based analysis and decision making that address individual students and the schoolhouse. MCPS has adopted positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), and is currently implementing and developing Curriculum 2.0, a new internationally driven standards curriculum, which holds the promise of broadening instruction to engage the whole child.

Importance of Connectivity

Connectivity with the individual student, the school, community, and families is critical to providing a high-quality education that ensures success for every student. As a school psychologist having worked in south central Los Angeles, and now in Montgomery County, the work to create a safe, supportive school environment is not only critical to but a prerequisite to student achievement. Connectivity starts with addressing social–emotional wellness and behavior. Wellness goes hand in hand with instruction. I learned this firsthand as a teacher and continue to see the needs every day. Having first worked as an English and then an English speakers of other languages (ESOL) teacher in Los Angeles, I struggled to meet the needs of my students. As a very young teacher, I started my first official job with energy, hope, and enthusiasm to be in such a noble profession. I felt lucky! I found myself planning amazing lessons for hours on end and trying hard to teach literature and writing while I observed my students struggle with peer issues, gang involvement, bullying, anxiety that manifested in attendance concerns, lack of engagement, violence, and low motivation. My students were struggling to fit in to school socially and academically. My lessons did not engage them as I had hoped. And by my second year, I found myself mentally exhausted and questioning whether being a teacher was what I thought it could be.

I was ready to quit. But despite the many difficult periods, disciplinary issues, and outside demands made on my students, they continued to come back and try to work with me. I knew that I was starting to connect with my students, and my instructional lessons became smoother as I better understood my students and their needs, but I still was exhausted and working too many hours. I planned to quit at the end of the school year.
Mid-year, a school psychologist knocked on my door to offer her help. She stated that I had looked tired. I believe I had aged about 10 years by then. The school psychologist helped me build self-confidence as a teacher by teaching me surface management strategies and skill building. She gave me advice about how to connect instruction with a nurturing environment. She knew how much I cared about the kids and articulated goal setting, provided me with resources, and pushed for me to be invited to staff development opportunities. She continued to coach and work with me as I reviewed my discipline policy. She consulted with me while I provided support to my students during homeroom period. I knew then that teaching entailed much more than instruction; it meant addressing the needs of the whole child with nurturance and skill building. It meant connecting with my students while developing skills to do it well. Addressing wellness and making connections with the curriculum and knowing how to maintain the motivation of my students became critical and central to my role as a teacher. I could not have done this if I had not had consistent access to the knowledge and support of that school psychologist, whom I viewed as a colleague and part of the school team.

**My work as a school psychologist**

Eight years later, I became a school psychologist and I, too, became ingrained in the fabric of my school as a support for teachers, administrators, and families and students. An important role is to connect and integrate services to address the whole child. I taught and supported staff to address safety issues, gang culture, and equitable instructional practices, and I became a coach in schools to assist new teachers with integrating instruction and providing a nurturing environment that allowed students to take risks and succeed. I was one of the lucky school psychologists who were able to work with one school several times throughout my career due to grants. I worked side by side with the principal and served as a student advocate and parent liaison.

Today as a school psychologist with Montgomery County, I am able to work with students from an integrated perspective. I participate in professional development and curricular planning that incorporates positive support strategies. I serve as the daily reminder that instruction, assessment and mental wellness strategies are part and parcel of good instruction. I am part of a multidisciplinary team that identifies research- and evidence-based structures/models of service delivery (e.g., response to intervention) that involve every child, including our special education population and our culturally and linguistically diverse students. We approach wellness through use of hard data. A transparent look at disproportionality, suspension rates, benchmark data, parent involvement and feedback, race and equity discussions, and climate surveys from all staff and students allow us to continue to better ourselves as we serve children. We promote wellness and connectivity through evidence-based practice, not through feel good statements. Let me show you one example of a student I worked with recently.

*The following PowerPoint case example includes fictitious names and picture to protect the identity of the student—yet the specifics remain true to the case.*

This is Isabel, a 13-year-old in seventh grade. She recently arrived from Peru, with limited English language and minimal information on her educational background. The staff was concerned and approached me with thoughts that she had memory problems and difficulty remaining focused. I first observed her informally and then reviewed her record. We met as a team to look at the existing data. She was ESOL level 1 and continued to score at the ESOL level 1 for more than a year. Although she was able to achieve Bs in some of her classes, her academic performance was sporadic. Her mother had not attended any invited meetings and indicated over the phone that Isabel received As in Peru when she
was with her grandmother. The counselor made several attempts to talk with Isabel, but Isabel remained quiet for the most part.

**Keep in mind:** Staff had not connected with family and Isabel. Isabel’s school performance was inconsistent. Classroom behavior was predictable based on classroom instruction. Isabel’s primary and secondary oral language were assessed. (She was able to read and write at the fourth to fifth grade level in her primary language; math had significant gaps, which was commensurate with when she left her home country. She had left when she was a fifth grader in Peru and came to the United States for her sixth grade year). I supplied a motivational and interest inventory to look at her desires, wants, hopes for her future. (She hoped to be an airline stewardess so that she could run away when she wanted and see the world.) Further inquiry with a home visit indicated why she wanted to run away. Mom clarified that the grandmother had died. Mom left Isabel with grandmother in Peru while she left for America approximately 7 years ago. Mother stated that she was only able to take Isabel’s younger sister and not Isabel at that time. This was a difficult separation. Mother was not comfortable coming to the school because she is having difficulty with her new husband and knows that Isabel coming to live with them has created some of the chaos in the home.

**Keep in mind:** Family and school connections, acculturation issues, cultural value system, new family, embarrassment, abandonment issues, anxiety levels, and more.

**After gathering the information and observations, a team meeting took place—The following activities and programs were put in place:**

- Isabel, her sister, and her mother agreed to start receiving mental health services through our Linkages to Learning Program.
- Because graphs showed different levels of engagement and focus based on good instructional practice, I supported the ESOL teacher with instruction and methodologies to better meet Isabel’s needs.
- Isabel was invited to a counselor-led lunch group where English skills were practiced and the counselor made connections with the students.
- The assistant principal and I worked together to look at interventions for Isabel to catch up with math and met with Isabel’s mother multiple times to help her to feel comfortable and be able to advocate for Isabel and come to school activities.

This is only one case within one school at a primary prevention level. Our structure for providing supports allowed a multidisciplinary team approach to solve problems in ways that improved the conditions for learning for Isabel. We incorporated school mental health services and community resources and our PBIS program that is addressing school climate and how welcoming the schools are to parents of diverse backgrounds. We also worked with the staff and the administration to address instructional match issues and looked at the environment to improve instruction and provide a more nurturing environment. The staff was flexible and looked at evidence-based interventions to address Isabel’s math gap. We made home visits. We made connections!

This is just one story of many that shows how we can take a student at risk to a place that is safe and capable of addressing her needs so that she can experience success and obtain her goals. Unfortunately, there also are many more stories that do not involve access to staff that are part of the fabric of a school equipped to address the critical needs of our students. Suicide rates, bullying, suspension rates, drop-out
rates, depression, and anxiety are becoming an increasing epidemic in this difficult economic climate. Instruction and behavior/wellness are intertwined and part of the fabric of an essential service delivery system. One does not work well without the other and both need to be addressed to allow for student success. I am proud to call myself a school psychologist—and I emphasize school psychologist—because within the title itself carries the critical message: **We must address the whole child in order to succeed in educating our children. We must connect instruction and behavior. Connectivity is the critical component in success with our children.**