

YOUTH WORK FUNDAMENTALS: BUILDING A POSITIVE PROGRAM CLIMATE

A Briefing Paper for Afterschool Professionals



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Have you ever walked onto a school campus or into an afterschool program where there's joy, acceptance, consideration, and kindness? It's in the air. It is felt. Where listening to different people's points of view is the norm? Where support and encouragement is commonly shared? Where authentic human connection is acknowledged and felt? These foundational elements of a positive program climate lay the nurturing soil from which the seeds of impassioned teaching and learning in afterschool programs sprout.

A POSITIVE PROGRAM CLIMATE: What Is It?

It has been said, “our kids don't care how much we know, until they know how much we care”. The feelings, attitudes, character, and emotional atmosphere developed by an afterschool program can be referred to as its program “climate”. It can encourage adults and students to participate or flee, to love or to disparage a program. According to the National School Climate Center,ⁱ “school climate includes major spheres of school life such as safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and the environment, as well as larger organizational patterns (e.g. from fragmented to shared; healthy or unhealthy).” Research studies show that safe, encouraging, positive, and caring educational climate directly relates to increased student motivation, academic performance, and behavioral success.



Why is it important?

A positive, affirming program climate leads to happier and more engaged teachers and students. It builds a win/win approach where adults and students are connected and together are joined in developing vibrant, fun, and successful afterschool programs. It helps minimize the level of negative student behavior including bullying and self-destructive behavior because students are connected to caring adults and to a growing number of understanding peers. Research at the University of Missouri and the University of Virginia shows that suspensions drop by as much as 10% when schools create a more positive school climate.ⁱⁱ

As the former principal at Social Justice Humanitas Academy in Los Angeles, Jose Navarro said in a recent article in Center X (UCLA), “*in our school, we have a structure of mentors- everybody mentors somebody and every mentor has a mentor, so the whole school has somebody watching each other's back. That mechanism creates a sense of being my brother's keeper. Kids don't know what to call it... so they call it a 'family'.*”ⁱⁱⁱ

This intentional “family building” directly shadows Abraham Maslow’s well-respected study on the hierarchy of needs. The essential need for a sense of belonging and connectedness underscores the necessity for afterschool programs to establish compassionate learning communities that benefit both students and adults. As cited in California Department of Education’s recent report on Positive School Climate, “when school members feel safe, valued, cared for, respected, and engaged, (then) learning increases. Schools (and afterschool programs) that provide students with support to meet these basic needs allow them to grow socially and emotionally and avoid problems ranging from emotional distress to drug use to violence- in addition to helping them grow academically.”^{iv}



WHAT CAN AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS DO TO PROMOTE A POSITIVE PROGRAM CLIMATE?

Developing a positive climate is an “inside job”. It begins with each of us individually. It has been said, “let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me”. To create a more positive climate in our afterschool programs, it also needs to begin with each of us. As we develop greater “personal positive climates” of self-awareness, empathy, and self-forgiveness, nurtured by a gentle commitment to our own self-care, we as educators can more fully activate a positive afterschool program climate around us.

What is a HEARTSET®?

Most people are familiar with the idea of a mindset- a frame of mind that has a significant correlation to one’s motivation, effort, and approach to life’s challenges. HEARTSET® is a frame of heart.

A Growth HEARTSET® is a kindness of heart.^v It establishes a climate of self-awareness, non-judgment (acceptance), peace, caring, positivity, giving, forgiving, and compassion that allows us to more freely and proactively be a force of good. A Growth HEARTSET® creates an emotional environment in which we, and the young people we teach can flourish in spite of the uncertainties and challenges that are so prevalent today.

Recently, after an EduCare’s ACE (Achievement and Commitment to Excellence) student success program that promotes Growth HEARTSET®, one high school principal noted the changes on his campus. He commented, “you are teaching from the inside out. You have opened my students’ hearts, and now we can capture their minds.” He recognized that when the afterschool program culture is set in a healthy and compassionate place, students’ minds are more open, more available, and prepared to learn.

The EduCare Foundation promotes eight skills for HEARTSET® Education that afterschool educators learn for their personal and professional development. Adult staff also teach these skills, cited below, to their young program participants.

1: Seeing The Best in Everyone

Seeing the best in everyone is seeing the best in ourselves, our students, colleagues, administrators, parents. It’s honoring each person – their uniqueness, their specialness, their gifts and talents. It’s demonstrating unconditional positive regard and respect.

2: Positively Reinforcing

Positive reinforcing, acknowledging, appreciating, and praising students, encourages and inspires them to do their best and keep growing and learning.

3: Listening From The Heart

Truly listening and hearing another is a great tribute and expression of honoring another. Children flourish when heard. Intuitively, they realize that they are respected and worthy to be listened to.

4: The Power Of Choice and Personal Responsibility

Life circumstances do not need to be the cause for negative reactions and attitudes. The choice we all have is the choice of our attitude at any moment. Blame and complaining is replaced with an ability to respond to life with wise and self-honoring decisions.

5: Resolving Conflict

Rather than viewing conflict as something to avoid or to win over, what if conflict (both within ourselves and in relationship to others) are opportunities for learning and growth? Conflict is often the forerunner to taking corrective action as a return to establishing greater balance and health. Honoring, listening from the heart, and accepting greater responsibility for one's own choices all play a role in resolving conflicts with greater dexterity and mastery.

6: Moving From Judgment To Forgiveness

Forgiveness is the doorway to a different viewing point - one of greater acceptance and freedom. As we forgive ourselves for the judgment we have placed (rather than our actions), we can learn from life's experiences and move on with greater wisdom and freedom. We are then more equipped to forgive others.

7: Turning Challenges Into Learning Opportunities

It has been said that we are never given more than we can handle. What if life (students, colleagues, school systems, etc.) are constantly giving us opportunities for our learning that are cleverly disguised as problems?

8: Giving and Receiving- A Learning Cycle of Living

Learning is expanded as we share our ideas, our abilities, our caring. There are personal rewards in the giving and in turn there is a need for receiving. We provide others with gratifying opportunities for giving as we more openly receive.



As afterschool educators learn, personally practice, and teach Growth HEARTSET® skills, significant changes in program climate follow. A Claremont Graduate University study (2018) reported that *EduCare's Growth HEARTSET® programs create a caring culture that humanizes relationships among students, teachers and parents. It builds a compassionate culture that fosters positive bonds among students and humanizes students' relationships with their family. It supports teachers in forming stronger connections with students, building a sense of community with colleagues, and adopting effective strategies to interact and involve parents.*^{vi}

ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICES

Although building a positive program climate is best addressed by the afterschool staff with direct connections with young people, the staff is supported by the larger provider organizations (school district or non-profit). There are organizational best practices which can support the work of staff. Below are some organizational tips and practices that have been identified as important.

Hiring, Performance Evaluation and Training

Building a positive program climate begins with the adult staff. This is greatly impacted by the larger organization. Thus, hiring protocols and performance evaluations should reflect the needed skills cited above. Training and professional development activities should also reflect these skills, and enlist dedicated and caring adults who are willing to be reflective and are committed to their own learning and personal growth. It is important that all organizational practices and values are upheld by everyone within the organization.



Interactions Between Staff

The “ordinary” everyday interactions between afterschool staff are the building blocks for the human connections that lead to a positive program climate. Are there opportunities for adult staff to spend authentic, quality time with individuals and groups within the larger organization?

Positively Model the Values, Norms, and Practices of Positive Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

Our youth learn most from the examples shown by the adults around them. As mentioned earlier, a positive program climate is an “inside job” for each of us to practice and demonstrate. Consider both staff and parents participating in training for developing a more positive “personal climate”, a Growth HEARTSET®, where kindness and caring expand from a “way of teaching” to a “way of being” and “relating to others”.^{vii}

Look for Building Connections and Work Collaboratively

Program staff should actively engage and partner with all stakeholders (parents, colleagues, school staff, and importantly youth) in the discussion, planning, and implementation of afterschool programs. How can the larger organizations ensure that this is happening? How can it assist the program staff? Consider student-parent connection events and activities including the powerful “Talk to Me” authentic conversations between young people and their parents.^{viii}

Creating a School-Wide/Program “Family”

How can the larger organization assist staff in creating opportunities where youth (across grades and interests) work on school events, service projects, and community advocacy or outreach to build a greater sense of a school-wide or program “family”? Engage parents and instructional day teachers to play active and vital roles.

Encourage Surveys, Reflection, Assessment, and Opportunities for Communication

How can the larger organization create time for personal, team, and program reflection and assessment? Review and discuss action steps for strengthening connections and relationship-building in the afterschool program and across the school community.

Integrate Afterschool Program

Integrate afterschool program climate building as part of the entire School Improvement Plan. This coordinated approach establishes afterschool programming as part of the comprehensive shift of the school's climate. How can the larger organization ensure that this happens?

CONCLUSION

Perhaps the essence of a positive program climate is summed up in a Mayan greeting of honoring people that is the motto and the guiding force at Social Justice Humanitas Academy:

*In Lak'ech which means "I am another yourself."
It also means, "I am you, and you are me.
If I do harm to you, I do harm to myself.
If I Love and Respect you, I Love and Respect myself."
--Luis Valdez*

Imagine schools where human connection and kindness is the norm - where no kid would go unnoticed; where students who may want to remain invisible and dangerously slip through the cracks are seen, not forgotten, and are valued and loved; where both the bullied and bully are noticed, deeply seen, and helped. Imagine an afterschool program, a school, an educational system, a government, and a society that steps up like a family that deeply cares. Imagine people looking with eyes willing to SEE each other, not for the differences that we think divide us, but for the goodness of who we each truly are.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper was authored by Stu Semigran (EduCare Foundation) and edited by Sam Piha (Temescal Associates). Thanks to our colleagues at the Expanded Learning 360°/365 project, and to the S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation for their support of this paper. Lastly, we'd like to credit the following organizations for the photos: EduCare Foundation, Spotlight: Girls, arc, and Temescal Associates.

About Temescal Associates

Temescal Associates is dedicated to building the capacity of leaders and organizations in education and youth development who are serious about improving the lives of young people. Our clients include leaders of youth serving institutions and organizations, school and youth program practitioners, public and private funders, intermediary organizations, and policy makers.

About the Expanded Learning 360°/365 Project

Expanded learning: 360°/365 is a collaborative project dedicated to promoting the development of critical skills beyond academics that research has identified as essential to young people's success in school, work, and life.

About the EduCare Foundation

The mission of EduCare is to inspire and empower young people to become responsible citizens, compassionate leaders, and to live their dreams. They accomplish this through the sponsorship and management of afterschool programs, as well as training workshops for youth, educators, and parents.

RESOURCES

Below are some resources that you may find useful:

- California Department of Education. “Safe and Supportive Schools” <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ss/se/safesupportive.asp>
- Cranston, Amy. “Want to know the secret to prioritizing school climate?”. Leadership. May/June 2017. 24-27
- DeWitt, Peter. “5 Ways to Foster a Positive School Climate”. Education Week Blogs. 12 May 2016
- EduCare Foundation. “HEARTSET® Education”, <http://www.educarefoundation.com>
- Loukas, Alexandra. “What is School Climate”. Leadership Compass. Vol. 5. No. 1. Fall 2007
- Semigran, Stu. (Article) “The Practice of Love and Forgiveness in the Lives of Youth”. August 2002; <http://www.educarefoundation.com/new-blog/2018/3/9/the-practice-of-love-and-forgiveness-in-the-lives-of-youth>

END NOTES

ⁱ National School Climate Center: <https://www.schoolclimate.org/>

ⁱⁱ Jacobson, Linda. “Study correlates positive school climate, fewer suspensions”. Education Dive. 18 December 2018

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} California Department of Education. “Positive School Climate” <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ss/se/schoolclimate.asp>

^v HEARTSET®: Transforming Teaching & Learning <http://www.educarefoundation.com/new-blog/2018/2/22/HEARTSET®-transforming-teaching-learning>

^{vi} Wang Y., Chen M., Resari A., Marshburn A., and Peterson M. “The ACE Initiative Evaluation Final Report Executive Summary”. Claremont Graduate University. August 2018

^{vii} EduCare's Growth HEARTSET® Professional Development: <https://youtu.be/LkKGjh2xu-U>

^{viii} “Talk to Me”: <https://youtu.be/XCLPzqrlwBE>