

Stress, Drama, and the Mess of Life

Building a culture of safety that has minimal stress is no joke especially in the midst of so much uncertainty in our nation today. From the novel coronavirus and the social unrest in regards to equality and race to the very dicey political climate we are now facing, having a stress-free, drama-free school environment is more important than ever. As I was reading in the educational periodical *Educational Leadership* how to create a trauma-sensitive school, I was reminded that creating an environment for children that is a safe place to simply “be” is of paramount importance before any learning it to take place within the classroom setting. The authors Kristin Souers and Pete Hall (2020) stated, “We can build a culture of safety—a nest, if you will—for the adults and students of our districts, our schools, our classrooms, and even our virtual environments.” Now, I couldn’t resist the correlation of the word “nest” in the quote as Kennedy Middle School’s mascot is the eagle, and we are truly building a “nest” of sorts in our school for our children to come learn, thrive, and socialize. But how do we create an environment at Kennedy Middle School in order for our children to do just that: learn, thrive, and socialize? At Kennedy, we are dedicated to three culture-building, safety-building attributes that I hope will help.

1. *Safety*—Continuing along with the article, “In a true nest, students and adults arrive in an environment that is free of bullying, violence, and any other threat to their personal safety.” At KMS, we take safety very seriously! In the physical sense of safety, we put measures in place that help prevent bullying both at school and in the virtual setting. We encourage open communication with adults at school, AND we encourage students to report any form of bullying they see. We also have an absolutely amazing counseling staff that takes over to ensure the students are safe and are able to tell their story. However, we also know that physical safety is just the beginning of students being able to learn, thrive, and socialize. A “feeling” of safety must also be an attribute for a student on a daily basis which leads us to our next nest-building attribute.
2. *Predictability*—Students often feel stress when they are faced with an unknown or when conditions in a particular setting are unpredictable. That is why the experience at Kennedy Middle School must be a place a student can enter and pretty much know what’s going to happen. They need to have the assurance that, if they begin feeling a certain way, an adult will immediately intervene and help. Students need to know that when they fail (an inevitability in a school environment) it is a safe place to fail, that the consequences of failing are not punitive but rather therapeutic, and that they learn what to do the next time to prevent that failure from occurring again. Students are able to predict the outcome of the situation because that’s just how business is done at KMS, and everyone knows it.
3. *Consistency*—Lastly, I can’t think of anything more important to ensure students can learn, socialize, and thrive than providing a consistent environment for them to do so. Being consistent in our interactions with students, being consistent in how we structure the school day, and being consistent in how we respond to situations gives students that “feeling” of safety. Students understand the intent of the actions from adults since that is

how it is done at all times. It is common language and a relentless attitude towards success no matter what.

As the educators at Kennedy Middle School continue to strive for excellence, it is my hope that each student is able to learn from his/her experiences through positive classroom interactions and a rigorous academic curriculum; thrive as a young person who is discovering what it means to slowly be an adult; and to socially interact with adults and peers that provide positivity to their day. Welcome to Kennedy Middle School! Welcome to our nest!

Souers, K. & Hall, P. (2020). *Trauma is a word—not a sentence*. Educational Leadership 78(2) pp. 34-39.

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