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RETHINKING THE PHYSICAL BUILDING

A school building itself can have either positive or negative effects on the mental health of the people who learn and work there. Usually administrators and physical plant services are the only ones thinking about the building, but there is so much we can do to improve mental health through the facilities. While we don't often have the chance to impact the design of a school building, there are times when communities build or renovate schools so it is a great chance to rethink them in light of mental and physical health.

This starts with the front door! School entrances and exits have become a source of great scrutiny over the past 20 years as school violence has become more of a threat. While we have tried to make our schools safer, we have also made it more difficult to feel welcomed at the schoolhouse gate. During student arrival and dismissal, students and families should be welcomed to the school by staff located outside the school. Seeing smiling administrators, teachers, and staff in the parking lots, traffic circles, and outside the school door can greatly reduce anxiety and be a first signal of that culture of caring we are trying to create. Once the school day has begun, clear and welcoming signage at school doors plus friendly protocols for visitors can also help parents and others feel welcomed but still maintain safety procedures. We know principals and administrators who also walk the neighborhood at different times during the school day to be more aware of how school operations are impacting the community. It is also a great opportunity to build better relationships with neighbors.

Over the past 20 years, we've also started to pay more attention to how the physical environment of the school building and classrooms impact student learning and student mental health. From an environmental point of view, air quality, lighting, sound, flooring materials, and access to the outdoors can either distract from or improve learning (Filardo et al., 2019; Schneider, 2002). Many studies have now shown evidence of how these school design and environmental factors can raise test scores and academic achievement.

There are also other studies that point to the positive impact on mental and emotional health when students and staff are surrounded by clean air, sunlight, and moderate temperature and sound. Access to green space, the outdoors, or even the ability to see these through windows can also help students and staff reduce stress and remain positive (Moser, 2016). Researchers, like Dr. Theresa Horton at Northwestern University, are finding links between nature and cortisol and glucose levels, and even aging (Browning & Rigolon, 2019; Horton, 2021; Paul, 2023). This means that adding more plants, lawns, raised planting beds, or rooftop gardens can help everyone feel better and potentially learn more, as can regular walks outside during the school day.

In the classroom, there are many ways teachers, staff, and administrators can improve the environment to help students feel comfortable and better engage in learning. In creating a trauma-informed classroom, teachers can think about how lighting, sound, and temperature might impact a student. Harsh

fluorescent lights can be covered by a diffuser or fabric to soften the light shining down on students. While some students might be energized by music being played as they enter class, others may be distracted or triggered by it so monitor sound levels carefully and talk to kids about what makes them feel comfortable. Teachers should also think about students who may have hearing disabilities and ask their administration to purchase microphone and speaker systems to amplify teacher and student voices.

Classroom furniture that is flexible and comfortable, especially furniture that can flex or bounce a little, can provide students with the right amount of movement to keep them focused and engaged. Many elementary teachers have moved away from rows of desks and created stations and areas where the furniture is more appropriate for the activity, such as water tables, bean bags chairs, or small tables for collaboration. It is also quite common to see calming corners or calming chairs in classrooms at all grade levels, which are wonderful places where students can choose to sit and regulate themselves when they are stressed or anxious. Often, teachers will add fidget spinners, coloring books, or puzzles to these spaces.

In many school climate surveys and research we've conducted over decades, a common pattern regarding student feelings of safety is that most will say they feel safe in their classrooms but not so much in other areas of a school. These non-classroom spaces are often also more informal student spaces with less direct teacher or staff supervision, such as hallways, bathrooms, locker rooms, cafeterias, playgrounds, and parking lots. Some schools have utilized camera systems to better monitor these areas but these are not useful at the moment of an incident and can add an element of "big brother" watching students, leading to distrust. Administrators need to create staffing plans for supervising these areas or securing them so students can't access them without supervision. We've also learned that these are also spaces where staff must be carefully trained to manage students and build positive relationships and environments where all kids feel safe.

In one school we worked with, school climate surveys showed very negative feelings of the students toward security staff, who were most visible in hallways, study halls, and the cafeteria. We spent a day observing these areas and discovered the reason for this response. When the bell for the passing period rang and students moved into the hallways, security staff often yelled at groups of students: "Keep moving!" "Get to class!" "Ya'll are going to be late!" In the study halls and cafeteria, security staff continued to loudly bark orders to students, chastise them for gathering in groups, or not following pretty strict rules regarding which direction to sit in a chair or for silence.

When we reported our survey results, observations and some video of what had become normal, daily interactions, school leaders saw clearly that the positive climate their teachers created in classrooms was forgotten upon stepping into the hallway. The following week, the assistant principal led groups of the security staff through some retraining and role-play. There was

an immediate change in the noise level in the hallways and student complaints about security staff diminished. By the following fall, after making some personnel decisions and additional training, with a focus on development connections with kids, students began reporting that the security staff were among their favorite adults in the school.

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