

Case Study: Bryn Mawr Elementary

Imagine walking into a school on two different occasions, about 3 years apart. The first time, you can feel a bit of tension in the school — it might feel like barely contained chaos. There are lots of students learning — but as you meet with the administration there are many interruptions. From various parts of the building the office is getting calls for help and support. The responses are appropriate — but it is clearly draining the adults in the building. While expectations are posted in the building, as you watch students move about there are a significant number of students who clearly are failing to follow them.

Then you visit three years later. The school has a sense of calm. It isn't perfect. Occasionally a student struggles — and you notice that they generally respond quickly when they are reminded by either their peers or adults. It seems like quite a change! This is not a school that has been celebrated as a ground breaker, and something big has shifted.

What happened?

Bryn Mawr Elementary is located in Renton, Washington. It serves more than 425 students who come from very diverse backgrounds (Asian 26.8%, Hispanic/Latino 24.4%, Black/African American 22%, two or more races 12.7%, White 12.3%, Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander 1.1%, American Indian/Alaska Native .06%). Seventy percent of the students are identified as low income, 30% are English language learners and 12% qualify for special education.

In 2014, after watching a neighboring school adopt Sound Discipline's whole school model, the school leadership team decided to slowly explore the same model. Understanding that students can't learn unless they can be in the classroom, they started by developing an internal discipline data team made up of representative staff that met monthly to learn about patterns of behavior in the school. From the beginning the staff focused on behaviors that were the most disruptive to learning and the school community: physical aggression and fighting.

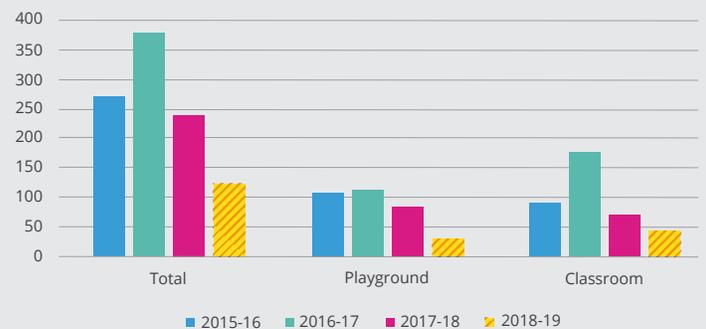
The year-long process of collecting data, looking for patterns and then designing solution-focused changes in processes and procedures was eye opening. They began to understand that the patterns of behavior were not because individual students were "bad," but because the school environment was particularly stressful to certain groups of students.

In 2015, the school voted to adopt the full school model which involved 18 hours of full staff training over the year to give adults the tools and knowledge to lead the Positive Discipline social-emotional learning curriculum and to align their discipline policies toward the solution-focused model. The lessons are adaptable to every grade level. It was not an easy year. In theory, moving from punishment to solutions sounded great — but when a student did something particularly hurtful — it was hard not to want to make that child pay for their behavior. By the end of the school year though, every classroom was holding class meetings in which students practiced problem solving, several times a week. They were actively practicing the skills they had been taught.

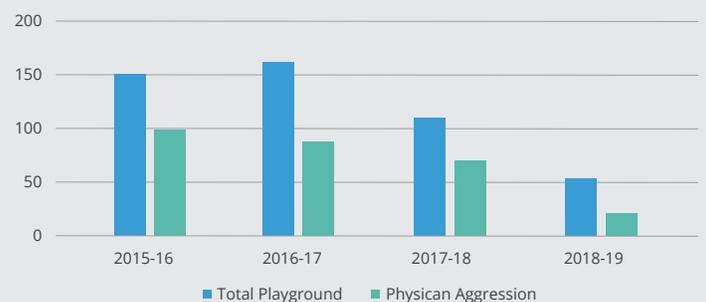
As the educators and students gradually became more skilled at creating community and problem-solving, behavior incidents decreased. As they decreased, there was more time for teaching. Progress did not happen in a linear fashion. However, by being consistent and using the strategies and processes that they had learned, they were able to overcome obstacles and continue to improve.

THE DATA ILLUSTRATES PROGRESS OVER 4 YEARS

Fighting and Physical Aggression (Sept - May)



Behavior Incidents on the Playground (Sept - May)



Behavior Incidents in the Classroom (Sept - May)



Case Study: Bryn Mawr Elementary

(continued)

The slow steady work by the adults and students together has had other impacts on the building:

- ▶ As in most buildings, there were a few educators who were vocal skeptics. They care deeply for students and worried that these school changes would not be helpful if students didn't feel the "full impact" of their misbehavior. A small group of those adults made their feelings be known quite loudly the first year, interrupting trainings and being the first to highlight things that were "not working." In September of 2018, one of the most vocal of the skeptics, noticed that they had experienced the best start of the school year ever. She acknowledged that behavior still wasn't perfect but expressed confidence the students who still struggled would quickly learn from their peers.
- ▶ In 2018, the family liaison began to question how the school treated parents whose children were not attending regularly. "Why is it that we send them letters that at first are inquiries, but then become progressively more threatening?" She noted that, "We stopped punishing the students, why are we punishing the parents?" Instead she proposed inviting them in for a conversation over a meal. The parents came in, initially quite skeptical — and after a solution-focused conversation, where it became clear that everyone wanted the best for the children, they left offering hugs to the school staff. Not surprisingly, the students' attendance improved.
- ▶ The educators who worked on the playground noticed that while students all had "cool down zones" in their own classrooms for times when they need to self-regulate, there was no place to do that on the playground. They decided to create spaces on the playground for students to calm down when they get too excited, upset or disappointed. There are now clouds painted on the school playground surface and every student can tell you what they are for, when you go there (voluntarily) and how you can support someone who is standing on a cloud. No shame involved.

What about learning?

Social-emotional safety creates a strong foundation for learning — and it doesn't work all by itself. The staff at Bryn Mawr are also intentional about continually improving their teaching. Students who feel safe, welcome and that they matter combined with teachers who are always themselves learning results in better outcomes. Over the last 5 years there has been steady progress.

This progress is most easily visible when you follow the progress of a group of students as they move from 3rd to 5th grade, as illustrated (right). Each line represents a group of students who were third graders in a given year and their progress over time. Notice that in addition to having made more progress by third grade, each year, the growth from third to fifth grade also increases for each cohort.

What are they still working on? Even though behavior incidents have dropped dramatically — they are still not evenly distributed across racial groups. The staff is digging deep and now able to address racial bias more openly than they were able to 4 years ago — and there is still work to be done.

There are also many things to celebrate:

- ▶ The school now has no trouble retaining or attracting new staff. Current staff encourage their colleagues at other schools to come join them at Bryn Mawr. They have become a staff magnet.
- ▶ Adults are now thinking differently about their students.
- ▶ Repair conversations (where students acknowledge the impact of their actions, solve their problem and share a plan to do better next time and are welcomed back to the community) are now common practice and expected by educators and students.
- ▶ The staff have built a stronger community and now are able to have conversations about difficult topics that they could not have had 4 — or even 2 years ago.

Percent of Students Passing English Language Arts State Exam



Improvement in English Language by Cohort



Referral Risk Ratio

