

## **For Principal Newsletters – Use Where Appropriate**

### **Social/Emotional Learning in the Schools: Developing Voice and Leadership**

Like many school districts, Parsippany-Troy Hills Township Schools have developed objectives related to social/emotional learning. What exactly is social and emotional learning? It's a small word for a rather large cluster of behaviors that help guide many of us through a productive, successful, and fruitful life. Some people refer to social/emotional behaviors as 'soft skills' - those behaviors like empathy, perspective, communication, self-awareness, and advocacy that are gained over time through social experiences. There are no quick lessons for teaching empathy or advocacy. These behaviors take time and repetition to hone.

One of the ways we are teaching these skills to students is by providing them with opportunities to have a voice in decision-making and to be leaders in their school settings. Students who view themselves as leaders are more likely to put forth their best effort, set high goals, and advocate for themselves. Students who have a voice in school/classroom decisions feel as if they matter and can make a difference. These are empowering feelings that translate well into adult behaviors.

What does leadership development look like in school? Our elementary schools build leadership skills from an early age with opportunities for older students to serve as "Class Buddies" where they might read with younger students, tutor younger children in math and reading, and "appropriately assist with dismissal procedures, bus safety, cafeteria cleanliness, and school diplomacy. At the "Back to School Nights" this year, students participated in the evening as Tour Guides, greeters, and even taught special parent workshops on our online math resources.

The Student-Superintendent Advisory Panel that meets with me regularly is a wonderfully dynamic group that has brought forth such ideas as "study hall passes" for athletes to use during P.E. classes, better sharing of information between our two high schools about students' college selection for possible roommate and commuting assistance, and input into district assessment practices. They have been an incredibly thoughtful group and I have appreciated hearing their candid and wise views on matters related to school culture, academics, and overall decision-making.

Each of our schools have a School Climate Committee that meets regularly to review student behavioral trends, social and emotional needs of the school community, and discuss ideas to build a positive learning environment. Many of our schools include student representatives on these committees and, as a result, have heard students' perspectives on how to make recess more enjoyable, creating a healthier lunch experience, and assembly ideas.

Students are an integral part of the selection process for school administrators. At Lake Hiawatha School, Eastlake School, Troy Hills School, and Parsippany Hills High School, students served as Tour Guides for principal candidates, fielding questions from the candidates and highlighting areas of interest around the school. The students then debriefed with members of the Interview Panels and shared their impressions of each candidate.

Promoting student leadership and voice in our schools is a critical element in developing social and emotional learning. We're excited about this work and about the amazing young people we interact with each and every day!