Horace Mann Middle School
SAN DIEGO, CA

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ENGAGING THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY IN THE TRANSFORMATION PROCESS

School connectedness, defined as the sense that students hold that they are accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school, is a significant indicator of student motivation, engagement, and well-being.[1] Recent studies have shown that shutdowns and disruptions due to COVID-19 have negatively impacted learning and relationship-building for students.[2,3] At Horace Mann Middle School in San Diego, CA, staff have invested in student well-being through professional learning, team-based climate work, and data use that prioritize the creation of a welcoming, connected environment. The school has emphasized collaboration between educators, paraprofessionals, students, administrators, and others to ensure that all school community members feel supported, safe, and heard. This multidisciplinary, schoolwide focus is crucial to ensuring that staff who may have unique insights into unwelcoming or inequitable aspects of the school climate are included in sustainable continuous improvement efforts.[4]

The first step toward building a campus environment where students and staff felt a sense of connection and belonging was to assess the current disciplinary systems and practices that staff implemented in their classroom communities. The school's Cougar Culture Committee was developed when students and staff voiced concerns about not feeling safe on campus. Classroom data showed high levels of behavioral referrals and classroom incidents at the time, which motivated the grassroots response from staff members who formed the Cougar Committee. From the outset, Committee lead and English teacher Catherine Fox-Copeland asked students to identify the ideal qualities that the school could embody. Students expressed the need for joy as well as rewards

for positive behavior, which resulted in the Committee's decision to build a Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) model.

Horace Mann also has a teacher-led Transformation team that ensures the integration of welcoming and inclusive practices in classrooms to build connection and belonging. Team members also created an observation tool to assess the fidelity of classroom strategies across multiple classrooms while assessing the impact of schoolwide climate work. Each team lead stressed the importance of the role of a warm "demander," described as a teacher who has high expectations for students while helping them reach their full potential in a structured environment.[5] Quantitative data demonstrate a decrease in behavioral referrals, while anecdotal data show higher levels of connectedness and belonging. Taking the time to utilize relationship-building activities to improve student and staff connections allowed staff to have more authentic and honest conversations with students about the source of their behavior when incidents do occur. Horace Mann's climate work has shown how school leaders who facilitate collaboration, solicit community voice, and use data to continuously inform climate improvement efforts can effectively support sustainable systems change.

School Information	
Number of students	824
Geographic setting	Urban
Grades served	6–8
School model	Traditional

Student Demographics	
Latinx	51.6%
Black	21.1%
Asian or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	19.5%
Multiracial	3.9%
White	2.5%
Filipino	0.6%
Students with disabilities	18.6%
English language learners	36.9%
Socioeconomically disadvantaged	93.9%

Data sourced from the California School Dashboard.

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Consider while you listen . . .

Horace Mann combines community voice and data analysis to inform its disciplinary reform and climate efforts. **Has your team analyzed disciplinary trends at your school? Have you sought out school climate feedback from students and family members?**

Collaborative, team-based work allows multiple school community members to problem-solve together, which facilitates meaningful, sustainable systems change. **How does your school community value staff with diverse backgrounds or expertise? How could your school climate benefit from work that brings diverse voices and perspectives together?**

References

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