

Dear Parents and Families,

I am writing to share some thoughts on our work in the area of school climate and culture. We are aware that bullying and mean-spirited behavior are issues in our school system; there are students who experience such things and they should not have to. This is true in Manchester and throughout the state and country. We work diligently to respond to concerns shared at the school level and will continue to do so. If, at any point a parent has a concern about the response at the building level, you can contact me at any time. Additionally, our Board of Education will review the policy on bullying and revise it based on feedback received.

Recently I have met with many individuals and groups to talk about school climate. From these conversations it is apparent that there are many people with many different ideas about how to strengthen school climate. What is also clear is that there is no one solution - no simple approach - to addressing what is a very complex issue. As a result, we in the Manchester Public Schools are trying a wide variety of strategies to support all students and build a strong school community. In an effort to garner additional feedback I would encourage you to attend the District-wide PTA meeting on Thursday, March 31 at 6:30 p.m. at Manchester High School. This event will highlight what is currently being done at the district and school level and allow for constructive dialogue to occur.

At the district level, we have implemented the Social Thinking curriculum in Kindergarten and grade 1 across all elementary schools and in grades 2-5 at six of the nine elementary schools. The Social Thinking curriculum teaches students social problem solving and social skills by focusing on self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, social awareness, and relationship skills. We will also be adding opportunities for social-emotional learning at the middle and high schools over the next year.

At the school level, strategies designed to strengthen relationships in our school communities include whole and small group assemblies, yoga and mindfulness, use of therapy dogs, individual and small group counseling, individualized behavior plans, student safety plans, and individual and group recognitions and celebrations. There are also cases where consequences including detentions held during lunch, after school, or on Saturday (depending on grade level), removal from class, In School Suspension, and, in rare cases, Out of School Suspension are used in response to student behavior.

Often, though, consequences alone do not change behavior and our challenge is to determine what is the root of why a child might behave in ways that are mean-spirited or worse. Those working in schools know that this work is not simple and that exclusion of students, which disproportionately impacts poor, minority, and students with disabilities, is not the answer. The goal for the start of 2016-17 is to have and communicate a consistent approach to teaching and reinforcing expected behaviors across our district while also leaving some flexibility for individual school communities. We will be seeking parent input and feedback as this school year progresses.

The purpose of public schools is to ensure that all children, regardless of race, gender, religion, disability, socioeconomic status, or neighborhood, receive an opportunity to become the best versions of themselves. On our best days, the differences in values, beliefs, customs, and actions we all bring help us to learn about acceptance, perspectives, and all of the skills I listed above that we are trying to teach children through social thinking. On our worst days our fears and misunderstandings get in the way of those lessons.

Our students arrive at our doors as unfinished products brimming with potential. We expect them to learn and grow and make plenty of mistakes. We know that there are days when students will not be the best versions of themselves for a variety of reasons - large and small. Some of these reasons we know because they tell us and some we will never know. Like most people, there are definitely days where I am not the best version of myself. It is on those days when I most need my family, friends, staff, and community to rally around me - to accept me, understand me, embrace me, and help me grow. Every single one of our students, staff, and families have days like this - some more than others - and it is our response during these times that says who we are as a school community.

And it is because of how we respond - with compassion and understanding - that I am proud of our public schools. I am not proud because we are perfect - we aren't. But everyday our teachers and support staff, students, and families come to school as the best version of themselves they can be that day and rely on the community around them to support them, nurture them and help them thrive. They do all this despite our differences, the challenges we face, and the complex problems in our world today. And they do it with energy, enthusiasm, courage, and strength, all while striving to be better today than we were yesterday and better tomorrow than we are today.

I hope you enjoy the long weekend.

Sincerely,

Matt Geary