

## The Happiest Place on Earth is not Disneyland, It's Your School

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School is my happy place. As a teacher, I always believed that getting to know my students first and building relationships with them was the most important thing I could do. As an administrator, I still believe this to be true only now, I have many more students that I can have a positive impact. Whether you have a school of a few hundred students or a few thousand, it is essential to know every student. Just as Jimmy Casas, states in his book, *Culturize*, “Every student, every day.” When you have a bond of trust and respect with a student, they will work hard for you. You do not deal with discipline problems, instead you enjoy students’ excitement for learning and students leading your school with kindness.

I came to Willow Elementary seven years ago after being a vice-principal at a high school for a few years. It was a good school, but I wanted to make it even better. We hear so much about bullying, and I had just come from a secondary school where I saw that kids are kids no matter how old they are, they all want the same things... to fit in socially, to be happy, to have a friend to talk to, and to be recognized in a positive way for what they do with feedback. Most people want those same things. If you ask kids what they like most about school, most of

them will say something related to the social aspects of school like recess, lunch, or extracurricular activities. So, from my first year at Willow, I set out to make it my mission to start with the elementary students and create a positive school climate and culture. It was not hard to get all staff members on board, they are amazing. We have had a theme each year. A few of these have included: “We Believe in Students,” “Be Kind, Pass It On,” and “Elevating Our Passion, Through Skills and Kindness.” The staff wears shirts with the theme, puts together a video and song to play for our first day of school Red Carpet Celebration as we welcome students back to school. Our theme for the year is embedded in everything that we do.

We are the Willow Wolves and we have a common set of expectations, which is our HOWLS. It stands for... **H**elp others, **O**bey rules, **W**ork Hard, **L**isten and learn, and **S**how safety. We have a HOWL team of teachers that plan activities and student/staff recognition such as: Students/Staff/Volunteers of the month to HOWL about (they get a phone call home and a yard sign), the PAW of the month-posted in the lunchroom (character trait), Picnic with the Principal (most improved student from each class in academics or behavior each month), and the lunch trophy for the highest score of the week in the lunchroom.

I also started a Buddy Bench for students to sit on at recess if they needed someone to play with, and a Buddy Squad. Our Buddy Squad consists of students that are nominated by peers-two per class each quarter in all grades and classes. They plan monthly buddy/kindness activities. A few examples of the things that we have done include: smile journals where each student wrote 3 positives a day in their journal, a giant friendship tree in the lunchroom, there's only one you kindness rocks, what's your word bracelets, a kindness chain, older students helping out at the younger students' recess, spreading kindness like glitter all over Grantsville, buddy post-it tag, the 12 days of kindness, and many more.

As a staff, we decided to make the journey of becoming a State Designated STEM School. I'm proud to say that we reached platinum status. I mention this for two reasons; first because when students are working on STEM projects together, they need to collaborate, which is an essential skill. As I have observed this, I have seen students that did not work well with others totally change and accept another's ideas. Second, along with STEM we focused on teaching our students to have a growth mindset. A growth mindset can make a huge difference in a school with students and when you teach it to parents as well. It changes attitudes and builds self-esteem as well as teamwork. Students naturally cheer each other on and help each other. Students are comfortable in their environment, they are not afraid to take risks, and school is fun. Recently, we are seeing the need to help students calm down or provide them with sensory items. So, in some of our PLCs, we do a make it/take it and create things like calm down jars. We are seeing students with anxiety on the rise and more mental health needs. I think the key is to try to stay ahead of the game or at least on top of things by reading and sharing best practices. We did a book study with the book, *The Behavior Code*, to help us better understand behaviors. A lot of the teachers do mindfulness activities with the students like Mind Yeti.

Teachers need to relax as well. My assistant principal and I let our teachers and aides know that if they need a break, they can text us. I recently put together a "Willow Wellville" room for teacher wellness. Teachers are given a ticket to spend 15 minutes in Wellville to relax and renew. Wellville is in the corner of a portable (we are a growing school - our enrollment is up 60+ students this year to 750), and it was created on a dollar store budget. However, when staff member enters Wellville they can turn on the calming sound, battery-operated candles, relax in a chair, color, read, do a puzzle, write positive cards, or do yoga.

I recently attended a conference on restorative justice. I loved it! It speaks to my philosophy on discipline. Teach students to be honest, responsible, and create a culture of empathy. The presenters were the authors of the book, *Hacking School Discipline*, Nathan Maynard and Brad Weinstein. Some of the main take-aways for me from the book include; to grow, students need coaching, modeling, and consistency in expectations. One of the most valuable traits that we can teach our students is empathy. Restorative practices create a culture of communication where students learn from conflict rather than just being punished for it.

Finally, I want to share with you some of my proudest moments that tell me there is hope for the future and all of our schools. Please don't misunderstand and think there is not any bullying in our school, but I can honestly say that we have students with empathy, students that are leaders of kindness, students that feel safe and happy, and students who feel the value of kindness. We are "buddies not bullies!" Kindness has become a part of who we are. Our theme has changed from year to year in words, but the message has always been the same. I think that one knows when they have arrived as an educator when they get to the point that students reach the "you do" stage of the I do, we do, you do concept. When something becomes intrinsic. It is amazing. We are there and I couldn't be prouder! Students have become the leaders of kindness all on their own. They come to me with ideas on how to improve our school or they simply do things on their own. Here are some examples:

- Every year I go around to classrooms at the beginning of the year to read a kindness book and talk about the three goals that I have for our school- being kind, safe, and to learn. This year in one class I read, *The Kindness Snippet Jar*, and then they made a proposal to create a kindness snippet jar for the whole school. (It is up by our office- I see students use it frequently).
- A fourth-grade student has organized a clean-up crew all on her own and every recess they clean up the trash on the playground. I did not even know this until her teacher told me.
- I had a fifth-grade student write a letter proposing a solution to having more time on the swings and a better way to take turns. We now have a sign with our "Swing HOWLS."

- Another group wrote me a letter wanting to start a club to help students discuss ways to handle situations at recess if they were being bullied or had a conflict with someone.
- Students are always holding doors for others, inviting them to play when they are on the “buddy bench,” helping others anytime that there is a need, and making new students feel welcome. I hear from parents and students over and over about how welcomed they have felt being new to the school. Just the other day in the lunchroom, I had a class raising their hand all excited and calling me over to introduce me to their new student (I already knew his name whew!)
- Last year and this year, students (thought of this idea on their own) went around putting up kindness posters by teacher’s doors and around the school anonymously to make others feel good about themselves and to have a great day!
- A class this year asked their teacher if they could do a kindness activity every month (maybe this comes from our whole school buddy squad monthly activities that we do each year- we do, but now it’s a -you do). So, they stood out front one day with signs and cheered as they welcomed students to school.

Thank you for allowing me to share. I love my job, my school, and all of my students. I hope that you have the very best year ever and enjoy making your school a happy, healthy place!