



California Department of Education 2014 California Distinguished Schools Program



Signature Practice 1 Narrative

Positive School Climate

1. Rationale/Basis of the Practice

Parents at Village School play a vital role in the school community. Our families sign a Parent Participation agreement and, as part of this agreement, families support the education system of their children in numerous ways, allowing us to bring many resources to the school that we might not be able to do otherwise. We have many programs that contribute to creating a safe, caring, inclusive environment where all students feel respected and valued. Administrators, teachers, parents and students are all involved but our goal is to ensure that all of our students have the very best opportunity to grow up to be healthy, caring, and contributing members of not only our learning community, but of the entire human community.

We recognize that to achieve this goal, children must work and play in a consistent, predictable, safe, and positive environment. Our Village Values of “Model Respect, Make Good Choices, and Solve Problems” depict this goal, and we use many tools to develop, promote, and maintain a positive school climate.

Our Positive School Climate program sets a strong tone for safety, respect and teamwork. Adults are purposefully taught to spend time listening to young people, to pay attention to what’s going on and to intervene by asking open-ended questions; kindly engaging students in their own learning. At Village the development of the whole child is valued and we strive to develop life-long habits of mind, both academically and socially-emotionally. We encourage all students to seek solutions to their problems and to help others.

2. Description of the Practice

Some of the tools we use to promote a Positive School Climate include: Positive Discipline, Project Cornerstone, No Bully and Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS). Combined with our community building efforts, these tools guide our personal interactions both on and off campus. “The Positive School Climate Team” is composed of teachers, staff and parents who use all of these tools to maintain and foster a consistent, predictable, safe, and caring environment for all. Our school’s Vision Statement is: *We all belong. We are all significant. As we work, learn and play, we come together with compassion and respect.*

Positive Discipline was a founding principle of Village School. Our parents attend Positive Discipline classes taught by fellow parents who are certified in the program and make up our Parent Education Team. Although Positive Discipline classes for parents have always been a requirement at Village School, in recent years we have added “Positive Discipline at School,” a new course designed to help new parents learn how to practice Positive Discipline in the classroom. Parents also receive training on No Bully, and work side by side with the administration and teachers to implement the Project Cornerstone activities at our school. Parents also participate in PBIS teams. In addition, because every parent works in the classroom at least three hours per week, they are able to see the teachers in action every day,

learning how to instill the academic, social and emotional values in our students that they need to succeed. All of these factors ensure that we all speak the same language and share the same goals for our children.

At the beginning of the school year, using the tenets of Positive Discipline, each teacher guides their students in creating Class Agreements (rules of respect to be followed in that classroom). Each class votes on a class name and designs a class T-shirt around its chosen name, furthering the sense of classroom community. At least weekly, and usually more often, teachers guide their students in positive conflict resolution by holding Class Meetings where students compliment each other and work together to solve any problems that the students have listed on the meeting agenda. Role plays, discussions, and modeling help the children to learn how to solve their own problems. Adults are on hand at all times to support their efforts, guiding the students through the problem-solving steps. Because teachers and parents are all trained in Positive Discipline, the work that begins in the classroom can be carried over onto the playground and into the home.

Village School has embraced Project Cornerstone. Our Parent Education team facilitates Project Cornerstone "Take It Personally" workshops that all parents are required to attend during their time at Village. Parents meet in small groups to learn the 41 Developmental Assets identified by the Search Institute and Project Cornerstone as being most influential in helping young people to thrive. Small group exercises and homework assignments bring the concepts to life. The deliberate focus is on developing and maintaining a positive culture for our entire learning community. We have also implemented the Project Cornerstone Asset Building Champions (ABC Reader) program. Dedicated parent volunteers visit each of our classrooms each month, read the book of the month, discuss it with students, and engage in an activity. Our Fifth Graders all participate in Project Cornerstone's "Expect Respect" program, visiting classrooms to present messages that may include student created videos and skits centered on being an up-stander and facilitating positive student-to-student interactions.

First Grade Teacher Gina Koepf has developed a series of cooking lesson called "Cooking with Character". These are hands-on lessons that include stories, music, dance, nutrition, math and more, so that students are learning not just nutrition and cooking but also important academic and social skills including teamwork and cooperation. Originally targeted to Kindergarteners, this program has been expanded in the last two years to include all grade levels - with each student participating in a "Cooking with Character" lesson during the 2012-2013 school year. This year the lessons have been customized around the Project Cornerstone ABC Reader books. Each month, all of the 1st graders participate in a cooking lesson that supports the ABC Reader theme for that month.

Our "No Bully" team works to promote a positive school climate through family, staff, and student training. The results are a campus-wide understanding of the resources available for problem-solving. "No Bully" ensures that all members of our learning community have access and a voice in identifying problems or potential problems and provides research-based protocols to ensure a positive school climate. No Bully Solutions Teams are student peer groups that, under the direction of trained Solutions Coaches (teachers and staff), assist students who are having challenges at school by providing a common language to discuss difficult conflicts and imbalances of power that may occur between students and provide a support system for both students involved in the situation.

Meeting and exceeding the expectations of our families and students requires that we maximize the effectiveness of the research-based tools available to us. For example, PBIS helps ensure a systems-based approach to student discipline – remembering, of course, that the root word of discipline is “disciple” – or “to learn.” PBIS is not a program or a curriculum. It is a team-based process for promoting systemic problem-solving, planning, teaching, and evaluation campus-wide. Under this umbrella are complementing tools, systems, and resources that address both general and specific behaviors. This emphasis on a systems-based approach to student discipline ensures that our focus and efforts are effective with each and every member of our learning community. Inclusiveness is the “Village Way.”

Village School is a small campus with 269 students who all eat lunch and attend recess at the same time. We take advantage of this opportunity to create a positive school climate by encouraging students in different grades and classrooms to play together. One way we achieve this is through our Lunch League activities. These activities started with a parent simply showing up for her work shift on Thursday afternoons with a bag of craft supplies. When we saw how the students responded to this opportunity, we expanded the program to offer a Game Room, soccer skills coaching, a Take-Apart Club, Crafts in the Courtyard, Yarn Club and Gardening activities open to all students on various days of the week. These consistent activities, facilitated by active, engaged and positive adults, ensure there are appropriate opportunities for all students to engage and refresh during recess in the way that feels best to them. Students participate in new activities, learn new skills, and emulate their adult role models as everybody works together to foster a gentle, kind and positive learning community.

Another way in which we encourage interaction across grades and classes is our Buddy-Reading program, which pairs upper grade students with lower grade students for one-on-one partner reading once a week for 30 minutes. These cross grade level activities give the older students a chance to be role models and the younger students an older buddy to learn from and facilitate cross classroom community building which results in a safer, more caring environment for all. Buddy readers often become long-term friends. One parent said “A 1st grader I know had a birthday party last week and his Reading Buddy from kindergarten was there, even though he’d already moved on to Middle School!” That is not an unusual occurrence with Village School students!

We know that students who struggle academically can begin to feel disenfranchised. The Positive Discipline philosophy that we espouse at Village School promotes respect for each person as an individual. Our teachers and staff use many tools to identify students in need of additional interventions. Parents, either working with small groups during their classroom shift, or fulfilling their school job as volunteer tutors, support teachers in helping our students achieve academic goals. This helps students to feel more secure in the community and less like an outsider. As one fourth grader said “Just as some people wear glasses, some kids need extra help. Kids at Village School get help from the parents and other adults around school.”

Social Events round out the community experience at Village School, helping our students, and their families, become a part of the larger community. Over the summer, the Village School community meets for park days. This helps children maintain their ties to the school, while helping new students and their parents enter the community. In the fall, when children come to school for the first day, they already have familiar smiling faces that greet them at the

gate. Each family is assigned a parent partner, who is a continuing member of the school community. This parent is available during the summer to alleviate concerns, answer questions, and provide a network for how to access information and maneuver the systems of the school. Beginning with our Back to School Picnic, families attend numerous events, including our all school campout on a weekend in early fall, the Halloween Carnival, holiday giving celebrations, the Egg Drop, Fun Run and End of the Year Picnic. These opportunities support the crucial link between home and school while developing a sense of community.

Required monthly General Meetings provide parents the opportunity to meet with the Principal and PTA leadership in the evening, without students present. Recent topics have included the move to Common Core, results of school surveys and district reports, fundraising efforts and other topics of interest to the community, all while building lasting relationships.

At Village School, we celebrate the process, not the product of learning. Table points, behavior charts, stickers and free time are not tools of choice. Student effort and success is validated through descriptive feedback, conferencing times, sharing opportunities, and publishing parties, where children can demonstrate their knowledge through project based learning. The climate at Village School is warm, positive, safe and inclusive, embracing the families and staff in our collaborative efforts to support all children on their road to lifelong learning!

3. Results of the Practice

The results of this work are demonstrated in many ways including high student academic achievement, extremely low office discipline referrals and consistently high attendance rates for staff, parents and students – all admirable outcomes. But our most tangible sign of success is the experience on our campus and the graduates we produce.

Step inside our campus and you will experience engaged, and supportive students taking responsibility for their learning and for their environment. You will see students helping each other in class, feeling accepted, honing their public speaking skills as they present information to and encourage each other. You will see that they understand and accept that everyone is at a different level. You will see them at recess reminding other students of the playground rules, helping to dispense equipment from the ballroom and picking up trash around campus because they want to.

You will feel the confidence of students who have been accepted for who they are and who have had a chance to voice their opinion and to help write the rules. You will see the experience they've gained by interacting with students of multiple grade levels and adults of many different skills and backgrounds. You will see them championing fundraisers and other causes they've decided upon themselves, because they know they are in a supportive and caring environment where anything is possible.

You will notice that they have character. They know how to be bucket-fillers. They reach out. They engage. This is because they have been cared for and respected themselves. You will see administrators, teachers and parents providing tools, serving as positive role models, and guiding them gently, creating the safe, caring environment they need to become the best versions of themselves.