

Engaging & Motivating Alternative Learners at the Middle Level

Heather Whitaker
Alternative Education Teacher
Gorham Middle School
2020 Maine Teacher of the Year

heather.whitaker@gorhamschools.org



Welcome Circle

- **Introductions**
 - Name
 - Current position
- **Share 1 thing you would like to learn/discuss/hear more about at this session**



Agenda

Welcome!

Program overview

- Restorative mindset & experiential learning
- Flexible curriculum with voice and choice

The Plate

- Relationships, relationships, relationships
- Trauma-informed approach

Putting it all together

Remember: everyone in the classroom has a story that leads to misbehavior or defiance. 9 times out of 10, the story behind the misbehavior won't make you angry. It will break your heart.

– Annette Breaux

TheCornerstoneForTeachers.com



Tori Williams Douglass
@ToriGlass

So having worked in a neuroscience lab for three years, I'm at the point where I no longer believe that kids misbehave. Kids do as well as they can given their current brain development and whether their physical and emotional needs are being met.

Program Overview

- Teaching in the Gorham School System for 23 years
- 10 years teaching 6th grade; 13 years as our alternative education teacher
- Work with students whose needs are not met in the traditional learning environment; focus on engaging learners and providing explicit instruction on social, emotional, and behavioral skills
- Student profile
- Experiential and community based learning, restorative practices, career exploration, Social-Emotional Learning
- Regular education program; cap at 15 (-ish) students; multi-age; looping

“Typical” Day

AT SCHOOL

P1: Restorative Circle; DBT Skills Group;
Robotics

P2: Learning Block

P3: Outdoor Education

P4: Movement Break

P5: Lunch and Allied Arts

P6: Co-teach science

P7: Learning Block

OUT OF THE CLASSROOM

P1: Restorative Circle

P2 – P6: Experiential Learning

- *Community service*
- *Outdoor education*
- *Academic focus*

P7: Restorative Circle

- *Reflect*
- *Problem solve*
- *Review next steps*

Embedded Restorative Practices

- Relationships, relationships, relationships!
- Circles: Community building, academic, problem solving, re-entry, conflict resolution, you name it!
- Accountability through owning behavior, repairing harm and learning new skills & strategies.
- It takes time, patience, and persistence.
- Support from colleagues.
- Refining my own practice .



What can you do to be a leader when welcoming a new student?

- Include
 - Greet them
 - Introduce yourself
 - Be Kind
 - Be helpful
 - Fill them in on what we're learning
 - Be encouraging + supportive
 - Lead by example
- Help with STEAM
- Share about the garden, yoga, etc.
- Be yourself
- Be respectful
- Allow new members to have a fresh start
- get to know them by asking q's

How can we support / hold each other accountable when things are changing?

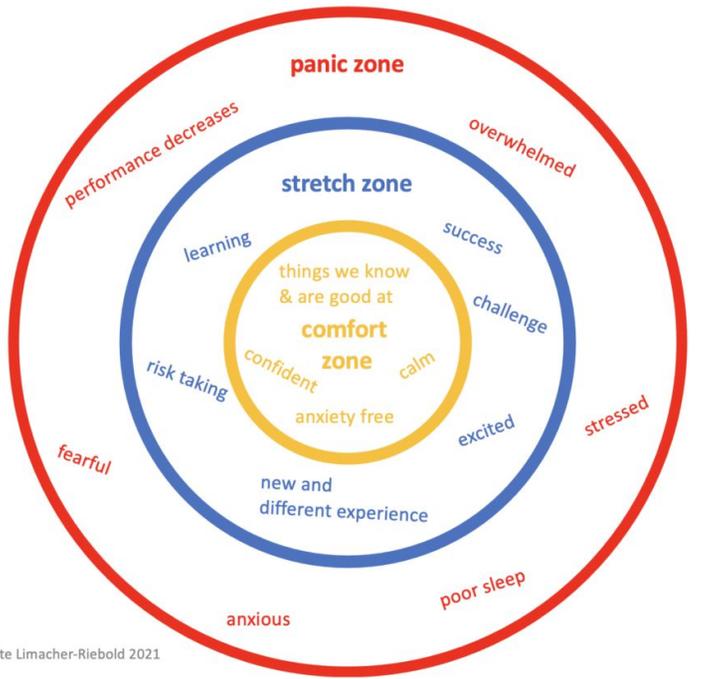
- Ignore inappropriate behaviors.
- Don't laugh; add to the chaos.
- Help by talking to them.
- Encourage appropriate behavior. In a kind way.
- Remind them of the NORMS.
- Be specific with your feedback.
- Ask a teacher for help.
- Be mindful of others in the class.
- Be responsible for your actions.
- Remember your personal goals for the program.
- Advocate for a circle.
- Take a break if you need one.
- What happens outside of school CAN NOT come into this classroom.

It's Not funny...

appearance	drugs & alcohol
race	religion
gender	interests/hobbies
size	age
learning ability	friends
\$ / income	sexual orientation
clothing	violence
ethnicity / culture	suicide

The "No Joking" List !!!

Experiential Learning



“Learning through reflection on doing.”

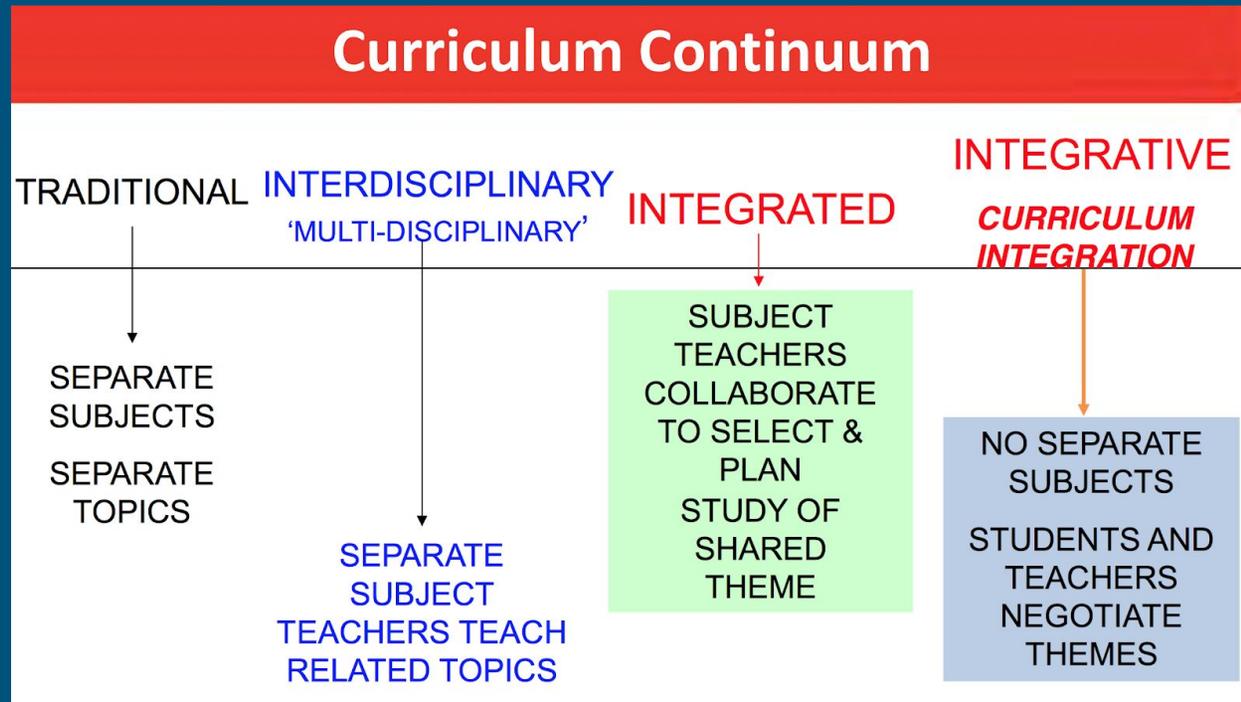
Our experiential learning opportunities are rigorous and our students may struggle for lack of experience, skills and confidence.

Experiential Learning Possibilities

- Hiking
- Rock climbing
- Career exploration
- Maine agriculture and aquaculture
- Weekly yoga
- Inn at Village Square
- The Ecology School
- Museums and the theater
- Peaks Island
- Fitness studios
- Local restaurants
- Robotics and STEAM
- Sunday River
- Portland Water District (*Trout Program*)
- Animal Refuge League
- School garden
- Food pantry
- SMCC
- WRVC and PATHS
- Cooking and *Cooking Matters*
- Building projects



Flexible Curriculum



Pause, Reflect, & Set a Goal

1. Where in your curriculum can you increase student motivation and engagement with experiential learning?
2. What support(s) do you need to actualize your goal?
3. What barriers may you face AND how can you overcome them?





As educators, the more we know about who we teach, the more effective we will be with what we teach.

Taking time to get to know our students isn't fluff time, **it's academic time.**

—DR. JUSTIN TARTE

edUTOPIA

**It's not about the content you teach...
it's about the relationship!**

Without a relationship there will be minimal change, motivation, or progress.

Critical Nature of Attachment in Teaching

- More than 30 hours per week of a child's life
- Central role in academic, social, emotional and behavioral development
- Role model and known to be highly influential in a student's life
- It only takes 1 caring person in someone's life to make a difference

74%

When students feel connected to their teacher, they are 74% more likely to report using strategies to learn more effectively.

Trauma Based Behaviors

Eloping, running away, walking the hallways

Fighting verbally, physically to push people away to protect themselves

Property destruction

Withdrawing, shutting down, isolating

Suicidal thoughts and attempts

Cutting and other self injurious behaviors

Substance Use



Common Reactions to Trauma Based Behavior

Thoughts

Why is this student not getting any better?

What am I doing wrong?

This student is doing this on purpose!

Not again...

I can't do this anymore.

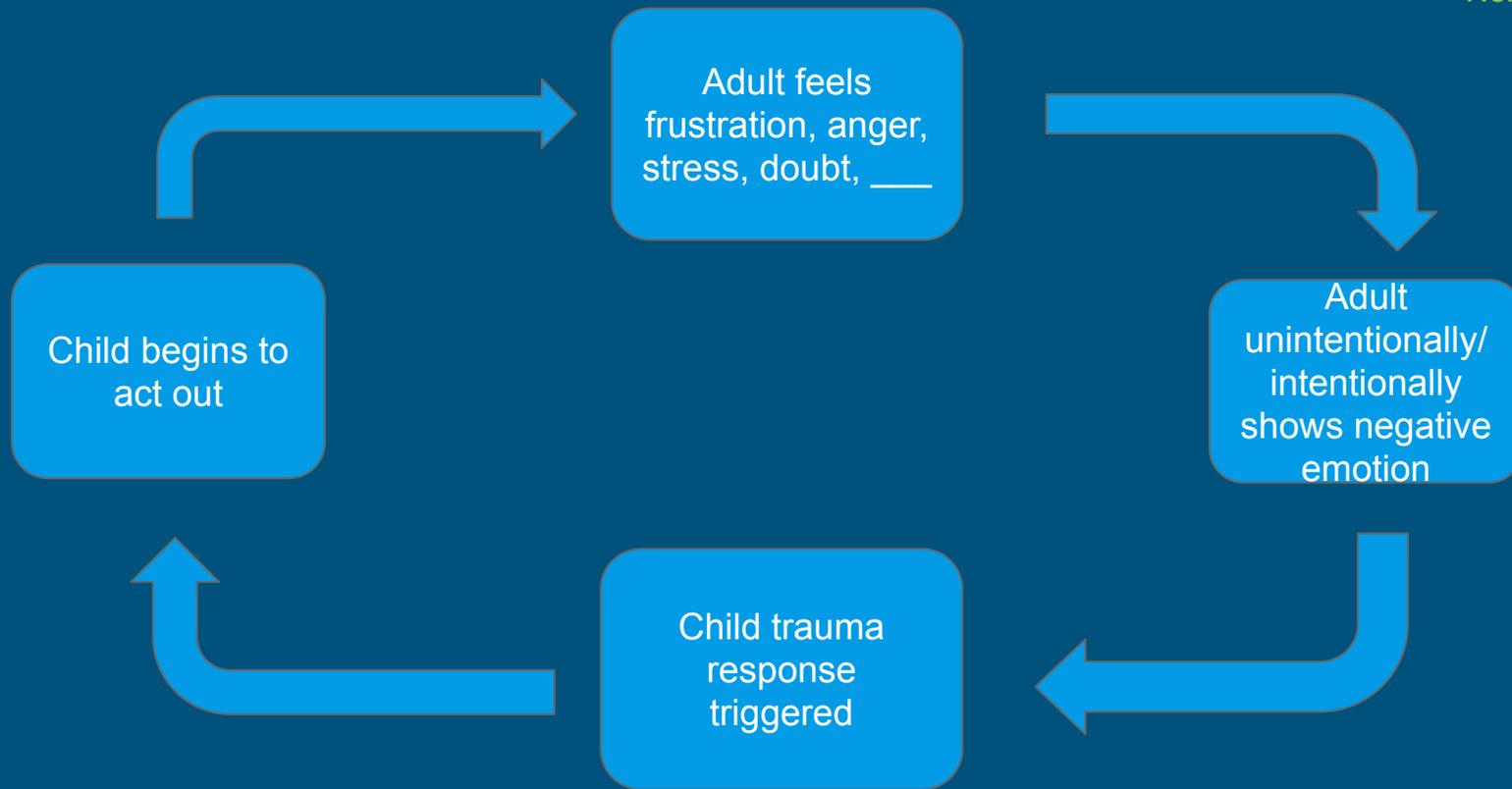
Actions

Ignoring the student or minimizing the need

Being overly agreeable or permissive to avoid further conflict with the student

Trying to control the situation with punitive or authoritative responses

Sending a student to the office without first trying to address the problem 1:1



Fuel is added to the fire if we are feeling burnt out, overwhelmed, frustrated...

Heather's Relationship Building Toolbox

- Routines
- Traditions
- 2 X 10
- Mr. Small's Advice
- Dominoes
- Depersonalize behavior
- Intentional reflection and self-awareness



I Trusted Mrs. Whitaker to end strong

I'm inspired by my amazing teachers

T.G.I.F!
 Sit back, reflect and tell me...

T - What/who did you trust this week?
G - What/who are you grateful for?
I - What/who inspired you this week?
F - What was fun this week?

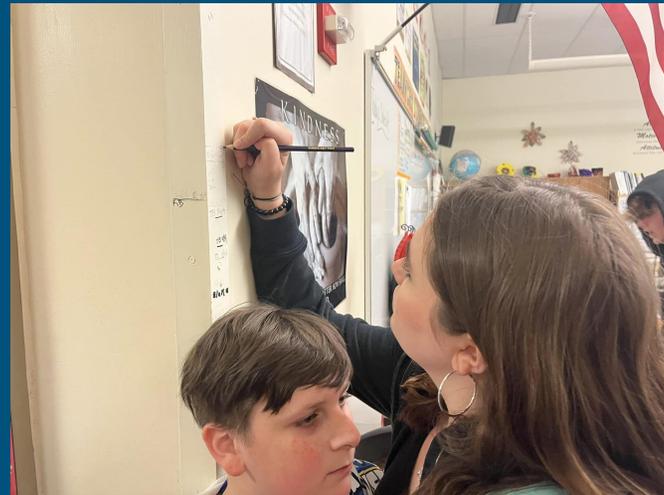
The funnest thing I did this year was the ecology school trip. *Miracle*

all the hikes this year inspired me. *Miracle*

Week #1
 salsa with vegetables from our garden
 our "cooking norms"
 114 lbs. and donated to the Garden Pantry; made bouquets of flowers for a teacher
 scavenger hunt
 icebreaker activities
 hoop houses in the garden
 in our first Community Circle
 the school library for a "four book week"
 selected SSR books

our 1st class photo
 ed brownies (to celebrate the 1st week)
 organized binders & lockers
 decorated the classroom
 completed a teambuilding activity
 to know one another
 will value Control: Behonest, Let go and have fun
 our schedule
 to debrief an incident that
 classroom community
 allowed picture books
 to read

Week #38 in Review
 Share Ceremony - we shared a positive story about every 8th grader - made reflections
 Garden - shared Kale, spinach, asparagus, parsnips
 8th grade BOG's parade
 finished chapter 6 in 7 Habits
 8th graders visited GIS for a tour
 our class made strawberry rhubarb jam
 small teambuilding challenge
 8th graders felt up to the challenge
 8th graders had a great time



Tell about them - something you appreciate
- something they bring to our community
- something they're good at

Offer an example/story

Authenticity/vulnerability > Humor - NOT a roast

Speeches require practice - find a partner and give toast

Timing: not too short, not too long

- Thank you for...
- I will miss you because...
- One of the things I appreciate about you are...
- I will always remember when...
- I wish for you...

Expectations:

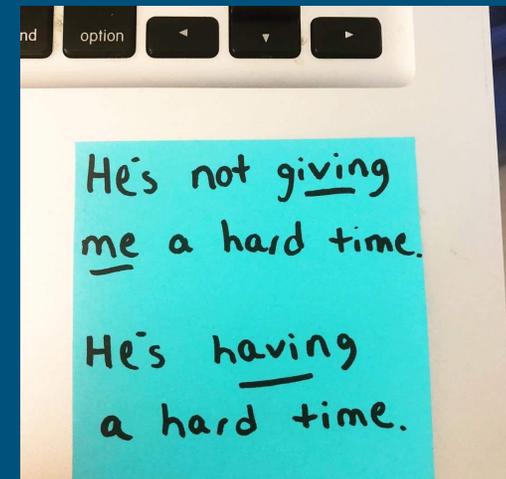
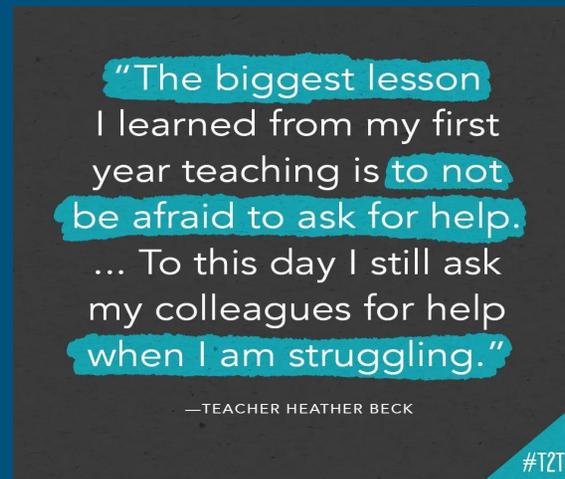
- unique messages for each classmate
- positive and kind; school appropriate
- meaningful
- include everyone
- Sincere

Put on Your Hazmat Suit!



- Self identify the experiences, people and/or situations that are most challenging
- Be aware of external stressors that might be affecting your ability to stay calm on the job
- Recognize the changes in your body when triggered by these things or the external stressors you have in your life
- Seek support and supervision
- Develop a self care plan

Extra Hazmat Protection



Create a visual or mantra of something you will say to yourself when a student is having a hard time to help you respond vs. react!

Trauma Informed Classroom

5 Principles of a Trauma Informed Classroom:

- Collaboration
- Safety
- Trust
- Choice
- Empowerment

And the role of self-regulation!

Quick Think Activity:

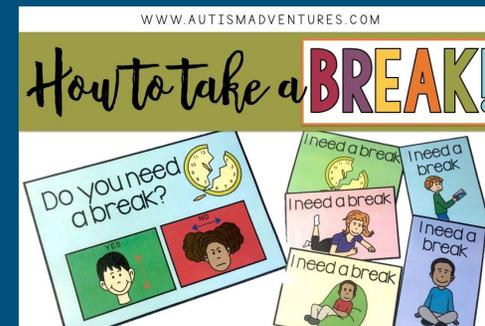
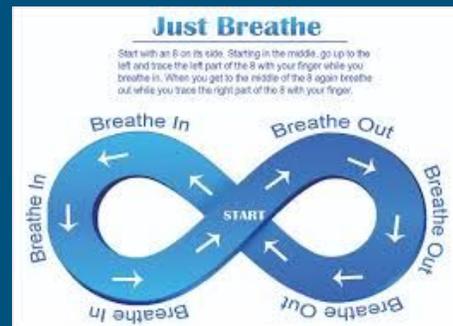
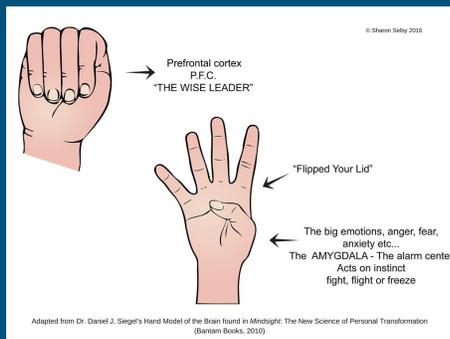
1. In your small group, take 5 minutes to brainstorm what strategies and teaching methods educators can use in the classroom to promote the principle your group was assigned.
2. Select one member of your group who will share with our larger audience.

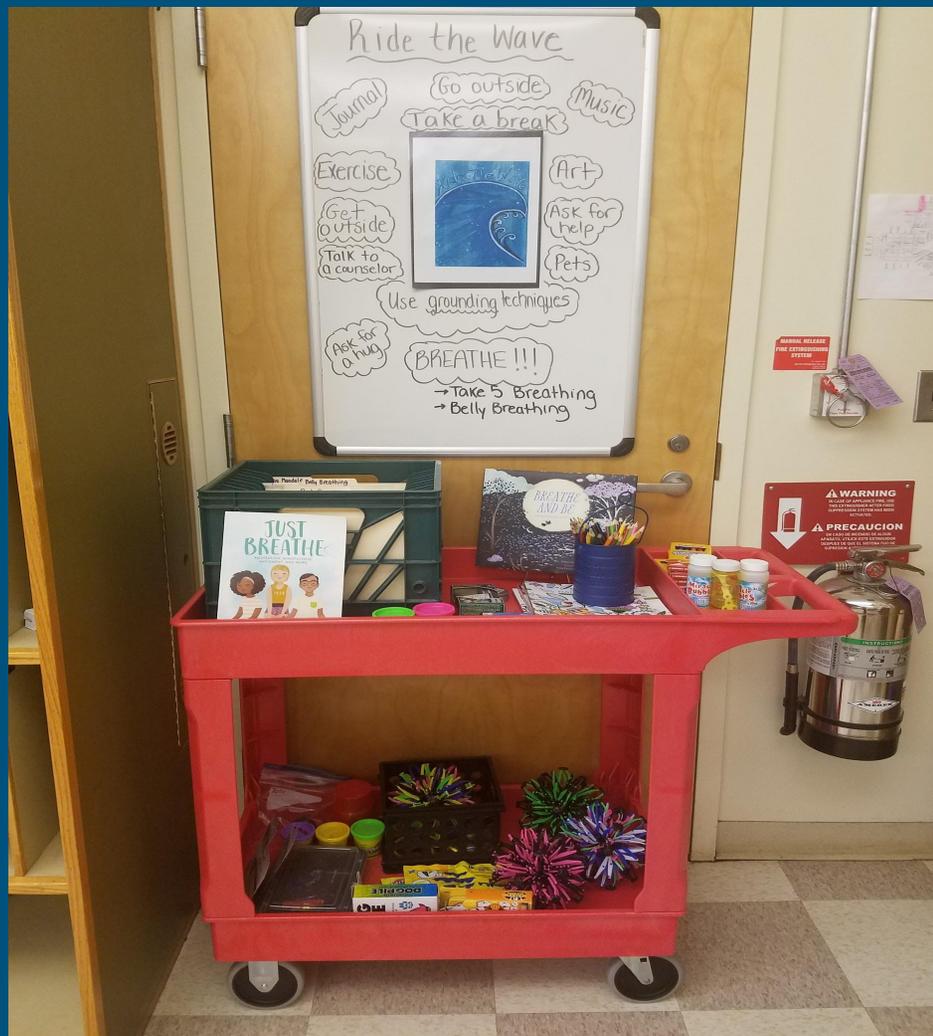
Regulation

- Accept and respect ALL of a person's feelings
- Show that you are listening, engaged, and curious to understand
- Reflect back what you hear and see
- Validate their experience
- Normalize the experience and feelings
- Name the feelings
- REMEMBER: offer advice, suggestions, reassurance, alternative perceptions
ONLY AFTER listening and helping the person express how he/she feels
- Empathy VS sympathy

Regulation

- Mindful Minutes
- Routines in your day that add movement
- Breaks built into your day
 - Breaks initiated by students
- Brain based research (teaching about their brain development)
- Explicitly teach strategies





Collaboration

Student

The first person to collaborate with (hear their voice, understand their perspective and ideas)

School staff

Establish relationships with other staff, discuss students, ask for support

Access school social worker, OT, PT, SLP, etc.

Families

Send home “good news notes” and positive phone calls

Community Providers



Safety: Both Physical & Emotional

- Clear & consistent rules for managing behavior & setting limits
- Accommodations to meet individual strengths & needs
- Predictable structure, relationships & environment:
 - Daily schedule
 - Organized classroom space
 - Consistent words and actions that relationships matter
- Greetings at the door, morning routine, end of day routine

Trust

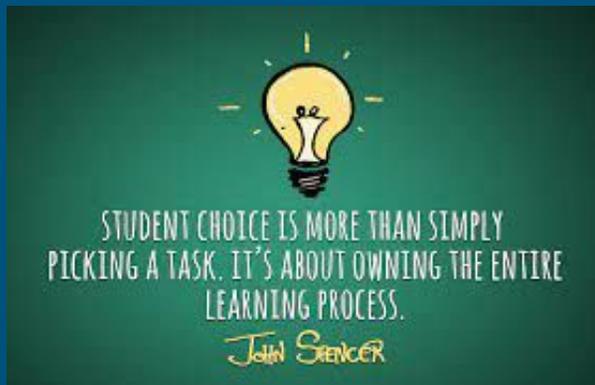
- Students must be in relationship with the teacher based on trust
- Unconditional positive regard for all students
- Follow through on promises
- Provide prediction and routines
- Be transparent with your explanations
- Validate the feeling
- Check for understanding and ask if you could do anything different
- Remember validation doesn't mean you agree with the behavior but you understand the feeling

"Building relationships with students is by far the most important thing a teacher can do. Without a solid foundation and relationships built on trust and respect, no quality learning will happen."

Timothy Hilton in Education Week Teacher

Choice

- Empowers students
- Offer power with versus power over approaches
- Have your students add voice to rules/expectations
- Choice in academics and social opportunities.



Think small. Think big!

Empowerment

- Embed mental health instruction into curriculum by teaching:
 - Coping skills
 - Self-regulation skills
 - Brain development
- Provide guided opportunities for meaningful participation
- Maintaining high behavioral & academic expectations
- Build on strengths
- Build competency
- Point out the positives



Support Cycle Template

Hi, _____. I see you have not completed this tASK yet, so I am reaching out to see how I can support you. That said, please let me know where you are in the "Support Cycle."

Do you need me to...

...help you get started?

...clarify directions?

...provide a reason for why I am asking you to do this?

...provide examples?

...model the process?

...modify the task or provide an alternative?

...provide resources?

...provide extra time?

...provide feedback?

Please let me know where I can join you in your learning. Thank you. ~sy

Hiking Unit Example

- 6 progressive hikes followed by 3 days and 2 nights with the Appalachian Mountain Club in New Hampshire at Carter's Notch.
- First and foremost, hiking is a real-life opportunity for students to work collaboratively and gain environmental awareness.
- Each student has a turn being a "leader" and a "sweeper" which are positions that teach students to be responsible for others.
- Through hiking, students learn how to work as a group, make decision, and form trust in each other's actions. We have integrate grade level lesson that are tied to the standards.

Hiking Unit Example

- **Regulation:** comfort circle, individualized strategies, partner with social worker, hike in multiple groups.
- **Collaboration:** leader, sweeper, supporting one another with encouragement, helping each other pack, carrying the load.
- **Safety:** Progressive hikes, communication (lots of it), proper gear, NORMS.
- **Trust:** checking-in, showing up, validating that this is hard AND you can do it!
- **Choice & empowerment:** Bunk mates, role in the group, expert areas, reflection, feedback loop.

Hiking Unit Example

Executive functioning: Trip planning, self-care, packing, taking care of personal hygiene and belongings

Social studies: Topographical maps, map and compass, 5 Themes of Geography

Math: Calculating distance, elevation gain, food planning and purchasing on a budget

Health: Basic first aid, cardiovascular and muscular endurance, health benefits of outdoor learning

Science: Environmental education, minimal impact hiking practices

ELA: Research projects, reflective journal writing, narrative writing

Code of Conduct: Hiking etiquette, conflict resolution, teambuilding, responsibility

"you cannot get through a single day without having an impact on the world around you. What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of a difference you want to make."

- Jane Goodall

IF YOU ARE GOING TO HANG OUT WITH CHICKENS, YOU'RE GOING TO CLUCK AND IF YOU HANG OUT WITH EAGLES, YOU'RE GOING TO FLY. -DR. STEVE MARABOLI



FAIL
[F] FIRST
[A] ATTEMPT
[I] IN
[L] LEARNING

