

Featured Mental Health Initiative

Pod C.A.R.E. – Character and Confidence, Attitudes, Relationships, and Empathy

Don Mills Middle School (Richmond Hill, ON)

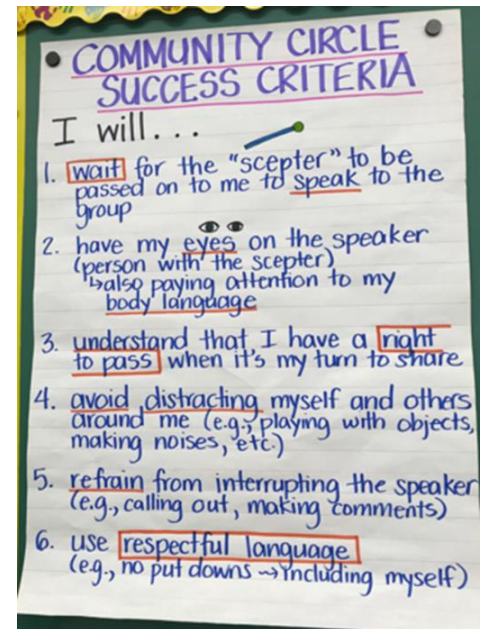
Background

The school has a student population of 409 students from grades 6-8 with a lot of cultural diversity and a variety of languages spoken. There is a high population of students with learning needs and 26% of students have an Individual Education Plan (IEP). In 2017 the school conducted a student mental health and wellbeing survey and the results demonstrated that students are stressed out, anxious, and depressed, they do not know about coping strategies to use when they feel stressed out, anxious or depressed, and they do not know where to go for help.

Promising Practice

Pod C.A.R.E. is an initiative that arose out of a need for the school staff to create connections with students in order to build trusting relationships and support the mental health and wellbeing of all students. The school staff wanted the students to develop knowledge and skills to support their mental health and to know there was somewhere to go when they need to talk to someone. The first week of every month, teachers meet with their homeroom classes for two periods to discuss topics related to mental health and wellbeing. The meeting starts with a community circle in which the group discusses the topic for the month using guiding questions created by teachers. After, students work on thought provoking activities related to the topic such as written reflection or role-playing. Teachers continue the discussions in their classrooms throughout the month and try to incorporate the topics into their instruction.

The last Wednesday of each month, school staff have a dedicated Pod C.A.R.E. staff meeting where they learn and review the topic of discussion for the next month's Pod C.A.R.E. meeting with students. They also discuss the questions for their community circle and the activities they will do with the students. It is important to note that before the initiative began, students were surveyed and they identified what topics they wanted to discuss and these are integrated into the staff meeting. Parents are also made aware of the Pod C.A.R.E. discussion topics via the school's monthly newsletter. Families are encouraged to continue these discussions



at home to reinforce the activities at school. At the end of the month, students gather at a student-led assembly to celebrate their learning for that month. There are also three theme campaigns throughout the year with examples of topics being how to care for ourselves, others, and the world; how to deal with bullying; and coping with stress and where to get help. The themes of the campaigns become the basis of other school spirit initiatives such as door decorating contests, poster campaigns, announcements, and bulletin board displays. The objectives of Pod C.A.R.E. are to provide students with the skills and resources to monitor and manage their mental health and wellbeing, promote healthy relationships with others, improve classroom and school dynamics, improve student achievement, and improve the environment for marginalized groups.

Impact

There has been an improvement in student-teacher interaction since implementing the initiative. In the last school survey that was conducted since implementing Pod C.A.R.E., 71% of students responded that they felt welcome at school, and even more said that they felt there was someone they could go to if they needed help. This is a significant improvement from the initial survey conducted in 2017. Students have positive comments about the community circle discussions and look forward to the Pod C.A.R.E. sessions with their class. It has also been noted that staff are more comfortable talking to students about difficult topics. Through Pod C.A.R.E., school staff have learned that students want and need to talk openly and honestly about mental health and well-being problems with their teachers and classmates. In order to create an environment where students feel they can share and get help from their teachers and other staff, positive relationships between staff and students need to be nurtured. Students need to be taught coping mechanisms and how to deal with stress, anxiety, bullying, and other mental health problems. Finally, staff need to be clear about where and who students can go to when they need help.

Sustainability

This initiative is sustainable because has very low costs associated with its implementation. Additionally, students and teachers are both committed to ensuring Pod C.A.R.E. is a part of the culture of the school and sustained over time.

Modifications

Here are suggestions to modify this approach for different learning environments.

- Consider allowing students to not only debrief and celebrate learning in a large group setting at assemblies, but also by allowing them to reflect about their learning in smaller groups within allotted class time.
- Encourage other ways for students to communicate how they feel in homeroom meetings. Some students may be better at expressing themselves through writing, drawing, moving, or in a one-on-one setting.

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