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On Proposed Chicago Mass School Closings

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Social emotional learning occurs when students develop competencies of self awareness, self-management, social awareness and decision making skills which manifest in: a) a stronger sense of community; b) higher academic motivation and educational aspirations; c) better understanding of consequential behavior; d) better ability to cope with school stressors; and e) more positive attitudes toward school and learning. What we also know about social emotional learning is that it is fostered through positive, healthy and rewarding relationships between parents, peers, community members and teachers. This argument highlights the importance of relationships formed between students and teachers, student's overall school attachment, the significance of forced detachment, and the sense of powerlessness that may follow.

A Middle Grade Task Force report (1987) purports that schools must promote "a sense of closeness" between students and the school community to "enhance the development of intellectual growth, academic achievement, and emotional and social maturity" (p.101). Researchers further assert that trusting and respectful relationships with adults, (Kirshener & Pozzoboni, 2011), often-through meaningful participation, and perceived teacher support is associated with positive perceptions of school climate and academic motivation (Frey, et al, 2008). Frey and colleagues (2008) discovered that school attachment is associated with lower levels of violent delinquency and aggressive beliefs, as well as with academic motivation. Moreover, students with consistently high attachment to school: a) had low levels of violent behavior and aggressive beliefs; b) perceived school climate more positively; and c) had higher academic motivation. Boys with consistently high school attachment during their transition from middle into high school had reduced levels of violent behavior, and both boys and girls with high levels of school attachment had lower levels of aggressive beliefs, high levels of perceived academic motivation, and more positive perceptions of school climate than students who had consistently low school attachment over time.

In contrast, low attachment (or school detachment) is related to higher levels of violent behavior and aggressive beliefs, more negatively perceived school climate, and lower academic motivation (Frey et al, 2008) as well as higher risk for school dropout (Thomas, 2000; Weinstein, 2002). When school detachment is coerced it could be likened to a traumatic event that occurs without any preparation, shattering feelings of security and promoting a feeling powerlessness and vulnerability to a potentially dangerous world. By laying this understanding of trauma over the current proposal of school closings I suggest that this process of forced school detachment may have greater ramifications for affected students' later in their school years.

Engaging student voice and their meaningful participation in positive decision-making also fosters social emotional development. Yet through the exclusion of student voices from the school closure conversation there has been a missed opportunity to

support future school attachment. If schools are in fact a forum by which our society generates an active citizenry and further advances a nation's progress, exclusion only reinforces a sense of powerlessness, and an historical pattern of divestment of schools that serve youth in low-income neighborhoods and those of color. Supporting student voice does not require adults to abdicate their decision-making roles but it does invite youth to participate in joint problem solving (Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011), promoting an equity-based reform that requires participation of those who are intended to receive support and who have been most affected by inequitable policies (Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011).

References

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