

**What Every Administrator Needs to Know About Creating a Caring School Culture:
The Circle of Courage Model**

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Topic Overview

Schools are communities of human beings with the fundamental purpose to ensure that every student achieves. Here at Orchard Place School, we accept that achievement for every student is our core mission. But just because we accept this as our core mission doesn't mean that it will automatically happen. We must first provide a safe, secure and positive learning environment that is characterized by supportive and caring adults. Creating a school culture of caring becomes an important prerequisite part of our mission.

The purpose of this presentation is to share how we've created a culture of caring at Orchard Place School. First, you need to understand our school setting. Orchard Place admits children who benefit from therapeutic services and are in need of a PMIC (Psychiatric Medical Institute for Children) or Day Treatment setting. The majority of our students live in this residential facility and stay for an average of ten to twelve months. Approximately 150 students attend our school programs in grades K through 12 and the majority of these students are staffed for level 3 special education services due to behavior and learning difficulties.

Our students often come to us with a history of school failure and a strong feeling that school is not for them. They often know school as a place of negative expectations, punishment, boredom and discouragement and have been suspended or expelled because of their behaviors. At Orchard Place School our first challenge is to change this negative perception of school.

Research is pretty clear that the quality of human relationships in schools may have a greater impact on student achievement and behavior than the specific teaching techniques and strategies used. We know from experience that teachers and counselors with widely different instructional styles and different methodologies can all be successful if they develop a positive rapport and form strong, caring relationships with students.

We discovered the Circle of Courage model about 10 years ago and adopted it as our school philosophy because of its emphasis on creating positive and reclaiming school environments. The Circle of Courage is based on Native American child-rearing philosophies that emphasize education and the empowerment of children. The Circle of Courage philosophy recognizes that there are four basic values that are universal human needs: Belonging, Mastery, Independence and Generosity. At Orchard Place we believe that it is important for us to work actively to address these four values in order to enhance our students' positive self-esteem and create a school culture of caring.

- Belonging is the universal desire for positive and caring relationships. To be an important person in the eyes of significant others. To believe "I belong here and am cared for."
- Mastery is our innate thirst for learning. Mastery is nurtured as we gain academic and social competence and learn to cope with the world. To believe "I am good at something."
- Independence is our desire to exercise free will. Independence is fostered by increased responsibility. To believe "I have the power to make good decisions."
- Generosity is our passion for life and is nurtured by developing concern for others and a commitment beyond one's self. To believe "I have a purpose. I can make a difference."

In the Native American Lakota Culture, these four core values are visually represented as a circle. The circle emphasizes that these values are continuous, that each is of equal importance, and that all four are needed for our youth to be successful.

Fully implementing the circle model didn't happen over night. It took years, lots of conversation and a fair amount of hard work. We started by reading *Reclaiming Youth at Risk, Our Hope for the Future*, by Larry Brendtro, Martin Brokenleg and Steve Van Bockern. This book provided us with an overview and historical perspective of the Circle of Courage model. Our staff attended conferences to hear the authors speak on the Reclaiming Youth philosophy. Teachers at all grade levels have taught, reviewed and modeled the circle philosophy with their students regularly. It has become the basis for social skill instruction and classroom management. As a staff, we've worked to implement school and classroom practices that support the values of Belonging, Mastery, Independence and Generosity.

Last school year we decided as a staff to become a PBS (Positive Behavior Supports) school. The Circle of Courage Model provided the foundation for establishing school-wide behavioral expectations for all areas and all school activities. The Circle model makes it easy to teach behavioral expectations in a positive and encouraging manner. We teach our students what it looks like to be students of Mastery and Generosity and how to practice Belonging and Independence. We've provided professional development to all teachers on the teaching of replacement behaviors so the students who continue to struggle receive additional instruction. We also celebrate student behavioral successes and recognize "Circle Students" as a way to reinforce positive behaviors. The Circle philosophy has provided a common language, common practices and a set of shared values to support our community of learners.

The Circle of Courage symbol is very visible all over our school campus. Classroom clocks, magnets, folders, posters, stationary, lapel pins and t-shirts are all adorned with the symbol as a reminder of the importance of our mission. If you were to walk into our school building and ask the first student you see to explain the Circle symbol, they'd be able to do it.

Our Positive Behavior Supports Program based on the Circle of Courage model has had a huge, positive impact on student behavior. Office referrals and incidents of unacceptable behavior have decreased significantly. Time out of the learning environment because of behavior issues has been cut in half and the number of students who received no behavioral referrals has jumped markedly.

The Circle of Courage model has truly helped us create the caring culture and reclaiming environment that we knew our students needed and deserved.

Implications for Administrators

The Circle of Courage provides a lens through which to examine all other school policies and practices. School leaders need to ask themselves, “Do our policies and practices support what we say we value? If not, are we willing to make the needed changes?”

Belonging

- Do we have hiring practices in place that help insure that we hire teachers who truly care about students?
- Have we examined our registration and enrollment procedures, especially for students coming to us from other placements or with histories of school failure?
Do our practices make new students feel welcome and send the message that they belong in our school?
- Are our school policies inclusive rather than exclusive?

Mastery

- Have we examined our curriculum to insure that all students can be successful?
Does our curriculum provide opportunities for sufficient rigor and challenge while insuring Mastery of sequential steps along the way?

- Are our teachers proficient with the concepts of multiple intelligences, interdisciplinary units, and diversified learning, in order to meet the learning needs of every student?
- Do our students understand what Mastery is? Do we help them determine their own goals and celebrate with them when they demonstrate Mastery?
- Does our staff work collaboratively as a Professional Learning Community with emphasis on student learning?

Independence

- Do we teach problem solving and social skills as an integrated part of the curriculum?
- Does our school-wide management plan give students choices, allow students time to make good choices and then hold them accountable for those choices with natural consequences?
- Do we teach students how to monitor their own behavior, set behavior goals and then celebrate successes?

Generosity

- Do the actions of the adults demonstrate to students that we value generosity?
- Does our curriculum include a Service Learning component?
- Do our school policies and practices provide opportunities for students to learn and practice generosity?

Strong leadership from school administrators is needed in order to build a safe and positive school culture. The Circle of Courage model can help articulate a core of shared values and a unifying theme, which is basic to a successful start. The Circle of Courage model can provide a framework for a school-wide discipline policy. The Circle of Courage model provides students, staff, parents and other members of the school

community a common, clear and understandable language that communicates your school's commitment to creating a safe, caring and respectful learning environment for all students.

The Research Base

The Circle of Courage model is based on Native American child rearing philosophies that emerged centuries ago from the wisdom of peoples who saw the education of children as their highest function.

The Circle of Courage Model is supported by Stanley Coopersmith's work on self-concept and self-esteem. His four components, significance, competence, power and virtue, parallel the four values of the Circle of Courage.

Recommendations for Administrators

1. As a school, identify your core mission and values and then clearly articulate these so there is absolutely no doubt about what you feel is important.
2. Read the book, Reclaiming Youth at Risk, by Larry Brendtro, Martin Brokenleg and Steve Van Bockern and subscribe to the "Reclaiming Children and Youth" journal. Both of these publications have provided us with valuable resources for implementing the Circle of Courage model.
3. Identify those simple, everyday procedures that show students you care;
 - Smile and greet students every day.
 - Converse with students and address them by name.
 - Make sure your first exchange with every student is positive, even if you need to be on his or her case about something.
4. Use caring, Circle of Courage vocabulary. Make sure students and staff hear it and use it regularly.

5. Understand that to truly create a culture of caring, focus less on changing student behavior and more on shaping the entire school community.

Summary

The Circle of Courage Model can provide school communities with a framework for identifying, clarifying and communicating the core values of a truly caring school culture.

- Belonging – Creating a welcoming school environment where students feel a part of a caring community.
- Mastery – Implementing a strengths-based curriculum that meets the learning needs of every student.
- Independence – Involving students in making their own choices and determining their own futures.
- Generosity – Providing opportunities for students to give of themselves and become caring members of society.

Critical Questions for Discussion

1. Does the staff at our school accept the concept that schools need to be caring environments in order for students to learn?
2. Is the Circle of Courage Model the best framework for supporting our values and shared mission, or are there other models that might work better for us? Can/will our staff embrace and support the Circle of Courage philosophy?
3. How can we measure the success of such a program? What data do we need to collect?

Resources

Brendtro, L., Brokenleg, M., & Bockern, S. (2002). *Reclaiming Youth At Risk – Our Hope*

For the Future, Bloomington, IN: National Education Service.

Deiro, J. A. (2003). Do Your Students Know You Care? *Educational Leadership*, 60.

Reclaiming Children and Youth – The Journal of Strength-based Interventions, Lennox, SD:

Compassion Publishing.

Rooney, J. (2003). Principals Who Care: A Personal Reflection. *Educational Leadership*, 60.

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University of Oregon.

Websites

www.reclaiming.com