

May 2, 2023

SCHOOL CLIMATE SUBCOMMITTEE

School Climate Subcommittee
Thursday, May 2, 2024 at 5:30 p.m.
Broadcast from the Media Arts Studio
454 Broadway, Cambridge, MA 02138

Called for the purpose of discussing the experiences of students in grades six through eight.

Subcommittee Members Present: Rachel Weinstein (Chair); David Weinstein

Also Present: Manuel Fernandez, Chief Equity Officer; Dr. Karyn Grace, Assistant Superintendent of Student Services; Kim Huffer, Director of SEL; Skylar Nash, Chief Strategy Officer

Chair Rachel began the meeting at 5:35 p.m. by welcoming the group and reading the call of the meeting. She shared the agenda and agreements of the meeting below:

Objectives

- Define the focus of the Subcommittee through 2025
- Discuss the social-emotional health of students in upper schools

Agenda

Agreements

- Speak and listen from the heart (respect and compassion)
- Share the air (will have max times if many want to speak)
- Direct comments to the Chair (do not name specific young people/educators)
- Progressive stacking (centering those furthest from power)
- Lean into discomfort (be open to be educated)
- Expect and accept non-closure (long-term problem=long-term solution, bike rack for separate items)

Welcoming Check-in

- What is one condition or action someone took during your time as a student that made you feel un/welcome at school?

Review of 2022 Teen Health Survey & CPS Responses last two years

- Four key areas of focus for middle school
- CPS actions since 2022 data
- Ideas we've heard from students for addressing challenges

To help frame the mindset for the discussion, Chair Rachel asked the participants to think about a condition or action someone took during their time as a student that made them feel un/welcome at school. Mr. Nash and a CPSD caregiver, Betsy, shared personal stories.

Chair Rachel updated the group on some notable findings from the Teen Health Survey which included a low percentage of students who identify as having an adult advocate. The data suggests that CPSD needs to look carefully at grades six – eight. She highlighted her recent positive walk through at Rindge Avenue Upper School (RAUC) and the high level of engagement by students, faculty and administrators.

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Chair Rachel asked Kim Huffer to speak to some of these issues. Ms. Huffer highlighted the following and shared a slide that can be found on this [website](#).

Based on the data, CPS and CPHD have identified 4 core areas of focus for the next two years:

- Belonging
- Healthy Relationships
- Mental Health
- Health Habits

Ms. Huffer highlighted Youth Mental Health First Aid and shared that CPS wants to ensure that educators are prepared to see signs of depression. CPS is committed to partnering with mental health providers and she noted that approximately 145 students and families referred to Cartwheel. She discussed SEL walk throughs and look-fors and the importance of identifying what schools are doing well and what areas need growth.

Mr. Fernandez agreed that there is more works to do and emphasized that learning directly from students would best help inform a way forward. He shared his observations from the recent RAUC visit. Mr. Fernandez noted student and educator resources such as Rainbow clubs, Equity by Design and the Equity Collaborative Project.

The group discussed the following topics:

- Students' desire to learn more from teachers on these issues and the importance of creating space for these discussions in every classroom.
- The challenges teachers face in building student relationships given the pace of the class curriculum.
- The struggle of middle school students, particularly those with IEPs.
- The urgency of developing concrete solutions.
- Concerned caregivers who are feeling unsupported.

Ms. Huffer outlined some of the SEL/OSS resources and practices, as well as challenges:

- Elevating youth voice through a healing-centering engagement course.
- Consulting with outside perspectives.
- Hiring of a Restorative Practice Specialist with a focus on relaunching peer remediation in the upper schools.
- The impact of a Student Support Team which may include special education adjustment counselors, guidance counselors, behavior specialists, social workers, family liaisons and support staff.
- Current middle school student cohort were impacted by COVID in elementary school when social and emotional skills are developing.

Mr. Nash noted that CPS wants to implement new systems and processes with the goal of shifting the burden from administrators and principals to a more collaborative space to problem solve. **Member Weinstein** highlighted the innate challenges of the middle school years. He noted the importance of the MTSS framework beyond academics and its adoption in the SEL realm. Caregivers shared their highly positive experiences of the pairing of 6th grade and 8th grade caregivers and its impact of creating community. The group noted the challenges of engaging families following the pandemic.

Dr. Grace shared an important finding from the recent Panorama survey. She highlighted that IEP families had reported favorably in relation to school climate and belonging, but students' with IEPs reported feeling that they do not belong and feel unsupported. This finding underscored that student voices' need to be elevated. Ms. Huffer noted that the 2024 Teen survey is currently underway and will be

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completed by May 10. She and her team plan to look at the data in June with the goal of informing their work in the next school year.

The discussion pivoted to CPSD cell phone policies. Mr. Nash has looked at other districts and noted that DESE has shared its guidelines (not mandates). He highlighted that CPS is not alone in grappling with this important issue. The group discussed the link between phone usage to a negative impact on mental health. Should a new phone policy be formally adopted, the group agreed that there should be a concerted effort to educate families and students before the start of the 24/25 school year.

In the closing minutes, Chair Rachel shared her goal of visiting more upper schools before the academic year concludes. She noted the importance of dedicated efforts to both immediate action items and long-term planning. She believes that unpacking the data from the Panorama survey will be helpful inform the subcommittee's future work. She thanked everyone for joining the discussion. (7:03 p.m.)