The School Communication Challenge

Communication and dialogue not only make schools safer, they create a climate where learning can flourish, and where students can reach their potential. It takes more than curriculum enhancements and excellent teaching to achieve excellence—it takes strong relationships and safe ways for students to talk about the challenges they face day to day.

Students are at the core of this communication challenge: when they find their voices, and can share their thoughts on how to improve their schools and feel safe and confident, they have the power to shape school climate. And creating a positive school climate is linked directly to academic success.

However, as many studies have found, students are often not given the necessary tools to allow them to speak freely and safely, nor are they in an environment where they are encouraged to do so. A recent study from the American Association of University Women found that only 9% of students reported sexual harassment incidents to an adult at school.1 Another study, commissioned by CNN’s “Anderson Cooper 360” program and conducted at a suburban New York high school, found that 81% of aggressive incidents were never reported by students.2
How School Climate Impacts Academic Performance

A communicative, respectful school climate can encourage students to speak up about roadblocks to their success, while raising academic quality. Education Week’s new Quality Counts report for 2013 makes solid arguments for the critical role that school climate plays in academic performance.

“National initiatives to improve schools tend to focus heavily on curriculum, testing, and personnel,” says the Quality Counts report. “But a growing consensus also recognizes that the elements that make up school climate—including peer relationships, students’ sense of safety and security, and the disciplinary policies and practices they confront each day—play a crucial part in laying the groundwork for academic success. Those factors, along with resources and the ability of school staff members to meet students’ needs, are seen as especially important for low-performing schools and at-risk students.”

According to a survey of teachers and administrators in the Quality Counts report, school climate is second only to teaching quality in terms of impact on education. However, some survey results show marked differences between teachers’ and administrators’ views of school climate and safety. For instance, 81 percent of administrators said that students and staff feel safe at their schools, compared to only 62 percent of teachers.

As detailed in the Quality Counts report, the availability of counseling is a key ingredient for a nurturing school climate. In a March 2011 report, the American Counseling Association listed several studies showing that school mental-health and counseling services have positive effects on academic achievement, behavior, and school engagement.

However, as the Quality Counts report goes on to detail, many schools have had to cut counseling resources: According to the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics, 2,000 counseling positions were eliminated between the 2008–09 and 2010–11 school years. During this same time period, the nationwide ratio of students to counselors went from 457 to 1, to 470 to 1.

This decline in counseling services does not bode well for the future mental health of students, or for improvements in school climate. Roger Weissberg, the president and chief executive officer of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), says in the Quality Counts report that de-emphasizing social and emotional well-being is a dangerous quick fix for schools: “If you have engaged, self-disciplined, connected students, with strong relationships … the academic performance and kids’ behavior both can improve … It’s kind of, ‘Pay me now or pay me later.’”
JOPLIN SCHOOLS: Community Provides Counseling in Wake of 2011 Tornado

The good news about improving school climate is that counseling doesn’t have to come only from people in the school community with the name “counselor” in their job title. Many schools are filling the gap with parents and community organizations. At Joplin Schools in the Joplin, Missouri area, the need for additional support for students became critical after a May 2011 tornado devastated the city.

In response, Ozark Center, which provides behavioral health services to children, adults, and families, partnered with Joplin Schools to offer students the SchoolMessenger Talk About It® service, which lets about 5,000 students reach out for counseling help via their mobile phones or personal computers. Ozark Center’s Access Crisis Intervention Team responds to student requests 24/7, along with school administrators who can help address student concerns.

“In its 47 years of operation, the Ozark Center has never experienced more need from the community than it has since the 2011 tornado. This is especially true among children and teens,” explains Phil Willcoxon, Ozark Center chief executive officer. “Research among adolescents tells us that one barrier to accessing crisis services is their unwillingness to meet face-to-face with adults or talk by phone with a crisis hotline counselor. Since cell phones and texting are undoubtedly the preferred communication method for students, this program allows them to reach out anonymously using the resources they find most convenient.”

Four Steps for Encouraging Communication and Improving School Climate

Creating a school climate that is safe and secure while also empowering students can start with just four steps. To address school climate issues on their campuses, schools need to identify the type of problems prevalent in their schools, change how they recognize these problems, monitor and offer solutions, and most importantly, get student support to resolve the problems through their buy-in on communication programs. These four steps can help crack the code of silence among students and make them more willing to ask for guidance and alert adults to simmering problems.
Step 1: Define the issue

The involvement of students is essential when defining safety issues in school communities. Students are more attuned to subtleties of communication among their peers—such as under-the-radar bullying, peer or teacher harassment, and potentially dangerous situations within social networking. In addition, students are more aware of the impact that social networking and electronic communications are having on safety challenges, and they can educate teachers and administrators on the pace of change these trends represent in schools.

Students are also a good source for problems that may not have been on the radar for teachers and administrators—particularly challenges that relate less to interpersonal issues and more to depression, feeling left out of popular groups, or struggling with low self-esteem. Students respond well to school safety programs that address a wider range of problems.

Step 2: Change how problems are recognized

The key to recognizing cues and clues that signify potential problems is student involvement. In the past, teachers and administrators were taught to look for visual or audio cues indicating problems such as bullying or self-harm—for example, visible injuries, or fighting and discussions between students.

However, student interaction now takes place in environments that teachers and administrators can’t access—within text messaging, email, and students’ social networks. Seventy-eight percent of teens prefer texting to phone calls, according to the 2010 Nielsen Mobile Report; and 80% of online teens ages 12 to 17 use social networking sites, according to a study from the Pew Internet & American Life Project.

By engaging students in the reporting process, schools can identify and address problems they did not previously know about. Students have shown that they are willing to raise these issues with the proper contacts in the school setting—provided they have a safe environment in which to do so.

Step 3: Establish realistic methods for reporting

Students do not want to be seen speaking up about a problem that involves other students, or even themselves. Their fears run the gamut from being identified as a “snitch” who tells counselors about bullying students, to merely being seen going in or out of a counselor’s office to talk about a personal problem. On the other hand, there is ample evidence that if this public exposure problem can be overcome, students will speak up.

Phone/text tip lines or online forms and email boxes have dismally low success rates. At the same time, school counselors struggle to get students to open up about their problems, or problems they see with their peers. Existing reporting solutions lack:

- **Anonymity:** Students need ways to bring up their concerns without identifying themselves, or without fearing that they will be uncovered by other students.
Breaking the “code of silence” around activities that can adversely impact school climate isn’t easy. “Kids don’t want to be seen publicly going to the counselor to report that they’re being bullied, or that they know someone who’s committing acts of violence or vandalism,” says Marcus Wood, principal of Shadow Hills High School in Indio, California (part of the Desert Sands Unified School District). “They don’t want their peers to know that they’re telling tales.”

To create a safe, confidential way for students to discuss their problems with responsible adults—which plays a key role in improving school climate—Wood implemented the SchoolMessenger Talk About It® service, which lets students have two-way conversations with counselors or teachers via text or online messaging. The students can choose to remain anonymous, improving the chances that they will feel free to speak up, as Wood told the Deseret News in a story about the Quality Counts report:

“A student sent me [a message] just this weekend, about cheating in a classroom,” says Wood. “He didn’t feel comfortable telling the teacher, but he gave me all the details. I shared that with the teacher so they can address the problem. And, I responded to the kid, and thanked him for doing that.”

Wood told the News that he got students comfortable with the Talk About It system by suggesting they use it to tally votes for the king and queen of a recent school dance. Now that students understand how Talk About It works, and trust that it lets them report problems anonymously, Wood says that it should help prevent problems even before they start:

“If the fight doesn’t happen, nobody is in trouble,” said Wood. “A lot of times the kid who was supposed to be in the fight is the one sending the message: ‘Hey, there is supposed to be a fight at such-and-such time and place.’ We’re there, so nobody gets hit, and nobody gets suspended. We create a mediation and address the problem.”
• **Two-way communication:** Students want to know that someone is listening. Tip lines and online forms don’t provide any reassurance that a problem is being addressed. These one-way systems also prevent administrators and teachers from taking advantage of a teachable moment: they are not set up to create a conversation between students and counselors.

• **Various contact points:** Students prefer to bring their problems to adults with whom they have developed a relationship. Tip lines and online forms don’t allow students to choose who they want to communicate with.

• **Familiar tools:** Students use text messaging and email to talk to each other, and they are more likely to report safety issues if these methods of communication are available to them.

• **Verifiable access:** Tip lines can be plagued by false reports, especially if they allow anonymous reporting. Requiring email registration and completing credential verification helps limit accessibility to only those in the school community. These safeguards provide administrators with the confidence that messages are real and relevant to their community, and not submitted by outsiders.

Schools should take a closer look at their existing reporting solutions and decide if they offer ways for administrators to engage in beneficial conversations with their students.

**Step 4: Develop methods for measuring data**

Schools need tools to parse the information gathered from student messages, and use this information to address and resolve school safety issues. Tip lines generally don’t offer research or reporting tools on the nature and type of problems that exist, or on who is doing the reporting. Similarly, online forms do not capture the demographics of who is reporting and thus do not provide details about issues that may be epidemic (for example, which issues ninth grade girls are reporting most).

Reporting can help schools allocate resources to problems that are on the horizon and perhaps not yet visible to administrators. For example, a sharp increase in reports about racial tensions can give schools advanced warning so they can defuse the looming problem.

**Stories from Schools**

Schools that embrace student communication services with student-friendly tools, anonymity, choice, and two-way dialogues have found that students can change their attitudes towards “snitching” and will, in fact, reach out for help—all of which can positively affect school climate. These same communication services serve as a deterrent to potential bullies, since they know they can more easily be identified and their actions reported. The three schools below are using Talk About It, an anonymous communication service for schools.
Round Rock Independent School District—Austin, Texas

Before installing an anonymous email- and text-driven communications service, Round Rock ISD students did not feel comfortable bringing problems to administrators and teachers. “If students want to see a counselor, they have to ask for a pass—and their visit is visible to everyone in the building,” explains Barbara-Jane Paris, a school principal in the district. “Kids are not going to do that in this day and age—that’s not how they communicate their concerns.” The school’s new communications solution gives students the anonymity they need to be comfortable confiding in adults. “It has empowered students to take control of the climate on their campus,” Paris explains. “There is a conversation that happens when a situation is reported and addressed.” Sometimes the conversation is all that students need in order to change their perspective on a problem. “Not every problem is something that we can fix,” Paris explains. “But we can always acknowledge what the person is reporting. Every response to a message begins with, ‘Thank you so much for sharing this with me. It was very courageous to do that.’”

Carrollton-Farmers Branch Independent School District—Carrollton, Texas

For a school communications solution to succeed, it needs to offer tools that students use on a daily basis. “Students like anything on their computer or mobile phone,” explains Brianna Foxx, an assistant principal in the district, of its safety messaging system. “That’s how our kids communicate. They text and use Facebook—they don’t write things down like we used to. It’s a comfortable way for them to report back to us.” Parents also like the fast-turnaround on responses to their children’s problems. “They know that if their child came home and told them about something, they could help them get the message to us immediately, instead of waiting until the next day and calling,” Foxx says. “It operates at the student’s pace, and does not require parents to intervene.”

The ability to send anonymous messages encourages students to participate and be forthright, Foxx says. “We know what’s going on in the students’ world because they can talk to us without having to be pulled out of class,” she explains. “They will answer questions a lot more honestly, which gives us a better idea of what’s going on.”

Keller Independent School District—Keller, Texas

Before setting up its communication service, the district experimented with other solutions. “We tried an anonymous reporting box,” explains Marcene Weatherall, the district’s coordinator for drug and alcohol abuse prevention. “But we would find trash in the boxes, or the students wouldn’t use them. They felt like someone would see them put something in the box.”
Once the anonymous communication service was in place, students felt more comfortable reaching out to teachers and administrators. “I think this helps the students you won’t normally get information from—the students who are not going to walk into a counselor’s office,” Weatherall says. “But they want help and they don’t know how to get it.”

The new system has raised awareness of problems that had not yet been identified by administrators. “During our first year with the system, we found out that at one of our middle schools, we had a problem with eating disorders,” Weatherall says. “We would have never known about these issues had it not been for the messaging system.

About Talk About It
Launched in 2005, Talk About It is the first and only two-way anonymous communication service that allows students to get the help they need to be safe and successful. The service is used by hundreds of thousands of K12 students, mental health services and the US military.

As part of the SchoolMessenger family of solutions, Talk About It allows faculty to meet students where they are—online and with text messaging—to help solve issues. SchoolMessenger is headquartered in Los Gatos, California. For information, visit talk.schoolmessenger.com or call 888.527.5225.

3 “Quality Counts 2013,” Education Week: http://www.edweek.org/go/qc13