

Plainville Citizen Op-Ed, May, 2020

While the social and emotional well-being of both students and adults alike is front and center during the current COVID-19 pandemic, Plainville Community Schools began an enhanced focus on expanding practices around this critical area several years ago. In the summer of 2018, members of the school district's Central Office team participated in a "RULER" training program sponsored by the Seedlings Foundation and held at the Yale University Center of Emotional Intelligence. The training program was led by Yale professor Dr. Marc Brackett, founder of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. Dr. Brackett co-developed the RULER program, which focuses on the five learnable skills of emotional intelligence: Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing, and Regulating emotion. Subsequently, five teams of teachers from Plainville attended the RULER program implementer training, and last April, Dr. Brackett hosted an interactive RULER presentation for all Plainville staff about the RULER program. This past November, whole staff and school-based training was held with a focus on teaching the "anchor tools" of RULER with each of the five Plainville school staffs, while each group also developed their own individual school charter. The initial focus was on teaching staff members to better recognize, understand, label, express and regulate their emotions and to support each other in the workplace. Since that initial focus with adults in the school district, there has been a noticeable increase in the emphasis on valuing the importance of emotions and mutual support among staff members across the district. Further, a variety of faculty and staff lead mental health support initiatives and events have been held across the district over the past two years, sharing positive mental health practices and supports amongst district personnel. With

the RULER program embedded in school district operations for staff, the next step will be to formally roll out the program with students over the coming school year, a focus that is more critical now than ever.

Since the move to distance learning in Plainville on March 16th, district faculty and staff members continue to incorporate the tenants of the RULER program, and have implemented a number of additional and creative strategies to stay connected with students and colleagues to support their social and emotional well-being at this very difficult time. As a school district, there has been an emphasis placed on mitigating the wide range of emotions of students and staff members through an enhanced focus on communication at all levels, using a variety of communication channels to stay connected. Since the beginning of distance learning, I have adopted a minimum twice weekly email “Information Update” sent to all district families and staff members. Through these updates, I share the most current COVID-19 information from local and state officials, and additional information on a variety of distance learning related topics, programs and initiatives. We have also fortified the school district website with a variety of resources for families and created a *Stay Connected* web page that houses a regularly updated remote learning photo album, several locally created videos, and other positive messaging.

At the school level, positive messaging and outreach occurs on a daily basis. Examples of these include video-recorded morning announcements, daily story time events at all levels, and real time connection between students, teachers and staff through several technology-based virtual meeting platforms. I, together with each of the elementary school staff member groups, and several administrators also participated in

“Car Parades” through each schools’ respective neighborhoods in town. The parades were well received by all involved, providing a wonderful opportunity for students, families and staff to see each other in a safe way. Staff members at each school continue to focus on ways to build positive feelings and emotions through virtual meetings, spirit weeks, online chats, social media, dance videos and more.

We have also developed several survey instruments to assess distance learning and gather feedback from students, families and staff members. Feedback from these surveys is helpful in gauging distance learning practices that are working well, and identifying gaps and areas that need to be addressed or refined including social and emotional, and other needed supports. We have a strong, high quality support staff team from each school that continues to provide outreach, resources and support to all students and families across the school district, and our school district volunteers are also able to continue to support students at this time as volunteer mentors connect with their student mentees making positive connections through virtual meetings.

In recognition of the herculean efforts of our staff members to support each other and our students and families during these very challenging times, we have also created the “Virtual Everyday Hero” award program. Nominations are accepted from staff members and families for staff members who have gone above and beyond during distance learning. In the first four weeks of the Virtual Everyday Hero program, I received over 40 nominations – a true testament to the high caliber of all of our Plainville Community Schools’ staff members. Virtual Everyday Heroes are recognized each week via email and are entered into a raffle for a small token gift.

As we approach the final weeks of the school year in our current distance learning environment, we do so with a strong emphasis on the social and emotional well-being of ALL members of our school district community. And while we continue to navigate these uncertain times, we know that these next few weeks will continue to be filled with virtual celebrations, positive, heartwarming and upbeat video messages, online socialization with teachers and students, daily outreach and supports at all levels, and highlights of the incredible efforts to connect with and celebrate all that is Plainville Community Schools - - #WeArePlainville and #TogetherWeCan!