

Leataata Floyd Elementary School

*The Pedagogy of Equity:
Prosocial Beliefs and Practices in an Inclusive Elementary School*

Billy Aydlett

*“What our students need the most is **not** negative consequence and zero tolerance policies.*

*What our students need is **absolutely consistent and urgent support around maintaining appropriate behavior.**”* –Billy Aydlett, principal Leataata Floyd Elementary School

“One thing that helps at our school is our Second Step lessons. The Second Step lessons help us show empathy and compassion towards each other, calm down, problem solve, and take responsibility for our actions.” – Leataata Floyd Elementary School fourth grade student

“One thing I insist to make our school feel safe is that everyone would feel empathy for others.”

– Leataata Floyd Elementary Fourth Grade Student (all quotes, Blanton, 2013, n.p.n.)

Demographics

- Built in 1952, formerly the Jedediah Smith Elementary School
- Serves 350 students in grades Preschool through Sixth Grade
- Lowest performing elementary school in Sacramento (present and historically)
- 100% students/families living in extreme poverty (all students come exclusively from the two largest subsidized federal housing projects west of the Mississippi River)
- Ethnic/Racial make-up of the student body: Black or African American -55% ; Hispanic or Latino - 21%; Asian - 9%; Pacific Island or Native Hawaiian - 7%
- Largest second language spoken- Marshallese (18%, the language of the Marshall Islands)

Recent History of the School

(Note: the following history and profile was written by Billy Aydlett, then principal of Leataata Floyd, and edited by Philip Brown. Because his perspective is so personal, his voice was left largely intact.)

Leataata Floyd Elementary School (LFE) is a neighborhood elementary school with 350 students serving the Seavey Circle/New Helvetia neighborhoods in the Sacramento City Unified School District. Historically, this school was created as a segregated school that targeted specific subgroups of students within the district (Soto & Kile, 2012). For many years LFE has had the highest referral/suspension/expulsion rate in the district while having the lowest daily attendance percentage. It is currently in year four of “priority” status under the US Department of Education's "turnaround school" designation system for low-performing schools.

According to principal Aydlett, there is a reason this school/neighborhood is not attractive to typical “educational reformers.” No charter schools have ever considered moving into the neighborhood. Charter/private school recruiters never visit the school. Why? The families and students have tremendous needs; charters/criteria based schools have the incentive to service underrepresented students, as long as they fit within their expectations. When a kid doesn't fit they are kicked out, with prejudice. Charter reform advocates claim to be inclusive, but that simply isn't the case for our neighborhood. In the past, dozens of Leataata Floyd students whose parents tried to find a better alternative have been kicked out of charter schools and end up back at Leataata Floyd.

Based on its troubled history and continuing low performance on state tests Leataata Floyd began a district sponsored redesign in 2010. Expectations were set, professional development was held, and academic program plans were made. But, a fundamental mistake was made that is not uncommon in attempts at educational transformation through external school redesigns --we forgot to include the most important elements in the planning -- our students and families.

This became glaringly evident on our first day of the 2010-2011 school year. The students and parents were not buying our academic-focused restructuring of the school. The school's leadership team was left with a stark and difficult choice; keep on doing what we had planned or make a radical change in direction.

A New Course is Chartered

Based on the negative response to an attempted restructuring of the school that focused almost exclusively on academics, the administrative team decided to revise the entire plan and emphasis based on the unique needs of our students/families. We decided to initially dedicate all staff effort to support the social and emotional development of our students, families, and staff first before concentrating on academics. We agreed that all leadership meetings (and eventually all school-wide meetings) would use social, emotional learning (SEL), its tenets and principles as our redesign touchstone. One of our academic training specialists would shift her duties and responsibilities from academic support to social emotional support. Everyone needed to be part of this approach, without it we would be ignoring the most glaring needs of our students to focus on the dictates of the academic driven culture that permeated public schools.

Initially, the district officials didn't like that change. Academic proficiency is the name of *every* game in public education under the current version of No Child Left Behind, even if students and families are not interested in playing. Thankfully, we made our case well enough that our superintendent gave us the freedom and flexibility to stick with our commitment to SEL; primarily because no one else knew what to do in service of our students. Or they didn't care. Or a combination of the two.

Before and while the academic necessities of our school are addressed, LFE's leadership believes that the social, emotional, and primary needs of our students and families require equal

and direct attention. Therefore, the school's mission has been simple for the past 4 years of our turnaround efforts:

- Kids have to like school
- Students and parents/guardians must develop trust and confidence in the school, and
- These two needs must be directly addressed while academic needs are attended to.

The staff of Leataata Floyd decided to focus on three prosocial practices of inclusive pedagogy to address the most significant needs of the students and families: SEL, Positive Behavioral and Intervention and Support (PBIS), and Restorative Justice (RJ).

Social Emotional Learning Component

SEL is a pedagogical approach that focuses on the social and emotional skills which are necessary for healthy child development as well as supporting the cognitive skills necessary for academic success (see Chapter XX). The school culture at Leataata Floyd is categorically founded on SEL. There are three main programmatic threads the school uses to support SEL:

1. Classrooms teach a social emotional learning curriculum (Second Step) on a daily basis,
2. All staff participate in the Parent Teacher Home Visit Project, and
3. Mindfulness practices are offered and supported school-wide.

The Second Step curriculum is published by the Committee for Children and serves students from preschool all the way through middle school. Each grade level features developmentally appropriate ways to teach core social-emotional skills such as empathy, emotion management, and problem solving. Classes at LFE spend 20-30 minutes a day working through the Second Step curriculum.

The Parent Teacher Home Visit Project supports authentic community engagement by supporting the development of positive parent/teacher/student relationships. This is

accomplished by structuring a conversation about a family's hopes and dreams for their child. This is done in the environment where the family and student feel the safest; their home. Conducted at least once a year, families receive a home visit from their child's teacher. During this conversation the parent/teacher/student triad discuss academic expectations, college/career dreams, and shared expectations. This past year (2013-14), the Leataata Floyd Elementary School staff conducted over 320 home visits.

Mindfulness practices are offered and supported throughout our school. Often, students who live within the stressors and trauma of extreme poverty rarely have the opportunity to practice and explore their inner lives. Mindfulness practices (basically non-religious meditation-see <http://www.mindfulschools.org/>) allow for students, staff, and families to regularly practice being present and mindful of their own space and mindset.

Positive Behavior Intervention and Support Component

Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) is a system that structures, monitors, and supports positive social interactions at school (see Chapter XX). The version of PBIS that the school uses is supported by research and technical support from the University of Oregon.

At Floyd, PBIS centers around 3 school-wide expectations: Be respectful, Be Responsible, and Be Hardworking. First expected behaviors are directly taught in the location where the behavior is expected (at least twice a year). Classroom expectations are taught in the classroom, cafeteria expectations in the cafeteria, even bathroom expectations are taught in the bathrooms. When an adult on campus sees a student meeting expectations, they are given a 'panther way ticket'. These tickets are turned in for weekly drawings; where students can earn privileges that support prosocial development, such as being the principal's assistant, eating lunch with their teacher, sitting in the teacher's chair, or lunch on stage with friend, etc. Initially

we allowed students to earn either prizes (extrinsic motivators) or privileges (intrinsic motivators). We discovered that our students universally prefer privileges over trinkets; relational experiences are always preferred over tangible items. Who would have thought that sitting in the teacher's chair was more popular than candy or toys?

It is important to note that the tickets/privileges data is viewed at our school as a prime indicator of the school climate. The number of tickets, location delivered and frequency of delivery is monitored and published. Over time we have found that the teachers who pass out the most tickets have the fewest behavior issues.

Restorative Justice Component

Restorative Justice practices at Leataata Floyd Elementary is the philosophy and method that the school uses to respond when a member of our learning community causes harm to another individual or to the community itself (see Chapter 3 of *School Discipline: A Prosocial Perspective*). Based on a variety of national/international research and practices LFE's first response to student/ adult misbehavior is not punishment or exclusion. Rather we first define the harm caused, determine who was affected, ask the "victim" to directly express how the harm was affected them, and then help the offender figure out how to most efficiently repair the harm they caused.

To address minor disciplinary problems, our school uses the class meeting protocol published by Jane Nielsen (2006) in her book *Positive Discipline for Schools* in every class. When major issues come up, our school responds first with Restorative Conversations/Circles led by an administrator with the participation of the teacher/student/family/victim. Focus is placed not on punishing the perpetrator, but rather on fixing the problem and the community.

Taking Stock: Our Progress to Date

Our school is still a work in progress. Initially our academic results did not show a lot of movement, which is what we expected -- many academic results flat-lined (or regressed). There have been a few academic bright spots, however. According to a 2012 Quality Review Report, "Improvements in student learning resulted in an increase of 28 points in the school's Academic Performance Index (API)" (Soto & Kile, p.5). The API is the cornerstone of California's accountability system, and measures the academic performance and growth of schools on a variety of academic measures. And according to the same report, science scores grew from 12 percent in 2010 to 57 percent in 2011.

The real news, however, is how the social emotional data began to shift: attendance rates doubled, referrals/suspensions were cut in half. More importantly, our students and families began to trust the institution of public education. The Quality Review Report supports this view when it states: "The staff works diligently in order to provide students with a different learning experience that is built on a better understanding of the demographics of the school's students. Students speak highly of the care and relationships that are developed between them and the staff" (Soto & Kile, 2012, p.8).

At Leataata Floyd Elementary School, we have a practice; before we partner with, support, or allow on campus any service group/volunteer, they must first come and hang out with our students and families. In the neighborhood or on campus, it doesn't matter.

We have found here are no consultants, proxies, reformers, or experts that own a magic bullet to "fix" chronically underserved students, schools, or neighborhoods. No quick fixes- just hard work and developing trust between the students, families, and staff of the school. This has been the crucible of the redesign work at Leataata Floyd -- making school relevant for our

community. We know we have a long path ahead and we have to be positive, present, and conscious every day and use our time to work and grow into a prosocial community school.

References

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