

My School's Components

Maria Olivas

University of North Texas at Dallas

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High schoolers are people before they are students. It is important to address the basic human needs of students before we can begin to address their academic potential. Students need to feel safe, welcomed, and comfortable so they can perform their best. By acknowledging cultural and personal needs, differentiating instruction to include personal significance, and providing alternative discipline methods with prioritization of mental health, my school would create the environment needed for optimal participation.

The first need that must be met is that which pertains to safety. In order to make students and their families feel safe, a welcoming environment must be established. Due to cultural differences, parents may feel hesitant to meet with teachers because they regard teachers as experts. Parents may also be unaware of how they can be involved in their child's education due to things such as language barriers or lack of knowledge about technology. However, it has been noted that parental involvement "historically improved the educational and learning outcomes of students" by positively affecting grades, behavioral problems, attendance, and overall student mentality about education (Cole, 2017). By creating positive relationships with parents, teachers can effectively encourage parents to become positive influences on the student's education. To ensure that parents do feel safe within the school environment, however, cultural competency among staff is required. Students of color are especially vulnerable within the education system because of systemic racism (Mayfield, 2020). Teachers that acknowledge and actively work against the effects of systemic racism in schools provide a safer space for families of minority backgrounds. Strong interpersonal relationships that respect a student's cultural background help foster the sense of safety needed for academic engagement.

Physical distractions can also decrease student engagement. When a student is preoccupied with something such as hunger, they are more concerned about when they can

address that need rather than with instruction. My school would seek to establish autonomy for students regarding their physical needs in ways that do not disrupt the classroom. Giving students the option to eat and use the restroom as needed not only removes that concern, it also provides them with a sense of respect. To maintain that sense of respect and continue to meet inherent human needs, a break period would also be provided. Students can use this time to rest, socialize, eat, and take care of other needs so that they may focus better when returning to class. Allowing time for socialization can also be important to increasing a student's sense of belonging within a school. Academic, behavioral, and nutritional aspects are positively affected by these kinds of breaks. It also provides the mental rest that decreases the negative effects of stress (Pillow, 2018). By removing these stressors, students can engage more actively in school.

To maintain academic engagement, lessons would be relative to students' lives. Autonomy regarding instruction and classroom rules can allow teachers to gain respect as well as concentration from the students (McCombs, 2010). Giving students a choice in the content studied in class allows them to pick material that is relative to their cultural backgrounds. This ensures that students feel personally connected to the material they are studying and thus improves retention. Academic content would also be better contextualized through community-based learning. Providing students the opportunity to learn from and about their communities not only improves understanding of classroom material but also creates interpersonal skills, improves critical thinking, and teaches social awareness (Guerrero, 2018). These are skills that students will carry with them outside of school so they may bring positive changes to their communities. Through the ways their academic learning is applied in real-world connections, students will gain a sense of importance and belonging from their participation in school.

Because one of the basic needs of students revolves around safety, discipline would also be handled in alternative ways. It is crucial to acknowledge that behavioral problems stem from obstacles students are facing. Whether it is a discomfort, sense of endangerment, mental distress, or other outside cause, teachers should be aware that students do not misbehave simply for the sake of misbehaving. It is important to continue the mindset of “person-first” when confronting disciplinary problems. By punishing students rather than addressing the source of the problem, students are taught that their concerns are not respected by the adults in their schools. Rather than solving the issue, it causes the student to feel unsafe about alerting their teachers.

Punishment creates fear and takes away from a positive learning environment; it does not correct problematic behavior (Dickinson, 2019). Rather than punishing students, teachers should make efforts to accommodate struggling students so they can refocus on learning. This is especially important when addressing disproportionate dropout rates of minority students. Historically, students of color have been more harshly disciplined compared to their white peers (Mayfield, 2020). This causes students of color to be suspended at higher rates due to things such as attendance problems. If these students who are already targeted by systemic racism are given better opportunities to handle behavioral problems, they will be less likely to drop out or avoid classes in general. This also contributes to the mental health of students who struggle with staying in school.

Mental health is a large aspect of high school students' lives. As such, counseling and mental health resources in school should be proactive rather than reactive. As part of the curriculum, students would be given the tools to effectively cope with mental stress and other related problems. Safe, healthy communication about one's mental health is one way to ensure that there are fewer high-risk situations with students who need counseling. Normalizing the

existence of mental health needs would serve to remove negative stigma regarding taking care of oneself mentally. It would allow neurotypical students to be more accepting and aware of the needs and behaviors of neurodivergent students. In the past, these issues were regarded as unimportant to academics. However, researchers are now recognizing that it is important to address these difficulties so that students can be more successful learners (McCombs, 2010). Because of the importance of mental wellness, one resource that would exist would be a wellness room. These rooms would serve as safe spaces for students who need some time to recuperate and regroup so that they can return to class in a better mental state. This would be especially useful for students who struggle with things such as ADHD, autism, and other needs. Providing resources like these will make school less traumatizing for students with extra needs and overall less stressful for the general student population. Removing the stress of accommodations also allows students to fully focus, attend, and engage in school activities more freely.

Students can only focus on their academic potential if there are no other distractions to interrupt their engagement. Meeting personal needs and relating academic content to their lives ensures higher participation in school. A healthy school experience is one that also aims to provide students with skill sets they will use in their adult lives. Because of these dynamics, it is important to prioritize the well-being of the students before focusing on academics alone.

## References

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