

Benson 20-21

CLIMATE TEAM NEWSLETTER

News You Probably Should Know -- February 2021 Edition



What is School Climate again?

Our conscious and unconscious beliefs, values, and norms that are the decisive factors which shape our classroom & school community. It's like the "feel" of the school -- online or not.

The Benson Climate Team's Purpose is to:

Talk about things that are working and things that need worked on to make sure all voices in the Benson community are heard, valued, and appreciated. As a group, we will help to make Benson a great place to be for everyone to learn and grow. We get to create an inclusive school climate, where all staff and students feel they belong in their school community.

Notes from the February 24, 2021 meeting

The meeting began by welcoming Amy Chotzen, Restorative Justice specialist for high schools in the district, Heide Goertzen, and the brand new Restorative Justice Union (RJU)!

What is the RJU?

- The Restorative Justice Union stemmed from a horrible racist online classroom incident where students decided that even though their classmate had consequences, they themselves were still hurting. In working with Amy Chotzen
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and Heide Goertzen in having an RJ circle with the student that hurt them, the students who make up the RJU decided they wanted to do more for students who feel like they did.

- Amy Chotzen stated: “One of the core tenants of RJ work is that it is opt-in. This shows that people who are coming to our processes are willing to take accountability and work towards a real resolution that repairs harm.”

Students of the RJU explained what and why they decided to create the group:

- To make Benson a safer place
- To educate about racism in individuals
- Overcoming racism in our community without unconditionally accepting it or simply using discipline
- Looking to change the larger mindset from punitive (discipline+punishment) to restorative (community and relational response)
- Addressing problems at their root, having the difficult conversations needed
- Expulsion/suspension won't change behavior and doesn't help victims feel safe

The group will be open to more students to join shortly and are looking forward to responding to incidents and work with specific students.

We stayed on the thread of making Benson better by looking at racism, equity, and bias.

We began this by pointing out this fact:

Last year, there were hundreds of referrals of BIPOC students at Benson. This year, there is **one. Just. One.**

Based on that statistic, the discussion that followed went like this:

Q: What's changed?

- Group Thoughts:
 - Lack of face-to-face interaction, disproportionate amount of BIPOC students represented in referrals usually due to white teachers

misunderstanding or being ignorant of cultural of differences (communication, body language)

- Authoritarian teachers have less to latch onto to give referrals to students
- Online causes lack of relationship between teachers and students
- No camera, no microphone means less engagement
- Fewer enforced rules
- Conflict between teachers and ESL students, threatening to take phones that are needed for translation, are now not present in CDL
- Also, there are so many "rules" that aren't in play anymore. You can't be annoyed at a student because they walked in late, eating something loud and smelly and "disrupting" the class

Q: Eventually, we'll be back in a building. What are some norms or things we should not do again?

- Group Thoughts:
 - Perhaps looking at ESL phone rules
 - History and other classes, stories are told through a white lens, almost never through a BIPOC perspective
 - Teachers can sometimes escalate situations themselves with authoritative stances/rules: no battles needed
 - Perhaps de-escalation training for teachers?

Q: What should we keep doing from CDL when we get back to brick and mortar?

- Group Thoughts:
 - Class conversations, open discussions on personal observations and ideas
 - Grace is given online to students, understanding that this class is not the only thing in their lives, should be extended to brick+mortar school
 - Grace given to students needing food during class, understanding they need breakfast + lunch from school if they don't have that at home
 - Acknowledgement of each student as they enter the class, creating a sense of safety and connection

We then moved to things teachers are working on at Benson to be more equitable and less biased. We focused on three things:

Grading:

Q: How do you feel about grading practices here?

Q: Have you seen or witnessed unfair grading?

- Consistent attendance + participation on the parts of students, but teachers may not ever extend a hand and wonder how they can help a student pass
- More diversity in how students can earn a passing grade, participation vs test based
- As a white male, I feel I get put to the top of a list. That's not fair.
- What's the point of grading if teachers think whites will do better. Those stereotypes have to go.
- I've appreciated the leniency of latework during CDL.
- The 1-4 system doesn't work in my opinion. I went to a school that only did 1-4, and my grade for one class was just so close to failing that it was extremely stressful.
- I wonder if we grade summative and participation and then take the higher grade and call that their grade.
- We need diverse ways for people to show that they understand and not just one way to show. Also not just give work for the sake of work- there should be purpose. Overly excessive workload is not helpful for students and their whole lives - it's that grace piece that's needed.

Curriculum:

Q: Do you see yourself in what you're learning?

Q: What's harmful/What could be more inclusive?

- More African-American literature and projects are needed
- More effort and engagement from students into work they feel represented in, and work they enjoy
- Being able to have **choice** in books, projects on culture, that let students dig deeper past white/american centric curriculum
- Queer history in history class, and other classes too
- I didn't know I wasn't being represented in the curriculum until I was. It felt so good to be there, in the curriculum as a BIPOC person.

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- Why do we always start with slavery when it comes to Black history. There's more to us than that! My culture is deeper than that!
 - They didn't steal "slaves"; they stole scientists, doctors, architects, teachers, astronomers, leaders, mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, etc.
 - It's wonderful seeing the positives of my culture and not just the hardships.
 - A shift to achievements and contributions from all would be much more healthy and benefit ALL students. As opposed to war victories, etc.
 - Can Benson add an Ethic Studies Class?

Classroom Management:

Q: Have you ever observed biased treatment in a classroom?

Q: Do you see race play a part in how classes are run?

Q: What do you think is one thing teachers don't think about when it comes to how they manage a classroom (but you notice)?

- Making assumptions about student's intentions
- There are many holidays besides American/Christian holidays
 - Getting marked absent for celebrating personal holidays
 - Giving consideration and lenience for Muslim students during Ramadan
- Sometimes teachers don't read the room; it only happens sometimes but there's an air they don't feel.

Names of attendees were put into the Wheel of Names for a pair of Benson PJ Pants.

Congrats to students:

Kevin Simons, Lily Tsehaineh, and Reba Booze for winning!

And congrats to staff:

Christina Thompson, Lisa Sweeney, Ed Railey, and Michaela McNairy for winning!

**The next Climate Team meeting will be on
Wednesday, March 17!
Come join the conversation!**