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Eliminating Social Homelessness: Providing a Home to GROW

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Abstract

Middle school students who belong to marginalized identity groups often experience alienation and isolation. These feelings are compounded for multi-marginalized students who experience social homelessness—a term Harrison (2015) uses to describe students who appear to be accepted in one or more social categories but, because of his or her competing identities, is unable to fully participate in the life of the social group without hiding a part of his or her identity. In addition to this internalized struggle, emerging research indicates that socially homeless students are at an increased risk for bullying and academic failure. Inspired by the need to build "homes" for students experiencing social homelessness and our professional experiences with student alienation and underachievement, we created a school-wide house system to promote healthy peer relationships for middle grades students. This essay details the motivation and processes behind creating a school-wide house system that promotes a growth mindset and fosters a positive school culture that is inclusive of all students.

Eliminating Social Homelessness: Providing a Home to GROW

Our school is diverse, serving 650 young adolescents (grades 6-8) from a range of racial/ethnic backgrounds (19% Asian, 13% African American, 7% Multiracial, 50% White) across the spectrum of socioeconomic status (~25% of students on free-or-reduced lunch). On the surface, it was doing well—nestled in a medium sized city, it boasted a 71% achievement score in reading, and a 66% in math (27% & 24% higher than the respective state averages). But a closer look at the school data revealed significant achievement gaps between our White students and our students of color, sometimes as large as 57 percentage points. We believe that part of the achievement gaps was connected to students being disconnected and disengaged, lacking meaningful connections with peers or adults. There were students like Kieran and Marcus, whose tempers put them in frequent disagreements with other students. But there were also students like Oscar, who, though never in conflict with peers, felt left out on account of his disinterest with popular hobbies such as Magic the Gathering and playing Xbox. Despite our efforts to build relationships or connect them with other students that shared their interests, many felt socially homeless. Social homelessness is defined as having multiple social identities, but lacking a social group where

an individual feels at home (Harrison, 2015). Students who are socially homeless may feel pressure to mask aspects of themselves in order to conform to a friend group or truly fit in.

Kevin (school counselor) and Rydell (principal) (hereafter: we) set out to help students feel connected not only to one another, but to their teachers, and ultimately to their school. Brennan (2015) recommends “setting up a schoolwide system for forging relationships...” (p. 58) as these school-wide social and emotional learning structures combat behavioral problems and bullying since students feel included by their peers. This is especially true when students are given a chance to provide input into expectations, guidelines, and consequences for a schoolwide system, making them feel a sense of ownership over what happens in the school. Students who are part of a schoolwide system of support are also more likely to show resiliency in the face of bullying behaviors (Davis & Nixon, 2011).

A Push for School-Wide Change

Compelled by our experience with students and the research literature, we felt an urgency to create something schoolwide that would provide students opportunities to build and foster connections with peers and adults. Research has demonstrated that shifts in early adolescent

relationships with peers and family members (Lord, Eccles, & McCarthy, 1994) may shape social behavior (Masten, Juvonen, & Spatzier, 2009) and provide validation and attachment (Buhrmester & Furman, 1986; Nickerson & Nagle, 2005).

Early adolescents purposefully differentiate from parents in an attempt to explore identity and test significant relationships. Research suggests a mismatch between the developmental needs of early adolescence and the environment of some middle schools, which are typically less personalized than elementary schools (Carlisle, 2011; Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Many lack sufficient meaningful student-teacher interactions to help students feel truly connected (Juvonen, 2007). Combined, peers' opinions may be valued over those of parents and teachers (Wigfield, Lutz, & Wagner, 2005) and connecting with peers can become students' biggest priority (Carlisle, 2011) in early adolescence.

The quality of peer relationships can influence how middle schoolers report feeling connected to adults and peers at their school (Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan, Reuman, Flanagan, & Mac Iver, 1993) and determine students' individual and group identity. These relationships help students develop identities that shape their beliefs about themselves and form social groups that answer the question, "Who am I?" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). The answer to this question is especially important for middle schoolers who may be especially vulnerable to feelings of alienation and isolation, which may be emerging for the first time (Hall-Lande, Eisenberg, Christenson, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2007; Shulkind & Foote, 2009).

A recent study on peer relationships in schools by Harrison (2015) found that students who experienced social homelessness also felt alienated from peers. Because academic failure can also lead to students feeling disengaged and disheartened by school (DeCastella, Byrne, & Covington, 2013), the prevalence of social homelessness is even greater among students who perform below grade level. This isolation may lead to bullying as students who lack friendships are at a higher likelihood of being disliked, ignored, and victimized (Rodkin & Hodges, 2003; Wheeler, 2004). For students on the autism spectrum, having low social skills and elevated levels of anxiety and anger may also

lead to victimization (Sofronoff, Dark, & Stone, 2011).

Relationships with teachers are also vital, and hold implications for student well-being and school connectedness (Shulkind & Foote, 2009; Suldo, Friedrich, White, Farmer, Minch, & Michalowski, 2009), especially during the transition into middle school (Akos, Creamer, & Masina, 2004; Carlisle, 2011). Adult-student relationships are recognized as paramount by the Association of Middle Level Education (AMLE), which states that schools must be supportive of students' emotional and physical well-being and foster long term teacher-student relationships (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010). Feeling connected to both adults and peers can help students to feel like they belong (Carlisle, 2011) and influence their academic motivation and performance (Baumeister, Twenge, & Nuss, 2002; Eccles et al., 1993) as well as emotional well-being and behavior (Way, Reddy, & Rhodes, 2007).

Setting the Foundation

Research was clear, we needed to change our school ecology to capitalize on shifting relationships and the potential for positive influences of peers and school staff. Most bullying research and intervention programs (Juvonen, Schachter, Sainio, & Salmivalli, 2016) recommend full school culture shifts. What we chose, therefore, was the creation of a student house system to support students who felt socially homeless by providing them a place where they feel like they belong. In the absence of meaningful connections with peers and adults, they were at an increased risk for feelings of isolation and alienation, which could lead to victimization, and academic failure. We believed that connectedness through a house system was the mediator that could buffer social homelessness and its negative effects.

Though the concept of student houses has existed in the British educational system since at least the 1850's (Steege, 2002), the popularity and creativity of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series has made them relevant for new generations of students. Our goal for the houses required us to think creatively as we wanted them to connect to who our students were, and what they stood for, as well as build important non-cognitive factors to enhance relationships and persistence.

The overarching theme for the houses came from a district-wide initiative for promoting a growth mindset. These concepts have become increasingly popular in American schools over the past two decades. Dr. Carol Dweck's book *Mindset* (2006) provides a framework to incorporate the concepts of malleable intelligence and neuroplasticity through teaching students about *growth* and *fixed* mindsets.

The *growth* mindset views the brain like a muscle that can grow and develop over time. Students with a growth mindset focus on effort and persevering through difficulties and even seek out further challenge. They take on academic tasks to learn rather than to appear intelligent (Educational Horizons, 2012; Pawlina & Stanford, 2011; Schmidt, Shumow, & Kackar-Cam, 2015). Conversely, students who use a fixed mindset are more likely to avoid challenges for fear of failure or appearing unintelligent, and see their intelligence as static and unchangeable through effort (Educational Horizons, 2012; Pawlina & Stanford, 2011; Vandewalle, 2012). These ideas have been used with students as young as pre-school (Pawlina & Stanford, 2011), and have been effective in boosting achievement scores, especially for Black and Latino students (Dweck, 2008). In fact, Jensen (2013) suggests that growth mindset is particularly necessary for students in poverty as it reinforces effort. The growth mindset comes with its own terminology, a common language used to remind students of the importance of hard work and persistence over the belief in inborn intelligence.

Growth and fixed mindsets hold implications for students and teachers. Hall and Pearson (2003) argue that students' perceptions of difficult situations influence beliefs about their own learning abilities and how to respond to future difficulties, and that adaptive thinking can be modeled by adults. Teachers' orientation towards fixed and growth mindsets influence beliefs about student-learning (Gutshall, 2013), and they play a key role in students' use of growth and fixed mindsets (Schmidt et al., 2015). Though most applications of the growth mindset focus on boosting academic achievement, its concepts can be applied to social situations as well given that effort and practice are an element of social skills building programs (Choi & Kim, 2003; DeRosier, 2004; Escobedo et al., 2012). As teachers and students adopt a growth mindset, it also affects their

social connections, reinforcing effort and growth of relationship quality.

The House Model

This extension of a house system should sound familiar to middle school reformers. Advisory programs similarly try to build deeper relationships between adults and students and create advocates for those isolated or socially homeless (D'Amore, 2013). A house system packages some of the benefits of advisory in a contemporary format building off student interests. It integrates social-emotional learning in substantive and genuine ways. It also seeks to create social connections where, Wormeli (2011) notes that "belonging is one of the primary concerns for the new middle-level students..." (p. 49). Additionally, the house system follows Juvonen's (2007) suggestions for reforming middle schools, including capitalizing on students' need for affiliation, and creating a caring peer-culture.

While we identified the need (social homelessness) and a theme (the growth mindset) we believed could impact relationships and academic success, we needed a way to make them come to life. What we lacked in not having a designated physical space for the houses we could make up for by creatively utilizing what we did have—our school foyer could be decorated with house-themed posters. Corkboard strips and bulletin boards on each hall could be utilized for specific houses' events and updates. House meetings and school-wide events could use our larger spaces including the gym, cafeteria, auditorium, and media center. In doing so, we could transform students' school experience with no need for a large budget.

But the houses needed to be more than just names and colors—we were attempting to create smaller communities within our school, a place where students could feel like they were really part of something. In order to combat social homelessness, the houses had to feel like a home, and students had to sense that they were important to, and supported by their house. This required intentional work on the frontend to ensure that the faces of each house would be people that students wanted to connect with, and who would want to connect with students.

To help the house system begin on the right foot, we chose two teachers that were highly visible and well-liked to be the face and voice of their

houses. These teachers were informed of the house system prior to the rest of the staff, and became instrumental in creating teacher buy in. Each set of the “Heads of Houses” balanced gender, as well as one elective and one core teacher representation. Furthermore, we wanted our faculty house leadership to represent the racial/ethnic demographic of our student body, and were intentional in choosing a diverse group of teachers to act as Heads of House. By having representation from every teacher team across all grade levels, we set the groundwork for the idea to stick, and for students of all grades to interact with one another. The intentionality of house representation within each teacher-team is also supported by literature indicating that adult-student relationships are more meaningful when the adult is also the student’s teacher (Deitte, 2002; Juvonen, 2007).

Another element of creating a positive environment with the system came in the naming of the houses. We recognized that they had to be inclusive, each with a unique identity that students could feel a connection with, but not overly competitive as to create divisions or further disconnections. Through this, the idea of the houses creating a message was born. In this way, students would be a member of their own house, but also part of a larger body, all with a shared goal. Considering our theme, no word fit better than *GROW*.

The house names were chosen from qualities utilized by those displaying a growth mindset. We chose the names Grit, Résolu (French for “Resolve”), Opus (Latin for “Work”) and Wandel (German for “Change”). Houses were also given a set of colors, a logo, and a motto to represent who they were, ranging from Sisyphus forever continuing his upward journey, to a phoenix, symbolizing the importance of adaptability, and willingness to try again.

Creating buy in. Those who work in schools know that it is difficult to implement schoolwide change, which requires buy in from adults as well as students. In addition to choosing “Heads of Houses” we sorted every single adult in the building, teachers, specialists, staff, and administrators into a house prior to our implementation. For additional buy in, we created a sense of suspense and wonder. Roughly two weeks before our planned announcement of the houses, we printed small posters with the house logos and the word “GROW”. These were placed around all areas of

the school—trophy cases, ceilings, stairwells—anywhere where they would be noticed. Next we dropped small clues of what was to come. Teachers arrived to find their house symbol placed in their mailboxes with no other explanation. Lastly, a movie-style trailer was created for every house, and played on the weekly video-announcements. Soon, the school was abuzz with teachers and students speculating what the posters and trailers could mean. By the time the idea was officially presented at the next staff meeting, excitement and curiosity were at a high, and led well into the first “Spirit Challenge” among teachers.

Student roll-out. With the dynamic of anticipation and teachers securely on board, the roll-out for students became much easier. To sustain an air of mystery we created and advertised a twitter account that posted hints about the house system. One such tweet read, “How do you think the sorting hat chose student houses? I hope it was for growth & effort not ‘inborn’ traits” alluding to both Harry Potter and the growth mindset. In addition, staff members coordinated a day to wear clothing and accessories that represented their houses. The teachers from house Grit, for example, wore black and silver (their house colors) along with eye-black and motorcycle gloves to put forth a “gritty” image. Students began making connections between the house symbols and the colors that teachers were wearing, but were never explicitly given an explanation, piquing their curiosity even more.

One week later, the actual “Student Sorting Ceremony” took place in the auditorium during students’ PE Class. These classes were already cross-grade level, so it allowed for students from 6th through 8th grade to be sorted at one time, and get to know their new housemates from other grades. We believe cross grade-level relationships were desirable for many students and activated a mentoring type culture. For efficiency we created a Keynote presentation for each class period that pre-sorted students into groups of 10-12. During the ceremony, these students were called up to the front of the auditorium where they drew a house’s flag to indicate their new home. After each flag pull, we triggered projections of that house’s symbol on the auditorium walls, coupled with celebratory music. We divided the auditorium so that sorted students would sit in house-specific sections, and there was always at least one teacher from each house to greet new members and begin

forming relationships with them. Teachers also assisted in compiling student names into our House Roster with the help of a GoogleDoc and iPad.

The following day, students had the first of many house spirit challenges. As we stood in the halls during class changes, we saw the power of connectedness and shared experiences—students engaged peers based on their house affiliation rather than the social identity groups that previously left some kids socially homeless. Students were also quick to build upon their newfound house identity, connecting with fellow house members through hand signals like a “W” for “Wandel”, or a sweeping circle, and snap for “Opus”.

Thereafter, students earned house points by demonstrating a growth mindset: facing academic challenges head on, refusing to give up in the face of adversity and using every available opportunity to demonstrate mastery. Schoolwide, teachers placed house symbols outside their classroom doors in a function similar to SafeZone stickers (Mail, 2002), letting students know that they were a source of support and safety. During classes, teachers had students to pair up based on house affiliation, nurturing relationships both within and between houses and reminding students of the importance of approaching social relationships and academic work through the lens of a growth mindset.

Each house also met before quarterly house challenges, providing an opportunity for students to continue fostering relationships and receive positive feedback from peers and staff on the ways that they had used a growth mindset. This was especially helpful for students who may have felt like “just one of the crowd”, as they had the chance to be recognized and celebrated by a group of over 150 peers and adults based on their effort rather than success or lack thereof. Once a month, the lunch schedule was modified to allow students to eat together in houses, rather than by teacher teams, which continued to strengthen these peer relationships. We made intentional efforts to ensure that the focus of the houses was kept positive, with a focus on growth and effort. Because of this, we saw little negativity, and competition between the houses never became a problem.

Lessons Learned

The house system was an effort to create communities within our school that transcended the traditional ways in which students self-segregate into social homes. Though our evidence is anecdotal, through student feedback and observation, we learned that when provided with an environment that promotes connectivity, students who traditionally feel alienated can experience feelings of belonging. One of the most powerful elements of the house system is that it redefined how students thought about themselves, and their success. It created a community for students and adults to be a part of, unencumbered by any other element of their identities. The initial novelty and excitement of the houses gave way to real investment, and a willingness to try something new. By the end of the school year students began to weave new mindsets into their identity formation as they looked to their fellow house members to answer the question, “Who am I?”.

Though they were in place for only three months, we were able to see changes in our school’s overall culture, and in student and teacher mindsets as a result of the house system. We saw students form relationships across grade level, and even some of our socially homeless students begin utilizing a growth mindset in their approach to social relationships. Students like Kieran and Marcus got an opportunity to be part of a group, something that they had yet to experience at the school. For example, Kieran, who often ended up working alone or being sent out of class, was now working alongside peers from his house. He was no longer concerned about getting the answer right, but instead focused on continuing to work through difficulties. In being rewarded for his effort he was helping his house, and he became more invested in his work. This investment led to him acting in more socially appropriate ways, and therefore having more positive interactions with peers, which also led to the benefit of him being in the classroom longer to learn. The simple reframe of “success” was enough to change his classroom experience in multiple ways.

The changes brought about by the house system also affected students like Oscar. He got a chance to make initial connections with other students through house affiliation, and began to see commonalities between himself and others that he had been unwilling to seek out when utilizing a fixed mindset about social

relationships. Though he still did not play Magic the Gathering or Xbox, he found housemates that played tennis, a hobby that they could talk about during lunch and share together during recess.

We also witnessed compelling examples of adult-student relationship building, confirming the research that suggests students' relationships with teachers can impact their level of school engagement, achievement, and enjoyment (Baker, 2006; Decker, Dona, & Christenson, 2007; Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Some of these were simple examples of students stopping into teachers' classrooms to say hello, and let them know that they were in the same house. Others went deeper—Jason, a 7th grade Language Arts teacher, leveraged the “artistic” image of his house, Opus, to form a drama club, giving students that shared his passion for theatre an opportunity to work more closely with him and find a place to belong amongst other students.

Schoolwide, each staff member had access to a GoogleDoc that allowed them to award students' perseverance and persistence with house points, up to 10 at one time. By the end of the school year, almost 20,000 house points were awarded, meaning that there were *at least* 2,000 instances of an adult in the building awarding students for their growth and effort, thereby providing students a new narrative of success and intelligence.

The houses also promoted student leadership via a three-lesson series dubbed *GROWth University*, offered to 6th and 7th grade students interested in *house chair* and *house representative* positions. *GROWth University* began by teaching students the difference between a fixed and growth mindset and provided examples of ways they already utilize the growth mindset in their daily lives. One activity had students write their name and house on a piece of paper with both their dominant and non-dominant hand, and discuss the role practice played in the differing legibility of the two. Participants also took a “Mindset Scan” survey that showed them whether they gravitated towards a growth mindset or fixed mindset. The lessons were interactive and included activities for students to practice recognizing the difference in mindsets. For example, in Lesson Two, students were asked to classify statements as either “growth mindset” oriented (e.g., “I need to listen to what others say

in order to learn more”, “I expect to work hard in order to be successful”, “look how far I’ve come. If I keep trying, I’ll go even further”) or “fixed mindset” oriented (e.g., “I’m no good at math”, “If I am smart, I shouldn’t need to ask questions”, “I followed directions, but I didn’t get it right. This will always be too hard for me”).

GROWth University concluded with students watching and discussing a TED Talk on Bobby Fischer, former chess grandmaster who utilized the growth mindset to become a martial arts expert, and a video on the many failures that preceded Pablo Picasso’s masterpieces. At the end of the Lesson Three, students received a personalized certificate of completion with their House symbol used as a watermark. In all, *GROWth University* saw attendance of 70 students, representing almost 20% of our 6th and 7th graders.

The Future of the Houses

As the school year came to a close, we began to think about the next steps for the houses. They were successful in helping students feel connected to one another, but the adult-student relationships could continue to develop. Since every person in the building belongs to a house, we imagine a future where every staff member is assigned a small subset of students from their house, allowing the opportunity for the formation of a significant adult-student relationship. Before the end of the academic year, we mapped out the following school year, providing dates for House-Lunches, Quarterly House Challenges, and Spirit Weeks and shared this information with the faculty. Because of its promising start, Growth University may become part of the school’s classroom guidance curriculum, and delivered to all students, serving as a new way to conceptualize and address our school’s achievement gaps.

We expect the houses to remain a big part of the school. They have been incorporated into PBIS-expectations, and continue to highlight the importance of a growth mindset. This academic year, as the “founder” of the houses, former principal Rydell Harrison was invited to the sorting ceremony for the incoming 6th graders, providing them a welcoming environment during such a critical transition (Akos et al., 2004; Carlisle, 2011; Lord et al., 1994). As students entered the dimly lit auditorium surrounded by house symbols and underscored by music that created a sense of mystery and

awe, their sense of excitement could be felt. During the first two weeks of the year, these new middle schoolers anxiously waited for the sorting ceremony and, when the sorting announced their house, their reactions were priceless. One student fell to the floor in thanksgiving because he always “knew” that he was Résolu.

Final Thoughts

According to author Louise May, if we focus on fixing our thinking rather than our problems, the problems will fix themselves. Our middle school house system was an attempt to change our school culture and foster positive relationships by changing our students’ thinking. Simply put, our response to the existence of socially homeless students was to build new houses.

The house system redefined how our school community viewed intelligence focusing on a growth mindset and effort-based learning, crossed social identity lines connecting students based on a new set of positive indicators, and created an intentional infrastructure to ensure all students were affirmed, which we believe is a critical step towards closing our achievement gaps. Although there is still work to do, hearing a student with autism who initially had few friends, state, “I’m so glad I got into Opus! I knew this is where I belonged,” helps us know we are on the right track.

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