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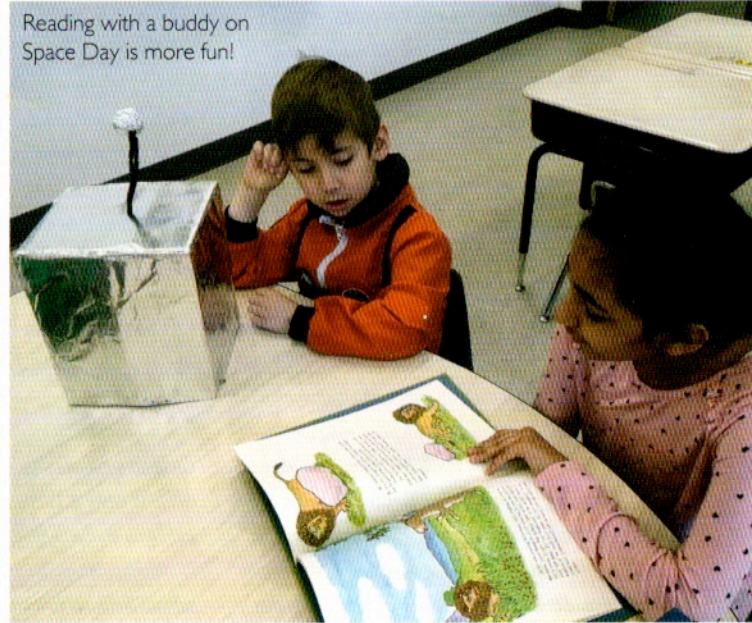
## Wellness & Well-being: Keys to Student Success





# **A Culture of Mutual Support**

By Teresa Di Ninno, CAPE Public Charter School



CAPE's charter goals of fostering academic and personal excellence demands a mindful focus on the wellness and well-being of each student. Yet, this dedication to wellness and well-being also envelops staff and administration. Therefore, promoting wellness means supporting the health of the school community as a whole in its many facets; physical, mental, emotional, social, intellectual, and spiritual. This is a tall order – one that requires the involvement of the entire school community, the support of system leaders, of the Board of Directors, and of community health professionals and agencies.

Our Board of Directors' one single focus is the students and the staff. Therefore, policies and accompanying administrative procedures have been developed to anchor the work at the school level in a sound deliberate framework.

The academic and the personal aspects of an individual, be that a student or a teacher or an administrator, are interdependent. One affects the other. Sometimes the academic causes the personal issues and sometimes the reverse

is true. These same intertwined facets are also present within staff. A student that lacks in self-confidence or self-esteem is usually unwilling or unable to participate in the learning process. Academic challenges and perceived repeated failures give rise to feelings of frustration, worthlessness, and low self-esteem; as a result, the student cannot or will not be engaged.

Teacher-generated and/or standardized test results reveal the gaps in knowledge, skills, and attitudes. However, further investigations are required to identify possible underlying issues. Academic challenges foster feelings of low self-worth and lack of confidence. Therefore, at CAPE, we have found that the first step in supporting the whole student is to identify how the personal and academic are intertwined and then we can begin to address areas of need to support the personal health and well-being of that student. It is important to determine which is the greater need and address that first.

How do we assess the personal wellness of a student? Intake processes, pre-registration meetings, and September intake meetings with parents allow for the exploration of the student's

history, including access to outside counsellors, psychologists, psychiatrists, occupational therapists, and so on. If the student is new to us, conversations with past administrators and teachers offer insights into the student's needs.

Relationships are then built with families and students, which allows us to develop a baseline. This, in turn, assists in the recognition of deviations from the baseline and circumstances of concern. Is it something that we can address in house? Does it require a counsellor? Does it require a physician or psychologist or psychiatrist? It is particularly important to ensure that a person of trust in the building be identified for each child (and adult). This identified person needs to respond positively and accept this role as part of the day-to-day work. Our in-house educational psychologist will also identify community resources that can best support the student, after considering the abilities of the parent(s) to attend to the issue, such as the ability to take the child to appointments.

It is not enough to provide for the student since supporting the family is also of crucial importance. Families are made aware of resources



available within the community, including sleep clinics, therapists, and counsellors. Our Out-of-School website has links that families can use to seek assistance ranging from child programming, to parenting courses, to general family supports which help meet basic needs. During the intake process, personal aspects are explored including family supports, family dynamics, and any other areas that seem appropriate. Through this process, necessary supports for the student and the family are maintained in the transition both in and out. The key to the effectiveness of this process is the personal relationships: the trust built among the stakeholders, and the empathetic and caring attitude not only of those closest to the individual but of everyone else in the building.

Our school community is small enough to allow for the development of relationships and processes that support wellness and well-being of not only students, but also each member of the school community. Nimble, flexible, attuned, and intuitive administrators can identify, monitor, support the wellness and well-being within the community, and respond in a timely manner and do so in an effective way.

Considering the number of students, our staff contingency is quite large. This is necessitated by our personalized program and our particular population that encompasses the full spectrum of emotional, social, academic, behavioural needs, and learning styles. Staff members develop meaningful relationships

in the collaborative atmosphere that permeates the school. New staff, regardless of years of teaching experience, are assigned mentors who provide not only professional support but also emotional support for the challenges of working with children and parents. Therefore, colleagues are able to recognize a baseline of behaviour in a co-worker and recognize changes in that behaviour.

This is once again based on relationships, trust, and a culture of caring. Staff members recognize when a colleague is struggling physically and/or emotionally and as a group, offer supports so the colleague does not feel isolated or alone. Administrators are alerted to the need. They in turn facilitate access to physicians, counsellors, or the professional that is best able to assist. Other referrals can follow, depending on the need. It's routine for the administration to provide release time to attend meetings, time for medical assessments, reduced work load, time to get away from the busy environment even if only a little while, offer a supportive ear – to name a few.

Mentorship is an integral aspect of our school's efforts towards wellness and well-being. The Superintendent mentors the principal in a long-term relationship. The principal in turn mentors the vice-principal, the teachers, and the assistants. Experienced teachers mentor less experienced teachers. The same applies to the educational assistants. Each staff member

has someone in the school to speak with about academic or personal issues. Teaching cohorts facilitate mutual support.

Our educational psychologist, which is our in-house support, is accessible at any time to anyone. She sometimes reaches out just to remind us that we too sometimes need a helping hand. "So many of our students have such challenging lives, I know it can be heart-breaking for you at times as you work with them. The stress we can feel at these times can be overwhelming and become what is known as secondary or vicarious trauma – supporting these children can have profound emotional effects on us. Even if it does not reach that point, it can still be overwhelming. I want you know that this is to be expected because you are such kind and caring people. I also want you to know how important it is to recognize it, and take the time you need to care for yourselves."


Flexibility is key to the administration's ability to manage the environment in support of the staff, to facilitate access to external services, and to take much needed time for oneself. Once, when the Board supported an online employee assistance program within the benefit package, it failed miserably. What was missing was the personal connections, the relationships, and the trust.

The culture of CAPE is so that every person – student, parent, teacher, educational assistant, administrator, volunteer, or visitor – feels welcomed, safe and supported, valued and valuable, and feels that they *matter*. It is within this culture that our processes have been developed over time. As the environment changes, so do the processes and the framework. The governance framework is malleable and responds to the needs of those it is intended to support. What remains the same is the foundational commitment to facilitate and support the wellness and well-being of each individual within the CAPE family. ■

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