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At Boston's Renaissance Charter, My Students Are Going Above and Beyond Their Pre-Pandemic Performance

BY AARON KESLER

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As educators, we know that kids cannot learn if they don't feel safe and supported at school. During the past two years, this truth was at its most visceral.


Social-emotional learning (SEL)—which not only helps students develop the skills to set goals, process and remember information, but also respond to stress and trauma—has always been a fundamental element of the curriculum at Boston Renaissance Charter Public School, where I've been a 6th grade ELA teacher for 12 years.

Over the past two years, we teachers have been upfront with students every step of the way while navigating the twists and turns of the COVID journey. We have ensured they have safe spaces to process their feelings and anxieties. We have collaborated with our team of mental health counselors and have stayed in close touch with parents and families. All of this provides our students with consistency, stability and comfort.

Since returning to school in person, that hasn't stopped. But this year, we have combined it with academic support that is helping our students not only revive, but jumpstart their academic motivation and performance.

Our Students Are Working Harder Than Ever Before

While the year has been challenging for us teachers, it has also been inspiring and motivating to see kids rising to the occasion, showing up, persevering, and learning in the face of an unprecedented and difficult moment in history.



Our students returned to their classrooms last September with feelings of uncertainty. Now, as we move toward the end of the school year, we're seeing a renewed sense among them that “my work matters.”

As an ELA teacher, my main goal has always been to help my students learn to love reading. In this environment, they've admirably gone above and beyond. They're reading more voraciously, care more about their grades, and devote themselves to the work they are producing in a way that I've never seen from 6th graders—ever.

Here's how that happened.

It Takes a Blend of Emotional and Academic Support

Most of this school year has been about helping our students get back into the routine of being scholars. We kept the best of our longstanding, ambitious instruction and adapted it to help students rebuild their stamina. We helped them relearn how to pay attention for extended periods of time and work independently. We also helped them rebuild their stamina and internal motivation to learn.

Before diving straight into academics, however, it was of utmost importance to create space for kids to express how they felt about being back in school.

At Renaissance, our sixth-graders “Circle Up” once a week to share their feelings and discuss anything on their minds. At the height of the pandemic, Circle Up became a reliable space for students to express their anxieties about the virus and share any stresses they might be experiencing due to food insecurity or social isolation. It even became a space to acknowledge grief about any lost family members.

Since returning to in-person learning, Circle Up remains a space for those issues, as well as serving as a restorative space to process interpersonal challenges students have experienced as they readjust to being together in the same physical space.

We also meet students where they are through our WIN (“What I Need”) time blocks. During these periods, we divide our students into smaller groups depending on what they need most. Some require review around foundational concepts, while others require a block devoted entirely to SEL.

We Need to Maintain Strong Adult Collaboration

No matter where the Covid journey takes us in the future, we must work together to remain on the right trajectory and carry the lessons of the past two years into the next. Conquering learning gaps while being mindful of the lingering effects of pandemic trauma will require continued collaboration with school mental health counselors, parents, and families. Supportive school leaders coordinate all these moving parts, empower teachers and equip them with the training and tools to meet their students' needs.

As we navigate these uncharted waters, we must continue to prioritize SEL and create spaces for our students to share so they will be able to grow, learn and thrive.



Aaron Kesler has been teaching for 15 years. Teaching is his passion and getting to work with students each year inspires and motivates his practice. He believes that all students can succeed when they feel empowered and supported by those around them. Mr. Kesler feels that all students have a voice to be agents of change in their lives. It is his job to facilitate a safe, nurturing, diverse ...

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