

Getting Connected

Making school a safe 'second home'

"School is a place that's safe to be without your mom."
—Alex, age 6

This sentiment, expressed so succinctly and eloquently by a first grader I know, sums up our District 220 goal of creating a "second home" for our children from pre-kindergarten to high school graduation.

I'm sure many of us can think of an occasion when school did not feel as safe and comfortable as home. I grew up in Niles, and as I entered high school I found myself in a building where I was the only student from my junior high. I literally didn't know a soul in the entire school. The memory of walking into the cafeteria on the first day of school still makes me cringe. Knowing no one, I walked past rows of tables carrying my tray, wishing and trying to become invisible. My only options – sitting alone or sitting with a table of guys that I didn't know – were not going to allow me the invisibility that I craved.

The first couple weeks of high school were tough, but three things saved me. The first was Mr. Maniola, my freshman algebra teacher. Mr. Maniola was a sincere, caring, and inspiring teacher who seemed to have a "sixth sense" that told him I was alone and lost. Immediately, he took me under his wing, made sure to say hello to me every day by name, found time to guide me into a few friendships that I still maintain today, and, in this world full of strangers, gave me an adult whom I could trust completely. He made such a significant impression on me that I can honestly say Mr. Maniola is the reason I eventually became a math teacher.

The second thing that saved me was the saxophone. I loved jazz and was a pretty good tenor sax player. Joining the school band gave me a ready-made social group with whom to share typical band activities: marching at football games, playing in pep bands, walking in parades, and competing in jazz festivals.

The final thing that saved my high school

experience was that in the spring, I joined a "no cut" sport – track. Although I was just an average runner, I got to wear a uniform, hang with my teammates, cheer on the talented kids during track meets, and have a group of guys to sit with at lunch. Thanks to a caring teacher who understood that he was teaching much more than algebra, and thanks to co-curricular opportunities offered at my high school, I connected and thrived during my high school years.

I have no doubt that many students go through exactly the same type of experience I had at some point in their school careers. That's why in District 220 one of our most important goals is to provide our students a variety of ways to "get connected."

Students involved in co-curricular clubs, concerts, sporting events, debate team, and many other activities make BHS a "second home" even after school and on weekends. This "second home" is an important concept for all of our schools. From Monday to Friday, kids spend more waking hours in school than they do at home. It is critical that schools be places where children can be comfortable...and that means that schools need to be places where kids feel safe and connected to their peers, as well as to adults.

It all starts in our elementary schools. We are fortunate in District 220 to have neighborhood elementary schools, where kids who grew up on the same street can attend the same school. I wish all our residents could tour each of our elementary schools. You would be so proud of the beautiful facilities and nurturing environment that you are supporting. Each classroom seems to resonate with the sacred partnership that exists between teacher and parents as they entrust their children to other caring adults.

At the elementary level, each of our schools has developed activities to make their environment that "second home" for kids. Field days,



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buddy classes, theme days, and family fun nights are just a few of the special activities that connect our children and families to their schools. At the end of fifth grade, most of our children have experienced a unique rite of passage – spend two nights away from their first home with their second-home classmates at Camp Timber-Lee.

In my next article, I will focus more on some of the ways we connect our middle and high school students with our teachers and staff, and most importantly, what we can do together if your child is feeling isolated. For now, it is enough to emphasize that when kids do not connect with school they feel alienated, which in turn affects their ability to learn.

Schools need to make sure that every child has a sense of belonging and that every child is connected to an adult within the school – someone they can turn to if things are not going well. In District 220, we strive to hire and bring the best Maniolas of the world into contact with the wonderful children of the Barrington area. This is the best way to create the magic that makes all kids feel connected to their "second home."

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