

Northwestern College, Iowa

NWCommons

Master's Theses & Capstone Projects

Education

Summer 2022

Peer Mediated Instructional Strategies

Leah Pederson

Follow this and additional works at: https://nwcommons.nwciowa.edu/education_masters

 Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Peer Mediated Instructional Strategies

Leah Pederson

Education Department, Northwestern College

EDU635: Capstone

Dr. Hayes

August 21, 2022

Abstract

The purpose of this school improvement plan is to improve the climate and culture within classrooms. Mental health issues are on the rise, and affecting children at younger ages. Teachers need to have strategies in place to support the social-emotional needs of our children. When children are given the opportunity to learn how to appropriately interact with one another, the hope is that it transfers to the outside world. The goal of this school improvement plan is to also create a more student-centered atmosphere in classrooms where children are learning from one another at all times both socially and academically.

Keywords: peer mediated instruction, PMI, social-emotional, mental health

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Abstract..... | 2 |
| Introduction..... | 5 |
| Literature Review..... | 7 |
| Site Profile | 15 |
| School Performance | 16 |
| Student & Community Characteristics | 17 |
| School Building Characteristics..... | 17 |
| Parent Involvement | 18 |
| Curriculum, Instruction, & Assessment..... | 19 |
| Professional Development Practices..... | 20 |
| Needs Assessment..... | 21 |
| Data Analysis | 22 |
| Data Summary | 22 |
| School Strengths | 26 |
| School Challenges..... | 26 |
| Assessment Options | 26 |
| Action Plan..... | 27 |
| Purposed Improvement Plan..... | 27 |
| Impact on Teaching and/or Learning..... | 28 |
| Alignment to Research..... | 28 |
| Summary..... | 29 |
| Implementation of School Improvement Plan | 30 |
| Intro..... | 30 |
| Timeline | 30 |
| Role Clarifications and Assignments..... | 34 |
| Progress Monitoring..... | 35 |
| Limitations | 36 |

Conclusion36

References.....38

Peer Mediated Instructional Strategies

Students today have an abundance of needs that exceed academics. Social-emotional needs are on the rise, and teachers are scrambling with strategies to ensure success of every student. Research shows children with disabilities, childhood trauma, or other underlying issues affects their performance in school. “Each child has their own individualized set of social-emotional skills based on age, development, cultural norms, and experiences. Social skills are vital to meaningful interactions and formation of friendships. Young children with disabilities interact less often and find themselves isolated by peers and in social situations. These deficits prevent children from creating and maintaining friendships” (Mitsch et al., 2021, p. 16). The problem is many students in our education system today struggle to interact with peers appropriately. Social-emotional needs can affect academic success. So, what can educators do to help students be successful socially? Peer Mediated Instructional strategies could be the solution for educators.

The purpose of this school improvement plan is to offer educators Peer Mediated Instructional Strategies that would be successful for children in the general education classroom. When educators gather a “toolbox” of strategies, it will in turn help *all* students succeed in the classroom. As teachers begin to feel confident incorporating strategies into their classroom, it automatically creates a more engaging, welcoming, and social classroom (Grand Valley State University, 2018). A welcoming environment is exactly what is needed for some of the most struggling of learners. If more teachers get on board with learning appropriate social-emotional learning strategies, the school building will become stronger and more cohesive.

While researching this topic, I needed to narrow down to a more specific topic within social-emotional learning. There are tons of research out there that claims social-emotional

learning needs are on the rise but finding what specific strategies would help can be difficult. I decided to narrow down to Peer Mediated Instructional Strategies to research. PMI is research-based, becoming well-known globally, and simple to understand. Some of my research depicts specific strategies that would help certain types of learners, but with my experience in the general education classroom, many other students will benefit from these strategies as well. Keeping in mind we want success for *all* students is always at the forefront, even with PMI strategies. Resources for this school improvement plan were compiled from the DeWitt Library at Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa.

The thesis of this project is practicing engaging and interactive strategies with students will allow them to apply them on their own with their classmates within the classroom. Providing smaller grouped interventions to students who need more support will help them become more successful in the classroom setting as well. Giving students the tools to help them assess what they want and how to get there is the goal. One type of strategy is not going to work for every student every day. That is why it is important to provide students with a plethora of strategies to use, and to practice them frequently. With practice brings confidence, and with confidence brings more social interactions within the classroom that they can then take outside of the classroom. We want students to be successful in our classrooms, but also to extend that to becoming successful beyond the classroom in years to come.

Readers will learn about social-emotional learning needs in today's world, what Peer Mediated Instruction is, specific strategies that target social-emotional learning, and ideas to extend those strategies to the outside world. All research has been gathered from the past ten years and are scholarly journals. Even if educators are not able to become trained with Peer Mediated Instruction in their current setting, hopefully they will gain knowledge on ideas to try

within their classrooms immediately. Strategies need to be clear, concise, and simple for educators to implement the next day.

Review of the Literature

Educators wear many hats. When we signed up for this profession, we knew we signed up to teach students. Did we ever think we would need to worry about the well-being of students? Did we ever think we would need to worry about how they form relationships? This literature review will look into the findings of social-emotional needs in our world today, what Peer Mediated Instruction is, what strategies educators can implement into their classrooms immediately, and how strategies can be applied outside of the classroom.

Social-Emotional Needs in Today's World

It is no surprise that mental health concerns are continuing to rise in the world today. “Childhood exposure to traumatic experiences and subsequent psychological symptoms increase the risk for lifelong behavioral and mental health problems, including depression diagnoses, reduced adaptive coping strategies, substance abuse, and early death, with negative impacts on children's social development and academic achievement” (Hutchison et al., 2020, p. 1257). There is research aligning traumatic experiences to problem behaviors, which leads to social gaps and poor social relationships (Kay, 2018). Some educators believe that challenging behaviors hinder the classroom climate (Zee et al., 2016). Not only are there problem behaviors that cause disruptions in the classrooms, but there is also the thought that our most struggling of learners are those with learning disabilities. How do we get them involved in the classroom appropriately to build long-lasting relationships?

“Socially neglected students are those who are unnoticed by their peers. Over time, this neglect may have a negative impact on their socio-emotional development” (Korem, 2019, p. 687). These socially neglected students need extra support in the form of social groups, peer interactions, and appropriate coping strategies to be successful in the general education classroom. Not only will our most struggling of students benefit from social strategies, but *all* students within a classroom should gain insights, experience, and skills to practice. Of course, the end goal being when students leave our classroom doors, they feel confident and equipped for success socially in numerous ways. This could transfer to the next school year, and to relationships outside of the school building. However, if students’ social-emotional needs continue to be ignored in society today, it could lead to lifelong issues such as depression, anxiety, or suicide (Hutchison et al., 2020). In my eyes, one ignored student is one too many. For some students, school is there only safe place. This information we cannot take lightly! There are a variety of strategies educators can try with students to avoid another heartbreaking statistic, and to improve the quality of the classroom climate.

What is Peer Mediated Instruction?

Every student that walks through our doors needs support. The job of an educator is to provide not only academic support, but social support as well. This is where Peer Mediated Instruction (PMI) comes into play. “PMI is an evidence-based practice in which peers serve to support both the academic achievement and social-skill development of students with specific learning needs, including students with ASD (autism spectrum disorder)” (Mahoney, 2019, p. 351). PMI involves classmates without disabilities to model, practice, and reinforce academic and social behaviors in the classroom.

Nowadays, students are pulled in every direction to meet their minutes for IEP's, 504's, reading support, math support, you name it. "Today, more than half of students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) spend 40% or more of their time in general education" (Haas et al., 2022, p. 3). How can we keep students in the general education classroom longer in order to work on academic and social supports? PMI could help students continue the supports they need without leaving their classroom and peers. "PMI supplements teacher-delivered instruction by incorporating peers to promote learning through systematic prompting, social initiations, and increased opportunities to respond. PMI can be particularly beneficial in large-group classroom settings because peers provide direct feedback to one another, which increases students' opportunities to respond" (Mahoney, 2019, p. 351). As a teacher, I strive to keep all students that are originally on my roster on *my* roster as much as possible. Peer support and interactions can help achieve that.

The need for social-emotional learning is not just children with ASD or other identified disabilities. What about that extremely shy student in class who never works with peers but is extremely bright? What about the student in class who takes control of every peer conversation because they do not have siblings at home, and they never have had to share the spotlight? These are *real* students in *real* classrooms each day. Social-emotional learning and PMI strategies can benefit *all* students to become socially and academically successful.

What about the teachers? Is this one more helping being added to plates? There is good news. Teachers naturally differentiate all day long. We modify directions, instruction, tasks, assessments, etc. to help students become successful. Would PMI be another "thing" to have to modify and differentiate? Sort of. "Learning challenges can be exacerbated by difficulties with executive functioning; social, learning, and communication difficulties; increased rates of

exclusion; and stereotypy and challenging behaviors. Support in the classroom may also be influenced by teachers' struggles to modify tasks, accommodate learning differences, handle challenging behavior, and support relationships between students with ASD and their peers" (Haas et al., 2022, p. 3). Incorporating strategies with peer modeling and practicing can take some of the stress off teachers. When we put in the work of coaching our students how to interact appropriately with one another and how to support each other, the environment should become more student-centered rather than teacher directed. This will in turn take helpings off the plate.

What would make educators want to choose PMI? If educators are passionate about creating an inclusive environment, decreasing undesirable behaviors, and having a socially and academically successful classroom, then PMI could be the solution. When I began to implement PMI into my classroom a few years ago, I wondered if my class was the "right fit" for these strategies. My instructional coach, who was leading me through PMI, looked at me funny and said, "what do you mean?" I explained that I felt like most of my kids were socially and academically on track (I really had no idea). She smiled and replied, "ok, but do you want it to be even better?" I thought about her words and considered the fact that I had nothing to lose. I am always open to learning new ideas and strategies to try with my students if I know it is going to benefit them in the long run. "Knowledge of the child's strengths and interests is central to the establishment of any meaningful PMI" (Lake, 2021, p. 109). So, I was going to sit and think about the strengths of each individual student in my classroom. This sounded like a ton of work. At this point of conversation, some educators would quit and stick with what they know, but would I want my students to do that?

Strategies That Target Social-Emotional Learning

Sometimes the trickiest part is knowing where to begin. “Instructional strategies can be useful tools in guiding learners learning behaviors or promoting particular cognitive abilities. With various approaches, different instructional strategies would encourage learners to apply diverse cognitive skills to complete the learning tasks” (Wang et al., 2017, p. 302). A few of the following strategies are specifically from PMI, and a few are other social-emotional learning strategies to try.

Collaborative Learning is a major component of PMI. Successful strategies of Collaborative Learning are problem-solving, role-playing, peer tutoring, and peer assessment (Wang et al., 2017). Pairing students up in partnerships is step one to any of these above strategies. Pairing can be done in a number of ways. It can be ability-based where you have a stronger academic or social student paired with a weaker one, it can be random, or it can be at the teacher discretion of pairings you would like to put together for a period of time. Next, you can come up with a “slogan” for your pairings such as macaroni and cheese, peanut butter and jelly, or fidget and spinner (Grand Valley State University, 2018). This slogan is just a way to address the partnerships where one person is one name and the other the other name. You want the slogan to be an idea your students enjoy and interest them. It does not need to be food related! When you have this slogan, the teacher can relay information to certain people in the partnerships (e.g., macaroni you will answer first, etc.).

Partnerships opens the door for role-playing scenarios, peer tutoring, and problem-solving together academically as well as socially (Wang et al., 2017). When I have incorporated partnerships in my classroom, some of my most struggling learners began to flourish. My student with diagnosed autism was paired with a very social peer. They formed this friendship because they began to trust each other and learned more about each other organically. My stronger social

peer naturally took on the role of a leader. He adored getting to help this student become an instrumental part of our classroom just by being in the classroom each day for every subject. It was also beneficial for my social student because he learned new ways to communicate, especially with an individual with diagnosed autism. Both were happy and successful. Another successful pairing was a student with behavior issues. I had him paired with two students instead. One was very social, and the other was shy. My hope was my student with behavior issues would learn social interactions from one, and help the shy student come out of their shell. It did not happen right away, but slowly it did. I also found ways to make this struggling student a high priority to others (Grand Valley State University, 2018). He would pass out papers that everyone would need, give everyone sanitizer before lining up for recess, or pass out textbooks to his classmates. I needed to find items that all the students *needed* so they would *need* him. He took his roles very seriously, and behaviors slowly started to improve. The other students were thanking him, and he rarely received those words in school from peers. Eye contact was beginning to happen (both ways). These are all simple components, but crucial for social interactions. When these simple peer pieces are practiced, academics can be the next focus.

“Numerous studies have been conducted using peer-mediated instruction in core academic classrooms and supplemental reading or math intervention settings to improve student outcomes, particularly at the elementary level. Potential benefits of peer-mediated instruction include the ability to provide ongoing corrective feedback in a timely manner and increased opportunities to respond and practice” (Wexler et al., 2015, p. 452). When students start to feel safe and comfortable socially, attention to academics can start to begin. Partnerships should continue to be used throughout the day academically as well. Students can work in pairs on assignments, projects, and simple classroom tasks like filling out their agendas. This gives

students a sense of consistency. They can depend on their partner to help them no matter what is happening. I did not want to incorporate PMI for only social exchanges to practice. I wanted to implement a system of strategies that would help my students succeed by using tools they have learned throughout the entire school day. “Individuals with ID (intellectual disability) increasingly participate in typical academic and postsecondary settings. As such, it is especially important that educators capitalize on the strengths of individuals with ID by providing individualized supports and adapting environments to foster participation in typical settings” (Shelton et al., 2019, p. 613). A predictable, consistent climate was critical for my *all* my students, not just those with ASD, ID, or behavior issues.

Another strategy to try (especially in our digital world) is video modeling (Mitsch et al., 2021). Some students who struggle the most socially are not going to pick up interactions with peers smoothly right away. Video modeling is a strategy to try with learners who are nonverbal, have ASD, or any other disability that needs more social support than peer pairings. This strategy takes students in the classroom and video records them modeling conversations, interactions, skills, jobs, expectations, etc. that are desired in the classroom (Mitsch et al., 2021). The struggling student can watch the video(s) and begin to reflect and practice. These videos need to be short and clear. Having a struggling student watch long videos would not be beneficial. You want the student to watch a specific exchange (like a greeting) between classmates, and then practice that. This student should practice on their own first, then with an adult, and lastly with a peer or two from class. It is critical to have peers involved, especially in feedback and reinforcement of the struggling student (Mitsch et al., 2021). Typically, students respond positively to peers giving positive feedback and recognition because they want to be accepted

and loved just like their peers are in the classroom. Make sure it is not just the teacher giving feedback!

Application of Strategies Past School Setting

“Success beyond the classroom”. That is what every educator desires, right? How can we prepare our students to the best of our ability both academically and socially? These children are not going to stay eight years old forever. Peer tutoring/interactions and video modeling can work well in the elementary classroom, but are there other strategies that would help them be successful outside of the classroom and later in life?

As we get older and our brains and bodies mature, we begin to understand what makes us feel stressed or emotionally distraught. Finding hobbies, exercise, ways to be outside, reading, spending time with family and friends are all outlets to regulating our social-emotional well-being (Mahfouz, 2020). “Understanding emotions through didactic information about pleasant and unpleasant emotions including physiological, cognitive, and behavioral responses to such emotions may be helpful. Practicing using reflection and mindful awareness to identify and manage strong emotions is another skill that could help” (Mahfouz, 2020, p. 452). I would think seeking a therapist or professional help to assist with regulating emotions and understanding your own cognitive responses that affect behavior would be beneficial at any age. “Often teachers do not have the opportunity to know or even have a conversation with a therapist working with a student in need” (RB-Banks & Meyer, 2017, p. 65). While this may be difficult, it could also be possible for therapists, teachers, and parents to work collaboratively for children throughout their lives.

“Relationship skills support healthy and positive relationships between people in society” (Wattanawongwan et al., 2021, p. 33). When teachers lay the foundation of social and relationship skills, it can improve student productivity and increase their personal responsibility (Wattanawongwan et al., 2021). Social skills are lifelong skills. You need them in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Think about it. Teachers are not just teaching children how to interact with peers in their classrooms. We are hoping these skills transfer into adulthood when applying for that dream job, for choosing a partner in life, for having their own children. “Social and emotional skills, also known as non-cognitive skills, soft skills, or character skills, are involved in achieving goals, working with others, and managing emotions. One of the main messages of these analyses is that social and emotional skills are particularly effective in improving many measures of social outcomes, whilst cognitive skills are particularly important drivers of tertiary education and labor market outcomes” (Miyamoto et al., 2015, p. 148). Social skills never end. They also never stop needing attention. I am constantly reflecting on my social-emotional health as an adult. I am continuously learning new ways to build relationships with people in the world. PMI strategies seems simple but can help with that foundation we hope lasts with them forever.

School Profile

In Northeastern Iowa, nestled within 12 surrounding schools, is Echo Hill Elementary. It is part of the Linn-Mar Community School District and is one of seven elementaries of the district. Echo Hill Elementary was built in 2008 and currently serves students Pre-K-4th grade. This school has continuously been filled to the brim with number of students, and there is no question why. Echo Hill is beautiful, welcoming, successful, and talented in numerous ways.

Many educators seek out openings at this building, and many educators never want to leave. It is truly a special place for anyone who walks through the doors.

School Performance

Echo Hill participates in ISASP (Iowa Statewide Assessment of Student Progress) testing once a year. Looking at data from ISASP gives a better understanding of Echo Hill's achievements and room for growth. According to Iowa Department of Education (2018), Echo Hill is a high-performing elementary, and the staff strive to maintain that identity. What makes a school "high performing?" "The overall performance includes both an overall score and performance rating for all Iowa schools across a number of performance measures. It provides a snapshot of school performance, but may not tell the entire story about performance of students in that school" (Iowa Department of Education, 2018). In the 2021-2022 academic year, Echo Hill scored an overall score of 63.96 out of 100 in terms of overall math and reading proficiency (Iowa Department of Education, 2018). The state overall score was 54.70, which gives Echo Hill its "high performing" title. This building scored 81.67 out of 100 on the ISASP reading testing (Iowa Department of Education, 2018). This means 81.67% of students were proficient at meeting the benchmark for reading. The state average was 68.95 out of 100. For math, Echo Hill scored 86.11 out of 100 (Iowa Department of Education, 2018). 86.11% of Echo Hill students met the math benchmark and were proficient. The state average was 65.21 out of 100.

Another aspect that makes Echo Hill "high achieving" is its graduation rate. In this district, 95.9% of students graduate (Linn-Mar Community School District, 2022). When kids are in engaged and in school, it leads to the successful accomplishment of graduating. This district has a 94.35% attendance rate (Linn-Mar Community School District, 2022). Both percentages are high and contribute to the high achieving, high performing profile that has been

distinguished. We know this district is successful, but what characteristics or tactics does this building use to cultivate such success?

Student and Community Characteristics

Within Echo Hill Elementary, there are 561 students in grades Pre-K-4 (Niche, 2022). Currently, there are 80.9% Caucasian students, 8.2% Asian, 4.8% Multiracial, 2.9% African American, 2.9% Hispanic, and 0.4% Pacific Islander (Niche, 2022). The building is almost evenly split with 53% male student and 47% female students (Niche, 2022). Of the 497 students, 7.8% are considered gifted (Niche, 2022).

The community of Echo Hill ever-growing. Since it is a newer school in comparison to the other elementary buildings in the district, families move to the surrounding neighborhoods any chance they get. This leads to higher enrollment and larger class sizes. We rarely turn down open enrollments because of the feeling that families want their children in our classrooms. This building has been known for its welcoming and positive atmosphere. And although the beauty of a building eventually fades, but it is clear that academics are a top priority here as well.

School Characteristics

Echo Hill was built in 2008 and was originally a K-5 building (Linn-Mar Community School District, 2022). With the recent explosion of housing nearby, and open-enrollment skyrocketing, more buildings were needed in the district. Two intermediate buildings were built in 2019, which moved 5th graders from our building to the new buildings (Linn-Mar Community School District, 2022). This gave our building a little more room for the growth that continues to happen each year. The climate of Echo Hill is warm and welcoming. Every staff member is highly qualified and works tirelessly to provide top notch education to the population they serve.

Many families move to the neighborhoods just to attend this elementary. That is a feeling that even high-ranking test scores do not provide! Although competitive in performance, Echo Hill never feels like a competition between elementary buildings. Our district has worked to provide a supportive environment for all staff, students, and their families at all times.

Parent Involvement

At Echo Hill, parents can be involved in a variety of ways. Conferences are held twice a year for parents to speak with teachers on student progression, concerns, and celebrations. Weekly newsletters are sent once a week from the building secretary with information on building events and general things to know. Parents can also volunteer at the building with special events for the students like the fun run, inflatable day, and relay races. Volunteers are always welcome to help in the library, individual classrooms, and with extra tasks that teachers cannot get done. Some of these tasks can be done at the school or at home (cutting, gluing, stapling, etc.). Parents may wish to serve on the PTO committee or attend monthly school board meetings to feel involved. Regardless, communication is open and encouraged at Echo Hill Elementary. It is a team effort to instill success in every student, and the more involvement from parents, the better.

School Mission and Vision

Linn-Mar's mission statement, *Inspire Learning, Unlock Potential, and Empower Achievement*, has a few meanings (Linn-Mar Community School District, 2022). It is the duty of the district to provide engaging and meaningful curricular experiences for students that inspires them to learn and grow. When that happens, students begin to see what they are capable of and what route in life they wish to pursue. Finally, we want our students to be successful in getting

there. As staff, we will walk with our students every step of the way until it is time for them to leave our district doors. At that time, we hope we have done everything we can to prepare them for the real world on their own. This mission statement is known and used at all buildings in the district.

Current Student Learning Goals

Major assessments that take place at this building are FAST assessments and ISASP. ISASP testing only occurs with third and fourth graders at our building, so the major focus is usually FAST. Echo Hill always creates goals around FAST assessments, and it is a way to measure growth throughout the school year. Goals typically include a percentage of a grade level meeting proficiency benchmarks on the FAST assessments, and the same for the whole building. A major goal with FAST in our building is to have 85% or higher of our students be proficient in reading according to the FAST data. When they are not, staff members are highly trained to provide intense interventions to students not meeting benchmarks. Data is reviewed *at least* quarterly to measure how our building is working towards our goals. The type of data reviewed would be progress monitoring scores and graphs, interventions used, and supports currently in place for students not meeting benchmark. Students also make their own reading goals in the classrooms. While not always directly tied to FAST, students construct reading goals specific to them. Goals range from text exposure to words per minute read, to number of books read per month. We work hard to tailor goals specific to the student's wants and needs.

Teacher Work

Curriculum is a major component of the education system. At Echo Hill, the reading curriculum utilized is called *Journeys*. It has weekly anchor texts and lesson plans to follow.

Within *Journeys* many skills are hit such as vocabulary, genre, guided reading sets, spelling, phonics, text structure, and author's purpose to name a few. *Journeys* is used K-4, so the students become familiar with the structure of the curriculum, and the skills spiral through from grade to grade to make sure the students are mastering them.

The math curriculum used at Echo Hill is called *Everyday Math*. It is also used K-4, and the curriculum builds upon the same skills from grade level to grade level. *Everyday Math* has intervention systems and extension activities built into the curriculum to help serve the variety of students that come through our doors.

At this building, there is a committee that serves the High Reliability Schools Framework focus (Marzano Resources, 2022). The purpose of this committee is to tighten up our building in terms of safety, instructional practices, response to intervention, and assessment practices. A few instructional strategies that are currently in place at Echo Hill are think, pair, share, cooperative learning, concept mapping, direction instruction, goal setting, close reading, think aloud, and modeling. These are just a few strategies that have been introduced at staff meetings from the High Reliability Schools committee in hopes to inform the staff of new ideas to implement in more classrooms.

Professional development happens throughout the school year. Topics range from instructional strategies, PLC, new curriculum, intervention tools, technology implementation, etc. The need for growth and improvement never ends. That is the beauty of this profession. Educators are constantly in the role of a student as well. Professional development is typically lead by administration and coaches, but at times is led by classroom teachers. This past year our building created "Echo Hill U" which gave classroom teachers a "college" feel of attending short, professional development training on topics of interest. There would be 4-5 classes

teachers could choose from at each PD meeting. This gave teachers the power of choice and less sitting in one place for one long topic. Having a variety of classes also lead to deeper conversations between colleagues because teachers were able to teach each other what they had learned.

Needs Assessment

At Echo Hill Elementary, more attention needs to be given to the climate and culture in classrooms. While academics are soaring at this building, there is still need for improvement with keeping as many students in classrooms as much as possible. The goal being we want students in classrooms engaged in learning the most that we can. This area is one that will constantly need improvement and creativity to improve from day to day, week to week, month to month, and year to year. There is no such thing as a *perfect* school climate and culture, but there is such thing as striving towards better for students at any opportunity. That is the purpose of this school improvement project. How can we *improve* the climate and culture at Echo Hill Elementary?

While Echo Hill is a successful school, there are still numerous hurdles that could cause disruptive behavior of some sort. Mental health issues are on the rise across the world, and taking time to dig into what students are experiencing may help teachers plan the best strategies to put in place. What are the biggest struggles students are facing and experiencing in their lives? How can teachers take that data, analyze it, and implement social support? When students are engaged in learning, there could be fewer problematic behaviors occurring. When students are involved in peer collaborative strategies, they can help keep each other on track and hopefully decrease undesirable behaviors, especially those that make students leave the classroom. When students feel a sense of belonging in a classroom, they will not want to leave it. My hope is that PMI will

help students establish meaningful relationships, and those meaningful relationships will help keep each other on track not only academically, but socially as well. Every child deserves a sense of belonging.

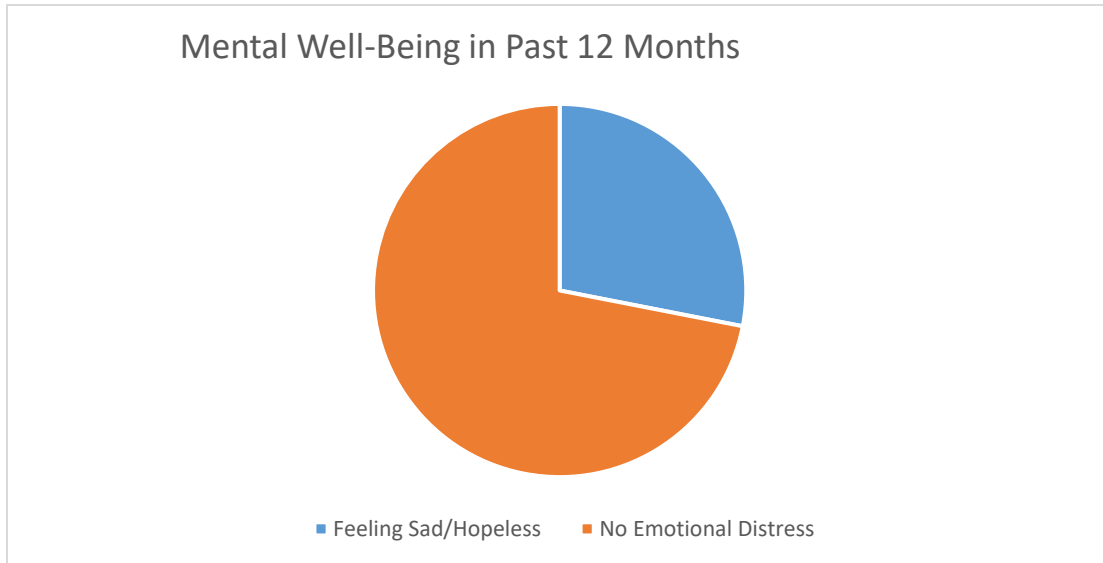
Data Analysis

In schools across America, more attention needs to be given to the mental health of our students. A positive and successful classroom climate works best when the individuals inside of it are happy and feel safe at all times. It is critical to pay attention to the needs of our students beyond their academic success to ensure their safety. This is a big responsibility, but putting PMI strategies in place ahead of time would hopefully keep unwanted statistics down. Educators cannot be expected to handle all aspects of a child's life, but we can educate ourselves to create more positive environments.

Data was collected from the Iowa Youth Survey from the 2021-2022 school year. The participants were students in grades sixth-twelfth, and the focus of data for this improvement plan was the mental health portion of the survey. The survey asked about the general mental health of students in Iowa over the past twelve months. While this is not specific data from Echo Hill, it gives a bigger picture of the mental health needs in Iowa, and how it needs to be a priority no matter what school or grade educators serve.

Figure 1

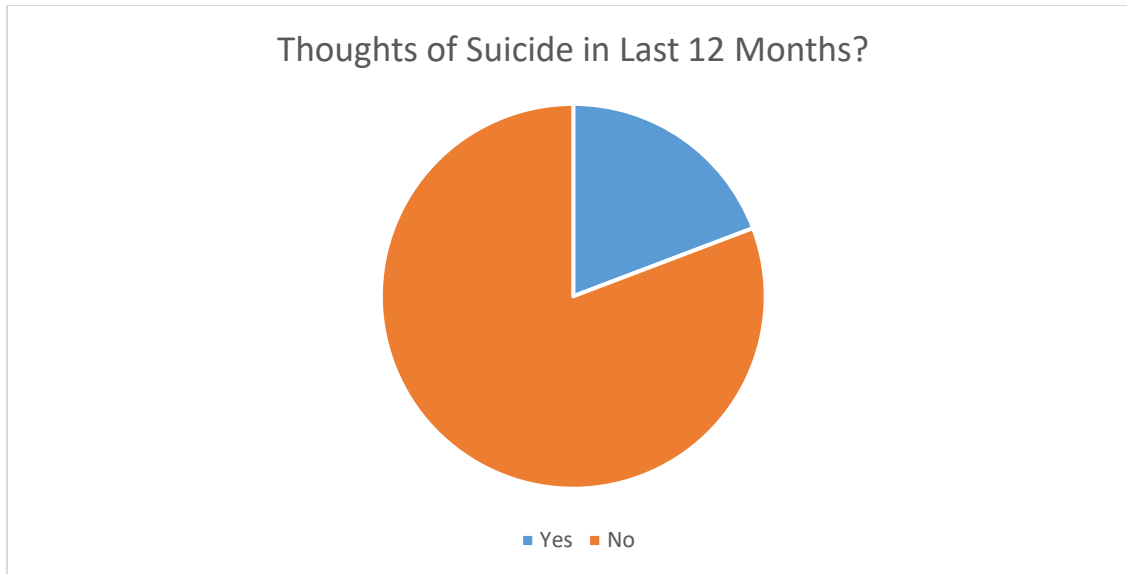
Mental Well-Being in Past 12 Months



“Between 27% and 36% of students, depending on the grade, reported they had felt so sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more in a row” (*Iowa Youth Survey, 2022, p. 49*). Figure 1 shows that between one fourth and one third of students in Iowa are feeling emotional distress on a daily basis. This could be from experienced trauma, stress, insecurities, bullying, and so much more. When individuals feel hopeless, it can lead to more serious issues such as suicide. While this seems extreme, it is reality. Creating a more cohesive and supportive school culture could bring these alarming percentages down. PMI strategies can give children a sense of belonging. When children know they matter, they do everything to continue becoming successful in and out of the classroom.

Figure 2

Thoughts of Suicide in Last 12 Months?



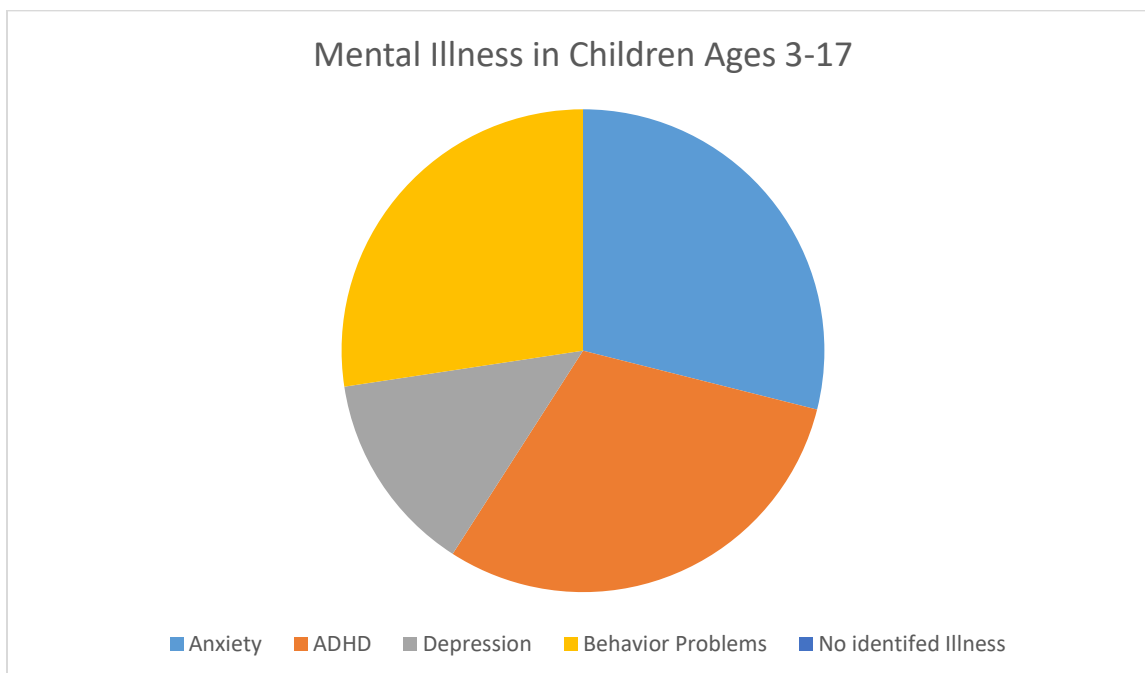
Taking this topic one step further, the survey asked students if they had thought about killing themselves in the past twelve months. The results showed 17%-24% of students, depending on the grade, chose “yes” to this question (*Iowa Youth Survey, 2022*). The percentage was higher with older grade levels, but children as young as eleven and twelve are represented in this data. These are the children all around us! Our neighbors, our sons and daughters, our nieces/nephews, our friends. You never know what someone is going through on the inside unless they voice it. Mental health is a significant issue, and these results show the need for change. This change is an *immediate* need.

Figures 1 and 2 tell us that our children perfectly imperfect. They are humans that have trauma, scars, baggage, and hardships just like adults. The problem is children are not always given the foundations on how to deal with their emotions appropriately, nor are their brains fully developed in order to do so. Children are not always seen as valued individuals by adults and their peers. This leads to mental illness and potential suicide. Mental illness is starting younger and younger now. “Mental health includes children’s mental, emotional, and behavioral well-being. It affects how children think, feel, and act. It also plays a role in how children handle

stress, relate to others, and make healthy choices” (*Data and Statistics on Children’s Mental Health / CDC, 2022*). While not always diagnosed, the top mental illnesses identified in children are anxiety, ADHD, depression, and behavior problems (*Data and Statistics on Children’s Mental Health / CDC, 2022*). In children ages 3-17, the percentages of mental illnesses are identified below.

Figure 3

Mental Illness in Children Ages 3-17



According to figure 3, in children ages 3-17, 9.8% were diagnosed with ADHD (approximately 6 million children), 9.4% were diagnosed with anxiety (approximately 5.8 million), 8.9% were diagnosed with behavioral problems (approximately 5.5 million), and 4.4% were diagnosed with depression (approximately 2.7 million) (*Data and Statistics on Children’s Mental Health / CDC, 2022*). These are children all around the United States, and we can clearly see it is an issue in every state. What is important to note is mental illnesses can tie together. Sometimes children are diagnosed (or not) with more than one mental illness (example anxiety

and depression). Another piece worth noting is many mental illnesses are left undiagnosed. Whether it is lack of parental support, disbelief, the list is long and endless as to why mental illnesses are not always identified. It is not the job of educators to diagnose these mental illnesses, but rather to support children and make them feel loved and appreciated for who they are.

It is clear that students feeling hopeless and depressed is a major issue and needs to be a top priority. Children spend a very large portion of their day within the walls of a school, and within even smaller walls of a classroom. A positive climate needs to be solidified in classrooms. Children need to build relationships *immediately* with their peers in order to feel accepted and supported. It is also clear a weakness is the percentage of children having thoughts of suicide. Anything higher than 0% in this area is a major red flag to analyze.

While these statistics are powerful or alarming, they could also be much worse. There is an abundance of children that are not displayed on the data that feel safe, loved, and who are able to build healthy relationships in and outside of school. That is definitely a strength I see, and one I would like to keep improving. If classroom climates continue to strengthen, I would hope the mental illness statistics would begin to decrease.

More surveys would be beneficial and appropriate in schools today. Surveys need to question children's mental health in order for teachers to see warning signs. These surveys need to begin at younger ages. With mental health data surfacing with ages three and up, clearly attention needs to be given to giving surveys age preschool and older. We live in a day and age where mental and emotional health concerns are the norm. These troubles are not going away, and I myself would like to know of any warning signs in my child sooner rather than later. Even if that means in preschool.

Action Plan

Strategies

Where do educators begin? What can feel like an overwhelming mission, the purpose of strategies is to create consistency. When we have structure, routines, and consistency, our lives become a bit easier all around. The goal of PMI being that the strategies put into place in classrooms will make the lives of everyone a bit easier and smoother. What are recommended strategies that can easily be put into place immediately?

After reviewing pieces of literature, a handful of strategies seemed the simplest to incorporate, and could offer big results. In order to improve the school climate and culture at Echo Hill Elementary, the first strategy to implement would be pairing students (Grand Valley State University, 2018). When students are paired up *first*, it allows more of the PMI strategies to take effect seamlessly. Students are paired according to teacher preference. They can be paired by academic ability, social ability, or a mix of both.

Once students are paired, the next strategy to implement would be a mix of peer modeling, problem-solving, role playing, and peer tutoring (Haas et al., 2022). Peer modeling is taking one student and having them model desired behaviors and dialogue for their partner. This strategy is especially helpful to students who are shy, nonverbal, or have autism spectrum disorder because it helps them figure out a way to communicate with one peer at a time. When confidence is built in those struggling social students, hopefully communication transfers to other peers in class. Problem-solving is teaching students how to fix a problem together. Naturally, disagreements are going to happen in pairings just as they do in our adulthood. Our job is to teach students appropriate ways to disagree with peers, and how to do so respectfully. An example of how to teach this strategy to students comes later in systematic prompting. Role

playing and peer tutoring can go hand in hand because it is teaching students *how* to teach their peers a social interaction, a desired action in the classroom, or an academic task. Having one student model for the other how to come into the classroom each morning, hang up their coat and backpack, greet the teacher, and find their seat is an example.

Students must be explicitly taught the expectations so they can teach others the desired outcomes of the classroom structure. When students are consistently following the classroom expectations, video modeling could be a strategy to try as well. Video modeling is taking a student (or group of students) and having them model a specific dialogue or action for another student to watch and learn from (Mitsch et al., 2021). This could be as simple as using your phone to video record two students greeting one another with eye contact, positive body language, and a high five. A student who is struggling with peer interactions could watch the video of their peers modeling the desired exchange and then practice with peers. The peers could also give feedback to that student instead of the teacher always doing it. This might make the student feel more confident and accepted by others.

The next strategy to explore is systematic prompting (Grand Valley State University, 2018). Systematic prompting is exactly like it sounds; a system of prompts that students can choose from to communicate with one another. Teachers could have conversation starters on a ring clip to practice from. Figure 4, below, are a few examples to get teachers started. Of course, teachers can tailor their conversation cards to what makes the most sense with their classroom and students.

Figure 4

Conversation Starters

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| Conversation Card #1 | “Good morning, _____ (name)” |
| Conversation Card #2 | “Tell me one thing about your night last night” |
| Conversation Card #3 | “I agree with what you are saying because _____” |
| Conversation Card #4 | “I see your point of view, but I think differently because _____” |
| Conversation Card #5 | “I disagree with what you are saying because _____” |
| Conversation Card #6 | “Could you show me how to _____?” |
| Conversation Card #7 | “What can I help you with, _____ (name)?” |

These are just a few examples I have tried with students. The most important part is practicing these conversation cards with *all* students before throwing them at them. It will feel awkward at first (for them and for you), but hopefully conversations will begin to organically unfold after practice with the conversation starters, and they will not need the cards any longer.

Steps to Solve the Problem

The following steps show educators how to implement PMI strategies in a logical sequence at Echo Hill Elementary. Starting in August 2022, teachers can begin implementing PMI into their classrooms. This would be especially beneficial because the classroom climate should be a top priority at the beginning of a school year. You want students to build strong relationships right from the start of the school year.

1. Pair students within the classroom (this will probably be a blind pairing because teachers will not know their students yet, and that is fine).
2. Establish classroom routines and rules as a class
3. Practice classroom routines and rules as a class
4. Come up with a slogan for the pairings of students (e.g., macaroni and cheese, peanut butter and jelly, etc.)

5. Establish desired conversation starters you want your students to exchange (systematic prompting)
6. Teach and practice conversation starters in their partnerships
7. Teach problem-solving strategies as a whole class
8. Practice problem-solving strategies in partnerships
9. Peer modeling*
10. Peer role-playing*
11. Video modeling*

*Strategies will be practiced throughout the year as the teacher sees fit

Implementation of School Improvement Plan

In order for this plan to be implemented smoothly at Echo Hill, a timeline is laid out in figure five, below. The purpose of the timeline is to give teachers a rough outline of ideas to try in their classrooms at an appropriate pace. The pace is set at a monthly speed, and is laid out August-May. Teachers should be given a yearly outline like this to help them see the consistency PMI requires. This timeline would make sense to give staff after they have received professional development training, and are familiar with the terms listed in figure five.

Timeline

Figure 5

Timeline

| Month | Goals for PMI |
|--------------|--|
| August 2022 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lead staff through PD on PMI on in-service days prior to the first day |

| | |
|----------------|--|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classroom teachers come up with slogan for pairings (e.g., macaroni and cheese, peanut butter and jelly, etc.) • Classroom teachers pair students up |
| September 2022 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New student pairings • Begin systematic prompting with students • Begin peer modeling with students • Begin Problem-solving strategies with students • Staff check in |
| October 2022 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New student pairings • Practice systematic prompting • Practice peer modeling • Practice problem-solving strategies • Begin video modeling if applicable • Staff check in |
| November 2022 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New student pairings • Practice systematic prompting • Practice peer modeling • Practice problem-solving strategies • Video modeling • Staff check in |
| December 2022 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New student pairings • Systematic prompting in place |

| | |
|---------------|---|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Peer modeling in place• Problem-solving strategies in place• Video modeling• Staff check in |
| January 2023 | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• New student pairings• Systematic prompting• Peer modeling• Problem-solving• Video modeling• Staff check in |
| February 2023 | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• New student pairings• Systematic prompting• Peer modeling• Problem-solving• Video modeling• Staff check in |
| March 2023 | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• New student pairings• Systematic prompting• Peer modeling• Problem-solving• Video modeling• Staff check in |

| | |
|------------|---|
| April 2023 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New student pairings • Systematic prompting • Peer modeling • Problem-solving • Video modeling • Staff check in |
| May 2023 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New student pairings • Systematic prompting • Peer modeling • Problem-solving • Video modeling • Staff check in/celebrations/ideas for next year |

Resources

There are a few resources that would be appropriate to get in the hands of staff as soon as possible. First, Echo Hill would need the *Elementary Peer to Peer Program Playbook* (Grand Valley State University, 2018) for each classroom teacher. Inside, this resource has step-by-step guidelines of running a peer-supported classroom climate. There are specifics included such as set up and scheduling in the classroom, how to develop a schedule, what autism spectrum disorder is and training on it, creative ideas to try, and much more. This book is easy to follow, and not overwhelmingly loaded with information that you lose hope and ambition. If funding is not available to get this book in the hands of every teacher in the building, grade-level teams could share one copy to follow and implement.

Another resource that would be beneficial to the staff at Echo Hill would be professional development from Grant Wood Area Education Agency AEA trainers. Grant Wood AEA is known for presenting educational strategies to teachers all the time. This agency is committed to supporting Iowa's teachers and students any way they can. I attended a few trainings on PMI from Grant Wood AEA in the past, and it gave me the appropriate background information of what this program was, *why* it could work with my students, and *how* it could benefit them. This is something that all teachers at Echo Hill need to hear! When the whole staff becomes involved in something, it brings a cohesive bond that automatically strengthens the school climate.

Staff Responsibilities

The building principal should be a large part of this implementation process. The principal should attend all trainings over PMI so they are knowledgeable on the topic, and can help answer questions throughout the year. It is important to have administration not only on board with this implementation, but also there to support teachers however they can when beginning this. Having the support of the principal shows the value of creating not only inclusive classrooms, but an inclusive school climate as well.

Currently, there are three teachers at Echo Hill who have been trained through PMI and could serve as building representatives and/or leaders for this implementation. These teachers could help lead professional development for staff in August at the in-service days before students start. The instructional coach of Echo Hill would also be a helpful resource for staff as they begin this new implementation process. The instructional coach can assist classroom teachers with instructional strategies, PMI strategies, pairing of students, or answering other questions that arise. They could also help co-teach strategies with teachers or gather observational data to see if strategies are successful or not.

The technology coach at Echo Hill could also be responsible for assisting with the strategy of video modeling. Having this coach assisting would be helpful to classroom teachers because they could focus more on the students and less on the technology aspect.

Plan for Monitoring Success or Failure

In order to monitor the success of this plan, there would need to be feedback from teachers throughout the implementation process. This could happen in a variety of ways. Surveys could be given monthly by the principal and/or instructional coach to the staff to gather their feelings on how PMI is going in their classrooms. The survey could also have a spot for comments and suggestions from staff. Classroom teachers are intelligent, creative, and resilient individuals. Therefore, their feedback would deem valuable to this implementation process to know if PMI is becoming successful or not.

It would be beneficial to discuss those thoughts, struggles, and successes together as a whole staff. It is one thing for a committee to gather and look through survey results, but to gather as a staff and have conversations about strategies that are working in classrooms could be more purposeful. My best learning has always been when my colleagues are sharing with me. The “buy-in” is more powerful, and the sense of collaboration within the building feels meaningful. Making time for this type of collaboration to happen is critical for success of the program at Echo Hill.

Another way to monitor success of this implementation is for the building principal, instructional coach, and technology coach conducting walk-throughs in classrooms. These walk-throughs should be non-evaluative, but frequent. Some teachers at Echo Hill will never stand up and share amazing strategies that are working in their classrooms because it is not their personality type, and they are very humble. To have the leadership team walking through

classrooms, they may see some strategies that are working positively, but would never be shared out to the rest of the staff. The leadership team could take notes while conducting these quick walk-throughs, and share some of the positives they saw with the staff at meetings. This could also be a positive approach to this implementation because the leadership team would be a larger part of the process.

Barriers and Challenges

With every new program that is implemented, there are always challenges. One of the biggest challenges is always time. How will staff have enough time to implement a new program at school? How will resources be gathered and distributed in a timely manner without overwhelming staff at the start of a school year? These questions are real, and they are valid. It is important to give staff the background and the *why* before throwing a new program at them. If this is done, more time can be made for PMI because staff will see the value in incorporating such a powerful program into the classrooms at Echo Hill. Hopefully, staff see how simple it is to start, and will make it a top priority before students arrive on the first day of school.

One way to give teachers time on implementing PMI is through PLC (Professional Learning Committees) collaboration time. Grade-levels meet weekly to discuss data and instruction, and PMI could fit as a topic of discussion as well. Perhaps once a month one PLC meeting could be dedicated to PMI discussions with grade-level teams. What strategies are working? What are your struggles? How can I support you moving forward? This idea would also make sense because the leadership team is always present at PLC meetings, and could easily be around to support each team in their discussions and plans.

Conclusion

When you think back to your favorite places to be, what do you think of? Are you surrounded by people who cherish you, who adore you, and who help you? Are your favorite places welcoming, positive, and supportive? Even as adults we thrive in healthy environments. Why would we not want that type of atmosphere for our children in our schools?

Social-emotional needs are on the rise in our world today, and need to become a focus in our schools starting *now*. Educators are not responsible for diagnosing or fixing mental issues. We can, however, put strategies into place that can help our children feel valued, respected, and successful both in the classroom and out. Every child deserves to be loved. Every child deserves to learn alongside their peers. Every child deserves the chance to be seen for their greatness. It is time to end sending children out of our classrooms for undesirable behaviors. Instead, we can have PMI strategies in place to assist those struggling students with appropriate interactions and desirable behaviors. The best learning takes place *in* the classroom, and how can children learn when they are not present?

Going forward, Echo Hill Elementary will fight for inclusion. We will continue to research, read, and educate ourselves about mental illness and how we can support those challenges in our classrooms. Children are unique individuals who deserve authentic but systematic instructional approaches to achieve learning success. Giving students the power to help one another succeed could be one of the most rewarding events to witness. Why not take that chance?

References

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2022, June 3). Data and Statistics on Children's Mental Health CDC. <https://www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/data.html>
- Grand Valley State University. (2018). *Elementary Peer to Peer PROGRAM PLAYBOOK*. START Project. <https://www.gvsu.edu/>
- Haas, A., Vannest, K. J., Fuller, M. C., Ganz, J. B. (2022). Understanding the effect size of peer-mediated academic instruction: a meta-analysis. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 37(1), 3–12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10883576211023329>
- Hutchison, M., Russell, B. S., Wink, M. N. (2020). Social-emotional competence trajectories from a school-based child trauma symptom intervention in a disadvantaged community. *Psychology in the Schools*, 57(8), 1257–1272. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.nwciowa.edu/10.1002/pits.22388>
- Iowa Department of Education. (2018). *Iowa School Performance Profiles*. Retrieved July 7, 2022, from <https://www.iaschoolperformance.gov/>
- Iowa Department of Public Health. (2022). *Iowa Youth Survey*. <https://iowayouthsurvey.idph.iowa.gov/>
- Kay, L. (2018). Searching for Dumbledore: A reflection upon the outcomes of a tailored emotional literacy program on three key stage 2 children. *Support for Learning*, 33: 122-141. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.nwciowa.edu/10.1111/1467-9604.12205>
- Korem, A. (2019). Success stories of educators with socially neglected students: perceptions and support strategies. *Social Psychology of Education: An International Journal*, 22(3), 687-700. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.nwciowa.edu/10.1007/s11218-019-09494-6>

- Lake, G. (2021). From Article to Action: Supporting Peer-Mediated Interventions (PMI). *Young Exceptional Children*, 24(2), 108–110. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10962506211006956>
- Linn-Mar Community School District. (2022, January 11). Echo Hill. <https://www.linnmar.k12.ia.us/school/echo-hill/>
- Linn-Mar Community School District. (2022, June 15). District Facts. <https://www.linnmar.k12.ia.us/district-facts/>
- Mahfouz, J. (2020). Principals and stress: Few coping strategies for abundant stressors. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 48(3), 440–458. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143218817562>
- Mahoney, M. W. M. (2019). Peer-Mediated Instruction and Activity Schedules: Tools for Providing Academic Support for Students With ASD. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 51(5), 350–360. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040059919835816>
- Marzano Resources. (2022). Marzano Home. <https://www.marzanoresources.com/>
- Mitsch, M. K., Riggleman, S., & Buchter, J. M. (2021). Responding to Young Children’s Social-Emotional Needs Through Video Modeling. *Young Exceptional Children*, 24(1), 16–27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1096250620910708>
- Miyamoto, K., Huerta, M.C. and Kubacka, K. (2015). Koji Miyamoto, Maria C. Huerta & Katarzyna Kubacka. *European Journal of Education*, 50: 147-159. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.nwciowa.edu/10.1111/ejed.12118>
- Niche. (2022). Niche: Find the School that Fits You Best. <https://www.niche.com>
- RB-Banks, Y., & Meyer, J. (2017). Childhood Trauma in Today's Urban Classroom: Moving Beyond the Therapist's Office. *The Journal of Educational Foundations*, 30(1-4), 63-75. <http://ezproxy.nwciowa.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly->

- journals/childhood-trauma-todays-urban-classroom-moving/docview/2043655307/se-2?accountid=28306
- Shelton, A., Wexler, J., Silverman, R. D., & Stapleton, L. M. (2019). A Synthesis of Reading Comprehension Interventions for Persons With Mild Intellectual Disability. *Review of Educational Research*, 89(4), 612–651. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654319857041>
- Wang, S., Hou, H., & Wu, S. (2017). Analyzing the knowledge construction and cognitive patterns of blog-based instructional activities using four frequent interactive strategies (problem solving, peer assessment, role playing and peer tutoring): a preliminary study. *Educational Technology, Research and Development*, 65(2), 301-323. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-016-9471-4>
- Wattanawongwan, S., Smith, S. D., & Vannest, K. J. (2021). Cooperative Learning Strategies for Building Relationship Skills in Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders. *Beyond Behavior*, 30(1), 32–40. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1074295621997599>
- Wexler, J., Reed, D. K., Pyle, N., Mitchell, M., & Barton, E. E. (2015). A Synthesis of Peer-Mediated Academic Interventions for Secondary Struggling Learners. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 48(5), 451–470. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022219413504997>
- Zee, M., de Jong, P. F., & Koomen, H. M. Y. (2016). Teachers' self-efficacy in relation to individual students with a variety of social–emotional behaviors: A multilevel investigation. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 108(7), 1013-1027. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.nwciowa.edu/10.1037/edu0000106>