

# Creating a House that Smiles

## Optimizing School Culture and Climate Through Relationship-Based Practices



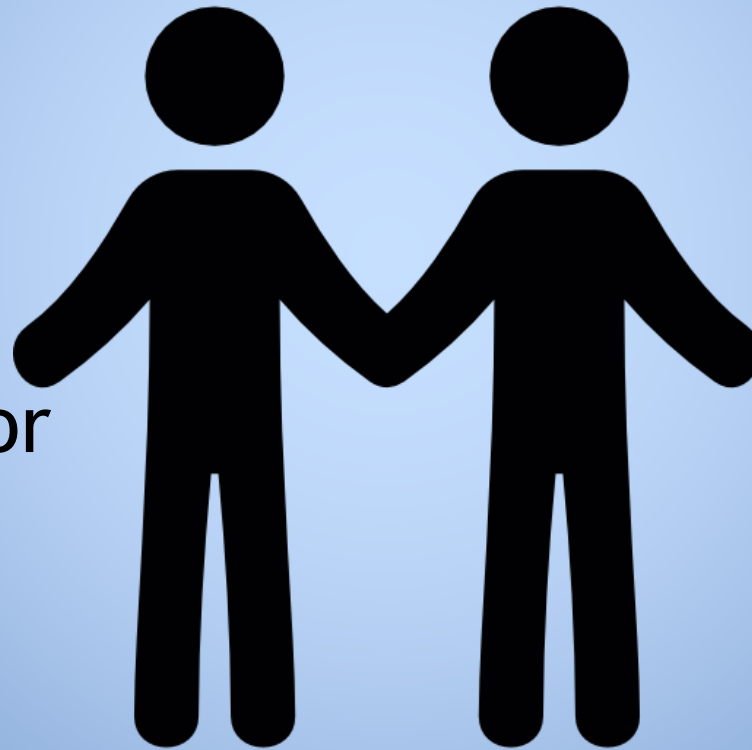
Basil Pizzuto  
Assistant Principal  
Ridgewood High School, NJ

Lauren DePinto, LCSW  
School-Based Clinician  
Ridgewood Public Schools, NJ

**About Us...**

# Demonstrating the Intersection between Education and Mental Health

The  
School  
Administrator



The  
School  
Clinician

# Session Overview:

At Ridgewood High School, our mission, model, and practice pedagogy is centered around promoting healthy, secure, and meaningful relationships between all members of the school community.

During this session we will explore how this understanding and thinking style has proven to be the most effective way to organically cultivate a school culture and climate that genuinely reflects empathy, compassion, and support. All of which contribute to - **LEARNING and ACHIEVEMENT!**

**Why does a discussion on transforming school culture and climate matter so much?**

**Because...**

**“School Climate is at the nexus of individual and group experience.”  
(Cohen, 2009)**

# Background:

- Ridgewood High School is located in Ridgewood, NJ. Ridgewood is a suburb of Bergen County, approximately one hour from NYC.
- The Student Population is 1,782 with a total staff of 200.
- RHS has a long tradition of demonstrating a progressive school culture beginning with an open campus (1970s), a unique student management structure (1980s), and numerous student freedoms based on mutual respect and trust.



# Background Cont'd:

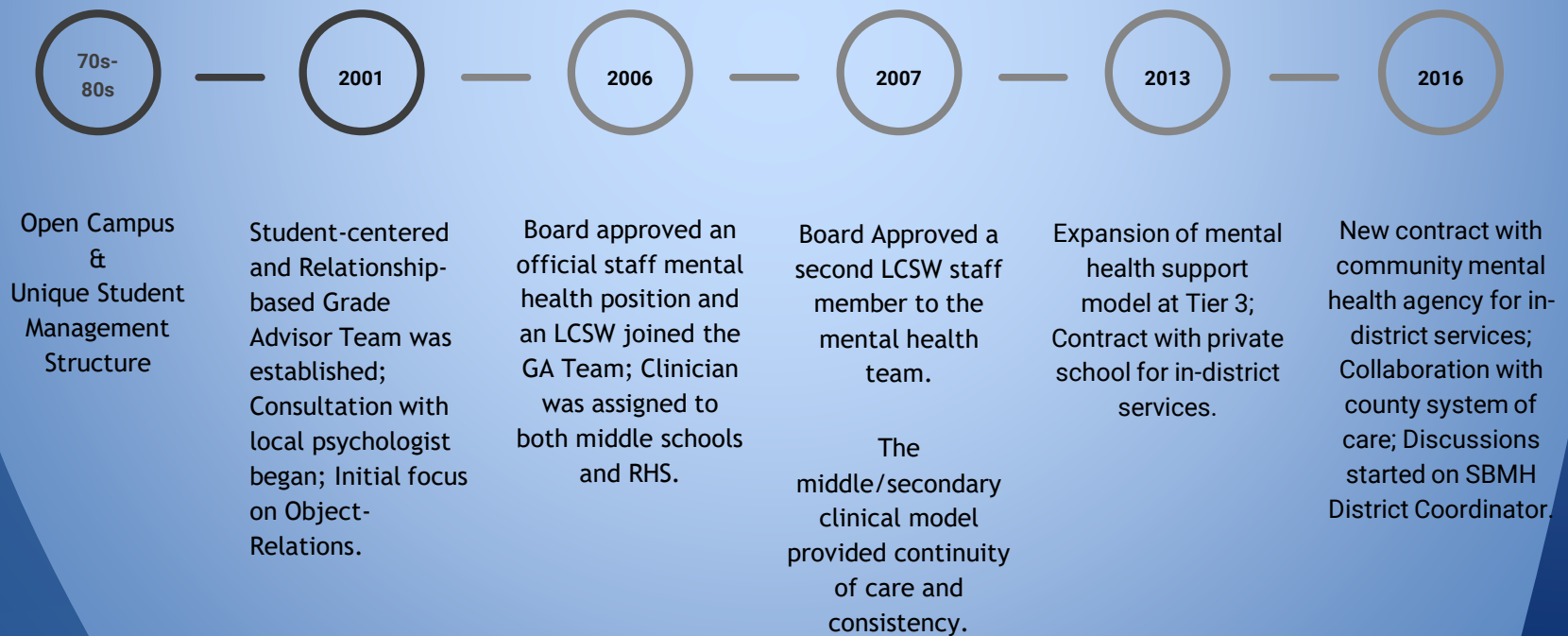
- During the early 2000's, the Grade Advisor (GA) team was developed. This dynamically changed the focus of student management.
- A student-centered/relational approach when addressing discipline and attendance was adopted.
- In 2006, after regular consultation with a local psychodynamically trained psychologist who volunteered his time at RHS beginning in 2005, an LCSW joined the Grade Advisor team.
- A second LCSW was soon to follow and joined the staff one year later in 2007.
- Several years later, the model continued to expand by contracting with outside agencies to provide more intensive Tier 3 services.

# **Important to note:**

**The addition of clinical staff members helped shift the district's understanding of student surface behavior and helped set the tone for a mental health focus across multiple domains that has evolved over nearly two decades.**



# A General Timeline of the Development of Our Model



# Young people...

are perpetually in a state of expression. Their words, actions, likes/dislikes, reactions, responses, dreams, etc. are all a reflection of who they are, are in the process of becoming, and wish to become.

By nature, kids want and need the stewardship of adults, but also are repelled somewhat by the responsibilities, boundaries, and limits that adults provide. Nevertheless, they need the combination of these two forces to thrive.

Over a decade later, this understanding and thinking style has proven to be the most effective way to organically cultivate a school culture and climate that genuinely reflects empathy, compassion, and support.

# Our Mission

## General Aims/Goals:

- Increase positive connections between adults and students at all levels and learning at Ridgewood High School.
- Strengthen our capacity to provide prevention, intervention, and postvention (at all three tiers of service) in the form of meaningful student involvement and interaction - responding more positively to student need with an emphasis on working WITH students as opposed to working for them.

## General Aims/Goals Cont'd:

- Create and promote a positive school culture and climate based on **cultivating and sustaining healthy, secure, and attuned adult-student relationships that contribute to and nurture our student-centered school “family.”**
- Move beyond more conventional administrative procedures/tasks toward **transforming traditional discipline and conduct issues into teachable moments and opportunities for connection and relationship-building** using a mental health lens that encourages:
  - attachment-aware, strengths-based, relational interventions that facilitate growth in the five main categories of SEL (Social-Emotional Learning) as identified by CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning): **Self-Awareness, Self-Management; Social Awareness; Relationship Skills; and, Responsible Decision Making.**

# Implementation Hurdles Along the Way:

- Staff “Buy-In”
- “Symptom Cultivation”
- Service Overlap
- Compassion Fatigue



# What makes our model unique?

- 1) One of the most unique aspects of the GA model and what sets it apart, is the inclusion of clinical staff in all aspects of school management, planning, and decision-making.
- 2) Clinical staff provides a psychological understanding of a student's surface behavior and contributes a mental health perspective regarding overall educational, behavioral, and social-emotional functioning.
- 3) View ADULT school staff roles as “Secondary Attachment Figures.”



# The Grade Advisor Team



# Insights and Observations from the Team:

- Everything we do is based on our relationship with the student. Although we are focused on all students, we try and stay most connected to “at-risk” students - keeping those who demonstrate negative surface behaviors the closest.
- The emphasis is on creating experiences around discipline that are therapeutic by choosing emotionally and developmentally appropriate interventions instead of punitive consequences that convey disappointment and anger. A playful, safe, accepting, curious, and empathic environment is created to explore tough topics that are often avoided, like shameful feelings about “bad” behavior.
- The physical set-up of offices and actual structure of physical space (i.e. privacy with proximity and accessibility, open access to support and psychological rest as needed) provides a sense of increased confidentiality, security, and comfort.
- Team members possess the soft skills and personality traits (i.e “with-it-ness” ) and character traits (i.e. honesty, transparency, non-judgement, approachable, playfulness, humor, reflective) that make this model work.



# Insights and Observations Cont'd:

- All interventions are individualized and thought about with developmental specificity in mind.
- Team members, regardless of discipline or training, believe our interactions can be healing and as such are a protective factor in the lives of our students.
- We make decisions that are best for the students not for the “staff” or “system.”
- We are interested in spending time with students and offer proximity support at all times. We are interested in knowing the student and having them know us. We enjoy just “being” with them.

# Listening as THE Form of Intervention...

Students “tell” their “stories.” Stories help both the student storyteller and the adult listeners make meaning of our lives, our work, and our purpose. Good stories have tremendous healing power.

# **Feedback Direct From the Field:**

**Our students validate this model continually, as they respond to our care, intention, consistency and emotional availability.**

**Some examples...**

*“It's easy to say that Mr. Pizzuto's office was not only a hotspot of student activity but the highlight of many school days because of his open door policy and ability to make anyone feel comfortable with him, no matter the depth of any issues at hand or the fact that he was a faculty member. He treated everyone as if they mattered. Personally, I felt comfortable telling him even the most intimate of things that I was going through. It was always easy to open up to him. I can say without any hesitation that the best and most memorable experiences were always with "Pizzuto," in or out of the office.”*

*Steven Spilka '06*



Mrs. Yannone,

June 17, 2015

Writing this has already begun to bring tears to my eyes. You will always have a special place in my heart because of the impact you have made on my life. Your guidance will never be forgotten and your kind words will always stick with me wherever I go. You're an amazing person, who has always inspired me to be just like you. Although this journey has come to an end, I look forward to visiting you as much as possible in the future. Especially for delicious Jolly Ranchers. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for making my high school experience so outstanding & memorable.

love always,  
♡ AVA Rinaldi

Ms. O'Brien,

→

Where to begin? I went into this year certain that I've made as many friends and connections as possible. As always, I was wrong. Your friendship and guidance truly saved me this year. I genuinely don't know what I would have done if I had any other GA. When I look back on this horrendous year in the future, you'll always come to mind.

I've grown to love our talks and the thought of not having a figure like you next year makes me so sad. Spending so much time in your office (56 days!) exposed me to how much you put into this school and our grade. I really wish more people got to see that and know you like I do. We've come a long way since February! Take a deep breath, eat some good Paleo food, and go to some pilates classes this summer!

you deserve it! I'd say thank you but that doesn't do my gratitude justice. I hope we can get together when I come home!

With much love,  
Sophie

Dear Ms. O'Brien,

Words cannot express how grateful I am for everything you have done for me. I can't believe I am going to college and I'm not going to be able to see you whenever I feel like that. Every chance I get I am going to come visit you. You have watched me grow up, you have seen me mature and you have helped me do all of these things. When you came to the hospital in New York that day sophomore year, I knew right there and then that you were like a mother to me. After then my life really did change. I didn't visit you as much the next two years and looking back at it I wish I did. I didn't do this because I didn't want to see you, it was because I was learning to do things on my own. Out of everyone at Ridgewood, I am genuinely going to miss you the most. Don't forget me ♡



# The School Clinician's Evidence Base - “The Box”



Getting to the Fundamental Method at the  
Heart of it All :

# Nurturing Relationships



# Building “A House that Smiles” ...ONE SECURE RELATIONSHIP at a time





**Drawing Inspiration from the  
Groundbreaking Discoveries of  
Fritz Redl and David Wineman**

**Children Who Hate (1951)**

**Controls From Within (1952)**

**Life Space Crisis Intervention (LSCI)**

# The Role of Attachment Theory in Understanding Student Behavior and Addressing Barriers to Learning

- There is a direct link between children's early relational experiences, emotional well-being, self-regulation, and school performance.
- It provides a strong general theoretical framework through which students' expressions, behavior, and apparent needs can be adequately understood in a **non-pathologizing way**.
- Working to restore relational competence nurtures and reinforces relational confidence: providing "corrective" relationships in students' lives helps promote their development of healthy relationships in the future.

# Developmental Dyadic Psychotherapy (DDP)

- Dr. Dan Hughes' attachment-focused **PACE** approach outlines four personal qualities that allow adults to support and nurture a child's development of their own self-awareness, self-regulation, emotional intelligence, and resilience. **It limits shame, promotes compassion, and brings a sense of mutual support, strength and resilience to the relationship.**
- Key to this approach is a deep respect for the child's own experiences and their inner life. When an adult engages in this work we provide a supported space within which children can develop their own thinking skills. As a result, we help children to reflect upon, understand and then manage their emotions more skillfully.

Information can be found at <https://ddpnetwork.org/about-ddp/meant-pace>

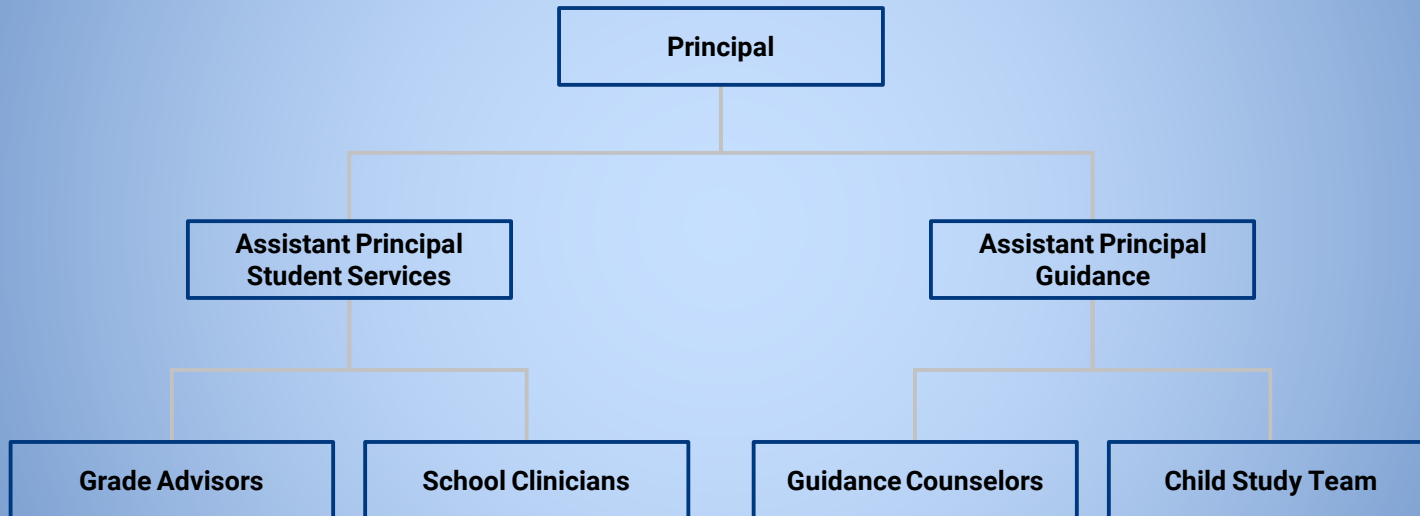
# Adapting and Applying Dr. Dan Hughes' PACE Method to our Work In Schools

- PACE stands for PLAYFULNESS, ACCEPTANCE, CURIOSITY, EMPATHY
  - **Playfulness** - an open, ready, calm, relaxed, and engaged attitude.
  - **Acceptance** - unconditionally accepting a child makes them feel secure, safe, and loved. “Hate the sin, love the sinner.”
  - **Curiosity** - without judgement, children become aware of their inner life.
  - **Empathy** - a sense of compassion for the child and his/her feelings.

## **Reinforcing Staff and Student Engagement to Maximize Student Wellness:**

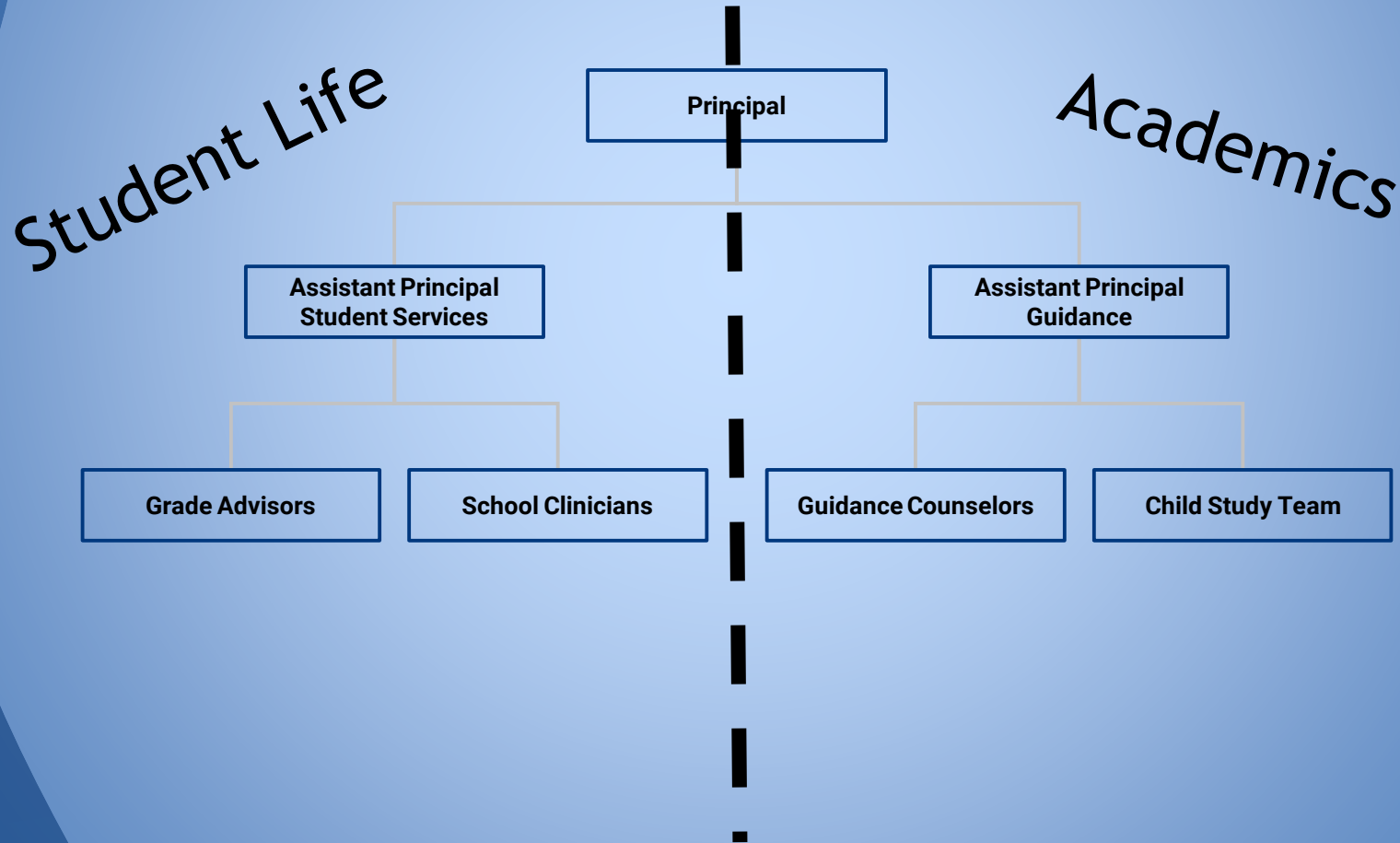
- Teachers are critical providers of student support and absolutely essential to the health and wellness of our school community as a whole.
  - Professional Development and “Morning Enrichment Sessions” target SEL competencies and staff self-care.
  - Development of an RHS Multidisciplinary MTSS Team to organize/map the formal and informal services available to ALL students.

# Ridgewood High School Leadership Structure



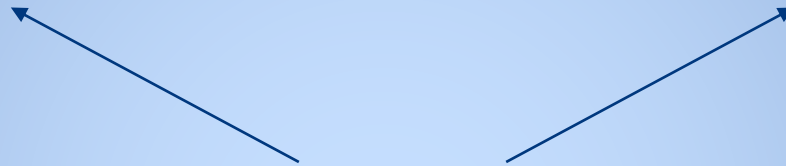


# Ridgewood High School Leadership Structure



Disciplinarian

Mediator



**Grade Advisor**



Attendance  
Officer

Class Advisor

# Grade Advisor Job Description

## III. Position Summary:

Promote positive student behavior and implement the Board of Education's attendance policy.

## IV. Reports to: Assistant Principal: Administration and Student Services

## V. Nature of the Position:

An applicant for this position should be someone who is willing to assume the challenging responsibility monitoring student behavior in a consistent and assertive manner. The individual must be willing to work equally well as part of a team and as an individual. Responsibilities will include working with students to organize social functions, fundraisers, and other class activities. The applicant must enjoy this type of work and understand that the position requires a significant time commitment outside of school hours.

## VI. Major Duties and Responsibilities:

### A. For the classes (grade levels) for which responsible:

1. Administers attendance procedures.
2. Works with Assistant Principal: Administration and Student Services and Principal in developing and administering policies and procedures regarding student behavior.
3. Works with the Assistant Principal: Administration and Student Services in regard to student government and class activities.
4. Works closely with Principal on school-wide issues.
5. Works with guidance department, crisis intervention counselors, and Child Study Team on student/parent programs.
6. Implements discipline and attendance policies.
7. Maintains appropriate records relative to disciplinary and attendance activities.
8. Works to establish closer relationships between the school and families.
9. Works to identify and support at-risk students.
10. Coordinates class assembly programs.
11. Coordinates distribution of ID cards.
12. Performs other duties as assigned by the Assistant Principal: Administration and Student Services.



# School (Mental Health) Clinician Job Description

## IV. Reports to:

High School Principal/Assistant Principal, Middle School Principals, Director of Special Programs, and Supervisor(s) of Special Education.

## V. Major Duties and Responsibilities:

- A. Provide counseling and/or support for secondary school students who are in crisis.
- B. Develop proactive measures to assist students who are at risk.
- C. Collaborate with administration, Guidance Counselors, Child Study Teams, and/or classroom teachers in the development of strategies that are designed to assist and identified student at risk.
- D. Provide advice and input to the school regarding potential or pending student disciplinary actions.
- E. Provide in-service opportunities for staff to help them identify student in crisis.
- F. Work with parents to address home issues that contribute to the crisis situation.
- G. Refer student and family to an outside counseling service or other outside resources, if appropriate.
- H. Maintain documentation of caseload, counseling session, and intervention outcomes.



# Important Structural Elements

- Weekly Advisory Meeting - Asst. Principal, Grade Advisors, School Clinicians
- Schedule
  - Free Periods - Access to Adults
  - Single Lunch Period
    - Open Access to Student Life Team
- Staff willing to connect with students
  - Clubs and Activities
  - Period 9 (teachers available to students)



# Documents Must Inform and Support Practice

- Job Descriptions/Hiring Practices
  - Hiring like minded people/shared philosophy
  - Establishes interpersonal expectations
- Student Code of Conduct
  - Based on Mutual Respect
  - Freedom/Responsibility
- Multi-tiered Mental Health Model of Support
  - Clarifies Philosophy
  - Spells out clear roles

# Transformational Change

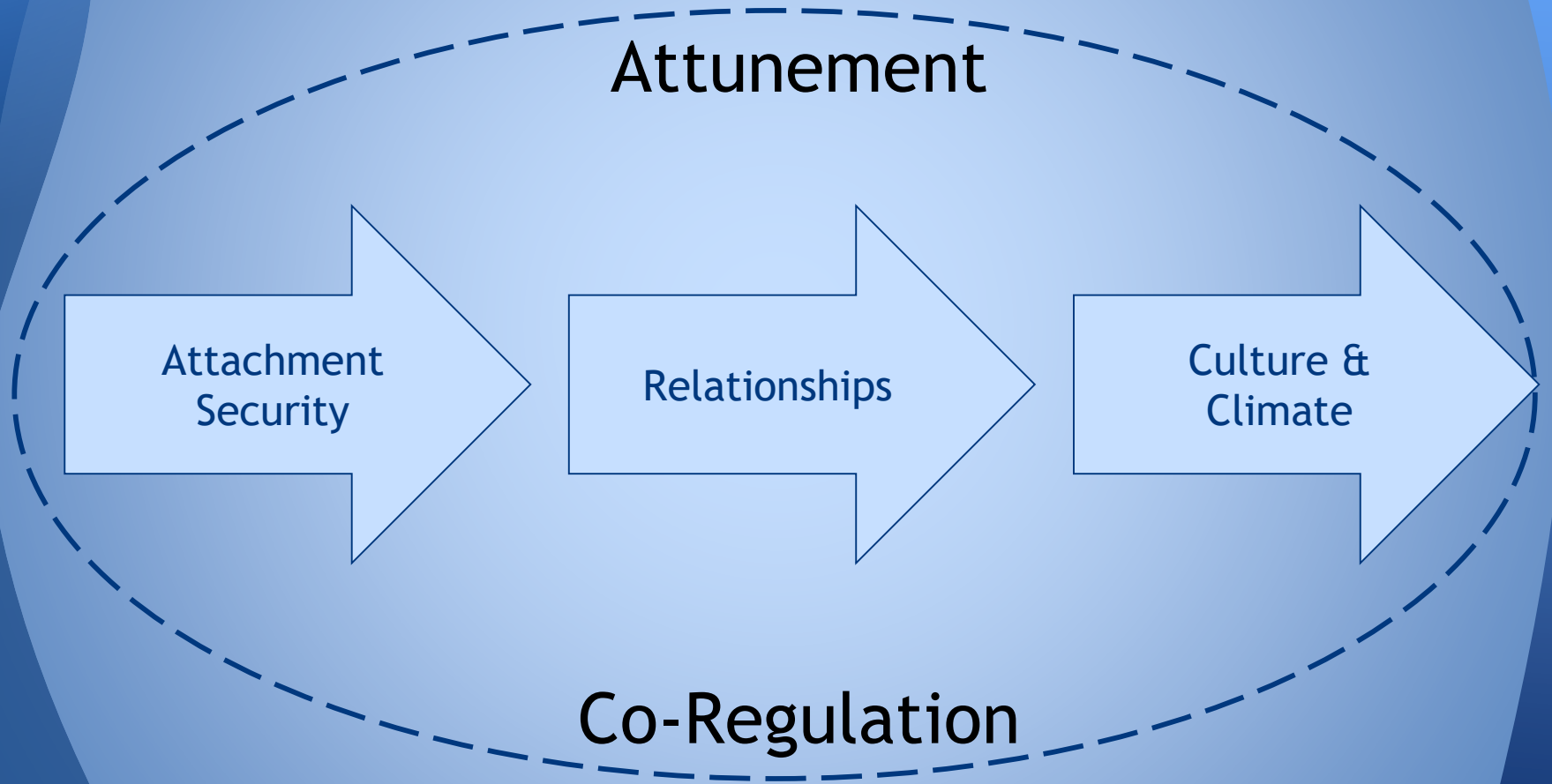
Attunement

Attachment  
Security

Relationships

Culture &  
Climate

Co-Regulation

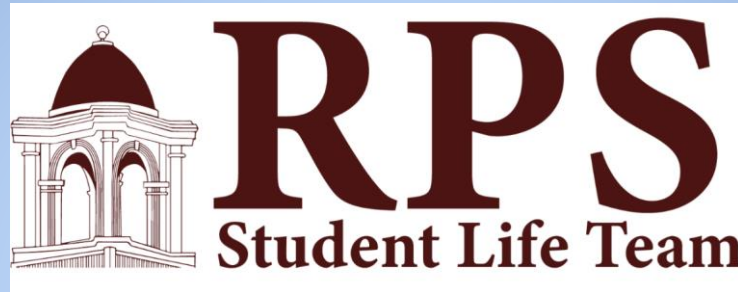


# Multi-tiered Mental Health Support Model (Secondary Level)



- Assistant Principals
- Grade Advisors
- School Clinicians
- School Counselors (Guidance)
- Child Study Team Case Managers
- Nurses

# K-12 Multi-tiered Mental Health Support Model (District Level)



- **Elementary School Counselors**
- **Middle School Counselors**
- **School Clinicians**
- **High School Grade Advisors**
- **Administration/Leadership**

# Advantages of our Mission and Model:

- Decrease in student absences
- Decrease in school suspensions and detentions
- Increased collaboration among staff and across disciplines/departments
- School-wide initiative/Approach
- Boosts student and staff morale
- Helps to reduce stigma
- Informal access to screening/Gatekeeping
- Access to direct mental health intervention for students, staff, and families.
- School/Community partnership

# What does the data tell us?

## Since 2012

- **+6%** SAT composite score
- **+8%** ACT composite score
- **+18%** # of AP tests taken
- **+10%** of AP 3+ scores
- **+7%** student acceptance rate (Barrons 230 most competitive through very competitive ranked colleges)
- **+25%** (+.6) # of above colleges these students were accepted into



# What does the data tell us? (cont.)

Disciplinary Offences - (Missed Homework, Cutting Class, Fighting, CDS Offenses, etc.)

|                   | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | % from LY | % from 2013 |
|-------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|-----------|-------------|
| <b>BY GENDER</b>  |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |           |             |
| MALE              | 786  | 823  | 632  | 704  | 601  | 384  | 342  | -10.9     | -56.5       |
| FEMALE            | 159  | 238  | 224  | 208  | 150  | 160  | 74   | -53.8     | -53.5       |
| TOTAL             | 945  | 1061 | 856  | 912  | 751  | 544  | 416  | -23.5     | -56.0       |
|                   |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |           |             |
| <b>9th Grade</b>  | 134  | 311  | 171  | 96   | 22   | 220  | 126  | -42.7     | -6.0        |
| <b>10th Grade</b> | 158  | 237  | 260  | 82   | 178  | 109  | 130  | 19.3      | -17.7       |
| <b>11th Grade</b> | 366  | 120  | 383  | 118  | 144  | 78   | 125  | 60.3      | -65.8       |
| <b>12th Grade</b> | 284  | 151  | 84   | 238  | 155  | 133  | 35   | -73.7     | -87.7       |

# **The Model in Action: What's next?**

- Continuation of K-12 School Counseling and Mental Health Model
- Expansion of Student Life Team
- Board Approved District School-Based Mental Health Coordinator

# RESOURCES

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