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LEARNING IN SAFE SCHOOLS

Creating classrooms where all students belong



Implementing Class Reviews

"You can't be a team member without being a part of the conversation. You'd just become a technician without reflection, and teaching just has to be so much more than that."

— Steve Rosell, teacher

School-based teams play a crucial role in developing safe and inclusive schools. They make so many decisions about children's lives, and their language influences teachers, parents, and students. If school-based teams have tunnel vision, speak categorically, or use judgmental language, then everyone in the school is affected in subtle or nonsubtle ways.

Many school-based teams set in place processes for dealing with issues, whether they are whole-school, classroom, or individual issues. Some of these processes work better than others in promoting open communication, collaboration, and a real and optimistic sense of problem solving.

Most school-based teams include people in the following roles: school administrator(s), school-based resource teachers, school counselor, school nurse, and classroom teacher of the student or class to be discussed. Some teams also include the school librarian.

These school-based teams invite other personnel to attend meetings if they are involved with a given classroom or child: these include school-based special education assistants, child-care workers, and district personnel such as the speech and language pathologist, and teachers of the hearing or visually impaired.

Making changes to how school-based teams operate is sometimes very difficult. Some teams become overly concerned with labelling and diagnosing and forget that the real job is to look closely at a child and do some sensitive and sincere problem solving that will help the child today.

Teams who are committed to inclusion develop strategies and processes that keep individual children the focus. They work hard to support the classroom teacher in meeting the needs of individual children and the class as a whole. Team members spend much less time on paper work, and much more time problem solving and teaching. The structure of meetings that school-based teams hold can influence staff perceptions about inclusion. "Class Reviews" are one example.

The Changing Nature of Class Reviews

Traditionally, class reviews have focused on sharing the needs of individual students in each classroom. In many schools, the school-based team sits down with each classroom teacher in September or October and the group reviews the class together. Often the classroom teacher will go through the class list, and the teacher and team members will share information about each child: learning needs, social or emotional needs, medical history, speech and language, and so on. At the end of the meeting, the resource teacher, nurse, counsellor, and administrator, as well as the classroom teacher, all have lists of students to see or things to do. In most cases, everyone leaves feeling overwhelmed after focusing only on the things that need doing, and the students who have specific needs.

Some teams design these meetings to be descriptive of not only individual students but the context of the classroom where these students spend their day. The meetings are more positive, encompass a wider range of topics, and allow the team members more insight into how they might work in meaningful ways with the classroom teacher. The classroom teacher is asked to paint a picture of the class by describing the strengths and needs of the class as a whole and to outline personal goals for the year. Then all team members share information about individual students. Student strengths and needs are seen in the context of the classroom rather than in isolation.

Preparing for the Meeting

Class reviews usually take about 45 to 60 minutes a classroom. Usually teachers-on-call are asked to take over classrooms on a rotating basis throughout one or two days. Before the meeting it is advisable for classroom teachers to mull over the following questions.

A Framework for Class Review: The Classroom Teacher's Perspective

1. What are the strengths of the class? What are the positive things about this group as a whole?
2. What are your concerns about the class as a whole? What do you wonder about?
3. What are your main goals this year?
(These goals may be based on the strengths and/or concerns, or on an area of interest, or a new grade level or new curriculum. Each teacher may have three or four.)
4. What are the individual needs in your classroom? (medical, learning, social-emotional, language, or other concerns related to individual students)

A Class Review That Models Inclusion

Each 45 to 60 minute meeting needs a facilitator and a recorder. An example of a recording form, which can be enlarged to fit an 11" x 17" (279 mm x 432 mm) page, appears on the next page.

In the scenario below, the school-based team includes the classroom teacher, the special education assistant who spends most of her day in that teacher's classroom, the counsellor, the nurse, two resource teachers, and the principal. Team members meet together at an appointed time, with refreshments set up in the room. The meeting begins after everyone is comfortable. One of the resource teachers serves as facilitator.

Facilitator (to the classroom teacher): I want to explain a little about the process that we will be using today in the class review. We are going to begin by looking at the strengths of your class as a whole, then the needs of the class as a whole, and your specific goals for the year or term. The reason we do this is because we think it's really important to look at the strengths and needs of the students in the context of the *whole* classroom. After we finish that part, we will all share information about specific students. You'll share information you have with us, and different people on the team will share information with you. This is *not* a time for IEP planning. You and your resource teacher need to choose a half day next week to plan. Okay? Please describe the strengths of your class.

Establishing Classroom Strengths

Teacher: Hmm, well, they are really a very caring group of kids. They treat each other nicely, they cooperate, they love to work together as buddies or in small groups. They're good listeners, and follow directions pretty well. Would you agree, Deb?

Teaching Assistant: Yes, there's a real solid group of kids who go out of their way to help other kids, or encourage them somehow. It's neat to see.

Throughout the review, the recorder records information, clarifying if necessary.

Facilitator: Sounds like a great group of kids. You've talked about them socially, and how they follow directions. How are they doing academically?

Teacher: Academically, they seem on top of things. There are some kids I'm concerned about, but quite a few are very strong and most of the others seem like they're where they should be. It's hard to tell for sure yet. As a class they love stories and they love art — painting, drawing, anything they can create with their hands.

Resource Teacher 2: Isn't there also a core that love Phys. Ed. and any other physical play?

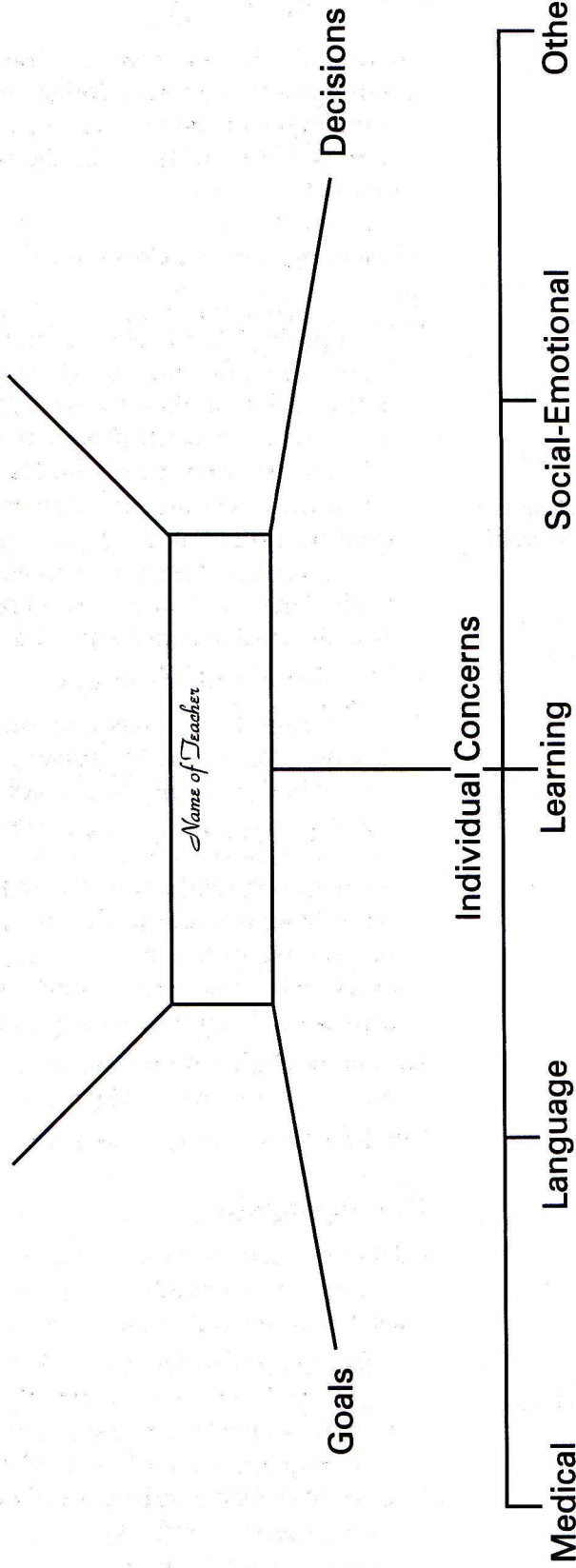
Classroom Strengths

- caring group of kids
- treat each other nicely
- cooperative
- love to work together (buddies/small groups)
- good listeners
- follow directions well
- help and encourage others
- academically okay
- love stories, art, creating with their hands
- enjoy gym and outside play

Class Review Recording Form

Classroom Strengths

Classroom Needs



Teacher: Oh yes! We've got a whole group that would spend all day in the gym or outside.

Facilitator: Thanks. That creates a good picture. You have a lot of strengths there. If you think of any other strengths, just say them and we can record them later. Let's move to class concerns. Do you have any concerns in terms of the whole class, things that you wonder about?

Expressing General Concerns

Teacher: Yes, I have a few. Although the class seems to be a very caring group, they don't seem to know how to solve problems. Any incident, no matter how small, is reported to Deb or myself. I haven't found a child in the class who stands up and says, "I need you to stop doing that." Instead, all of them come seeking adult assistance. That's one area we're working on. Then there is exclusion. There are about five strong personalities in the class. They're super kids and have incredible potential to be great leaders in the school. However, they can also really affect the climate of the class. If one of them is upset with someone, you can count on five more kids ignoring or excluding the child in some way. I haven't got a handle on it yet.

Facilitator: Any other concerns?

Teacher: Parental involvement. Again, I have a nice group — they come in and chat — but I'm unsure about their commitment to helping their children really learn. Follow-through on things seems to be quite a problem. I've been wondering if I should hold some evening meetings, or send home more newsletters, or figure out ways to get them into the classroom. I sometimes get the feeling there is a hidden agenda, or a misunderstanding of what our class needs, but I'm not sure. Some unrest or something. I need to figure out a plan. I've already talked with Janet and Leah (the principal) about the matter and we've been throwing around some ideas.

Facilitator: Okay, let's put working with parents under the goals section, seeing as you are already making some plans there. Anything else?

Teacher: No, I don't think so. Those are the major things right now.

Determining Goals

Facilitator: Let's look at goals now. When you think about both the strengths and needs of your class, plus your own goals in teaching this year, what do you see as your main foci?

Teacher: Well, besides the parent meetings or information, I want to work on classroom meetings. It's not something I've done before. It may be a way to get at some of the problem-solving issues. I'd love anything you have that I might read.

Also, Debbie and I are working on figuring out ways to communicate more efficiently. We might start a book, or find a way to meet briefly at least once a day.

Classroom Concerns

- kids' inability to problem-solve on their own
- exclusion of some students; 4 or 5 students set the tone
- parental commitment to learning or follow-through is questionable

Goals

- working with parents
- class meetings
- increased communication between teacher and teaching assistant
- writing process
- math centres
- friendship circles

Note: The description of the teacher's goals sometimes gives the resource team openings for working collaboratively.

I want to focus on the writing process too this year and figure out ways to encourage every child to write and feel successful. And I'm working on setting up individual math centres in my classroom to reinforce what I'm teaching in different math areas. I've already started that by compiling all this stuff.

Debbie, do you want to talk about what we were saying about friendship circles?

Teaching Assistant: Yes, we're looking at finding ways to make a friendship circle of some kind for both Jamie and Jessica. We want it to be real, not artificial, so we're looking at who would be potential friends for both of these rather isolated kids. I'm really keen on this because I've done some reading and I've got time at recess and lunch to promote the idea — if we can just figure out ways to do it.

Facilitator: Sounds like a lot of new things! Let's consider how the resource team could help you in any of those areas.

Teacher: Well, I don't know. Like give me materials?

Counsellor: I have lots of background in class meetings. Maybe there's a way I could fit in, and we could focus on some of those social concerns. I've also got some material on friendship circles, and I know some people who are using them in other schools that you might want to talk to.

Teaching Assistant: I'd love to see the materials. Thanks.

Resource Teacher: When we meet for planning next week, maybe we could talk about how I might team with you in writing or math as part of our time together.

Facilitator: Think about it, because there are several possibilities there.

Teacher: I will for sure. Thanks.

Facilitator: Okay, under decisions, let's put Sheri (the counsellor) to give Deb materials on friendship circles, and should we note that you'll talk with Sheri and Janet (the resource teacher) about class meetings, math centres, and the writing process?

Teacher: For sure.

Decisions

- Sheri to give Deb material on friendship circles
- Talk with Sheri re: class meetings and with Janet re: writing process and math centres

Student Medical Needs

- Sonny — headaches
- Kinder — asthma/inhaler on field trips
- Jamie — toileting/heart murmur

Identifying Individual Students' Needs

Facilitator: Thanks, Donna. Now let's move to the section called individual concerns. We'll start with medical concerns and Nadia (the nurse) can fill us in. If anyone else has information, please let us know.

Nurse: There are only three kids I know about. Sonny gets bad headaches and occasionally needs to be sent home, but I think it only occurred a couple of times last year. Kinder has asthma. Again, it's not severe but you should keep an eye on her when she's in Phys. Ed. and be sure she has her inhaler when you go on field trips.

Teacher: Yes, her mom mentioned it. I guess it got pretty bad this summer for awhile but seems to have calmed down again.

Nurse: I'll note that. Okay, then there's Jamie. Jamie, you all know, has lots of medical history but is doing amazingly well. He is not toilet-trained and the doctors say he may never be, but he may surprise us yet — on occasion, he does go to the bathroom. Isn't that right, Donna?

Teacher: Yes. It's quite exciting. I kind of think he's starting to take the cues and once he does that you never know!

Nurse: That's great. Jamie has lots of other medical problems such as heart murmur, but toileting is the major one at school. We just have to keep an eye on him when he's very physical, but he seems to cope pretty well. Deb and Donna have a good grasp on what to watch for.

Facilitator: Any other concerns? No? Okay, let's move to language issues.

Teacher: There are three kids in the class who are new Canadians and have very limited English. All of them are at level 1 on the ESL assessments. They are Timmy, Quan and Shuster. Timmy and Quan are fitting in really well and already have kids to play with. Shuster is the only one I'm concerned about. He is really impulsive. He sits very restlessly on the carpet, he throws blocks off the table, he pushes kids — all with a smile on his face. He talks a blue streak, but it's all mumbled and kind of strange. For example, if you talk to him about throwing stuff he begins to talk about a dog, or chasing someone on the playground. I've tried talking to his mom but she has limited English too. I wrote everything out for her because she said she'd get it interpreted, but the next day I found my note in Shuster's book used as a book mark. I don't really know what to do next.

Recorder: I've put Shuster under language concerns, but it sounds like he also fits under social-emotional.

Teacher: That's for sure.

Principal: It sounds like we need to find an interpreter. Let's figure that out after the meeting, and I'll contact one and get a meeting set up with mom and dad.

Teacher: I don't think there is a dad. But a meeting would be great. Thanks.

Facilitator: Let's move to learning.

Teacher: I've listed the kids in a couple of ways. Three of them have a lot of needs overall — language arts and math, fine motor, etc. They are Shane, Elizabeth, and Narra. Jamie could fit there too. And then there's Jessica and Tom who need lots of help in expressing their ideas. Really, there are more than that but those are the two along with the other four I mentioned that I'm most concerned about.

Then I'm also concerned about keeping a few others stimulated enough — Ruth, Justin, and Paul. Paul is already doing math about five years ahead of his age! Ruth is a prolific writer and Justin does everything well beyond expectations — he's thorough, thoughtful, organized, and just works away quietly.

Student Language Needs

- Timmy, Quan, Shuster — ESL (Level 1)

Learning Needs

- Shane, Elizabeth, Narra, Jamie — language arts, math, fine motor skills
- Jessica, Tom — expressing ideas
- Ruth — writing prolifically
- Paul — challenge in math
- Justin — challenge in all areas

The rest of the class is okay, I think. Verbally there is a whole crew who need encouragement, but that will come with time.

Facilitator: What about the social-emotional area?

Teacher: Well, I've mentioned Shuster. He's having difficulty settling in, but the kids are really quite patient with him. I am more worried about Jamie who, at this point, is very isolated, as is Jessica. Jessica is new, hardly speaks at all, and when she does, she whispers. But she has another side to her. She is shy but she's also sneaky, I think. I see her do things like write on kids' work when they aren't looking, sneak a pencil from someone's desk, tear a book, etc. The kids don't particularly like her, and I know a group of girls ostracize her and get all the kids to stay away. I am upset about this little group of girls — but I'm also worried about them because obviously they feel they need to show they are better than she is. Instead of helping her, they make things worse.

Facilitator: Some of these issues you plan to work through with class meetings and friendship circles?

Teacher: Right.

Facilitator: Okay. Thanks. It looks like you've got a good grasp on things already. Did you want to add anything more to any of the sections?

Teacher: No, I think that's fine. How about you, Deb?

Teaching Assistant. No.

Facilitator: Okay. Let's review the decisions. Then before we leave let's review dates for follow-up. You're meeting next week on Jamie? And would you like to set a date for Jessica as well?

Teacher: Yes.

The school-based team reviews decisions and sets dates for IEP meetings, and then sub-groups set up times to talk about and plan re: the writing process, math centres, and friendship circles.

The next page shows a completed form based on the class review just presented. It is an accurate reflection of a review where the school-based team and the classroom teacher took an inclusive view of the strengths and needs of the whole class.

Using such a form does not mean the focus of the conversation will change. Some team leaders use these forms, go quickly through the strengths, concerns, and goals, and then focus most of the time on individual needs. They then draw all the decisions from the individual needs section. In other words, to change the focus from individual students to the teacher and whole class, you need to believe that working with the teacher to meet her or his needs is one way of making real differences for children, one way of meeting their needs.

The process for a class review based on inclusive values does not automatically change attitudes. It is only one way to assist staff if the attitudes and beliefs are already there, or one way to influence attitudes if some of the team members believe in it.

Student Social-Emotional Needs

- Shuster — difficulty settling in
- Jamie — isolated/no friends
- Jessica — isolated/whispers/no friends
- group of girls who ostracize Jessica

Sample Class Review Web

