



## **Statement on School Culture**

Since March of 2020, we as parents, teachers, and administrators have worried immensely about the emotional and mental health of our students. Social isolation, fear of the unknown, changes in environment have all driven worry and anxiety to serious levels for our students.

Returning to school in a full-time capacity has been a blessing for our students, staff, and families. The last month of school, however, have not been without challenges. Students have had to adjust to longer days, new experiences, and larger class sizes while still maintaining health and safety protocols. The month of April (and now May) have shared the challenges of the first month of school with the challenges of the last months of school. Beginning-of-the-year uncertainty combined with end-of-the-year apathy.

### **Space & Grace**

We all hold high expectations for our school. One of those expectations is that all students should feel:

- ✓ Protected
- ✓ Respected
- ✓ Accepted
- ✓ Connected

### **Student Behavior**

***This year, we have identified some student behavior that falls seriously short of our values and how students are expected to act according to our standards.***

There are several steps we have initiated this school year that have had a positive effect on students' attitudes, communication, and conduct. The mistakes our students have made this year should not define who they are, or who they can be, and especially who God has meant them to be. All students are capable of positive behaviors. However, when students make those mistakes, especially when physical or emotional harm is done, it will be addressed promptly and with the seriousness it deserves.

### **School Culture**

Culture within a school community almost always means a shared set of values in a diverse setting.

Since Easter Break, we have conducted weekly sessions with students discussing various topics dealing with respect for one another, human dignity, humility, empathy, authenticity, and how to be an advocate for each other.

### **Service Learning**

Since returning to school full-time, students have engaged in various service learning projects including preparing ABLAZE bags for Family Faith Formation, collecting diapers for our Bottoms Up Diaper Drive, donating clothing items for homeless individuals in Columbus, and making sandwiches for those in need via our St. Vincent DePaul Society.



## **Peace be With You: Bullying Redirect**

We are currently consulting with Frank DiLallo, founder of Peace be With You and Author of [Bullying Redirect](#) on implementing a comprehensive curriculum for our staff and students. This program focuses on Servant Leadership Skills, Empathy-Based Interpersonal Skills, and Intrapersonal Skills within a scripture-based foundation.

### **The Next Steps: How Do We Build On This?**

There are several steps that we will either continue to do or begin doing as we continue this journey of ensuring an inclusive, positive, Christ-like school culture.

#### **Establish a Safe Reporting System for when a Student Experiences Physical or Emotional Harm**

Students need to feel safe in schools and those same institutions are expected to take care of the social-emotional needs of their students. This is not possible unless students feel they have the appropriate channels to bring their concerns discretely and confidentially.

The avenue of communication has to be clearly defined for students, regardless of grade level. Student should know how to bring up a concern, to whom to bring it, and the appropriate time to do so. All too often, students may not feel comfortable bringing up an incident at school. Or, more commonly, they may not have an opportunity to do so. As a school, we must not only make students feel comfortable bringing up issues, but allow specific times and locations to do so with a teacher or administrator.

#### **Thoroughly Engage in Due Process**

When an incident is reported to a teacher or administrator, a specific timeline of protocols should be maintained. As previously stated, a safe reporting system should be established and continuously communicated.

The most important aspect of investigating an incident is to speak to each party individually first, directly from the student, and in a timely manner. After all parties are asked for their recollection of the incident, other students who have witnessed the interaction will also be asked to give their accounts.

After these initial steps are completed, parents will be notified of the administrator's or teacher's determination of what happened and any consequences that might result.

#### **Institute a Restorative Process**

Students must be accountable for their actions at every grade level. Subsequently, there needs to be a healing process and a system for students to make amends. Students who make a poor decision should have the opportunity to learn and grow from their poor choices. There is obviously a difference between an isolated incident and a pattern of behavior. The actual process would look different depending on the situation.

It is imperative that the actions have timely and meaningful consequences. These consequences are meant to change the behavior, change the attitude, and change the damaged relationship for the better. It is also imperative that students who were physically or emotionally harmed feel safe.



## **Collect Meaningful Data**

One of the most important aspects of examining school culture is knowing that it is not static. It is fluid and dynamic. It is important to understand the thoughts, feelings, and attitudes of all students. We want to ensure the exception is not the norm. Analyzing concrete data, even subjective data, can better identify areas of concern within a school culture. Implementing a grade-specific survey, non-biased observations, and student reflections can be valuable tools.

## **Evangelization**

One of the most challenging realities in our society is the absence or de-emphasis of Jesus Christ. It is difficult for our students to emulate Christ when he is less present in our lives. There needs to be great emphasis on evangelizing our students so they can know Jesus and imitate him especially in his call to love God and neighbor.

## **Re-Introduce Education in Virtue**

The [Education in Virtue Program](#) is based on the four Cardinal Virtues along with connections to the Theological Virtues, Fruits of the Holy Spirit, and the Saints. Each of the virtues have several "sub-virtues" that can be adapted for each grade level, has real-world examples for students, and direct connections to scripture.

What is so important about this program is there is a familiarity for staff and the virtues are based on positive behavior providing models for our expectations.

## **Social Emotional Learning Standards**

The Ohio Department of Education has adopted Social-Emotional Learning standards for K-12. The Diocese of Columbus Health Course of Study also align with these standards throughout the K-12 curriculum. These five essential skills are vital for all students at any grade. Although these standards won't show up on the report card, without mastering these first, student will not reach their full academic potential.

### ***Social-Emotional Learning Standards***

1. Self-Awareness
2. Self-Management
3. Social-Awareness
4. Relationship Skills
5. Responsible Decision-Making

## **Introduce a School-wide Touchstone i.e. "We" Statements**

Nothing can replace our school's motto of Love of God, Love of Learning, Love of Neighbor. However, "We" statements can be actionable commitments to improving a school. These can be developed by students with the help of staff. Examples of "We" statements can be...

- ✓ St. Catharine Students stand-up for themselves
- ✓ St. Catharine Students stand-up for those who can't stand-up for themselves
- ✓ St. Catharine Students stand-up to people who choose to hurt others
- ✓ St. Catharine Students stand-up for what is right

...and so forth.



## Student Organizations

Allowing students to serve in leadership roles not only develop those essential skills, but provides a sense of responsibility and loyalty to classmates. Re-establishing these student organizations like Student Council will make a significant difference in our school culture.

## Bystander Education

*"Each day we have to decide whether to be Good Samaritans or indifferent bystanders." – Pope Francis*

One of the most important, but often neglected factor when addressing school culture is educating students who are not directly involved in a situation. Often times, when physical or emotional harm is done by one student to another, there are often other students present. It is not easy for a student to step in when someone is being wronged. This goes back to our "We" statements and reinforcing the importance of avoiding apathy and indifference to negative events. There is very little external rewards for a student who stands up for another student being harmed. They can become a target themselves. This is why students must understand how important it is and have the confidence and skills to intervene when injustice happens.

This is not to say that telling an adult is not the appropriate response. However, when a bystander "steps in" to a situation and "steps up" for a classmate, it provides an immediate and direct message that 1.) those actions are not OK and 2.) students are not alone. This process of active participation takes time, but also builds lifelong skills having an immediate effect on school culture.

## New-Student Orientation

Students who are new to our school will initially be assigned a peer mentor to help with the potential anxiety of transitioning to a new school. Much like "Buddy Families" are an important and unique aspect of our school community, having peers who are responsible for helping new students feel welcome.

## Environment of Inclusion

*"At the end of the day, I'd rather be excluded for who I include than included for who I exclude."*

*-Rev. Eston Williams*

St. Catharine has historically been a school that prides itself on inclusion. This culture of inclusion needs to be continuously communicated and demonstrated so that all students, regardless of differences, feel included as a valued member of our school community. Pope Francis says that "inclusion should be the first 'rock' on which to build our house".

There are several elements of inclusion that are imperative in a school environment which include relationships, advocacy, a sense of identity, shared experiences, and transparency, ([McMaster](#)).

Element of Inclusion	Virtue to Strengthen that Element
Relationships	Humility
Advocacy	Courage
Shared Experiences	Empathy
Transparency	Authenticity

All of our students are children of God, made in his image and likeness. The dignity of every human person should be recognized and celebrated by everyone in our school community.



## **Buddies**

Whether it be reading buddies, math buddies, buddies for sacramental prep, pairing younger students with older student mentors is such a positive influence on school culture. Not only is it impactful for younger student to have an older “buddy” to model their behavior after and look up to, it is just as important for the older student to know their influence and impact with younger students as role models.

## **Mental Health Focus Groups**

One of the most valuable assets we have at St. Catharine School and Parish is our partnership with [Spirit of Peace Clinical Counseling](#). In addition to individual counseling sessions for students via teacher or parent referral. We have also conducted large group sessions for students to help deal with the anxiety that comes with the COVID-19 Pandemic. We will continue those sessions on a regular basis next school year to cover topics such as anxiety, social skills, stress management, self-esteem, and other issues. All new students will have available sessions to help transition to a new school environment.

## **Responsibilities**

Another repercussion from the pandemic was the reduction or elimination of school responsibilities for students. Simple tasks around the school and in the classroom have not been as present this school year. These responsibilities are another way for students to think outside of themselves and develop a sense of pride in themselves and in the school.

## **Accountability: The Framework of an Apology**

One of the most overlooked yet simple skill that children need to have is simply knowing how and why to say they’re sorry. As Pope Francis says, “I’m Sorry” is one of the three most important phrases for all families. The ability to truly regret your own actions enough to humble yourself to ask for forgiveness is a sure sign of compassion and maturity.

In my opinion, an important component in teaching forgiveness and remorse is not to force an apology but rather suggest it as an option to make amends. A forced apology is painfully obvious and inauthentic.

When someone has poor judgement, makes a poor decision, and that decision physically or emotionally hurts another student, accountability must be in place. There are some critical questions that must be answered in order for reconciliation in any situation to happen.

- ✓ What did I do that was wrong?
- ✓ When, where, and how did it happen?
- ✓ Who did I hurt in the process?
- ✓ What outcome did I expect from my actions?
- ✓ What do I need to do to make things right?
- ✓ How can I commit to avoiding this action in the future?

This list is loosely based on the Four Steps of Reconciliation, which are:

- ❖ Contrition
- ❖ Confession
- ❖ Penance
- ❖ Absolution



**St. CATHARINE SCHOOL**

Love of **God**. Love of **Learning**. Love of **Neighbor**.

### **In Summary**

School Culture is a dynamic reality and always changing. We have identified the need for improvement and know that with God's grace, and the efforts outlined above, we will persevere in bringing our students closer to who God has created them to be.

Yours in Christ,

Mark Watts, Principal

Fr. Daniel Dury, Pastor