

Creating a Safe Learning Environment

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Belmont was a school run by the students. They skipped class and roamed the halls in the hundreds. Fights were a near daily occurrence. Police cars regularly parked outside. An emergency alarm sat next to the cash registers in the cafeteria to sound when students tried to steal the lunch money. Teachers feared for their safety and stayed in classrooms behind locked doors, desperately trying to teach while ignoring the distractions outside.

Three years ago, people referred to the Dayton, Ohio high school as “Hellmont.”

“It got to the point where I would get phone calls from friends saying my school was on the news again,” said Michael Slightam, a social studies teacher at Belmont. “It was an embarrassment for my personal life and my professionalism.”

Belmont was the place where the lowest-performing and most troubled students were dumped in the Dayton Public Schools district. In Dayton, parents can choose which schools to send their children to, though that will change in the 2011-2012 school year as Dayton moves towards a neighborhood school attendance model.

Belmont’s reputation meant that it wasn’t a school parents choose. Not surprisingly, the school was also a revolving door for teachers.

All of that changed when David White took over as principal in July 2009. Under his leadership, the school achieved dramatic reductions in discipline problems in just a single year.

Compared to the 2008-2009 school year:

- Fights went from 143 down to 17, an 89 percent reduction
- Assaults went from 83 down to 10, an 88 percent reduction
- Arrests went from 58 down to 1, a 99 percent reduction

With discipline improving, the school is also achieving academic results. In the 2008 – 2009 school year, 30 percent of freshman were promoted to sophomores. The following year, 63 percent were promoted and this year, 2010 – 2011, 84 percent of freshman will move on to their sophomore year.

Teachers who once left the school now want to come back. And those who never left now wear their Belmont Bison t-shirts with pride.

“There have been times I have walked through the hallways in the past two years and hear no sound. I actually have to stop and think ‘is this a school day? where are the students?’ Because they’re not in the halls,” said Robin Thompson, a data technician. “They’re in the classrooms where they are supposed to be. The teachers can teach now, and they can teach with their doors open.”

How Did Belmont Do It?

First, Principal White and his leadership team focused on restoring order.

Going into such a chaotic school, they knew the best course of action would be to spend the entire first year working on behavior. Once a safe learning environment was established, then they could move on to the academics and the tests.

Belmont Principal David White delivers the daily announcements via bullhorn during lunch.

Principal White established authority with the students from the very first moment of the 2009-2010 school year. As students milled outside on Day One, waiting for the doors to unlock, White stormed out with his now-famous bullhorn in hand and demanded the students form two single-file lines. They waited outside until the lines were perfect and then White marched everyone into the auditorium to explain the new expectations for Belmont students.

White sent the message loud and clear that things were not going to be business as usual. "I created good habits, structure and direction," said White. "The kids feed off of that and have done very well."

Expectations at Belmont revolve around the 5 B's:

1. Be prepared
2. Be on time
3. Be respectful
4. Be accountable
5. Be consistent

The staff at Belmont work hard to get the students following the 5 B's, and are strict with enforcement. "If you instill that in the kids, it becomes a habit. Once it becomes a habit it becomes their character," said Larry Carter, the 9th grade transition coordinator.

"Big expectations, that's the key now," said Ajilon Harmon, a paraprofessional who works with special education students. "The kids are starting to see that staff are really here for them and they can learn and progress."

"When I was a freshman and sophomore, there were fights all the time," said Ben Cox, who graduated from Belmont on May 20. "Mr. White came in and now it's a pretty good place. Some people don't like Mr. White because he's strict, but the people who want to learn like him a lot."

It Also Takes Collaboration

Principal White doesn't like to be considered the lifeguard who saved the school from drowning. He's careful to point out to that it's the educators at Belmont who work closely with the students each day. "I'm lucky to have inherited a group of people that wanted change," said White. "They were tired of violence. They were tired of the disrespect. They were tired of coming to work in fear. I was very fortunate to walk in to this group because they just said 'what do we need to do?'"

"We're all on the same page now," said Alice Owen-Clough, a physical education teacher. "The teachers are on the same page with accountability, bellwork, classwork, homework. Everyone meets twice a week. It's just a good thing all around."

The alley leading from the school to the bus stop used to be a dangerous spot. The Dayton Police Department along with Belmont staff now monitor the alley every day after school.

Lieutenant Christopher Williams of the Dayton Police Department credits Principal White and the staff at Belmont for taking charge of a plan that relies on support from the police as well as the Montgomery County Juvenile Court in Dayton. "David White is the guy who implemented the plan and his staff are the ones who monitored it," said Williams.

The police department helped White and his staff identify the root behavior problems, and the police department then worked with the juvenile court system to work on a special case basis with Belmont students. No matter where a Belmont student got in trouble, action was taken in accordance with the education plan.

"When I take a look at the impact we've had with our piece of the puzzle at Belmont, there is no doubt in my mind we've made a difference in people's lives," said Williams. "We've all given some of these kids a future they never would have had."

Student Dress and Grooming Standards

Because certain fads and extremes of dress and hair styling tend to attract improper attention to the individual and sometimes interfere with the normal educational process, all students are expected to conform to the following standards of dress and grooming when participating in any school activity:

- Hair shall be neat, clean and well-groomed.
- Clothing shall be modest, neat, clean, and in good repair and shall include shoes.
- Clothing and/or jewelry may not display obscene or suggestive words or pictures, or advertise any substance a student cannot legally possess or use.
- Jewelry shall not be worn in any pierced body parts other than the ears.
- Modesty means covering shoulders, midriff, and back. No short shorts, tank tops, halter or crop tops, or extremely short skirts or dresses.
- No gang-related attire, to include bandannas, chains, or other articles of clothing or jewelry.
- Hats and caps shall not be worn during regular school hours.

If a student's dress or grooming interferes with the normal educational process, he or she will be asked to change whatever is in question. The school administration will be ultimately responsible for the administration of the policy.

Student Behavior

Students of Springville High School will always conduct themselves with pride and dignity and treat both teachers and peers with courtesy and respect.

Students are subject to the authority of all teachers in all areas of the school throughout the school day.

Unacceptable behaviors include:

- Fighting anywhere in or around the school building - participants will be suspended
- Insubordination or disrespect of any kind
- Possession of inappropriate reading material
- Displays of affection in excess of holding hands
- Truancy and habitual tardiness
- Rowdy behavior in buildings
- Conduct that is not decent, polite, honorable, or honest
- Destruction, defacing or vandalizing of school property
- Locker misuse or abuse

Items Prohibited in School

Items which might be hazardous to others, or that might interfere with the educational process are not to be brought to school. Items of this nature may be confiscated. Any weapon or facsimile of a weapon will result in suspension and referral to the Nebo School District's Office of Pupil Services. Items considered hazardous include, but are not limited to:

firearms of all kinds	"Chinese Stars"
knives	hard balls
toy guns	fireworks
water guns	hackee sacs
bean shooters	
sling shots	
dart guns	

Gang paraphernalia will be confiscated and sent home. Students who demonstrate gang affiliation are subject to suspension, and/or other administrative interventions

No medications, including over-the-counter, herbal, or prescription drugs, are allowed on school property. If there is a special need, clearance must be obtained and may only be distributed by the principal or his/her designee.

Electronic Devices

The use of personal electronic devices is strictly prohibited in any classroom. Students in violation of this policy are subject to school discipline action, to include confiscation of the device or suspension. This includes, but is not limited to, ipods, cell phones, MP3 players, etc. For a first offence, electronic devices will be confiscated by the teacher and returned to the student at the end of class. A second offence requires the confiscated device be sent to the office where the student can pick it up after school. The third offence requires a parent pick up the device from the administration. The fourth and succeeding offences will result in further disciplinary action. SHS is not responsible for stolen or lost items.

Students who send and/or possess electronic information that may negatively impact the school environment may be subject to suspension and/or police referral. This includes but is not limited to pornographic, threatening, or otherwise inappropriate messaging or texting.

Hall Policy

During class time, students should be in class, not in the halls. Students in the halls, parking lot, etc., without a hall pass, will be escorted to class and/or given detention time. The faculty and administration of Springville High will make every effort to encourage students to be in class on time. Unauthorized persons – those who have no legitimate need to be in school - will be invited to leave.

Final Note

Due process will always be followed to protect student rights.