

**Creating a Sanctuary for Trauma-informed Care**

**Public School 69, Jackson Heights, NY**

Nyack College School of Social Work

SWK 770- Trauma-Informed Care: NLSB

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**The Sanctuary: P.S. 69**

P.S. 69 is one of hundreds of schools in Queens, NY that provides free education and meals for attending students in its community of Jackson Heights. Its construction began in 1920 and was completed in 1923 by architect W.M. H. Gompert via the Putnam Construction Company Inc. The school was renovated in 1995 and the building was extended to offer more classrooms and an elevator for the school to better assist the growing needs of its school community of Jackson Heights.

The school, also known as “The School of Cultural and Performing Arts”, serves children, grades Pre-K through 5<sup>th</sup> grade. The elementary school hours are usually from 8:00am to 3:00pm with the exception of after school activities. The school ensures equal learning opportunities for all 844 registered children, including those with physical, emotional or learning disabilities.

These services are provided through the Special Education Department, which is like an umbrella that encompasses many services such as Response to Intervention (RTI); occupational, physical, and speech therapies; adaptive physical education, paraprofessionals just to name a few. Services cater to students of all ethnic and cultural backgrounds with the provision of translation as needed for the students and families.

The surrounding neighborhood is a colorful reflection of the diverse ethnic immigrant cultures, school staff, small owned restaurants and businesses from all over the world including South America, Europe, Caribbean, and Asia.

**Destroying Sanctuary**

In the year of 2020, a phenomenon swept the world affecting each country's economic order. New York, and specifically P.S. 69 in Queens was not exempt to the disarray the COVID-19 pandemic brought. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Covid-19 is a new coronavirus that easily spreads from person to person and symptoms vary from mild to severe. It is recommended to maintain 6-foot distance from others, constantly disinfect your surroundings, and wear a protective mask that covers your nose and mouth in public areas (as the virus is spread through respiratory droplets and infection can occur when a person coughs, sneezes or talks.) (CDC, 2020). To date New York City has had over 285,000 cases of Covid-19 and over 24,000 deaths just in the year of 2020. (Google Statistics, 2020). Experiencing this as a nation and city has caused many American trauma whether they were directly affected by the virus or the drastic changes the virus brought to everyday living.

To ensure student and staff safety the building closure was announced on March 15, 2020, as order by Mayor DeBlasio. There were potential reopening dates set but due to spikes in COVID-19 cases as well as high mortality rate the school building remained closed to students and staff for the remainder of the academic year. This overall experience caused trauma and stress to the staff, students and their families. There were students and staff that experienced loss in their families due to the virus.

In addition to the virus and its ramifications, the staff struggled in transitioning to remote teaching/working. There was almost no notice of school closure and very little training on the online educational software's (google classroom) as well as online meeting networks (Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, etc.) This lack of knowledge or direction caused staff to work past the allotted work hours in search of virtual classwork and material for students to use. They

also spent hours looking up videos on how to navigate the google classroom platform. Many of the staff struggled in their own homes and lacked the community, knowledge, and support of working together in the school. They became insecure of their teaching and working abilities. For example, teachers who had been working in the school for over 18 years felt as though their experience was irrelevant because of limited knowledge of technology. Many experienced anxiety and burnout in the unpredictable time. In addition to longer work hours the yearly spring break was cancelled, and school classes were ongoing. This non-negotiable precaution was decided by Mayor DeBlasio in an attempt to keep adolescents quarantined indoors despite the warming weather.

By June, school principals and the city were made aware of expected school budget cuts. Without a specific budget, school principals were expected to let staff go. From the months of May through June staff was in fear of losing their jobs or being relocated to other schools. Overall, 3 teachers announced early retirement and come the fall 6 more teachers were let go and there was still talk of additional excess. Since the new academic year, a quarter of the staff remains working remote (there was no ability to select a preference of working in school or from home-besides approved medical accommodation). There have also been multiple classroom changes as well as pushed back reopening dates. Decisions of changes such as reopening, parent surveys (remote or blended learning preference) were made citywide (by Mayor DeBlasio) and teachers and staff were not informed beforehand. Most staff had to notify parents on new changes and clarify previously had conversations.

While this is not the fault of the school's administration, this slew of events and lack of consistency and support has caused the sanctuary of the school to weaken.

### **Restoring Sanctuary**

While there are still pending changes based on student enrollment for blended learning as well as potential spike in COVID-19 cases there are strategies the staff can implement in an attempt to restore the sanctuary that is the school.

The S.E.L.F. model will be utilized for the purpose of restoring the sanctuary of the school. Bloom and Farragher's (2013) S.E.L.F. model include a focus on an agency's safety, motional management, loss, and future issues. In identifying the needs to be met and the protocol in addressing these needs, one hopes it will lead to the restoring of the school's sanctuary.

In identifying a safety plan, the school has created a Building Response Team to respond to COVID-19 related incidents. The roles of the members of this team includes a BRT Leader, Emergency Officer (EO), Incident Assessor (IA), Special Needs Coordinator (SNC), Assembly Point Coordinator (APC), Recorder, and School Nurse. There is a planning document on the DOE website indicting the exact steps to be taken when a student or staff displays COVID-19 like symptoms. Once the ill individual is taken to the isolation room and appropriate measures taken the Principal will then contact the Superintendent and Emergency Information Center if the test results are positive. Having this team in place and the procedure available to the public has brought reassurance that the school is prioritizing the safety of all staff and students. There was also a virtual training which the entire school was explained the process and which staff were assigned to the roles. Some of the BRT members include the two Assistant Principals, Guidance Counselor, IEP Teacher, Social Worker, School Nurse, and select others.

In addressing the emotional management of the sanctuary, a Crisis Team is in place at the school. The team focuses on the physical, behavioral, and emotional signs of crisis primarily in

students. It uses a holistic approach to addressing stressors that students may be facing. There are assigned rooms in school that will be used for counseling for students. In being equipped and trained to address children's needs as they submerge in the classroom it allows the staff to open dialogue about the presenting issue at hand. (NYC DOE, 2020). Also, in staff participating in these trainings it opens a line of communication and self-awareness to their own feelings and triggers. Many of the staff meets weekly to discuss the week and plan for the following week, they can use this time to discuss their coping with the changes and incorporate the learned skills in identifying their triggers. In taking the time to process together they can give and receive the emotional support management and in doing so create a more supportive sanctuary than in the past months.

In regard to loss, many families in the school lost loved ones as well as their sense of community, consistency, and familiarity with work production. To address these issues the school has partaken in the social emotional learning curriculum (Sanford Harmony) in the classroom, as well as create a SEL group counseling done by school social worker and MSW intern. This group is made for students who have experienced loss of a loved one or are struggling with coping with the changes that remote learning has brought. The group gathers on a weekly basis (virtually) and will be meeting with students from every grade by the end of the school year. Students referrals are made by teachers and school administration. The group discusses mindfulness techniques, how to form positive relationships, time management, loss of a loved one, positive self-talk, managing and identifying emotions, to name a few.

The UFT and DC37 Unions for staff at the school offers counseling services and resources on their website that are readily accessible. In order to promote those services, it will be suggested that the Union Representatives hold virtual meetings to share the information as

well as check in with the staff to see what other needs and insights they have. In addition, the exposure to SEL material this year has also positively influenced staff in their own forms of coping. To assess the extent SEL curriculum has had on staff a survey will be administered to assess areas of growth as well as areas that may need more attention or addressing.

Lastly, future issues will be taken into consideration by the planning for another community shut down as a result in COVID-19 spikes in cases. Fortunately, the staff and students have experience on their side when it comes to the remote learning and teaching and will not be as blinded by the transition as they were the first time. Many improvements have been made to Google Classroom settings and navigation has become simplified. In addition, up to this point, staff, students, and their families have had the last three months to become better acquainted with each other through blended learning and virtual meetings. They are familiar with classroom teachers this year (with the hopes of no more class changes) and have open formats of communication which include, email, stream in GC, and a messaging app called Class Dojo. Having these in place can continue communication one with another.

## **Conclusion**

Therefore, in the implementation of the S.E.L.F. model in addressing P.S. 69's needs in safety, emotional management, loss, and addressing of future issues will contribute towards restoring the negative impact COVID-19 has had on the staff and students. Utilizing this model should restore the community of the school by providing the appropriate outlets for stress, constructive communication, and trauma informed educational approach.

## References

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