

RSS UPDATE:

Is it the Most Wonderful Time of the Year?

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“It’s the most wonderful time of the year!” is a quote associated with the holiday season, and for many, it truly is a time of celebration and joy. A time to relax and eat, to share gifts and celebrate all the season has to offer. For the majority of us, we may approach the holidays with a cheerful and joyous attitude, but what do we do for the kids and possibly some employees who will find them difficult?

I learned as a high school principal that not every student would experience holiday happiness. For some students, the holiday break can be a time of anxiety, concern and despair. It is a time when their normal routines are disrupted and they may feel a sense of negative self-worth or inadequacy when comparing their real-life experiences with the extraordinary expectations of the media, social media and/or their peers. School may be the only safe haven and reliable source of meals for some families. They may not be thinking about what gifts to buy or what they will receive, but where they will eat and how warm they will be. The holidays may amplify feelings of grief and loss for loved ones who have passed away. Stress levels in the home may rise as a result of families' financial reality around the holidays. Feelings of anxiety and tension are often elevated in homes experiencing divorce or separation or with parents who are deployed or incarcerated. Additionally, students may stress or worry about being away from their peers who help support them or from that special counselor or teacher who cares, listens and validates them. All of these concerns may manifest in subtle or obvious ways. Students may withdraw, seem sad or quiet, stop doing schoolwork, miss activities or they may act out in various subtle or extreme ways. This is why it is important for principals to remind school staff to listen and be aware. Remind your teachers, nurses, counselors and paraprofessionals to keep their eyes, ears and hearts open. Remind the students who we know need support that we care and validate their concerns and realities and that we see and understand what they are going through. Remind staff when they encounter those who are struggling with the holiday season to provide support, listen and be sure others who can support the student are informed.

A few ideas to support students who may be struggling with the holidays from my experiences would include actively addressing this topic during a staff meeting and discussing students or families of concern during student assistance or counseling staff meetings. Many schools hold food drives or have pantry or backpack programs to share snacks and food with students and families. Additionally, you can link families with toy drives that could assist them in providing gifts for their children. In order to help struggling kids manage the holiday, deal with stress or figure out what to do when their sadness hits the highest point, counselors can brainstorm ideas with them.

School counselors can play a significant role in helping students and families feel supported during this time of the year. According to a 2017 PBS article titled *Don't assume that every student had a fun or warm holiday break*, school counselors can assist students in lowering their stress and anxiety levels in the following ways:

- **Identify community resources:** Locate resources within the community to support students and families, i.e., shelters, food depositories, safe havens, affordable childcare and counseling.
- **Post and send home memos with lists of resources:** A helpful way to share resources for students or families who might need food, clothing, or shelter and be too ashamed to ask for help.
- **Giveaways:** Host fundraisers for food donations, coats, blankets or gifts that can be provided to students and families.
- **Ask teachers to refrain from giving assignments about winter break.**
- **Facilitate small-group counseling:** This is helpful for students struggling with grief, loss, divorce or other identified needs.

We need to be proactive in helping students and their families who are struggling with the holidays. We must show that we care, listen to them and acknowledge their concerns. Recognition and intervention will ease some of their stress, and in some cases, it may just be what is needed to save the life of a struggling child. Remember: Nobody said that being a principal was going to be easy. To quote noted speaker and author Todd Whitaker, "The best thing about being a teacher (principal) is that it matters. The hardest thing about being a teacher (principal) is that it matters every day." Wishing you all strength, wisdom and perseverance this holiday season; your students and staff need and deserve it! And just maybe, it will be a more wonderful time of the year for all!

REFERENCE:

Perry, K. (2017, Dec. 29). "Don't assume that every student had a fun or warm holiday break." *PBS NewsHour Teachers' Lounge*. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/education/dont-assume-that-every-student-had-a-fun-or-warm-holiday-break>