



Anamaria Orbe is the principal of [Charles G. Hammond Elementary School \(PreK-8\)](#) in the Marshall Square Neighborhood of Chicago. A former high school dropout who had a tough life as a teenager, she experienced the life-changing impact of a trusting relationship when a band teacher encouraged her to come back to school. In this interview, she describes how she gradually integrated social and emotional learning (SEL) into her school after she became interim principal in 2011.

The importance of culture and climate

I did not set out to do SEL. It was accidental. My goal was to ensure the school was doing what was best for students. And it was clear that unless teachers understood students and their social issues and challenges, they weren't going to be able to teach anything.

A top early priority was to address the culture and climate. Unfortunately, I found that a large percentage of my teachers and staff lacked social awareness and were not culturally competent. I had to address that, so I counseled out about a third of my teachers in that first year. I let go of my social worker and assistant principal. They all were good people, but they set low expectations for the students and parents. It was important to have staff that were a right fit.

School Profile
• Grades PreK-8
• 450 students
• 90% Hispanic
• 8% African-American
• 2% other
• 97% low-income
• 50% ELL

Walking the talk on shared leadership

Once staff left, I formed a talent acquisition team of teachers, parents, and teacher assistants who shared my vision. They conducted the initial interviews, and I picked from the top two candidates. It was important to show I meant what I said about shared leadership.

When students saw the new hires were so much more diverse and that we'd worked through teams, that sent an important message. We hired more African-Americans and Asians. We hired the best candidates who happened to include African-Americans, Caucasians, and Asians, in addition to Hispanics. Before that, with one exception, all African-American staff worked in the kitchen. That sent a strong message about "where they belonged"—not in the classroom. I needed to change that.

Addressing adult SEL

The key was establishing relationships. I couldn't focus on instruction until I had staff in place. The CASEL grant (see sidebar) gave me the tools to advance SEL. Our SEL team presented staff trainings that initially focused on creating shared agreements and staff and student expectations. Through the Second Step curriculum, our students are learning how they can resolve conflicts, respect themselves and each other, and, most important, solve problems and make responsible decisions. Last school year my parent leaders began presenting SEL sessions for parents and community members at the school after attending SEL training sessions at a partner organization. This year we're expanding to include a health and nutrition component.

We know that adults are not always correct. SEL ensures a higher level of communication that helps with decision-making and helps build relationships. I often had to remind my staff, "Who is the adult?" That is no longer the case.

Increasing student voice

When I started, students had no voice. I met with them all the time—in the morning, in the afternoon, in my office. It was clear they didn't trust teachers and felt decisions were unfair. I challenged them to help come up with solutions. They have much more voice now. The student tech team basically runs events. Students volunteer as ushers to assist with report card pickups, they plan our end-of-the-year Fun Day, and they have a major say in our shared agreements. We now have a student and parent advocate whose job it is to support students and parents.

In the beginning, there was a lot of racial tension between the Hispanic and African-American students. They didn't realize they were more alike than not. Many of the Hispanics were scared of the African Americans. In my second year a new African-American teaching assistant was helping with crosswalk duty. I observed a Hispanic first-grader skipping across the street, stopping halfway, and giving him a tamale. That's the norm now. It was one of my proudest moments.

Impact

The year I started, the school was on probation. Two years ago, we were at level 1-plus, the highest level, based on attendance, academic growth and attainment, the percentage of students on track, and the 5E's survey. This past year, we missed level 1 by one-tenth of a point.

Supportive Schools Grant

Charles G. Hammond is one of the schools participating in the *Building Systemic Approaches in Chicago Public Schools* grant funded by the Robert R. McCormick Foundation. In its third year, the project is uniting schools, families, and the community around a single goal: to promote SEL by focusing on systemic SEL implementation. The Discussion Series for Parents and Caregivers (available in [English](#) and [Spanish](#)) is one project component that captures the processes for creating a systemic approach to SEL.

It's also obvious that the school is there for the community. We're now open an extra hour in the morning and from 4 to 7 in the evening. Our play lot and parking lot are never locked. We've started a community garden. We have shared agreements with staff, students, and parents.

Major challenges

We always have to work on strengthening relationships. A specific goal this year is to increase trust between staff and students in middle school, where we have three new teachers. We want to continue increasing parent involvement, and I am hoping our expanded communication through Facebook will help. We're constantly fundraising, including many teachers writing grants. And time is a challenge. I didn't sign up for this job until my children were grown up and I was an empty nester. I'm still fighting to find the right life-job balance.

Most important lesson

Don't judge a book by its cover. No one expected me to be where I am except for one teacher, the band teacher, Eugene Seinfeld, who changed my life. I always need to say his name. He took the time to get to know me. I'm constantly reminding my staff, "You can be heroes. You don't realize the impact we can make. And when it's that great, it's especially important to reflect on our actions and our words all the time."

RESOURCES

[SEL Team PowerPoint](#), including the school's vision, shared agreements, and more
[Student needs assessment](#)
[Safe Space classroom posters](#)

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