

Building Alignment to Support School Climate:

Connecting Initiatives, Practices, and People at Connecticut River Academy

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At Connecticut River Academy (CTRA), a school in the Goodwin University Educational Services (GUES) district, district leaders recognized that many of their efforts to support students—including school improvement planning, restorative practices, discipline reform, social-emotional supports, and student engagement and belonging initiatives—were often operating in parallel rather than as part of a cohesive system. While each effort had merit, leaders wanted to create greater alignment so that staff could see how the work connected and students could experience more consistent supports across schools.



Participating in a WestEd professional learning series focused on establishing and sustaining positive, supportive school climates for all students provided the framework to make that shift.

For Sarah J. Burke, Assistant Superintendent for Student Support Services, the professional learning helped district leaders move beyond individual initiatives and focus on building a connected system.

“We’re really trying to use the framework that we were given to streamline and integrate all the things we’re trying to do because sometimes it becomes too segmented or too siloed.”

Using the school climate framework as a unifying structure, district leaders began intentionally connecting climate work, restorative practices, discipline systems, student engagement and belonging efforts, and school improvement planning. This shift helped reduce initiative fatigue and create greater coherence across the district. It also strengthened vertical alignment among the district’s schools, ensuring that expectations, practices, and supports were more consistent while still recognizing the developmental needs of students at different grade levels.

Narrowing the Focus to High-Impact Priorities

The work prompted district leaders to take a closer look at how they planned, monitored, and implemented improvement efforts. Through multiple cycles of reflection and revision, leaders recognized the importance of focusing on a smaller number of high-impact priorities rather than trying to address every initiative simultaneously. This approach helped sharpen school improvement plans and created greater clarity around the actions most likely to improve outcomes for students.





Across the district, leaders also strengthened systems for identifying and responding to student needs. School climate committees, data teams, administrators, social workers, and support staff began using data more intentionally to examine trends, identify students requiring additional support, and monitor the effectiveness of interventions. These structures have increased collaboration and created more consistent pathways for connecting students and families with needed services.

Strengthening Alignment at the School Level

The impact of this work is evident in schools across the district.

At **CTRA Middle Level**, leaders embedded the use of school climate and student outcome data into existing data team meetings, staff meetings, and professional learning opportunities. These data help them identify challenges, inform improvement efforts, and reinforce successful practices.

“One meaningful shift we have seen [is] reviewing data during our data teams/staff meetings [and] professional development to analyze our systems and align/calibrate responses.”

—CTRA Middle Level Leadership Team

Through this process, staff regularly analyze behavior patterns and student needs, reflect on current practices, and make adjustments when necessary. The school has strengthened its ability to identify students who may need additional support, engage families in problem-solving, and connect students with appropriate services.

At **CTRA High School**, leaders focused on creating greater coordination among the many teams supporting students.



“The biggest shift we have made is organizing the work we were doing in different silos into one centralized monthly meeting where all players contribute.”

—CTRA High School Leadership Team

By bringing together staff who previously worked independently, the high school has created a more collaborative and coordinated approach to addressing student needs, supporting school climate, and improving outcomes.

Shifting Beliefs, Not Just Practices

Perhaps the most significant learning emerged as district leaders examined discipline, attendance, achievement, and behavior data alongside their restorative practices work. As they explored implementation challenges, they uncovered an important insight about the beliefs driving adult behavior.

“I believe ... many of our staff members feel that restorative practices come without accountability. Since that is untrue, that was a big ‘aha’ moment. We then shifted our professional learning to change that mindset for our educators.”

—Jessica Gomez-Bedosky,
Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction

This realization shifted the district’s focus from simply teaching restorative practices to addressing the underlying beliefs that influence whether those practices are embraced. Leaders recognized that meaningful change required helping educators understand that restorative approaches are not the absence of



accountability. Rather, they provide opportunities for students to take responsibility, repair harm, and remain connected to their learning community.

As district leaders considered next steps, they identified professional learning as an important lever for supporting implementation. Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction Gomez-Bedosky emphasized the value of leveraging in-house expertise and educator leaders to help colleagues reflect on their practice and deepen their understanding of restorative approaches. Leaders also highlighted the importance of maintaining vertical alignment across schools through consistent messaging, shared learning opportunities, and ongoing collaboration.

Moving Forward

While long-term outcomes continue to emerge, district leaders are already seeing promising indicators of impact. Schools are using data more consistently, responses to student behavior are becoming more restorative, collaboration among staff has increased, and support systems are more coordinated and responsive. Most importantly, the district is building the structures and mindsets necessary to create affirming and inclusive learning environments in which every student feels supported, valued, and connected.

What began as an effort to improve school climate has evolved into something broader: a districtwide commitment to aligning systems, strengthening adult practice, and ensuring that every decision is grounded in what students need to thrive.





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