PassageWays

By: Mellisa Heath with Rachael Kessler
Elementary Principal with Author of The Soul of Education

A way to develop and strengthen authentic connections with those that enter our lives for minutes, days, or a lifetime - establish connections and relationships that can impact your life, even in the classroom.

I began Rachael Kessler’s Soul of Leadership training tired, emotionally stressed, drained and not wanting to participate. As the material was presented, I began to relax, listen with awe, and then, by the end of the day, I was excited! THIS is what it is all about: connecting and relationships—feeling a part of someone and something!

The next morning Paul Katnik, a supervisor in the State of Missouri’s Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, approached me, inviting our two elementary schools in East Prairie to participate in a research project that focuses on the leadership growth of my colleagues Donna Smith and myself. Funded through the Wallace Foundation of Educational Research, the PassageWays Project is based on a partnership formed with Rachael Kessler, author of The Soul of Education and Executive Director and Founder of the PassageWays Institute (PWI) in Boulder, Colorado. PassageWays emphasizes the emotional well being of a child as an important aspect of learning: When children feel safe and comfortable in their environment, academic achievement is enhanced. Kessler’s book, The Soul of Education: Helping Students Find Connection, Compassion and Character at School (ASCD 2000), gives teachers tools for working safely with the inner life—that essential aspect of human nature that yearns for deep connection, grapples with difficult questions about meaning, and seeks a sense of purpose and genuine self-expression.

Donna and I began with training in the PassageWays Model in Boulder and then brought PWI faculty to East Prairie for a summer session where the staffs of the two elementary buildings were trained to implement PassageWays’ strategies for creating a culture of caring, connection, and compassion among faculty and in the classrooms. Our 60 teachers also explored the “Teaching Presence”—qualities essential to becoming a skillful and inspiring teacher—the art of respectful discipline, and bringing an open heart and our full presence to our teaching and to each other.

As principals, we offer PassageWays activities in staff meetings and teachers, in turn, are bringing strategies to their students that help to create feelings of acceptance, respect, value, and compassion for themselves and others. The school and classroom become a place that is safe for them to be real and not feel threatened to share their likes and dislikes and all the while discovering they are all more alike than different.

As a special education teacher writes, “I try to help my students prepare for other students treating them differently. Using PassageWays has offered many occasions for my students to express their own differences, and to recognize it is okay to be different. The use of the “talking piece” has encouraged them to be better and more respectful listeners.”

Every Monday begins with “Solo Time,” a PassageWays activity that teaches students and adults the power of “being present.” Following the pledge over the intercom, I invite everyone in the building to join together to be silent for 30 seconds. This activity helps transition us from what is and has been on our minds to focusing on where we are now and the purpose of the day ahead.

Students are not the only ones meeting at a deeper level—teachers working with PassageWays are also feeling a new level of connection to those they have so much in common with as they educate students from the same community. Once a quarter both buildings join together to enjoy time set aside to focus on sharing activities that allow them to develop a closer connection to each other.

Today, I continue to feel what I wrote in my journal after that first encounter with The Soul of Leadership: “The PassageWays experience can truly heal broken spirits and inspire each of us to be happy, safe, secure, and connected to each other. We CAN feel the strength of self and support of others.”

Fifth-grade students participating in a "where the wild wind blows" activity.