

Molly Stark Elementary School's Testimony Regarding School Discipline
Donna L. MacKenzie, Principal Gail W. Johnson, Assistant Principal
March 8, 2016

Molly Stark Elementary School Data 2015-2016
(September 2015-March 7, 2016)

K-5 school; 402 students

Special Ed: 83 students (21%)

504 Plans: 25 (6%)

Free/Reduced lunch: 73%

Total Suspensions: 3 students; 1 day each (K=1; 4th=2)

Total # of behavior incidents that required student to be sent home: 92

Total # of students that make up this number: 22

- Of this total, 48 are Special Education (23 in FLEX RR)
- Of this total, 17 are on 504 Plans
- Of this total, 27 are regular education
- No minorities or ESL are included in these numbers

Gail Johnson and I have worked together as administrators at Molly Stark for the past 8 years. Our combined years in education total over 65 years. Over the past 5-10 years, we have seen an unfortunate increase in the number of children entering school in poverty, in trauma, homeless, and not ready to learn or not available to learn. This has a huge impact on the entire school and its climate. Increased aggressive behavior, including physical and verbal outbursts or threats, impacts the teachers ability to teach and for other students to learn. Although we have many positive things in place for students and families, the reality is that these children are coming to us each year with more and more needs and the unspoken expectation is that "schools will fix them".

Schools need help with resolving the underlying issues that cause such young children to be so dysregulated. We need to address the needs of the "whole child". Children growing up in an environment of substance abuse, poverty, trauma, homelessness, multiple transitions between states and/or schools, foster care, verbal or physical abuse, and hunger are areas that our communities need to address. Schools are meant to educate and keep children safe. We do not believe that schools were ever meant to be what we have been forced to become: Mental health wrap around services for every child. If there is a policy that needs to be looked at, let it be that local mental health agencies will team together with schools to make effective changes. This would undoubtedly require a change in our funding sources. Schools cannot (and should not) be called upon to do this alone.

The resolution, in our opinion, does not rely on policy changes around discipline. It seems that most teachers in our Vermont Schools, although highly qualified and educated, do not have the required knowledge about how to recognize and teach children who are experiencing trauma. In hoping for long-term systemic change in our educational system, teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators need to be appropriately trained in this area. When a school is trained together about a cause that they are passionate about, it will have a lasting positive impact on our climate and achievements. I would like to suggest that more laws will not make it better. But more support for staff in our buildings and more support for the Agency of Education will make an appreciable difference.

Promising Practices at Molly Stark

- PBiS:

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- PBIS school for the past 10 years (triangle aims for 80% in green (universal), 15% on yellow (needs some work); 5% in red (high flyers needing additional support))
- Molly currently has 82% green, 11% yellow, 8% red
- Strength is in one's universal tier where you have things in place for ALL students
- Check and connect is used for targeting specific needs of individual students (this is short term and data is collected)
- Tier 3 students: On-site counseling with outside agency, FBAs, behavior plans, risk assessments, family safety planning meetings (family, school, DCF, Easter Seals, United Counseling Services), Coordinated service Team
- Office Discipline Referrals (ODRs) are tracked through SWIS, which enables us to have accurate data on discipline
- **Trauma:**
 - Worked 3 years ago with a trauma coach & trauma sensitive school in MA. Introduced us to "The Purple Book", Helping Traumatized Children Learn (A Report and Policy Agenda by the MA Advocates for Children) <http://traumasensitiveschools.org/tlpi-publications/download-a-free-copy-of-helping-traumatized-children-learn/>.
 - Through this coaching model we were introduced to Service Teams and Flexible Framework (found in Purple Book).
 - Research has proven that children in trauma experience a very different brain development.
 - Whatever we put in place to support children in trauma will be good for ALL students.
 - Twenty three teachers & staff from Molly took a course through Lesley College on trauma. This has helped to inform our practice and to work together on a common goal for our school.
- **Full Service School:**
 - Molly Stark has been a Full Service School since 1995 (introduced by former principal Sue Maguire). What this means for Molly:
 - On-site dental facility
 - Licensed day care before and after school
 - Consulting pediatrician
- **After School Programs & Summer Camp:**
 - After school programs have 3 sessions/year and run approximately 10 weeks each (21 activities to choose from; 150 students participating)
 - Summer Camp runs the month of July from 8-12:30. Focus is academics (specific to the child) as well as collaborative learning across grade levels, which include art, music, health/wellness
- **FLEX Resource Room:**
 - Due to the increase of highly disruptive and dangerous behavior, Molly created what we call our "FLEX Room". Most students who participate in this program have a diagnosis of Emotionally Disturbed, but that is not a criteria to attend. These are students who typically would have been sent to our district ED program for their educational placement. We have found over time that it is often difficult for these students to transition back into their home school. The FLEX Room enables children to attend their regular classroom, when able, but to remain in the school setting, in this room, if necessary, to receive their daily instruction. This is run by a special educator who must be in collaboration with the classroom teacher to ensure that academics continue.
- **Early Ed transitions into Kindergarten:**

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- Molly has an excellent working relationship with our EE coordinator. Our kindergarten & Early Ed team work tirelessly to provide a smooth transition into school.
- K teachers have the opportunity to observe in-coming K students in their current environment. Transition meetings are held before the end of school and pertinent information is shared so that we are prepared for their arrival.
- Molly hosts a month long summer camp for our in-coming K students. This runs the month of July (8-12:30) and allows our youngest students to become acclimated to the building before school begins.
- About 50% of our students attend this program.
- **Free/Reduced Lunch:**
 - Molly is a CEP school (Community Eligibility Program) where all of our students receive free breakfast and free lunch.
 - We also participate in the VT Food "Back Pack Program". Approximately 50 students take home food every other weekend.
 - Molly also is a participant in the VT Foodbank food drop. Every other week, the VT Food Bank sets up at Molly for food distribution to our families. We typically have 150-185 families that participate.

No child comes to school and thinks today is the day I'm going to throw a tantrum, destroy my classroom, attack my classmate, shout obscenities at my teacher, or hit, kick or spit on administration. A child's behavior is his/her form of communication. Behavior is always telling us something. If we can really focus on the whole child and their needs, with help from our local agencies, we will do a much better job of really educating our children, which will help to ensure that they have a bright and hopeful future tomorrow.

We have to look at behavior as communication. We have to listen to what we see.