


Chapter 10

The Perfect Storm of Challenging Students: Fifteen Strategies to Support the Socio–Emotional Learning and Education of the Whole Learner

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores 15 strategies being employed at various public military charter schools across the United States to support the socio-emotional learning and education of the whole learner. These research-based strategies are intended to overcome and vanquish the adverse childhood experiences (identified in a Kaiser health study), various forms of trauma, and typical “at risk” factors so common amongst families who tend to choose public military academies in the hopes these schools will “fix” the many challenges their children face. Through a careful examination of each strategy (including its research basis and benefits and challenges), the author provides a glimpse into a possible formula other public and private schools might consider employing to meet the socio-emotional and educational needs of students impacted by a cacophony of life’s challenges.

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching is a very difficult profession. Most people who have never tried to teach a room full of young people have no real understanding or appreciation for how challenging it can be. Arguably, the most compelling and urgent challenge facing schools today is the growing number of students who are coming into classrooms with significant trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences. These challenges have created what the researcher has termed, “Perfect Storm of Challenging Students”. For example, in one current seventh grade class section at the North Valley Military Institute in the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles, California, there are 37 students enrolled. The average reading and math performance of those seventh graders is at the third-grade level. Of those 37 students, 36 students are “students of color,” 36 qualify for free and reduced meals because of poverty, eight are homeless, four are foster children, 19 are Special Education, 33 have failed **two** or more classes in the previous school year, four are diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, 11 have diagnosed significant emotional disturbance, 15 are English learners, nine require weekly counseling sessions with licensed therapists, social workers or credentialed school counselors, 32 have been suspended or expelled from another school at least one in the last three years, 14 are from single parent households, 21 have had more than 10 absences from school in their previous six years of formal schooling, and **all 37 of the 37 have two or more** of these characteristics. Those numbers surely paint a bleak picture and compel recognition of how difficult teaching such a perfect storm of students can be.

The researcher’s extensive study of public military academies across the United States for nearly two decades reveals that there are strategies that appear effective at reaching those students caught up in that perfect storm. That empirical study has included both quantitative and qualitative analyses of student academic achievement, the nature and extent of academic and socioemotional supports in place at those schools, the design of character and leadership development programs at those institutions, and the robust characteristics of athletic and wellness programs at public military academies.

The formula these public military academies employ is seemingly simple, yet very difficult to implement successfully. Following are the 15 elements that appear common (to varying degrees) in those public military academies: 1) every adult on the school campus must believe that, with support from caring adults, every student can learn and achieve at high levels, completing a rigorous college preparatory curriculum that prepares them for entry into colleges and universities of their choice; 2) academic classes require predictable routines led by teachers with solid content knowledge and the ability to help students make sense of complex academic ideas in a highly structured environment; 3) clear, consistently enforced

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