

Using the CREE to Make School Improvements

by Mary Guilfoile and Dr. Patrick Queenan



Mary Guilfoile (third from right) with colleagues and students

The Glenholme School, a therapeutic boarding school in Washington, Connecticut, serves middle and high school students who have been unsuccessful in other settings because of emotional, learning, or behavioral challenges. The Smart & Good Schools approach has added strength and rigor to our efforts to help these students become healthy, moral, and resilient people.

When we read the *Smart & Good High Schools* report (www.cortland.edu/character), we realized that attention to performance values (positive attitude, best effort, perseverance, etc.) and collecting reliable data to assess our program had been missing pieces in our approach. We chose two of the Smart & Good report's 8 Strengths of Character to focus on: "diligent and capable performer" and "socially and emotionally skilled person."

First Steps

First, the faculty met in small groups to look at these two strengths of character and decide what Smart & Good practices we were already using and what new practices we should adopt or adapt. We agreed we needed to expand

opportunities for student leadership; involve students more in decision-making; and include more rituals in the life of the school. We then invited Dr. Matt Davidson from the Institute for Ethics & Excellence (IEE) to observe our program and make suggestions. He recommended that we collect data on our school climate and culture using the CREE (Collective Responsibility for Excellence & Ethics), an instrument developed by IEE.

Measuring the Climate and Culture

We decided that a longitudinal study of climate and culture was important for our school's growth. Then, in November, 2007, Dr. Vlad Khmelkov from IEE showed us how to administer the CREE in a confidential manner. We assigned a number to

each student and employee so that future administrations of the survey could track changes in attitude and behavior. Teachers used a class period to conduct the survey with their students. In February, 2009, we added the parent version of the CREE.

Sharing the Results

We devoted a lot of time to sharing and discussing the results with the full staff. Using the *Keys to Reports* guide provided by IEE, we identified:

- ✓ what there was to celebrate
- ✓ what we could improve
- ✓ questions we still had.

The summary and the full reports were also loaded onto the school intranet. All homeroom teachers taught their students a lesson on interpreting survey findings. Homeroom groups then examined the student data and chose what to focus on during the coming year. Students overwhelmingly agreed that they wanted to:

- improve student-to-student interactions
- increase student involvement in bringing about positive change in the school.

Improving the Climate and Culture Through Leadership

To help the students achieve these goals, 28 were chosen to participate in a week-long, summer Student Leadership Conference. Students explored leadership and teamwork concepts, practiced leading various group activities, and identified areas of school life that students could impact. Helping new students feel comfortable and welcomed was a project the group wanted to undertake.

They therefore developed a new Glenholme ritual, *Getting to Know You*. For an afternoon in September, the school hallways were lined with booths that described different aspects of school life; student leaders escorted new students as they explored the booths and met the staff; and the rest of the student body participated in activities led by other student leaders.

Many of the students who participated in these activities went on to run for student council. We found these students

Items from CREE (Collective Responsibility for Excellence & Ethics)			
<i>Ratings of 3 or above are desirable.</i>			
	2007	2009	Change
1. When I see someone having a problem, I offer to help.	3.46	3.55	↑ .09
2. I speak up when someone is bullied or harassed.	3.26	3.41	↑ .18
3. Someone verbally abuses or harasses another person (reverse-scored).	2.09	2.37	↑ .28
4. Someone steals from another person (reverse-scored).	2.51	2.82	↑ .31
5. Someone physically assaults another person (reverse-scored).	3.10	3.14	↑ .04
6. Someone uses email, text messaging, or websites to bully or harass others (reverse-scored).	4.28	4.25	↓ .07
7. Students here do not talk to or include those who are different (reverse-scored).	3.48	3.55	↑ .07
8. Students who are not part of the popular groups get picked on or excluded (reverse-scored).	2.36	2.66	↑ .30
9. Students here only care about themselves. (reverse-scored)	3.15	3.07	↓ .08
10. Students take an active role in helping solve school problems.	3.18	3.02	↓ .06
11. When students see someone being picked on, they try to stop it.	2.67	2.92	↑ .25
12. Students would try to stop their friends from spreading rumors or gossip about others.	2.36	2.38	↑ .02
13. Students believe that working together, they can bring about change in the school.	2.76	3.04	↑ .28

The scale of the CREE survey is 1 to 5. Negatively worded items are reverse-scored for the analysis, so that a higher score on an item always indicates a more positive behavior or perception.

Student Commitments

- I will not tease anyone who is different in looks or beliefs.
- I will try to look more on the positive side and influence others to do the same.
- I will be kind to others.
- I will stand up for people who won't stand up for themselves.

much more ready for their leadership roles than past students who had not been part of a Student Leadership Conference. We hoped this group's willingness to be involved in improving the school would have a ripple effect on the whole student body and school culture.

Evaluating Impact

In February 2009, we conducted the CREE survey for a second time to see if there were any changes in ratings of those items dealing with student-to-student interactions. The first column in the table (p. 4) lists the items students felt were most important to target. The next two columns list the mean scores for the items in the two administrations of the CREE. The "change" column indicates the difference between the two means. We considered any change of + or - .25 large enough to be substantively important. Using this standard, we determined that there had been substantive improvement in perceptions of:

- **Safety:** less verbal abuse, harassment, and theft (Items 3 & 4).
- **Acceptance:** less popular students being picked on less often (Item 8).
- **Prosocial action:** trying to stop students from being picked on (Item 11).
- **Students believing that they can bring about school change** (Item 13).

To test the effects of the leadership conference, we analyzed the data from the 2007 and 2009 CREE surveys for the

student leadership group alone. The rating for the item, "When I see someone having a problem, I offer to help," was higher for the leaders on the second administration compared to the rating for the whole student body (4.06 vs. 3.30). When we analyzed only the ratings for the newest students, the results indicated that they perceived the environment more positively than those who had been students longer. We hope we can attribute this result to our new *Getting to Know You* ritual.

Students Examine the 2009 Data

After the 2009 administration of the CREE, we once more made sure the student body had a chance to examine the data in focused class discussions. Students posted every school change that had taken place in the previous year that was the result of a student idea or action and discussed how the change had benefited the school.

All students also wrote about what they would commit to do in the coming year to continue to improve school culture. Sample commitment statements (see box) were shared with the student body and faculty.

The leadership conference experience was repeated in the summer of 2009.

Returning student leaders shared the ways they had implemented leadership lessons in the past year. They explored the question, "How do you get individuals who have their own agenda to cooperate for the greater good?" The group interviewed school and community leaders, such as the mayor of Torrington, to get their perspectives.

Glenholme has found the Smart and Good approach helpful in generating and documenting our outcomes. More longitudinal data will help us make further improvements. We will administer the CREE to students and staff for the third time in 2010. A parent leadership group will also be sending the survey to all parents. ■

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The Glenholme School, a Center of the Devereux Foundation, is a therapeutic boarding program and exceptional learning environment to address varying levels of academic, social, and emotional development in boys and girls ages 9-18. The goal is to prepare our graduates for continued education in traditional schools, boarding schools, colleges and universities.

THE CREE PROCESS

by Vlad Khmelkov



The story of how the Glenholme school worked with CREE data to inform and enhance their improvement efforts is a compelling real-world example of the steps that constitute what we call the "CREE Process" to support data-driven school improvement (see graphic).

The Smart & Good Schools Initiative views assessment not just as a way to check on one's progress. We believe that working with CREE data is a fundamental approach to helping staff and students practice in a natural way the principles of ELC (Ethical Learning Community) and PELC (Professional Ethical Learning Community), such as developing shared purpose and identity, aligning practices with desired outcomes, strengthening everyone's voice, and exercising personal and collective responsibility for excellence and ethics.

The Glenholme School started by identifying strengths and weaknesses in their existing practices (step 1 in the graphic), and gained consensus on which issues were the most important at the moment (step 2). Then, they explored ways to clarify the current state and selected the CREE as a tool to use in their longitudinal study (step 3). The results from the baseline data collection allowed setting specific goals for improvement (step 4) and a concrete action plan for how to reach those goals (step 5). After a year of implementation (step 6), the cycle repeated itself, but did so at the deeper level of understanding of the existing state and desired state, stronger commitment to fidelity of the process, and broader involvement of the stakeholders.

While many schools look for ways to involve the whole staff in discussing how to improve, centering such discussions on data makes the process less threatening, more focused, and ultimately more productive. Glenholme also found creative ways to involve students in reflecting on the CREE findings and taking action steps to improve school and culture. ■

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