



Leadership Development

Anywhere, Anytime

Practical Tips for School Leaders – #13

May 14, 2020

Please Stop Calling It Social Distancing

Excerpt from *Psychology Today*, Jim Taylor Ph.D.

Professor Taylor gave me a number of things to reflect on in his article. He reminds me there is power in words and that the term ‘social distancing’ may keep us from connecting with people just when we have the greatest need. “Words shape how we think, the emotions we feel, the way we act in our world and how we interact with others”. He goes on to say that the phrase ‘social distancing’ is an inaccurate representation of what we have been asked to do. Medical experts are asking us to maintain ‘physical distancing’ by staying 6-feet apart from each other to reduce the risk of transmitting or receiving contagions. The word social has nothing to do with maintaining physical distancing.

The definition of social: relating to society or as a noun, a gathering. Interestingly enough, Professor Taylor says we need to stay connected during the toughest of times. Isolation from others can cause depression. Humans are social beings and we must continue to associate with others to help us navigate uncertain times. Connecting with people provides communication, support, compassion, empathy, and the opportunity to share.

He reminds us that through decades of evolution human beings are hard wired to rely on interactions. Connecting with family, friends and peers benefits us physically, psychologically, and emotionally. Social connections help us feel safe, relaxed and are essential to helping us deal with stress and anxiety.

How do you help students and teachers stay connected? There have been several examples across the SJCS D schools of strategies used to connect students, teachers, staff and parents. A few examples to share: yard signs to designate a graduating senior, red carpet recognition for teachers, yard signs to recognize the volunteer of the year, videos posted to YouTube, phone calls to students, use of TEAMS for meetings, parades, etc. These have all lifted the feeling of isolation and helped people feel valued. Each example has helped maintain human/social interaction not driven by technology.

What advice can we give our students to help them stay connected with each other and yet maintain a safe and healthy physical distance? Professor Taylor suggests that each time we leave the house we speak to people. We don’t want students to talk to strangers though perhaps we could encourage them to make eye contact or share a smile with a person they see in the neighborhood while they are biking or walking the dog. As adults we can ask someone to tell us how they are managing the isolation?

When school opens, how will we help students adjust to maintaining safe physical distance from each other? Are there ways we can teach children to stay socially connected that don’t involve touching?