

Dr. Marta Pérez, School Board Member

SUBJECT: STUDENT PLEDGES

COMMITTEE: ACADEMICS, INNOVATION, EVALUATION & TECHNOLOGY

LINK TO STRATEGIC

BLUEPRINT: SAFE, HEALTHY AND SUPPORTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

As schools re-open, there is a need to manage student behavior that can spread the novel coronavirus. Several school districts that have opened in Florida report case reoccurrences including Orange, Osceola, Brevard, Volusia, Lake and Marion counties.

At its September 9, 2020 meeting, the Board approved *Agenda Item H-12 (Covid-19 Safety Acknowledgement)* presented by School Board member Dr. Dorothy Bendross-Mindingall which, among other measures, asked for the creation of a safety acknowledgment document intended to fortify a safe learning environment. Dr. Bendross-Mindingall's item states:

"The 'Integrity Principle' is a pledge and promise to actively participate in the social contract and moral obligation to exercise the one most powerful and fundamental sound tools at our disposal, which doesn't require much cost or effort on the part of the user which is to wear personal protective equipment as frequently as possible."

This item seeks to follow Dr. Bendross-Mindingall's initiative to further strengthen the requirement of responsibility by all, including our students, during this terrible historical time.

In addition to adhering to public health guidelines, some school administrators throughout the country are asking students to make a commitment or "pledge" to choose behaviors that reduce the risk of coronavirus transmission. This involves requiring students to sign their name to a promise, making them more accountable (and hopefully more likely to follow through). These conduct codes and written pledges mandate students to follow specific guidelines with defined expectations.

Research

There is evidence supporting pledges or public commitments. Research shows that people who publicly pledge to do something are more likely to follow through than those who do not make the pledge. This has been tested in multiple settings, including the use of contracts for college students' health-related behavior change (Petosa, 1984). The reason pledges work is clear — they create social pressure. The key to a successful pledge is public recognition, and teens who stick to a pledge are more likely to follow through if they have a source of accountability. It is believed that teens will be motivated to engage in prosocial behavior when under social pressure to do so. Not only does publicly pledging increase follow through, but it also encourages others to do the same.

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Further research supports signing a pledge is a powerful way to change behavior, even over the long term. Obtaining a written commitment is a cost-effective way to increase the likelihood that behavior change efforts will be effective. “Personal norm activation” suggests that once people make a commitment, they embrace it as a norm or “moral standard.” Choices and behaviors that are at odds with the commitment motivate them to act in accordance with the promise they made. Furthermore, when people perceive a misalignment between their actions, beliefs, or values, they experience discomfort (cognitive dissonance). People generally strive to maintain “cognitive consistency.” Making a written commitment indicates they are on board with the proposed behaviors, increasing the likelihood they act to match their embraced beliefs.

A study by E.S. Geller showed “promise cards” were effective in encouraging people to wear seatbelts (Geller, 1991). Drivers were asked to sign commitment pledges to consistently use seatbelts for 1-2 months. A significant number of pledgers increased their safety belt use – even over the long-term.

In another study by Werner, et. al. residents who made a written commitment were more likely to participate in recycling efforts than those who were told about the program in-person, by telephone, or through an educational flyer. A similar study looked at the recycling behavior of students and found that both individual and group pledges worked to positively change recycling habits – but only those students who signed individual pledges maintained the habit long-term.

There is ample research to support that signing a pledge or commitment is a powerful way to change behavior – even over the long-term. Obtaining a written commitment is a worthwhile and cost-effective way to increase the likelihood that behavior change efforts will be effective.

Application for our Students

M-DCPS should use the research on pledges to help in our commitment to use all means necessary to keep our students safe. If pledges can help our students’ safety to any degree, our school district should ask students to sign them (sixth grade and up). Research suggestion for effective pledges include:

- Public pledges seem to work better than private commitments.
- Written, specific, time-bound commitments are more effective than verbal or online pledges.
- Ideally, combine individual and group pledges so teens can take personal responsibility and hold each other accountable.
- Ensure that teens are aware and consistently reminded of their commitment and expected behavior (monitoring and accountability).
- Consider and remove real and perceived barriers to desired behaviors.
- Always include specific and measurable behaviors.
- Define quickly-executed consequences if pledge is broken.

MDCPS reinforces our district’s nine core values in our Values Matter Miami initiatives. In October, students are reminded of the importance of responsibility. What greater opportunity to practice social responsibility than to pledge safe behavior for the good of our entire community during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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The Board should consider adding the student pledge as part of the Covid-19 safety acknowledgement.

References:

Doel, A.M. and Shapiro, L.E. (2020). Taking Care of Your Mental Health during the COVID-19 Pandemic; Between Sessions Resources, Inc.; Norwalk, CT.

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Lederer, A. and Stolow, J. (2020). Don't Rely on Student Contracts to Safeguard Your Campus, Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/09/18/student-contracts-wont-do-enough-encourage-safe-behaviors-during-pandemic-opinion>

Petosa, R. (1984). Using Behavioral Contracts to Promote Health Behavior Change: Application in a College Level Health Course, Health Education, 15:2, 22-27.

Werner, C., et. al. (1995). Commitment, behavior, and attitude change: An analysis of voluntary recycling. Journal of Environmental Psychology, 15:3, 197-208.

This item has been reviewed and approved by the School Board Attorney's office as to form and legal sufficiency.

ACTION PROPOSED BY DR. MARTA PÉREZ:

That The School Board of Miami-Dade County, Florida, direct the Superintendent to review the feasibility of:

- 1) Educating students on the benefits of signing a pledge to follow safety guidelines relative to Covid-19;
- 2) Making available a uniform voluntary pledge to be signed by students (6th grade and up); and
- 3) Encourage schools to promote activities which engage students in understanding the importance of social responsibility.

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