

Better Student Experiences for Better Outcomes



By Donna McGuire

Feeling connected, safe, secure, curious, encouraged, brave — these are the hopes we have for all students in our schools, and the building blocks for creating instructionally safe environments that propel student learning.

A recent *Education Week* survey asked students, “What, if anything, could your teachers do to help you feel more motivated to do your best at school?” The number one answer was, “Give me a chance to redo assignments if I get a low grade.” Also among the top responses: incorporate more fun and humor, more hands-on experiences, provide more feedback, get to know me as a person, stop playing favorites, control the class.

What does this tell us? That a student who feels safe about making mistakes, asking for help or clarification, who is connected with a teacher focused on growth, who feels safe in their surroundings, who is not distracted by chaos, nervousness, or uncertainty, is more likely to take educational risks and thrive academically.

**LET'S LEARN LIKE A TEAM,
WORK LIKE A TEAM,
AND RACE LIKE A TEAM!**

A STORY ABOUT TEAM 18

"You need to be aware of what others are doing, applaud their efforts, acknowledge their successes, and encourage them in their pursuits. When we help one another, everybody wins."

- Jim Stovall

The inspiring quote from Jim Stovall serves as a reminder for educational leaders that to reach our greatest potential, we need everyone on our team to work collaboratively, as a school and as individuals within it. As administrators, we reflect on the way we support all the members of our learning community. We may believe we are meeting the needs of all students and staff, and that we are inclusive in our programs and instruction. However, would everyone on your team agree? What does the data indicate about your school? It could be a learning environment survey, or perhaps a focus group with students or parents. The answers may be telling, perhaps even jarring. More importantly, what do you do with the data you cull and how do you take the academic community to the next level?

THE DREAM

During the midst of the pandemic, our school, PS/IS 18, sought out ways to connect with our students, staff, and families. When we returned in September 2020, our priority was to continue to engage everyone and create a learning space, regardless of the learning platform, for everyone to be comfortable and succeed. It was imperative that all students and staff members receive the necessary tools, resources, and academic support so they could have a more rewarding and enriching school experience. We sought out

learning experiences from around the city and state that demonstrated a team approach to learning and wanted to infuse it into our instruction. To that end, we were introduced to the International Soap Box Derby program.

Ms. Patricia Lockhart, an amazing NYC special education teacher and staunch advocate for students, introduced the International Soap Box Derby program to her students almost ten years ago. She started it with the mini car program in grades 3-5, because it came with organized professional development for staff, five lessons for the unit, and an activity book for students to track their progress. Pat used the program to teach STEM with a hands-on approach and found that the learning activities could be completed at the students' desks, the lessons were collaborative and it excited students.

Another offering of the Soap Box Derby program is for students to work on a stock car, building it together, and participating in a race in which they can drive the car. For students with special needs, there is also a Super Kids stock car, where a special needs and general education student both ride in the car. The stock car program was wildly successful and inclusive, and Pat was determined to help other schools in Staten Island implement the program. It was not long before Pat gained interest from neighboring schools in her area. Her dream of having schools race each other became a reality, as a minimum of twelve participating cars or teams are needed to have a qualifying race within the International Soap Box Derby program. The idea caught on and now there are stock car races happening in different boroughs, and the first-place winner and their family go to Akron, Ohio to compete in the annual International Soap Box Derby race. A Director of STEM in the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) called me and asked if I would be interested in bringing a new program to the school and spearheading a race program in Manhattan, by getting twelve schools to participate in the stock car race program. Ms. Lockhart reached out to me, pitched the benefits of the program, and helped me to secure funding from grants. After

further research into the program and the success it was happening with the participating schools, my principal and I were eager to share the concept with the staff.

Before moving forward with the program, we need to look backward and learn about the history of the Soap Box Derby and how the International Soap Box Derby Program was developed. The history of the derby started back in 1933 when a news journalist, Myron Scott, was on an assignment and he saw a group of boys racing homemade cars. He was fascinated and so inspired, that he took photos of them and helped to create a copyright to the Soap Box Derby. Chevrolet sponsored the first All-American Soap Box Derby race in 1934. The event was in Dayton and it then moved to Akron, Ohio because the streets were hilly and more conducive for racing. In 1936, The Derby Downs, in Akron, OH, became the permanent track for this All-American race. WWII halted the race and it resumed in 1946. From its inception, the race and program were only offered to boys until 1971, when girls were allowed to participate. In 1972, Chevrolet was no longer the national sponsor and the local municipality attempted to keep it going.

In 1974, the International Soap Box Derby, Inc. was formed, to continue the program. In 2012, the derby program was made available for children ages 7-20 to participate from around the world. Unlike the soap box derby program of yesteryear, the International Soap Box Derby program is open to boys and girls, to build and race stock cars. In addition, students with special needs up to age 20, are also able to participate, because they can enter a car that will be built and adapted for them, hence, the Super Kids stock car. Instead of some students being marginalized, as in the early days of soap box derby, now all students have a chance to participate in a fun and educational activity!

WHAT TO GLEAN

After speaking with Ms. Lockhart, and learning the positive effects the program had on her special education class, we were excited. She explained that years ago, girls and special

education students did not have opportunities such as the derby. In fact, local races were mostly in suburban areas, and the program was not inclusive for all, because urban schools may not have had the necessary funding or support. Pat explained that during the process of building the cars, whether it be the mini cars they build at their desk, or putting a stock car together that they drive, the students are excited to build something with their hands. They use creativity and ingenuity, learn about teamwork and sportsmanship, and everyone can have access to something that can be a joyful experience. Of course, the program fits in nicely as a STEAM initiative in school, as students build a car with the accompanying toolkit, decorate it in a way that best represents them, and apply various weights to learn what makes the car go faster and slower, weigh the cars using the special scale and record their race times in their booklets. I worked with Ms. Lockhart, followed her guidance, wrote grants, and even presented the program at the virtual NYCDOE STEM Conference, all to acquire and maintain mini cars, the racetrack, and a stock car at school. PS/IS 18 was the first school in Manhattan to introduce the program and we hope, like Pat, to create a buzz amongst our borough so that we can have a Manhattan race. After our first year, we even secured a \$1,000 grant for another school, to excite them to participate and pay it forward. I continued by sending out information regarding the program and offered to present it at other schools, as a way to continue the momentum in our area.

FORM A TEAM

- As part of the International Soap Box Derby program, we received professional development for teachers in grades 3-5, on five lessons to do with the students, 100 mini cars, a racetrack for them, including a ramp and electronic timers, and provided instructional workbooks, so students could record their progress.
 - Students and staff that worked from home picked up their mini car kits and everyone completed
- the car, with the hybrid learning.
 - We had the custodians put the mini car racetrack together in the gymnasium, and taught staff members how to use the digital timer and track.
 - On race day, in late June, almost everyone came in to race on the track. It was a great day. In fact, the in-person race was the perfect way for students to transition back to school, and meet up or reconnect with their peers and staff.
 - The stock car is for students in grades 6-8, and it excites students in lower grades for what is down the road for them. It is a car that fits one student, and he/she will participate in a race on a real track, against other students.
 - In our second year, we had the grade 6-8 STEM teacher, launch the kickoff of our race season, with an assembly in the gym. It included the ten members of the race team of the stock car from the previous year. They spoke about earning trophies, how they worked together, and everyone has an opportunity to participate in the program. The team was open to all students in grades 6-8. Each school team received a trophy for participation on race day.
 - The Soap Box unit has now become a tradition within our school community and something to look forward to throughout the grades.
 - We hosted a school race with the mini cars and participate in a New York City borough race with the stock car. We were able to secure 100 mini cars and a racetrack for our sister school, by securing funds from a grant. The more the merrier...let's share the fun!
 - Winners from the five borough races for the stock cars will be eligible to compete in the annual race at the Derby Headquarters in Akron, Ohio - home of the Soap Box Derby.

GET THE STEAM

In our first year, we introduced the mini cars to grades 3-5. In 3rd grade, we had a remote girl come into school, specifically to race her mini car on the racetrack, and she won for her grade. In grades 4 and 5, we had a boy and a girl from special education win their perspective races. The students were very excited to have won and everyone was so happy for them. Think about the impact inclusiveness has on learning in our children's lives. Almost a hundred years ago, girls, special education students, and minorities did not usually partake in this experience. The students customize their cars during art class, test out the cars by placing and taking away weights and recording their times on the track, and it gave them something to be proud of because it was something they created. The program gave the students confidence and motivation and the teachers used it as a way reward system to give students some time to go back to the racetrack with their cars. The teachers worked together to share best practices. The custodians were helpful in putting together the racetrack and cheering our students on from the side. The teacher assistants supported our students every step of the way. In fact, one even drove the stock car to the borough race and worked with the STEM teacher to ensure that our race team would have all their necessary paperwork and permission slips in order. A feeling of pride was throughout the school, knowing that we all worked together in a program that excited the students. Now in our third year of this program, students and staff look forward to the derby, it creates a synergy that is so impactful, and memorable, and is a great way to end the year at Team 18.

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