

Speaker 1 ([00:04](#)):

Welcome to the GUIDE for Life podcast, exploring topics related to the personal competency skills that empower Arkansas students and teachers to thrive at home, school, on the job and in the community.

Tammy Friend ([00:16](#)):

I'm Tammy Friend. And joining me today is Cloverdale Middle School Assistant Principal, Crystal Green-Braswell. She's going to share all those good things she is leading over at Cloverdale Middle School. How are you today, Miss Braswell?

Crystal Green-Braswell ([00:37](#)):

I am extremely well, Tammy. Thank you for asking and I hope you're well too.

Tammy Friend ([00:41](#)):

I am. Thank you. So just to kind of introduce, get acquainted with you. What are some fun facts maybe that you might want to share about yourself?

Crystal Green-Braswell ([00:51](#)):

Some fun facts about me is that I love nature. I absolutely love, love, love nature. I love hanging out at botanical gardens. When I visit a new area, I love to take my camera and my phone and dabble in photography, but capturing all of nature's beauty in those places. I've been known to be in a botanical garden for five hours and nobody hear from me. So that's a fun fact. Another fun fact is I am trying to get over a fear of heights, and so I do really wild and crazy things. One would be going up to Pike's Peak over in Colorado. I mean, I probably had about three anxiety attacks on the way up. Cried twice, but was able to get there and just be happy about making it up there. And so I'm trying to face my fears while living the best life that I can possibly live.

Tammy Friend ([01:47](#)):

Well, I'll say you went all out. You didn't just go climb Pinnacle Mountain. You like go big or go home. So yes, that's awesome. I heard you mention that on Miss McAdo's podcast. And I was so intrigued and in awe of really your commitment to wellness in general, which kind of leads into the work that you've done over at Cloverdale. Well, so tell us a little bit about your journey into education.

Crystal Green-Braswell ([02:15](#)):

So I would just say that the adults that had the greatest impact on me as I was growing up were those adults in the school building. And no fault of the folks, you know, my mother, my father was just absentee due to circumstances that they could not control. And so I hold no grudges there. But at the same time, those folks that were in those school buildings for me really helped guide and help me to become the person that I am today. And they did not make me feel like I was a burden.

Crystal Green-Braswell ([02:52](#)):

They didn't make me feel like it was just something else on their to do list. They were really connected to me. I felt like there was relationships there and so true relationships. And so with that being said, I saw how impactful that was on my life, and I just clearly wanted to be that for others. And so that is what led me to education. Simply stated, that's it. That is the reason why I'm on this journey.

Tammy Friend ([03:21](#)):

And I'm so thankful that you are, as evidence for the lives that you've touched. And so I first learned about you through the school wellness wheel, and you are in there contributing in a series of vignettes. You share your and your team's experiences of adopting the school wellness wheel as the instructional framework for Cloverdale Middle School. So how did you come to know of the framework? And maybe can you tell us a little bit about the framework?

Crystal Green-Braswell ([03:51](#)):

The framework pretty much has three pivot points. And those pivot points are the culturally responsive teaching, trauma responsive schooling and mastery based learning. And those three points really lead our work, the bulk of the work. But around those points are wellness and of course learning and then literacy. And so with that being said, let me not glaze over the center of that work, which is becoming a healing and resiliency centered organization. And so we began the work, Dr. Mike Ruyle, who is the author of the book, and he was coming to us to work with us with our high reliability schools through Marzano. He was our Marzano Associate. But in talking to him about what we wanted to become, he said, "Listen, this really aligns with work that I want to do. And I want to publish work to help schools become exactly what you're striving to become."

Crystal Green-Braswell ([05:00](#)):

And so, because we serve a historically traumatized population, our population, African American and Latino. And so with that being said, we know that our students come to us traumatized by life experiences. And so, one, we did not want school to be yet another traumatizing experience. But second, we wanted to be very deliberate about what we were exposing students to in order to help them to heal. And then hopefully reaching back to their families and helping them as well. And so that work, we were working to become a level one safe and collaborative culture, ended up just kind of snowballing into this work. And so we were able to implement the work while also helping to build the framework, kind of trial by fire type situation. But it's really been a outstanding journey for me, if I can just be selfish for a second, because I'm evolving.

Crystal Green-Braswell ([06:06](#)):

I always tell people, we're never in the land of done. And so I feel extremely blessed to be a part of this work, but then also in helping others to be their best selves and to heal from whatever it is they may be feeling held hostage by. And so the work there, and then the three pivot points, the fact that we're asking teachers and students to be engaged in work that is culturally responsive, of course, that then makes people feel more connected. And so, again, helping people to feel safe and feel able to collaborate. But then the trauma responsive schooling where we are doing very deliberate things in our classrooms to just help people to take the anxieties away and the brain is ready to learn. And then of course the mastery based learning. So one thing is to try to figure out how we can take stress away from not only students, but teachers.

Crystal Green-Braswell ([07:03](#)):

And so with that mastery base, there comes essential standards. Well then that means that teachers aren't stressed out about trying to figure out how to get it all in. But then students aren't stressed out about teachers running through a curriculum. And so with the mastery based piece, they feel success. Well, what does success do? It motivates me to do other things and it takes stress away from me. Thus,

all of those things rallying around being a healing and resiliency centered organization. And so this work, it just speaks to my entire soul and I'm happy to do it. I hope that answers your question.

Tammy Friend ([07:44](#)):

It does. It does. So many moving parts that rely and build on each other for the comprehensive wellness. In the book, you mentioned when you're talking about the implementation process, that it being a heavy lift for everyone. So what did the planning and training process look like? Even selecting your teammate, you don't want them to merely buy in. You want them to be committed. How did you go about that?

Crystal Green-Braswell ([08:13](#)):

We had to begin with deciding who our guiding coalition would be, with our work through Solution Tree. And so with that being said, it was important for us to take observations that we had conducted, because we wanted to look for teachers who had natural connections with students, who were able to create spaces in their classrooms that felt like safe havens. And we wanted folks who did not mind leading while modeling the behavior. And so we were able to kind of pick those folks out and say, okay guys, this is what we're wanting to do. And we want to take what you do in your classroom on your own to scale for our entire building, and this is the framework that's going to help us. And from that point, we then began to look at our systems. We spent a lot of time together in the summertime.

Crystal Green-Braswell ([09:12](#)):

The guiding coalition always spends at least a week together in the summer, focusing on the part of the wellness wheel that will be our overarching theme for the year. And then we also spend time getting to know ourselves better. We spend time in nature. We spend time working out together. And so the process that we use with our guiding coalition, and we don't have the same people every year either. There are some folks that are, you know, they're there, they're stationary. But we will gather a new person or maybe a brand new, like a novice teacher that's coming in. But we really want them to, first of all, feel connected to us, feel connected to the work. And so with that being said, when you spend a week together and we're out in nature and we might take a hike and somebody may not be able to make it down and we hold ourselves able, and we can do this and we can lift each other up. That just kind of separates who's in this for the, you know, whose heart is in it and whose isn't.

Crystal Green-Braswell ([10:19](#)):

And so it really does, the cream does rise to the top as my great principal says all the time. Miss Wanda Ruffins, she says, "The cream will always rise to the top." And so with that being said, we then take that group and that group is dispersed out in to the Cloverdale world and is able to help guide and lead and answer questions and kind of soothe the naysayers and get them to understand the real reason why we're doing this work. And so it's just been a blessing.

Crystal Green-Braswell ([10:58](#)):

I can give you an example. One of the teachers was going through a divorce, a really messy divorce. And she called me in tears. And her tears were not because she was distressed, she was so happy that her journey had led her to Cloverdale so that she would have the tools that she needed to navigate through that very difficult time. And I just literally, I held it together while I was on the phone with her, but I hung up that phone and I cried myself. And it was because if we can give people the tools that they need to navigate through life's journey, then we have done our job.

Tammy Friend ([11:38](#)):

Absolutely. And what validation. Not that you needed validation, but it never hurts when you see the immediate impact, the positive impact that you are having on your colleagues, your coworkers. And the fact, just the training process, you are modeling the very skills, building those relationships that you plan to transfer into the classroom with the students and equipping them with the skills that will strengthen them. What positive outcomes have you witnessed since implementing the framework? And first of all, how long has the framework been in motion?

Crystal Green-Braswell ([12:15](#)):

So we've had two different things going on at once. So we've had the level one, two, and we're working on level three with HRS, getting those certifications. And so we, pretty much three years as far as the implementation. But then also the fact that we had to try to figure out how to navigate around, through, whatever this pandemic, which has really kind of set. I don't know if I want to call it a setback. It really just, it slowed our momentum down. Because we had to stop and focus on how to navigate through having school at home, virtually, pandemic and that kind of thing. Now, what I will say is if we hadn't had this in place, I think we would be dealing with more issues now than before. But I will say that the positive outcomes that we've seen, and I'm going to speak to you pre COVID and post COVID, because it's two different worlds.

Crystal Green-Braswell ([13:27](#)):

Pre COVID, our teacher attendance increased. Our student attendance increased. We had suspensions decrease. Our turnover for staff decreased. Our enrollment increased. It was amazing. And I think the thing that has really been exceptional for me to see is that students and staff, their ability to articulate their emotional needs, I think that's been the most rewarding for me. Because the more that we can process our emotion and then articulate what we need, that keeps us from blowing up and doing things that, you know, it manifests itself in other ways that can't, most often isn't as positive. It would be viewed more as a negative thing. Now let's talk about post COVID.

Tammy Friend ([14:19](#)):

If we must, if we must.

Crystal Green-Braswell ([14:22](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. Let's talk about post COVID because we have had some people decide that they're ready to retire. They're ready to give this up. And so then, of course, that means we're getting new people. So what does that do for our turnover rate? Well, it kind of [inaudible 00:14:44] our attendance rate, because there are teachers who had to be out because they're quarantined, they have COVID themselves, that kind of thing. I mean, it's just, you know, you've lived this COVID life with me or with us. And so we've not allowed it to discourage us, I'll say that. But what we've seen the first nine weeks where everybody had to come back to school, and there was this culture that was going on where folks were just, the kids just wanted to fight each other for all kinds of reasons.

Crystal Green-Braswell ([15:20](#)):

And so the first quarter, we really tried to help the young people understand that that's not the way. Remember the cub way, we teach our students the cub way in our college and career readiness course.

And so with that being said, after the first quarter, things started to level out. And we don't have the issues that a lot of the other campuses around us are dealing with because we do have the cub way. Because we're helping students to process their emotions. We're helping students to engage in mindfulness. We are helping students to journal, just different things that they can do instead of those negative things. And so I will say that that is a positive and a plus for us. And I do know that this is the foundational work that will then help us academically to be able to deal, or to see the achievement come to fruition there.

Crystal Green-Braswell ([16:22](#)):

Because if, you see the little meme all the time, we've got to take care of the Maslow stuff before we can ever deal with the Bloom stuff. And so with that being said, we've got trauma already existing, then the trauma from the pandemic. Just the fact that we weren't able to socialize, or we're not able to socialize and not able to show affection. People shying away from hugs and holding hands and that kind of thing, that all has an impact on the psyche. And so coming away from all of that and helping teachers to help students and even helping teachers for themselves to navigate through that, so that we can focus on that academic piece. I am a firm believer that once we've got this foundation laid, and then we'll see the academic piece.

Tammy Friend ([17:16](#)):

Yes. Great gains. That's what the research shows for sure.

Crystal Green-Braswell ([17:20](#)):

Yes, absolutely.

Tammy Friend ([17:21](#)):

So you are kind of, I would say a visionary, here in the district. You just take off, you're like, you know what, we're going to go with this approach. We're going to try this framework. And you went on with fidelity, clearly.

Crystal Green-Braswell ([17:34](#)):

Yes, ma'am.

Tammy Friend ([17:34](#)):

So do you know if any of the schools in your district plan to follow suit or?

Crystal Green-Braswell ([17:41](#)):

Well, I will say that we are working with one middle school. We've kind of established a PLC of our own, where we're working together to help them to implement the wellness wheel, the school wellness wheel [inaudible 00:17:53]. Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tammy Friend ([17:54](#)):

That's awesome.

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Crystal Green-Braswell ([17:55](#)):

Yeah. I'm excited about it too. And hopefully the other folks will get on board. But you know, it's okay. We'll find a way. We'll find a way.

Tammy Friend ([18:04](#)):

Absolutely.

Crystal Green-Braswell ([18:05](#)):

Yes. But we are working with one middle school.

Tammy Friend ([18:07](#)):

That's great. Well, do you have a final thought or thoughts to leave with us today?

Crystal Green-Braswell ([18:12](#)):

I guess my final thought today, and this is just for everyone in general, is wherever life's journey takes you, remember to be present in every moment. Because whatever moments that we have, once they're gone, they're gone and we can't get them back. And so it's important that we really are present in every moment and just find ways to be well.

Tammy Friend ([18:34](#)):

That's a great reminder. One we all do, especially in this high tech digital world, is to being intentional is definitely key.

Crystal Green-Braswell ([18:46](#)):

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Tammy Friend ([18:49](#)):

Well, thank you so much for joining us today and sharing your journey and the progress you've made at Cloverdale Middle School. And I just appreciate, I was in the classroom for 18 years and I appreciate the work that you do for our kids.

Crystal Green-Braswell ([19:03](#)):

And I will tell you Tammy, I appreciate the work that you are doing too for our state. Just getting this message out and any message that will help people to be well and to create systems for wellness. I'm just excited about being a part of it. So thank you so much.

Tammy Friend ([19:22](#)):

Thank you.

Speaker 1 ([19:27](#)):

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