

Mindfulness & Wrap Around Services Support Student Success in Schools

By Shawnta S. Barnes – June 15, 2017



Rondell and his mother at a spring session of K-2 STEM Challenge Club.

It was Saturday, May 14, 2016, and it was the first time I met Rondell Sarver who was five years old at the time. He was standing next to his brother Noah Sarver who was lying in a casket. Noah passed away on Sunday, May 1, 2016, at ten years old from an accidental gun shooting. I did not know it at the time, but he would become my little buddy.

A few months later, it was August, and Rondell began kindergarten at Wendell Phillips Elementary School #63, the school his brother Noah previously attended. It was apparent right away that Rondell was a bright boy, but he struggled to adapt to the school setting.

One of my school responsibilities was breakfast duty. Each morning, I greeted students as they picked up their breakfast from the cafeteria. Early on in the school year, Rondell struck up a conversation with me in the breakfast line which led to us talking almost every day. Some mornings when he walked into the cafeteria, he would be in tears and didn't want to speak, other mornings he would be angry and pace, and some mornings, he just wanted a hug. Rondell loved learning and enjoyed coming to school each day, but he struggled at times processing his emotions.

Our school created a new position, Culture and Climate Specialist, the previous school year. Our specialist, Kayleigh, was charged with building a positive culture for our school by helping and coaching students to make different choices. She also supports teachers in changing their mindsets around discipline and incorporating mindfulness inside of the classroom. "My first task was connecting Rondell and his mother with counseling through Midtown so they could receive grief support."

Many times in education, I have seen families get connected to support, but then it falls through the cracks. With a Midtown office in our school building, this allowed for sessions to take place during the school day at the optimal time for the student. Having a mental health office inside of a school also helps decrease the stigma of mental health services. The stigma of mental health services especially in minority communities keeps families from wanting to receive necessary treatment.

One day, I was walking down the hall on my way to observe reading instruction. I came across Rondell walking alongside an adult. "Mrs. Barnes, I want you to meet someone important. This is my therapist. She's pretty cool. She helps me, and I

get to play games with her.” He did not have any shame introducing her to me, and the way services are integrated into our school, this seems to be the case for other students.

In addition to being a literacy coach at my school, I also served as the high ability building facilitator and brought a K-2 STEM Challenge Club to our school through The STEM Connection. Rondell attended club during both our fall and spring sessions. I noticed how focused he would become during tasks and the level of critical thinking questions he would ask. After discussing my observations with his teacher Ms. Wood, we recommended him for high ability testing. Testing showed he qualified for high ability for English/language arts. This critical piece of information allowed his teacher to serve his academic needs better while our Culture and Climate Specialist served his social and emotional needs.

“After connecting Rondell’s family with services, I implemented a plan for him. Every morning he checks-in with me. He would receive a schedule of his day with smiley faces and frowns next to each task. His goal was to earn at least eight in the morning. If he earned eight, he would enjoy a fun activity at noon with me. We would play some pragmatic skills games. If I could see he just needed a little down time, we would color, play tic-tac-toe, or just listen to music and draw. At the end of his break, we would do some breathing and stretching. I would remind him of his expectations and goal to receive eight or more smiley faces. If he earned those in the afternoon, he was able to dismiss with one of his favorite teachers. He would turn his paper into me the following morning to earn a sticker on his goal chart. We chunked his goal chart at the beginning in really small increments.

By the end of the year, he was completing his goal charts in two-week chunks. After filling out our chart from the day before, we would go into our breathing and stretching routine. We would role play and go through scenarios for the day that might give Rondell challenges. He learned several different coping skills throughout the year.” Kayleigh Fosnow – Culture and Climate Specialist

It was evident as the year progressed that Rondell was able to recall the coping skills he learned and apply them to various situations. This allowed him to spend most of his school day inside of his classroom. His mom April Sarver shared, “I am grateful to school 63 especially Mrs. Fosnow. Rondell calls her his school mom.”

Even the brightest students, when they face trauma need proper supports in place. The old adage, “It takes a village” is the attitude every school should have. Each person, a child, comes into contact with should add value to the student’s life and help him or her work towards success. I recently attended Indianapolis Public Schools Wellness Luncheon, and Kristina Hulvershorn from the Peace Learning Center said, “The wellness of students is the business of everyone.” We have to reach the whole child, so we are sending adults into society who can cope with life challenges in a productive manner.