

SAY CONNECTS

A YEAR-LONG SERIES FOCUSING ON COMMUNICATING OUR PRIORITIES FOR CHILDREN

INTRODUCTION

What is self-efficacy

The possession of "grit" has been deemed by many in education as necessary for academic success; particularly when speaking of kids of color who are struggling. I've never liked the term. It speaks of courage and strength of character in the face of difficulty and asks kids to be tougher. It also upholds the practice of letting some kids be kids while asking others to grow up faster and toughen up.

I prefer helping kids develop self-efficacy. A leading researcher in the field, Albert Bandura, defines self-efficacy as "the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations." Success is not about enduring or surviving. It is about building the skills to thrive while growing confidence. Self-efficacy puts some of the onus on adults to help young people develop these skills and lets them "fly" on their own. It doesn't presume that hard work alone will lead to success, or that the road will be smooth. It gives kids the sense that they can manage the "bumps" and feel good about themselves at the end of the journey.

This issue of Say Connects covers the important subject of self-efficacy in our community. How it's nurtured by adults and how a group of young people are making a difference by practicing it.

— Linda Francis

Director Success of All Youth

Our website is SAYoprf.org.
And we're on Facebook at
Success of All Youth.



VOICE OF YOUTH: Five OPRF students talked candidly of their experiences with race and equity during the Jan. 17 Say Connects forum. From left, Michela Anderson, Charles Lemke-Bell, Jocelyn Meraz, Daysha Walker, Alexia Lopez, and moderator Linda Francis. (ALEXA ROGALS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

OPRF student leaders grapple with empowering the whole

The challenge? Extending their sense of efficacy to those left out

By **MICHAEL ROMAIN**
Contributing Reporter

The renowned psychologist Albert Bandura writes that a "strong sense of efficacy enhances human accomplish-

ment and personal well-being in many ways," adding that individuals who have strong self-efficacy, or a "high assurance in their capabilities" confront difficult tasks not as "threats to be avoided," but as "challenges to be mastered."

On Jan. 17, five student-leaders from various Oak Park and River Forest High School clubs and organizations gathered in Percy Julian Middle School's auditorium to share their experiences with trying to master the difficult task of overcoming OPRF's long culture of

racial inequity.

The panel discussion — sponsored by Success of All Youth and Wednesday Journal, and moderated by SAY director Linda Francis — included

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Making our communities a better place — one child at a time!

Too scared to fail

Is this generation lacking important skills? What should we do?

By **LACEY SIKORA**
Contributing Reporter

These days, it can be hard to escape the stories in the media about grit. People call it grit, gumption, self-sufficiency.

But how about calling it self-efficacy, believing you have the stuff to make happen what needs to get done, the ability to work your way through inevitable challenges.

There is a common thread, though, that says young people with those skills succeed and those that don't are going to get stuck. Another common thread? That much of the current generation of kids lacks these skills and that their parents are failing to prepare them for life outside the home.

From employers frustrated that their young employees have more cell phone skills than work skills, to parents annoyed that their kids don't seem to take personal responsibility around the house, the manifestations of lack of self-efficacy are varied but not surprising according to Oak Park parenting coach Sheryl Stoller of Stoller Parent Coaching.

Stoller says that a common refrain from parents in her practice is that they feel they are supposed to be teaching their kids responsibility at home so they can go out in the world on their own and thrive, but their kids don't seem to be taking the initiative at home the way earlier generations might have. What's the difference between kids today and how their parents were raised?

She says that one key factor is the increasing amount of structure kids have in their lives these days. "With all of the activities they do, all of the coaches or guides in these activities act as if this is their entire world, but kids are participating in four or five or more activities.

They're expected to do too much and are expected to look good on paper for colleges or whatever comes after school. This leads to heightened anxiety."

Parents can benefit from reframing the problem. A lack of helping out around the house may not be a lack of responsibility; it may be a mental health issue. She points out that parents need to consider that kids need downtime to function. Then, parents need to model appropriate behavior themselves. According to Stoller, "Parents need to show how to incorporate self-care into their lives. This means refueling, feeling all of our senses and creating balance. Kids need to see that there are always trade-offs and you can't do everything all of the time."

Another difference kids today face is the constant presence of social media. Stoller says, "Social media and being under a microscope is a whole lot of added pressure. The pressure is way worse than what parents experienced at this age."

She recommends that parents recognize this and provide a safe, judgment-free harbor for their kids to counteract the impact of social media.

The brain's hardwiring and the pleasure response that comes from electronic usage can add to that sense of being too scared to fail. It can be far easier to focus on one's phone than try something new and risk failure.

Stoller says that the science shows "we are wired to know if something is dangerous or safe. We are wired for safety and pleasure."

She notes that some children react to this by a lack of action due to their fear of failure, "I can't fail if I never try." On the other side of the spectrum, overachievers and perfectionists accept the pressures of society and don't



GOOD ADVICE: To learn self-efficacy, children need to see their parents work on problems, sometimes fail, and then regroup, says Sheryl Stoller, a parent coach. (ALEXA ROGALS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

"You can say, 'I just tried this, and it didn't work.' Model the struggle through the solution. They can see mom and dad juggle the plates and see mom and dad drop the plates."

— **Sheryl Stoller**
Parent coach

allow themselves to fail at great cost to their mental well-being.

Parents, teachers and employers of young people can make it possible for kids to open themselves up for challenge. "The goal is to make the challenge fun. We also need to model that and welcome trying and failing. Our desire to have fun being curious about what we're capable of, what we can tweak, this produces gumption. If this is the environment at home, it goes a long way."

A parenting tip that Stoller believes can help parents of all children is to act as mirror to their children. When they've worked hard at something, she counsels: reflect that back at them by saying something like "You're in a great mood," or "You're beaming right now." This sort of statement gives the child a chance to

"radar in" on how their actions are affecting their mood.

Conversely, if something is not going well, she recommends the same approach, using statements and observations rather than questions. "The goal is to let them know, your world is yours. You share with me when you want to share with me."

She also recommends parents let kids see them fail. "You can say, 'I just tried this, and it didn't work.' Model the struggle through the solution. They can see mom and dad juggle the plates and see mom and dad drop the plates."

To top it all off, she says adults should recognize that society expects a lot of kids today and model self-compassion for them so that they can realize they are the source of their own well-being.

All of this plays into creating young adults who can be healthy and independent. She likens teenagers to being in the chrysalis stage in butterfly formation: they must disintegrate in order to become a butterfly, and once they break out of the chrysalis, they need to rest and replenish in order to fly. "We, as parents, should not be afraid of the chrysalis stage. You have to drop that egg in a place where you think the hatching caterpillar will be able to find food and let it go."

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Finding joy in working

With two jobs, Ben Rankin-Parker is all about the people

By **LACEY SIKORA**
Contributing Reporter

Ben Rankin-Parker likes to be busy. The Oak Park resident doesn't let his disabilities keep him at home. He has two part-time jobs and feels a sense of purpose, as well as an enhanced sense of community, from punching the time clock on a weekly basis. While Ben and his family see the benefits of his working, not every person in his position is able to find meaningful work.

In 2015, a report of the National Conference of State Legislatures for the Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion, funded by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy, found that in spite of the fact that Americans with disabilities make up one of the largest minority groups in the country at nearly 20 percent of the population, only 20 percent of citizens with disabilities are participating in the workforce, compared to 69.1 percent of people without disabilities.

There are roughly 45 federal programs that support employment for people with disabilities. In the western suburbs, Oak Park's Oak-Leyden Developmental Services offers a Supported Employment Program to train people with disabilities to prepare them to obtain private sector jobs. Lo-

cally, Culver's in Berwyn, Jewel in River Forest, and Oak Park's Trader Joe's and Happy Apple Pie Shop are employers who see the benefits in working with adults with disabilities.

From making money to connecting with the community to building lifelong skill sets, the benefits of employment for those with disabilities are wide and varied. Once people with disabilities age out of the school system, a job can provide an important lifeline as it has for Ben.

The state is required to educate students with disabilities until they are 22, and public schools and social service agencies can help students prepare for life after school. Ben's mother, Ruth Rankin, says that the services of Oak Leyden were instrumental in bridging the gap between high school and employment for Ben.

When Ben aged out of OPRF, he attended job training programming through Oak Leyden. At first, Oak Leyden worked to train Ben as a busboy at a downtown restaurant, providing on-the-job training. That job proved too challenging for Ben, Ruth says so Oak Leyden and Ben recalibrated to find a job that he could master. Oak Leyden provided on-site training for Ben at the River Forest Jewel, and he jumped into the job bagging groceries as a courtesy clerk.

Ruth notes that for individuals with



ON THE JOB: Ben Rankin-Parker has worked at the River Forest Jewel for 11 years. "I like everybody there," he says. (PHOTOS BY ALEXA ROGALS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

disabilities, self-sufficiency takes on a different meaning. Ben will never live on his own or manage his own money, but she says that his ability to learn through hard work and his self-worth have absolutely been impacted by his employment.

At OPRF, the CITE (Community-Integrated Transition Education) program for students with disabilities promotes movement from school to post-school activities, including post-secondary education, vocational training, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation.

Gwendolyn Walker-Qualls, OPRF's director for student services in the special education department, says approximately 45 students are currently enrolled in CITE, and these students have a variety of different disabilities: including autism, emotional disabilities, learning disabilities, attention deficit disorder and intellectual and physical disabilities.

CITE teachers and transition special-

ists work with students in volunteer experiences, work experiences, and exploration experiences, based upon the abilities of the students. In the classroom, Walker-Qualls says CITE students work with resume building and job interviewing skills. They might take

part in working on job applications and learning about various career opportunities.

For students who may not be able to participate in competitive employment, CITE recognizes that self-efficacy can be fostered through other means. Students participate in volunteer opportunities or workshop experiences, which

provide a sense of purpose and an important connection to a larger community.

Finding that right fit of challenge and engagement with the community can be key to self-efficacy, no matter the kind of disability a young person lives with.

Ben has experienced plenty of times when he was not able to do what everyone else was doing, but his employment has changed that dynamic according to his mother, "His work is

absolutely priceless. He knows he's an integral part of the community and that the work he does is valuable. He doesn't need job coaching anymore, he has learned how to do it himself. Being a part of something that's so visible is invaluable to his happiness."

Earning a paycheck is also a part of that equation. Ruth notes that Ben has a strong sense of the value of being paid for his work. "When he pays for things he wants to do or buy, he knows he's doing that with money that he's earned, and that matters."

While Ben loves his weekly shifts at Jewel, the lifelong Oak Park resident was not content with just one job. A few years ago, he was at the gym when he ran into a neighbor. Ben recalls, "I asked him if he had a job for me, and he said, 'sure.'" That neighbor happened to play a key role in Aspire Coffeeworks, an organization on the north side of Chicago that combines Aspire, a leader in providing services to kids and adults with disabilities, and Metropolis Coffee Company. Adults with disabilities work through Aspire side-by-side with Metropolis employees to bag and market Metropolis Coffee. Every dollar of Aspire Coffeeworks proceeds go back to fund programs for people with disabilities.

While his two jobs may be quite different, for Ben there is a sense of connectedness and purpose that goes along with both. "I like having two jobs," he says. "I like to be busy."

"Ben has a way of greeting people that is totally genuine and makes people feel great."

— **Ruth Rankin-Parker**

Ben's mother



EQUITY

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Michela Anderson and Jocelyn Meraz of Students Advocating for Racial Equity (SAFE); Charles Lemke-Bell of OPRF's Student Council; Daysha Walker of the South Asian Youth Club; and Alexia Lopez of ASPIRA (Latin Leaders Club).

"Having grit alludes to just survival," said Francis. "But having self-efficacy means you're thriving."

The students articulated their struggles with building healthy, thriving personalities, and advocating for themselves, within a high school culture that can often overlook the particular needs of the less well-off and people of color, among other marginalized groups — particularly those outside of the black-white binary.

"I have Latino friends who are really frustrated, because they see the conversation at OPRF as really black and white," said Lopez.

The binary, other students said, is embedded in gaps in the curriculum. Meraz said that "we don't really learn about Asian or Latino history." Lemke-

Bell pointed out that, after telling his counselor that he was interested in Latin American history, the counselor told him that the course no longer existed. That it was no longer an option likely because not enough students enrolled in the course, he said.

"Speaking for South Asians," said Walker, "some of us are fine with not being noticed."

"I would like to hear more experiences from people of color, but I can't speak up for them and I'm not really seeing them and I don't know how to help them. If I knew how, I would."

The students said that, in addition to some marginalized racial groups like Latinos and Asians, there seems to be an entire half of the high school missing from the student-led struggle for racial equity at OPRF — boys.

Much of the recent equity-related agitation and policy activity at OPRF — from the protests to the public comments at school board meetings to the push for a racial equity course at the high school, which faculty and students are planning to rollout as a pilot next semester — have been led by young women of color.

"We want to have more action. We need to have more students in conversations with the administration, we need to have more students on committees."

— Charles Lemke-Bell

OPRF Student



CHARLES LEMKE-BELL: "Having men and boys involved in social movements is extremely important."



MICHELA ANDERSON: "I would like to hear more experiences from people of color, but I can't speak up for them and I'm not really seeing them and I don't know how to help them. If I knew how, I would." (PHOTOS BY ALEXA ROGALS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

The young men, Lopez said, disappear during club meetings. And when they come, they don't contribute much to the conversations, said Anderson, who advocated that, as an antidote to this apathy, people empathize with young men, especially young men of color.

The boys, Anderson said, are following society's expectations for them. Their lives "have been setup" to wear a mask of masculinity that is not necessarily conducive to social change, she said.

"Having men and boys involved in social movements is extremely important," said Lemke-Bell, the only male on the panel. "I think the best way to do that is to move past the toxic masculinity that defines how we think men should be in this country. Men aren't taught to be emotional outside of the football field or maybe a funeral, if we let them. It's not OK."

Walker said that in the Asian community, toxic masculinity is "absolutely horrible," adding that young men in her community must "show no signs of emotion or femininity." The "discussion of how men should be treated definitely has to change," because the damage that this inflicts on "sons is really traumatizing."

Within the culture of OPRF, as in the wider world, there's a general dearth of spaces that allow students, regardless of their particular identities, to be vulnerable, to express weakness, without fearing some kind of social reprisal, the students said.



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When OPRF Principal Nathaniel Rouse attempted to create a safe space for African American students to talk with each other in 2015, Lemke-Bell said, "It was shut down and condemned by the community."

This dearth of safe space even extends to white students, said Anderson, who lamented that there are no spaces "for white people to say something ignorant [about people of color] and not feel attacked."

Self-efficacy, after all, has its limits. For an entire system or culture to change,

there needs to be what might be considered collective efficacy, meaning that individuals must feel assured in their capability to effect systemic change while working together, not just as isolated actors, the students indicated.

"We want to have more action," said Lemke-Bell. "We need to have more students in conversations with the administration, we need to have more students on committees and in meetings with the administration talking about important issues. I don't think we have enough of that yet."