

# Resilience in Action: Millennium Middle's Path to Academic and Cultural Success

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In the fall of 2023, Millennium Middle School in Sanford, Florida, embarked on a transformative journey guided by the Peace and Justice Institute's (PJI) Whole School Resilience Program and the "Principles for How We Treat Each Other." This initiative, championed by newly appointed Principal Crystal Higgs and initially funded by the Foundation for Seminole County Public Schools, aimed to create a more inclusive and resilient school culture for both educators and students.

Principal Higgs, the first Black principal at Millennium Middle School since its establishment in 1968, has led this effort with dedication and vision. Reflecting on the school's progress, she notes a significant shift in positivity and belief among staff and students. "None of this is happening by accident," Higgs shares. "What we are doing in partnership with PJI is making a difference."

Under her leadership, Millennium implemented initiatives that have catalyzed cultural and academic growth. Recognizing the challenges her students face—many of whom enter below proficiency levels—Higgs prioritized investing in the school's culture and climate for students and teachers.



## The PJI Principles

A key component of this success was introducing staff and teachers to PJI's Principles during an initial summit, which served as a foundation for cultural change. During the summit, approximately 20 teachers shared personal and professional challenges, fostering vulnerability and connection. Higgs describes the summit as a pivotal moment: "This helped with the culture and how we do business. This takes time. It does not happen overnight."

The Principles, designed to support inclusive, caring, and safe environments, began to shape daily interactions within the school. Teachers reflected on their experiences during the summit, with one teacher discussing the strain of her sister's medical issues and another expressing gratitude for the chance to connect with colleagues in an otherwise isolated work environment. These moments highlighted the need for intentional community-building efforts.



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In the spring of 2024, the school introduced the science of Positive and Adverse Childhood Experiences (PACES) to its educators, encouraging them to consider how students' backgrounds influence behavior and discipline. The Principles became integrated into discipline meetings, weekly announcements, and other daily practices, focusing on one Principle each week. A Student Summit further extended these teachings, bringing together 40 student leaders to explore PACES and the power of the Principles.

By March 2024, Higgs launched "Mission Possible," a campaign blending PJI Principles with academic interventions to energize the school community for the following year. Framed as a "pep rally for next year," this initiative exemplified Higgs' leadership in fostering optimism and collaboration. She also moved School Advisory Council (SAC) and ParentTeacher Student Association (PTSA) meetings to a local community center, increasing attendance to 20 participants per meeting.

Support from the Ginsburg Institute for Health Equity at Nemours Children's Health further bolstered these efforts. Millennium's participation in the PJI Summer Academy—a week-long intensive program—was a turning point. The academy allowed the Millennium team, including Higgs, to deepen their understanding of the Principles, learn restorative discipline strategies, and develop a comprehensive plan to integrate PJI teachings into the school's culture. Higgs credits this experience with forging lasting connections among staff: "This gave us time to forge connections that we have been able to hold onto."

### **A New School Year**

The 2024-2025 school year continued this trajectory, and Higgs notes, "This started the year so well and it was so different." With further support from the Ginsburg Institute for Health Equity, staff summits on "Emotional Intelligence (EQ) and Reflective Practice," as well as "A New Lens for Discipline" were offered.

One workshop participant shared, "I don't know if it's just me, but I feel the culture at the school has changed already. It feels different and much more positive." Survey feedback echoed these sentiments, with one teacher noting, "This is always so beneficial. I appreciate your investment in our team at Millennium."

Having Jania Fuller, a PJI-trained facilitator, embedded in the school has been instrumental in sustaining momentum. Fuller's leadership of Lunch and Learn sessions, "Mindful Mondays" and the calendaring and collaboration on "The Falcon Loop"—a live communication document for campus highlights and feedback—have fostered daily alignment with PJI Principles, reflection, and ongoing improvement.

In the fall of 2024, a second Student Summit brought 40 students together to reflect on their leadership roles. Participants highlighted the safe environment and opportunities for self-discovery: "The best part about today was I felt when we were in the circles everyone felt safe to communicate," shared one student. Another reflected, "Drawing my leadership tree helped me acknowledge my roots and focus on my goals."



### **The Impact on Student Achievement and Behavior**

These efforts culminated in noticeable improvements in school culture. Higgs remains optimistic about the future, emphasizing the importance of intentionality: "All of the things we implemented helped." And the data tells a similar story.

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## Academic Increases

With the PJI intervention beginning Fall 2023, the impact is beginning to show. By the end of the 2023-2024 school year, English Language Arts (ELA) scores improved across all subgroups, with one in two students achieving a learning gain—the highest since the pre-pandemic era.

Direct teacher interaction with PJI was paramount to student gains as 70 percent of teachers who attended one or more of the teacher summits exhibited an average 5.8 percent increase in their student proficiency. This is representative of 1 to 16 growth percentage points.



## Discipline Decreases

In addition to the academic gains, there was a dramatic change in the discipline in the school. Across campus, discipline referrals decreased by approximately 18%, and the number of students sent to alternative education schools has dropped dramatically by approximately 66% compared to the previous school year.

Again, teacher participation was an important part of the change, with 55 percent of teachers who attended one or more of the teacher summits writing fewer discipline referrals in comparison to last school year.

The types of referrals were also an indicator of school culture change. Prior to the 2023-2024 introduction of the Whole School Resiliency Program, aggression was the number one cause for disciplinary referrals in the school.

Within the first five months there was a decrease in aggression infractions by 43 percent, and aggression is no longer listed in the top five infractions at the school.

## Impact on Faculty and Staff

The increase in academics and decrease in discipline on the student side reflected a change in school culture for teachers and school staff. On the Fall 2024 Panorama Education Survey, sense of belonging on campus rose to 53% (up from 36%) for faculty, and 61% (up from 41%) for staff when compared to the Spring 2024 report.

When asked "How optimistic are you that your school will improve in the future?" both staff and faculty reported feeling more optimistic in the fall than they did in the spring.

Higg's leadership and dedication were also apparent in the surveys. Staff-Leadership relationships rose by 21 percentage points to 63% favorable by teachers, and up 39 points to 74% among staff. This was demonstrated in feelings of compassion from school leaders "When challenges arise in your personal life, how understanding are your school leaders?" with increases in both groups.

Finally, the feelings of trust and autonomy among faculty and staff is crucial to school success. When asked "To what extent are faculty/staff trusted to work in the way they think is best?" both faculty and staff reported that they felt more trusted than they had in the past.



**Table 1- Staff Response Changes from Spring 2024 - Fall 2024 Panorama Education Survey**

Indicator	Spring 2024	Fall 2024	Change
Belonging	41 %	61 %	+ 20 %
Optimism	23 %	74 %	+51 %
Leadership Relationships	35 %	74 %	+39 %
Understanding	42 %	83 %	+41 %
Trust	23 %	73 %	+ 50 %

**Table 2 - Faculty Response Changes from Spring 2024 - Fall 2024 Panorama Education Survey**

Indicator	Spring 2024	Fall 2024	Change
Belonging	36 %	53 %	+ 17 %
Optimism	30 %	42 %	+ 12 %
Leadership Relationships	42 %	63 %	+ 21 %
Understanding	50 %	75 %	+ 25 %
Trust	25 %	45 %	+20 %


### Looking Forward

As Millennium Middle School continues to embrace PJI's Principles and practices, the anticipated outcomes include greater unity among staff and students, higher academic achievement, and fewer discipline referrals. The collaboration with PJI exemplifies the school's commitment to creating a supportive environment where every individual feels valued and heard.

For more information on the "Principles for How We Treat Each Other," the PJI Summer Academy, Whole School Resilience Project, and their impact on educational communities, visit the Peace and Justice Institute's official website: <https://www.peacejusticeinstitute.org>

## PJI Impact by the Numbers

Millennium Middle School Impact Following the Peace and Justice Institute’s Whole School Resilience Program Implementation




**5.8%**  
Increase in student proficiency

70% of teachers who attended at least one of the PJI Summit events had an increase in student proficiency.




**1 in 2**  
Students made an ELA learning gain

English Language Arts scores increased across all subgroups



**18%**  
Decrease in Discipline Referrals

Additionally, 55% of teachers who attended one or more of the teachers summits writing fewer discipline referrals in comparison to the previous school year



**43%**  
Decrease in Aggression Infractions

Aggression was the top infraction at the school. Five months after implementation, the infractions decreased by 43%. Aggression is no longer in the top five infractions.

**74%** Staff members are optimistic that the school will improve in the future. Up 51 points from previous years.

**75%** Teachers feel that the school leaders are understanding of challenges in their personal lives. Up by 25 points.

**73%** Staff members feel that they are trusted to work in the way that they think is best. Up by 50 points.

Data from: 2023, 2024 Panorama Education Survey,, Skyward Student Management, FAST Assessment Progress Monitoring Data