

Be Intentional: Enhance School Culture with Teamwork, Empowerment, and Innovation

By Joshua Cole | Categories: SEL, Classroom Community, Caring School Community, Thought Leadership

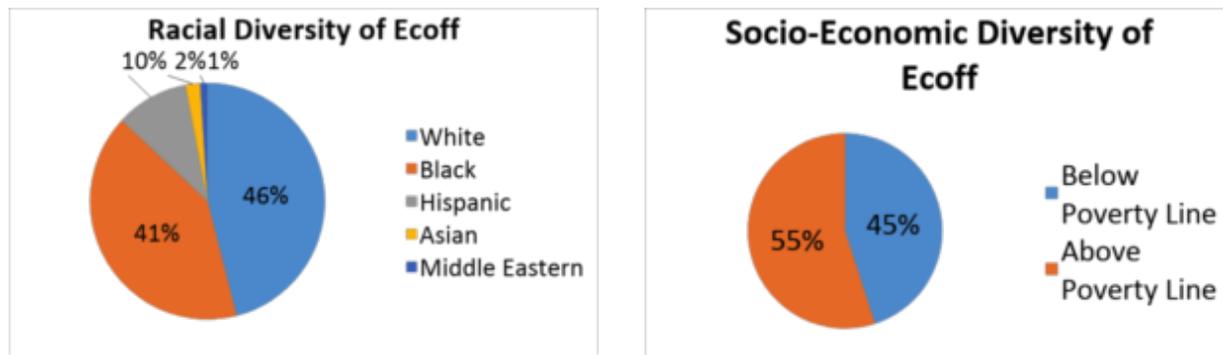
Welcome to Ecoff!



Ecoff Elementary School in Chesterfield County, Virginia, brings social-emotional learning (SEL) to life by creating a learning environment focused on teamwork, empowerment, and innovation. Our journey began three years ago when we welcomed Collaborative Classroom into our family. If you visit today, your senses are overwhelmed by the revolution that has occurred. The process has by no means been all butterflies and unicorns; rather, challenges, conflict, and courageous conversations have facilitated a school culture we are proud to share with you.

As soon as you arrive, you can feel the positive energy reverberating throughout the school grounds, as if Ecoff is the site of an ongoing family reunion. Indications that Ecoff is an inclusive environment for learning and growing are everywhere: in a Free Little Library at the door, in the murals in the foyer, and in the way the students are engaged as they move between classes. You wonder, *how did Ecoff get this way?* For the past three years, we've been working on teamwork, empowerment, and innovation as we transformed our learning community using Collaborative Classroom's Caring School Community program as a foundation.

See below for student demographics:



Teamwork

Teamwork starts at the top. We model this by having the admin team (principal and assistant principal) share an office. Images of teamwork on the walls and in the halls include posters of the Ecoff Expectations (that use the mnemonic device **TEAM**: Treat everyone with respect; Everyone follows directions; Accept responsibility; Make good choices). School programs are featured on other bulletin boards, and pictures of our 100 staff members, including bus drivers, custodians, and cafeteria workers, are also posted. The friendliest front office team that any admin team could hire greets you with a smile and instantaneously makes you feel like you are part of our team. Coming out of the front office, you pass another bulletin board encouraging all families and community members to follow us on Twitter @EcoffElementary and to hashtag #Tribe Pride or #BeBrave (current theme for the year). In addition, artwork by the annual "artists of the year" hangs on the walls and represents one of the many traditions of "The Tribe."

Taking a few steps down the hall, you hear sounds from the lab focused on Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math (STEAM), where collaboration is the vehicle for Project Based Learning (PBL). You will also notice students taking responsibility for their learning and behavior in other areas of the school, such as the library, gym, and cafeteria. The success of Ecoff is built on a teamwork stemming from the Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) framework that Collaborative Classroom has fostered at our school.

Empowerment

Near the school office you will find the Empowerment Zone—the parent/community resource center that we created based on a needs assessment. The Zone centralizes resources to meet the needs of the whole child and our entire school community. The PTA office as well as information and resources about all of our 36-community partners are located here. The space is available for partner workshops that may include financial and health and wellness services. The idea is to equip the entire community with SEL tools such as self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills and is based on Collaborative Classroom's Caring School Community resources. We use the phrase Empowering Communities & Opportunities For Families as our tag line for the Zone.

Another aspect of social-emotional learning that supports students is the focus on specific character traits: self-control, gratitude, curiosity, social intelligence, optimism, zest and grit. These character traits are displayed in several ways throughout the school, including visually and through discussions of read-aloud books such as *The Character Club* by Joshua Cole.

At Ecoff, we go out of our way to create opportunities for students to take responsibility for their goals, including an opportunity to have a written exchange of questions and empowering messages. Strategies for success are displayed at every hallway intersection to continuously encourage students to use their inner character strengths through social-emotional learning to exceed the Ecoff Expectations.

Innovation

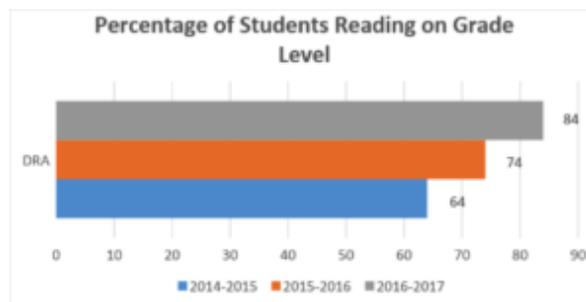
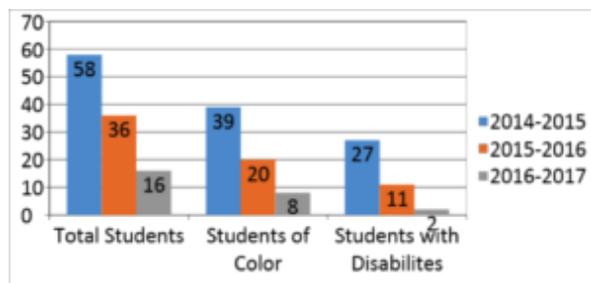
The third part of our intentional planning for transformation was to create an experience in the entire school much like an amusement park where each space is its own learning adventure. After walking a few steps down a hallway, you realize that the hallways are a classroom of their own! 1200 frequently used words are painted at the eye level of students so that the students will have multiple chances to read these important building blocks of literacy. Two outdoor courtyard classrooms provide a space for outdoor learning.

Every morning the school-wide announcements include reciting the Ecoff Pledge: “We pledge to everyone, to follow our Ecoff Expectations. We will respect ourselves and others too and be responsible for all we do. Excellence for everyone, it starts with us.” After the announcements, 20-minute class meetings using lessons from Collaborative Classroom’s Caring School Community program. Caring School Community addresses all aspects of school life, including class and staff norms, class-meeting discussion stems, cross-aged buddies and homeside activities. Our team has embraced all of these elements to enhance our engagement with students and their families. Everyone has invested in the SEL structure to help cultivate our school culture for students to solve their own problems through conversation and conflict resolution strategies.

Currently, our teachers are developing an innovative instructional model that embodies SEL and Project Based Learning (PBL) initiatives to meet students’ needs and enhance the culture of learning at Ecoff. Our teachers are phenomenal! Discussions about equity in education and the assumptions and beliefs that are barriers to our students’ success create an open and honest working environment, even when these discussions are challenging. Teachers open their doors to administration to come in and teach, and administrators also cover classrooms so that teachers can observe one another to provide timely feedback. From the messaging to the action, the focus at Ecoff is to create a safe and secure environment for students, staff, families, and our community through teamwork, empowerment, and innovation. We must be brave, take risks, fail, learn, and develop a growth mindset to build a better school and society.

Success at Ecoff

By intentionally working hard to foster teamwork, empower everyone, and focus on innovation at Ecoff, we’ve changed the community and created resources to fit our needs. Specifically, the intentional implementation of SEL through teamwork with Collaborative Classroom has helped decrease our disproportionate suspension rates significantly (see Figure 3) and increase our students reading on grade level (see Figure 4) dramatically.



We have forged a new and innovative path for the school that includes a Family Breakfast series and Morning Meeting events for each grade level to share our SEL approach to learning with families. We empower families to advocate and support their child’s and other children’s success in school by allowing their voices to be heard through surveys and feedback at PTA meetings.

We listen to our families and set out to meet their needs with supports, including tips for teaching social-emotional learning and character education at home. We address issues of inequity in our school and community through ongoing open and honest conversations with staff and families about the potential for success of every child. Our accomplishments were recently recognized as a 2016–2018 National PTA School of Excellence.

We've turned our barriers into opportunities. This is not easy in our modern culture. However, by creating a safe place to take risks and allow conflict to happen so that problems can be solved, we have created empowerment and an innovative pathway to an exhilarating school culture full of adventure.

