

# I felt engaged. I felt special.

Sixth-grader Lenya Ryan sat with a group of other [P.S. duPont Middle School](#) students. Agnes Paul, the math teacher who brought them together, asked, “Where in school do you feel most comfortable and least comfortable?” Students named various places where they felt welcomed. But everyone mentioned the front doors after the bell where some students would act like bullies. “So,” Paul asked, “what can we do about it?”

Lenya’s group grew out of a P.S. duPont staff discussion of the [results from the 2015–2016 School Climate Surveys](#), which the school and more than 150 other participating schools administered to students, parents and educators. These results showed that at P.S. duPont, like at other schools statewide, students’ ability to get along with each other is a problem. This kind of discord can foster hostility and depression, compromising students’ ability to learn, explains [Debby Boyer](#), director of CDS’s School Age unit. And it can make students with disabilities even more susceptible: CDS research indicates they face a disproportionate risk of bullying, Boyer says.

Looking for solutions, the [Delaware Department of Education \(DDOE\)](#) applied for and won a 2014 federal [School Climate Transformation Grant](#)—one of 12 nationwide. With new funding, the [Delaware Positive Behavior Support Project \(DE-PBS\)](#), a long-term collaboration with DDOE, took a more active role in improving school climate, writing training guides and offering in-person coaching to select schools.

[DE-PBS coach Megan Pell](#) advised the PBS team at P.S. duPont to organize student focus groups. “We need to acknowledge their voices,” Paul says, “and teach them to empower themselves.” Student feedback proved influential in clearing bullying behavior from hallways. “Hearing about that made staff decide to change dismissal procedures,” says Paul.

Focus groups sent a transformative message. Days later, Lenya realized she was thinking of her school as a “community” for the first time. “I felt engaged,” she says. “I felt special.”



Walking the walk: Lenya Ryan (left) and Agnes Paul happily stride along a school foyer that once attracted students engaging in bullying behavior.