My name is Cari Vanderpool. I am a professor at the University of Illinois and my wife and I have two children who attend Kenwood Elementary. I’m here to speak about what I think is a key consideration in the search for a new district superintendent.

The district’s state #1 goal is: “The Superintendent will foster high academic achievement, wellness and well-being among all learners in a safe and supportive environment.” It is right that we should emphasize the emotional well-being of students alongside academic achievement. Children can’t learn if they are scared, angry, sad or overwhelmed. So, as we seek a new superintendent we must consider how they will help the district address children’s social and emotional needs as a crucial component of their educational experience.

I know the board is concerned about the high rates of exclusionary discipline in the district and their disproportionate impact on students of color and students with disabilities. I believe this reflects the need for more emphasis on teaching kids skills needed for understanding and monitoring their own emotions and for self-regulation. I also believe we need to give adults a new lens for viewing challenging behavior as communication of unmet needs, and of discipline as a practice for teaching new social and emotional skills rather than a system of rewards and punishments.

I’d like to share a brief passage from an article that illustrates how this works in some schools.

*THE FIRST TIME THAT principal Jim Sporleder tried the New Approach to Student Discipline at Lincoln High School in Walla Walla, WA, he was blown away. Because it worked.*

*This is how it went down: A student blows up at a teacher, drops the F-bomb. The usual approach at Lincoln – and at most high schools in this country – is automatic suspension.*

*Instead, Sporleder sits the kid down and says quietly: “Wow. What’s going on? This doesn’t sound like you. You really looked stressed. On a scale of 1-10, where are you with your anger?”*

*The kid was ready for an anger blast to his face….”How could you do that?” “What’s wrong with you?”…and for the big boot out of school. But he was NOT ready for kindness. The words pour out: “My dad’s an alcoholic. He’s promised me things my whole life and never keeps those promises.” The waterfall of words that go deep into his home life, which is no breeze, end with this sentence: “I shouldn’t have blown up at the teacher.”*

*And then he goes back to the teacher and apologizes. Without prompting from Sporleder.*

*“The kid still got a consequence,” explains Sporleder – he went to ISS — in-school suspension, a quiet, comforting room where he can talk about anything with the attending teacher, catch up on his homework, or just sit and think about how maybe he could do things differently next time.*

*The numbers tell the story: in 2009-2010 (Before the new approach)*

* *798 suspensions*
* *50 expulsions*
* *600 written referrals*

*In 2010-2011 (After implementing the new approach)*

* *135 suspensions*
* *30 expulsions*
* *320 written referrals*

Some may think that schools shouldn’t have to deal with kids’ emotional problems – that their parents should take responsibility. And while that’s true, that disempowering attitude provides no way forward for schools. Schools can be safe and nurturing places where we teach kids skills that will allow them to learn no matter what’s going on at home. The reality is, traditional behavior management systems and punitive disciplinary methods are failing our most vulnerable students. There are other options, and I hope the board will prioritize finding a superintendent who will provide leadership in this area.

I’d like to end by saying that I’m proud to be a parent in this great district and would welcome the opportunity to speak to any of you about this topic in more depth.