

Schools giving more attention to 'soft skills' as a way to head off behavior problems



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NEW PORT RICHEY — Deer Park Elementary had a problem.

Its discipline referrals and warnings were on the rise, with 433 incidents last year for 574 students, which didn't bode well for the school's academic performance.

"There is a direct correlation between disruptions in the classroom and how well students learn," said principal Margie Polen, who pointed to the Pasco County school's C grade from the state, just shy of a B.

"A lot of our (behavior) problems were in fifth grade," she said, "and that's where our low scores were."

Her faculty decided to tackle the issue with a new social-emotional learning system. Their goal: Decrease disruptions and referrals by 10 percent.

PREVIOUS COVERAGE: *Should kindergartners be encouraged to conform to peer pressure? One Pasco school suggests so*

The approach, called "Discipline Without Stress, Punishment or Rewards" by Marvin Marshall, nearly flopped on entry. Parents saw posters with catch phrases in their children's classrooms before getting any information, and several raised concerns.

They particularly bristled at a poster that seemed to suggest a student who "conforms to peer pressure" is a good student. "How Orwellian," one dissenter suggested in a feisty Facebook thread.

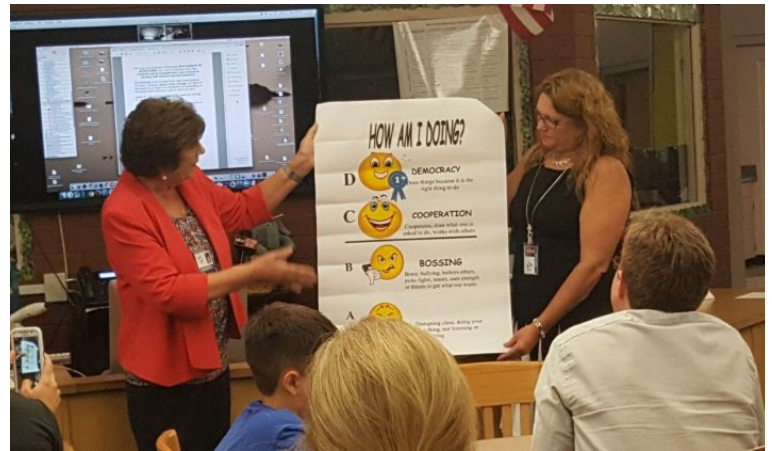
Polen quickly agreed to revise the language, and make it more approachable.

But nearly lost in the flap was the role such programs are playing on a larger scale. Across the Tampa Bay area, Florida and the nation, a movement is rising to counter years of slavish attention to test performance.

"During that focus on scores, what you lost sight of was the focus on other life skills," said Karen Bierman, director of The Pennsylvania State University's Child Study Center.

Those include the ability to work through conflict and persist when frustrated. "Schools are saying they see students need help with those skills," Bierman said.

But it's not just schools. Even the federal government, which has insisted for years on test-based accountability, mandated in the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act that non-academic aspects of a school's climate be included in new improvement plans.



For the first time in years, the social and emotional would share footing with the academic as a required indicator of success. The move in that direction had long been coming, said Michael Krezmien, associate professor of student development at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

THE GRADEBOOK: *All education, all the time*

Schools are using ideas that originated in special education and grew into wider use. Their inclusion in law has driven researchers to seek methods that work not only for unsuccessful children, but for all, Krezmien said.

If teachers can prevent the need for additional services later by attacking behavior issues early, he said, they can pay more attention to academics. Many times, he noted, children are not behind because they are unable to perform, but rather because they have not learned what to do.

That holds true for behavior as much as reading, Krezmien said.

The programs are in schools all over the Tampa Bay area. Many in Hillsborough, Pasco and Pinellas use some form of "Positive Behavior Support," a project based at the University of South Florida.

Some layer other ideas on top of that system, or tailor more specific guidelines, to give them a more local flavor.

Hillsborough County recently added Botvin Life Skills Training to its middle schools, with a goal of providing the "soft skills" that people need beyond school — things like setting goals and meeting deadlines.

Too often, people assume children learn these behaviors from home or elsewhere, said Julia Sarmiento, Hillsborough's social-emotional learning coordinator. "We decided, let's stop the assuming and let's ensure it."

At Deer Park Elementary, the staff already had a set of expectations based on the letters of its mascot, the Bucks. Those are Be responsible, Use respect, Convey confidence, Keep engaged, Safety first.

Now Deer Park is looking to add to its endeavor.

To deal with parent concerns, principal Polen held a 90-minute meeting Tuesday in the school media center. Many walked away satisfied that the school had its children's best interests in mind.

Yet others still harbored concerns, not with the goal of improving behavior, but with the selected model. They wanted some assurances that Marshall's system had worked in other schools.

Deer Park had, after all, paid more than \$2,000 for materials and would spend a year trying to implement it.

PREVIOUS COVERAGE: *Pasco parents, school approach consensus on behavior concerns*

But Marshall told parents via Skype there was "no way I can quantify how successful this program is," even as he touted its use worldwide. What's more, Bierman and Krezmien said the model does not appear in any peer-reviewed literature, and neither they nor their colleagues had heard of it.

Each said parents are right to ask questions about Deer Park's choice, to make sure children get viable instruction.

"A bunch of programs have proven quite effective," Bierman said, adding that the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning has reviewed several of the top ones. Still, she said, she could understand why a school might go for a less expensive version that appears to have some of the desired attributes.

Krezmien said he would be wary, too, of a system whose author presents no data or science to back it up.

Pasco school superintendent Kurt Browning said he was comfortable knowing that Polen chose her school's model based on local teachers' past experiences.

"How do you know it's going to work unless you try it?" he said, blessing the decision and the goal of improved discipline. "We need to have a conversation a year from now, and see what the outcomes were."

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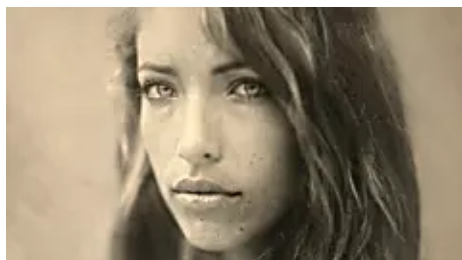
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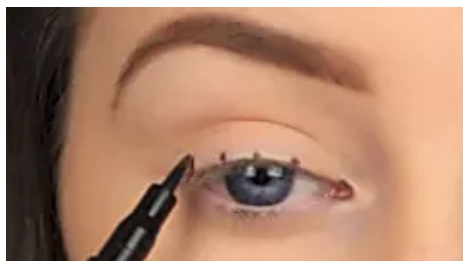
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