

Snapshot #14

Improving Student Attitude and Behavior Loma Linda Elementary School Northeast Junior High School

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RESEARCH FINDINGS

Research in the affective realm points to several areas of educational practice which can enhance student attitudes and improve school discipline. As outlined in *EFFECTIVE SCHOOLING PRACTICES: A RESEARCH SYNTHESIS* (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1984), these include:

At the CLASSROOM level:

1.10 STANDARDS FOR CLASSROOM BEHAVIOR ARE EXPLICIT.

- Teachers let students know that there are high standards for behavior in the classroom.
- Consistent, equitable discipline is applied for all students.

1.11 PERSONAL INTERACTIONS BETWEEN TEACHERS AND STUDENTS ARE POSITIVE.

- Teachers pay attention to student interests, problems and accomplishments in social interactions both in and out of the classroom.
- Teachers make sure they let students know they really care.

1.12 INCENTIVES AND REWARDS FOR STUDENTS ARE USED TO PROMOTE EXCELLENCE.

- All students know about the rewards and what they need to do to get them. Rewards are chosen because they appeal to students.
- Rewards are related to specific student achievements. Some rewards may be presented publicly; some should be immediately presented, while others delayed to teach persistence.

At the SCHOOL level:

2.7 DISCIPLINE IS FIRM AND CONSISTENT.

2.9 INCENTIVES AND REWARDS ARE USED TO BUILD STRONG MOTIVATION.

THE ST. VRAIN VALLEY SCHOOL DISTRICT

The St. Vrain Valley School District is located in Northern Colorado on the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains. The center of the district is the city of Longmont, which is located about 40 miles north of Denver and has a population of over 50,000. Some 14,000 students attend St. Vrain's 18 elementary and 12 secondary schools.

Approximately 85 percent of St. Vrain's students are white/non-Hispanic, 12 percent are Hispanic, and 3 percent represent other minority groups, chiefly Asian cultures. Many migrant students attend school in the St. Vrain district.

The Longmont area encompasses a large socioeconomic range, from upper middle class families to inhabitants of the city's housing projects.

LOMA LINDA ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

SITUATION

Approximately 350 students in grades K-3 attend Loma Linda Elementary School. The student population is nearly 90 percent white/non-Hispanic and 10 percent Hispanic, with small numbers of students from other racial/ethnic backgrounds. Socioeconomically, Loma Linda families are lower to middle class, and most parents have a high school education or less. Twenty percent of Loma Linda's students receive free or reduced-priced lunches.

CONTEXT

Loma Linda is a participant in the Onward to Excellence (OTE) school improvement process, a process in which school leadership teams compile profiles of school performance, and school staff select improvement goals based on the profiles. Staff then review research, develop prescriptions and plans to achieve identified goals, implement those plans, monitor operations, and periodically review and renew their school improvement efforts.

Loma Linda staff began using the OTE process three years ago. Large numbers of referrals of students to the principal's office and distressingly high levels of classroom disruption led the staff to identify improvement of student discipline as the school's priority goal.

In frequent communication and collaboration with the entire Loma Linda staff, the OTE leadership team worked to identify the specific discipline problems confronting the school, and determining approaches which would help to meet identified needs.

A review of various potential practices led staff to focus their attention on the prosocial skills training program called Skillstreaming. Originally developed for use with special education students, the Skillstreaming program proceeds from the belief that behavioral problems are the result of skill deficits. Remediation of behavioral problems, therefore, calls for training in

prosocial skills- -skills in self-management and in getting along with others. The current Loma Linda program is an adaptation and expansion of the Skillstreaming ideas and materials as presented in the book, *SKILLSTREAMING THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: A GUIDE FOR TEACHING PROSOCIAL SKILLS* by Ellen McGinnis and Arnold P. Goldstein, Research Press Co., Champaign, IL, 1984.

PRACTICE: PROSOCIAL SKILLS TRAINING AT THE ELEMENTARY LEVEL

Each of the school's priority skill areas (e.g., classroom skills, friendship skills, etc.) becomes the schoolwide focus for a month at a time during the school year. Prosocial skills training is provided in that goal area during that month.

Various staff members volunteer to lead the different monthly efforts and are at liberty to choose whatever means they prefer to teach the skills schoolwide and in classrooms. They might offer role playing demonstrations, lead art projects (e.g., featuring posters which display the skill), or bring in speakers to address the targeted area. Examples of monthly goal areas include honesty, "joining-in" skills, classroom skills (listening, question asking, getting clarification), and being a friend (what does it mean and what do you do?).

The program emphasizes self-monitoring and internal checking rather than placing adults in the role of monitoring students' behavior. Appropriate behaviors are broken down into small, teachable units and presented in sequence, so that students can progressively build upon what they have already learned.

Reinforcing students in the use of prosocial skills is an important part of Loma Linda's program. Staff members (including classified staff) give out buttons to students they observe practicing the skill of the month. Since each staff member may give out only three buttons each month, staff must be judicious in their selection of students and situations which merit awarding the buttons; and receiving a button is something students truly value. An all-school assembly at the end of every month provides an occasion for giving certificates to students who have demonstrated improvement in the skill of current interest.

Parents support the program in various ways, including giving their input about the program at school gatherings and reviewing the goal of the month with their children at home. The parent involvement component of the program is currently expanding, with parents taking on task assignments based on their skills and preferences as determined by a school-administered survey. For example, parents are involved in such activities as computer data analysis, putting on a lecture series, and planning for a parentsponsored barbecue.

What has changed as a result of implementing the prosocial skills program? Disciplinary referrals to the principal's office have reduced dramatically. The year before the program began, 77 first graders were referred to the principal's office for disciplinary action; in 1988-89 three first graders were referred. Teachers report spending far less class time dealing with disruptions, and they assert that the program has enabled staff and students to have a common baseline of understanding and "speak the same language" with regard to social skills. Students and parents like and support the program. And although it is difficult to establish a causal relationship between the program and student achievement, staff believe that the SAT score improvements of Loma Linda students are attributable, in part, to the increases in learning time which have resulted from use of the program.

In addition to its other functions, Loma Linda is the site for the district's high-intensity program for trainable mentally retarded students, and efforts are made to mainstream as many students as possible. The school's prosocial skills training program has been modified to meet the needs of this special population, and staff and parents are pleased with the way the training has facilitated successful mainstreaming of these students. Special education teacher, Margaret Wilson, observes, "One of the things I like about the program is that it can be used with almost any level of kid I also like it that the program is not punishment oriented; it focuses on identifying positive elements in kids' behavior. And it makes the [special education] kids feel more a part of the school."

Loma Linda principal, Noelle Branch is very enthused about the role of the prosocial skills training program in meeting students' affective needs. "We have to give kids tools for interacting with others successfully and opportunities to use those tools," she says. "I love this program, because it does that."

For more information about Loma Linda's program, contact Noelle Branch, Principal, Loma Linda Elementary School, 333 East Mountain View, Longmont, Colorado 80501, (303) 776-9108.

NORTHEAST JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

SITUATION

Northeast Junior High School serves 675 students in grades 10-12. Approximately 90 percent of Northeast's students are white/non-Hispanic, and most of the remaining 10 percent are Hispanic. Most families in the Northeast attendance area are at lower or middle income levels.

CONTEXT

An OTE school since 1985, Northeast has as its goal the improvement of student attitude. This goal was chosen because of a schoolwide concern about the high incidence of behavior problems, tardies, and absences among Northeast students.

Northeast's principal Bob Foster and OTE leadership team members worked with all staff, as well as parents and community members, to plan a program which could bring about improvements in student attitude. Six focal areas--drawn from the practice clusters in the NWREL document, *EFFECTIVE SCHOOLING PRACTICES: A RESEARCH SYNTHESIS*--were identified. These include: (1) quality teaching, (2) good classroom management, (3) positive personal interactions between teachers and students, (4) incentives and rewards to promote excellence, (5) firm and consistent discipline, and (6) parent involvement.

PRACTICE: IMPROVING STUDENT ATTITUDE IN A JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL SETTING

As in the Loma Linda program, various Northeast staff volunteer to coordinate activities in each of the focal areas and to offer workshops and presentations for their fellow staff members. Approaches have included forming a team to develop a discipline code, bringing in a speaker to discuss ways to promote parent involvement, and reviewing and sharing research findings on the topic of classroom management. In addition to staff development activities on priority topics, efforts are also made to keep students and parents aware of the school's improvement

goals and things they can do to help achieve them. Prosocial skills concepts, problem-solving steps, and other positive messages are displayed in classrooms, and some teachers have undertaken systematic prosocial skills training activities with their students.

Northeast staff are also involved in operating a substance abuse prevention program and in working intensively with atrisk students to help them achieve success. Staff continually work to coordinate these efforts with OTE activities, and these components together are viewed as responsible for bringing about positive changes in the attitudes and behavior of Northeast students.

One obvious indication that Northeast's program is working is that scores on student attitude measures are considerably higher than they were prior to program implementation. In addition, Northeast has experienced notable reductions in behavior problems, tardies, and absences. Staff assert that school hallways and grounds are cleaner; there are fewer fights and less use of profanity; and student involvement in sports, music, and student government has increased since the program was implemented. There is a smaller core group of students who are repeatedly referred for disciplinary action, and increases have occurred in the numbers of minority students receiving awards for their involvement in extracurricular activities. One of Northwest's assistant principals, Tom Bachenberg, remarks that, although improvement of STAFF attitudes was not identified as an original program goal, such improvement has in fact occurred and is another factor in Northeast's enhanced school climate.

Another assistant principal, Barbara Levin, summarized these improvements by saying, "Now Northeast feels more like a regular junior high school than a high-risk junior high."

An interesting footnote to the list of positive outcomes noted at Northeast is an observation made by the school's next-door neighbor, Loma Linda principal Noelle Branch. Branch asserts that, whereas groups of Northeast students used to come over to the Loma Linda grounds, engage in fights, and litter the area, such problems have virtually disappeared. "They must be doing something right," she says.

More information about the program is available from Bob Foster, Principal, Northeast Junior High School, 233 East Mountain View, Longmont, Colorado 80501, (303) 772-7900.

This publication is based on work sponsored wholly, or in part, by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), U.S. Department of Education, under Contract Number 400-86-0006. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views of OERI, the Department, or any other agency of the U.S. Government.

November 1989