

Snapshot #18

Frequent Monitoring and Student Recognition Whiteman Elementary School

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RESEARCH FINDINGS

Student achievement and behavior can be improved through frequent monitoring of student progress and positive feedback and recognition for gains made. This is the belief that guides school improvement efforts at Whiteman Elementary School in Denver, Colorado. In **EFFECTIVE SCHOOLING PRACTICES: A RESEARCH SYNTHESIS** (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1990) the following research findings are identified:

1.2.3 There are smooth, efficient classroom routines.

1. Teachers plan rules and procedures before the school year begins and present these to students during the first few days of school.
2. There are smooth, rapid transitions between activities throughout the day or class.

1.4.1 There are high expectations for student learning.

1. Teachers set high standards for learning and let students know they are all expected to meet them. Standards are set so they are both challenging and attainable.
2. Teachers hold students accountable for completing assignments, turning in work, and participating in classroom discussions.
3. Teachers monitor their beliefs and behavior to make certain that high expectations are communicated to all students, regardless of gender, socioeconomic status, race, or other personal characteristics.

2.2.3 Discipline is firm and consistent.

1. A written code of conduct specifies acceptable student behavior, discipline procedures and consequences; students, parents and staff know the code; students and staff receive initial training and periodic reviews of key features.
2. Discipline procedures are routine and quick to administer. Disciplinary action quickly follows infractions and is always consistent with the code; treatment is equitable for all

- students Follow-up and action for absenteeism and tardiness normally occur within a day.
3. Discipline is administered in a neutral, matter-of-fact way; the disciplinarian focuses on the student's behavior, not on personality.
 4. Out-of-school suspensions or expulsions are minimal; in-school suspension is used in most cases.

2.4.2 Incentives and rewards are used to build strong student and staff motivation.

1. Excellence in achievement and behavior is recognized and rewarded. Requirements for awards are clear; explicit procedures ensure consistency; evaluations are based on standards rather than on comparisons with peers.
2. School staff motivate students to achieve highly and behave appropriately chiefly through praise and rewards; attempts to build motivation through threats or punishments are avoided.

SITUATION

Whiteman Elementary School is located in a metropolitan residential neighborhood where citizens are largely of retirement age. Not far from this middle-income neighborhood is the Denver, Colorado airport bordered by a variety of businesses and industries on one side, and the Lowry Air Force Base on the other. Eighteen years ago, with the implementation of busing to accomplish desegregation, many parents in the neighborhood elected to send their children to one of the many private or alternative schools available to them within a very short distance of their homes, so that their children would not be bused. It is only in recent years that some of these neighborhood children are returning to Whiteman School.

At the time of desegregation, in addition to busing, Whiteman was paired with another elementary school. This means that children in the attendance area attend grades 1 and 2 at Swansea Elementary School, which is located in a primarily lower- to middle-income Hispanic community with many immigrants from Mexico and Central America, then transfer to Whiteman for grades 3, 4 and 5. Because kindergarten is not mandatory, both schools have half-day kindergarten classes, and students are not bused out of their neighborhoods.

Whiteman has 420 students and is one of 81 elementary schools in the 65,000-student Denver Public School system. The Whiteman students are 18.9 percent Anglo, 73.4 percent Hispanic, 4.9 percent black, with the remaining 1.4 percent a combination of other minority groups-- mostly Southeast Asians and American Indians. Because of the military base and the close bond with families in Mexico which has students moving back and forth, the student turnover rate ranges from 20-30 percent per year. For the Hispanic students who return to rural communities, there is often a break in their education, as they often do not attend school when they are out of the United States. At Whiteman, seven of the thirteen classrooms are bilingual. The students are taught in their primary language, but all students learn in both Spanish and English. Parents may choose to place their children in either a monolingual or bilingual classroom. Many parents who are primarily monolingual choose to have their children in bilingual classrooms so that the students may learn a second language.

CONTEXT

After four years of having a new principal every year, the current principal, Dr. Michael

Wilson, came to Whiteman seven years ago. This provided a much-needed stabilizing influence. According to one parent, prior to Dr. Wilson's arrival, there was a need to create order out of chaos and a sense of direction for the staff and students. Dr. Wilson felt the parents also had two main fears which needed to be alleviated: 1) the fear that their children might not be in a safe environment; and 2) the fear that when their children got off of the bus at home, they might not know any more about reading, writing and math than they did when they got on in the morning. In addition, some very basic needs, such as securing textbooks, had to be met.

The next step was to establish a schoolwide code of conduct which was to be consistently implemented, and good behavior was to be recognized and rewarded. The intent was for staff to be just as aggressive in providing good feedback and rewards as they were tenacious and steadfast in providing good discipline for the child who does the wrong thing. Other goals were to establish high expectations for student academic performance and to make learning accessible regardless of the student's native language, thus the emphasis on providing a quality bilingual program.

To reinforce their school improvement efforts, the Whiteman staff participated in the Onward to Excellence leadership training program from 1986-88. This enabled them to become familiar with the research base of effective classroom and schoolwide practices. The results of their efforts were more clearly focused goals and a well-defined improvement plan for 1988-89. The activities outlined in the plan and those established years before were still in clear evidence in 1990.

The goals selected for implementation for 1988-1990 were:

1. Decrease the number of office referrals through improved classroom discipline and reinforcement programs. Decrease the number of out-of-school suspensions.
2. Meet the health and hygiene needs of students by providing programs in the areas of substance abuse, family life and general grooming.
3. Demonstrate an improvement in the academic performance and learning abilities of Whiteman students.
4. Improve and increase the opportunities for extended or challenge learning for Whiteman students.
5. Increase or maintain the percentage of overall school attendance compared to previous years.
6. Increase parent and community involvement at Whiteman School.

To achieve goals 1, 3 and 5, the staff believed that careful monitoring of student achievement and consistent and public recognition of their accomplishments would be required.

Improvement gains are indicated by the following evidence:

- On the ITBS the students at Whiteman showed the following improvement on the composite percentile score:

Grade 1986 1989

K 36% 47%

3 39% 42%

4 29% 38%

5 35% 40%

In 1990 the norms for the district test were changed making additional comparisons impossible.

- There has been a 25 percent reduction in out-of-school suspensions. In-house suspensions have declined significantly from what was typically a full classroom to two or three per day.
- Bus referrals have decreased from five to ten per day to two or three per week.
- Average daily attendance has increased in the seven years from 92 percent to 97 percent.

SCHOOLWIDE PRACTICES

SCHOOL DISCIPLINE. In order to reinforce the concept of consistency in discipline and to underscore the importance of good behavior, the principal visits each classroom two days in a row to talk about the code of conduct. He emphasizes that the students never need to resort to violence to solve problems. They then discuss alternative ways to approach conflict situations. It is also made very clear that no gang activities or paraphernalia are tolerated. This includes clothing or weapons, and a discussion is held about what is appropriate to bring to school. Violations concerning drugs and weapons are dealt with quickly and with consistency, which usually results in immediate suspension and a conference with parents, who are also informed beforehand of the code of conduct.

An attempt is made to draw comparisons between what is expected in school and what is expected in the "real world," so that students can see that there is a purpose for appropriate behavior beyond the life at school. The staff tries to help students make good choices and to know that they are responsible for the choices they make.

Observations in hallways and classrooms verify that students have learned to respect one another and their environment. Students movement in the hallways when classes are in session is quiet and orderly. The maintenance of the school shows great care and concern for a clean and cheerful place free from graffiti and neglect.

BUS CONDUCT. Bus conduct is also taught and rewarded. There are five rules for good behavior on the bus:

- No littering
- Remain seated
- Talk quietly
- Don't disturb the driver
- Hands, arms, and head inside the windows

At the beginning of the year there is a bus driver appreciation day where drivers are recognized with a breakfast and also receive instruction about the rules. They are then responsible for evaluating and giving the whole bus points for each day. Riders receive one point for each of the rules not broken. If none is broken, there is a five-point bonus for a total of ten points. The points are charted in the lunchroom by the P.E. teacher so that students can see the running totals. The bus with the highest point total is rewarded with an ice cream feed. Even though the majority of students are bused, there are also rules for walkers, and their points are recorded and reported by volunteers who supervise the students coming and going.

ATTENDANCE. Attendance for each classroom is posted daily by the principal's office. The class with the best monthly attendance record receives an ice cream party. At the end of the year, students with perfect attendance receive plaques. Three years of perfect attendance means an even larger plaque is awarded.

MATH ACHIEVEMENT. Another schoolwide reward system is called Tracks for Facts. On Fridays, students at any grade level who think they are ready take a computergenerated math facts test. Certificates with pictures of tiger tracks (the school mascot is a Tiger) are awarded for 100 percent performance, with different colors for addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. When math facts for all four are mastered, a larger certificate with the student's picture replaces the four smaller certificates. All certificates are posted around the walls of the hallway at ceiling level, and students watch their progress as the "trail of tracks" becomes longer and longer.

AWARDS ASSEMBLY. Every nine weeks there is an awards assembly where students are recognized for good citizenship, attendance, best efforts, and Honor Roll. Students are graded on a 4.0 scale, with those receiving a 3.5-4.0 being on the Honor Roll, and honorable mention given to those who receive a 3.0-3.5 GPA. School personnel feel that this is good preparation for students as they move on to the middle and high school levels. The criteria for the citizenship award is determined by each classroom. The two awards per classroom are presented by the Windsor Garden Optomists, a group from the retirement community.

STUDENT BEHAVIOR. Another example of the positive reinforcement program is the Whiteman Good News Checks. These look like a check used for banking purposes, and all teachers and classified staff are given thirty a month. These are filled out as a reward for good behavior, which may include such things as completing homework, helping new students, or helping clear the snow from the sidewalks. The check must be taken home and signed by the parents, who are encouraged to offer praise for the reward. It is then brought back to school, and each month two names are drawn to have pizza with the principal. This effort is supported through sponsorship of the PTSA.

CLASSROOM PRACTICES

Monitoring basic skills development is assisted by the districtwide testing program called ALPAS. This program identifies the promotional standards which are the building block skills and concepts a child must learn in reading, mathematics, and language. The teachers of the Denver Public Schools have identified these as skills and concepts which are essential for each child to learn before progressing to the next instructional level. The teachers are provided with a grade-level guide that indicates which skills are the essential skills. A pretest is given at the beginning of the year covering all of the required skills and then again at six-week intervals over the expected units of instruction. Some of the teachers at Whiteman indicated that, because of language barriers, the sixweek intervals may be too fast paced for some of their students. If this is considered to be a serious problem, the school may choose to test at different intervals.

Whiteman teachers use these test results, plus many other indicators, to track student progress and to recognize achievement.

There are many examples of effective use of positive feedback and recognition for student achievement.

MATH MASTERY. Most of the classrooms have mathematics charts with graphs indicating the percent of students who have mastered each of the promotional standards as they move through the curriculum outlined in ALPAS. The pretest scores are posted in one color on a bar graph, and then a different color is added to the bar to indicate those who passed on the next six-week interval test.

TUTORING. To reinforce staying in school and to help with academic problems, students from the two high schools that Whiteman students will attend provide tutoring for students who are falling behind. These high-achieving students not only help Whiteman students with their work, but are asked to talk about their high school experiences and activities that they find satisfying and worthwhile. The intent is to help the children to build skills, develop confidence in their learning ability, and begin to get a positive sense of what high school is all about.

KINDERGARTEN. In the kindergarten classes the emphasis is on developmentally appropriate instruction. In one of the classes rhythm instruments are abundant, and music and movement are used to help students learn to express themselves in a variety of ways. The other class uses cooperative teaching strategies and students learn "happy talk," which are words for students to use to compliment or praise the work of another student when working together. In both classes vocabulary is stressed, and labels in both languages are seen everywhere in the bilingual classrooms.

Charts are used to monitor students when they learn such things as their address, phone number, numbers and colors. Stars and stickers are used after the students' names to indicate mastery.

RECOGNITION AND REWARDS. All classrooms had displays of excellent student work, and there were many examples of ways to provide incentives and recognition:

- Kindergarten students who can count to 100 become members of the "100 Club."
- Happy faces and stickers are evident everywhere as good work occurs
- One fourth grade classroom allows students to play checkers if they receive 100 percent on their spelling test, while the other students practice their missed spelling words.
- The self-contained special education classroom has a Student of the Week, with a picture being taken and posted outside of the classroom near the door. At the time the present writer visited Whiteman, these students were being rewarded with "fish sticks," which was that month's reward theme. For example, for writing five sentences in their journals, they got five fish sticks and six if they included a picture. These prizes can be saved and redeemed for more tangible prizes, such as pencils.
- Several classrooms display charts indicating individual students' homework completion. For example, one labeled "Soar High in Homework" had an airplane to complement the theme. Some teachers send home homework assignment forms for parents to sign and return upon completion.

CLASSROOM RULES. All classrooms have classroom rules posted, even though these varied somewhat from room to room.

BILINGUAL INSTRUCTION. In the bilingual classrooms the teachers shift readily from English to Spanish, depending on the students' dominant language. Students also write in their journals in both languages. Thus, the cultural differences of the students are honored.

CLIMATE. In all cases, the students are treated with respect by their teachers and administrators. There is an obviously warm and caring environment established for the students.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Increasing parent involvement was considered essential to improved monitoring of student progress and reinforcement of student effort. Parent participation is encouraged, and one parent

reported that she is always made to feel welcome and that overall parent involvement had greatly increased. All newsletters or information of importance to parents are written in both English and Spanish.

PTSA. PTSA meetings alternate between student-involved programs and informational programs. Incentives such as class prizes and door prizes are used to increase participation.

CONFERENCES. Teachers hold parent conferences in both Whiteman School and Swansea School, so that regardless of their children's grade level, parents can attend conferences at the school that is closer to where they live.

PARENT ADVISORY GROUPS. Parents can provide input through the Bilingual Parents Group and the School Improvement Accountability Committee. The Bilingual Parents Group has meetings that are conducted in both languages, and parents from both schools are members of the group. In the School Improvement Accountability Committee, parents have input into the goal-setting process and designing improvement plans. As part of this, the SIAC also conducts an annual survey of parents, staff and community to assess perception of the Whiteman School's needs.

For further information about the use of frequent monitoring and the rewards and incentives activities, contact Dr. Michael Wilson, Principal, Whiteman Elementary School, 451 Newport Street, Denver, Colorado 80220.

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