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Learning to accentuate the positive

Focus is on problems, not problem students

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Research has shown that a ratio of five positive comments for every negative remark can work wonders in parenting, athletics, the workplace — even marriages.

So educators at Arcadia University in Montgomery County are training teachers, counselors and school staffs in the art of catching children being good instead of naughty.

The program, called Building Behavioral and Educational Support Teams, or B²EST, has potential to improve student behavior not only in the classroom but also on the playground and in the lunchroom and hallways — typical school hot spots, Arcadia educators say.

The strategy, which includes rule-setting and motivational incentives, also aids students who are so behavior-challenged that they are assigned to what are called emotional-support classrooms, according to Christina Ager, the program's creator.

The B²EST program trains school staff to focus on problems, rather than problem children, Ager said.

"If 25 kids are walking quietly in the hallway, and only one kid is making noise, let's acknowledge the other 25 and see if that 26th student will get quiet," she said.

B²EST personnel have consulted in the Lower Moreland and Philadelphia districts and have trained more than 600 teachers and other staff from area suburban and city schools. The program has an annual budget of about \$1.5 million.

Sharen Finzimer, principal of F.S. Edmonds Elementary School in the East Mount Airy section of Philadelphia, praised the program for its "all-encompassing" impact.

"It covers every grade, special education and regular education, every age. It's something tangible, and it's school-wide," she said.

Edmonds, a high-poverty school with 650 students, calls its version the "High-Five" program, with five key rules: Be respectful, responsible, prepared to learn, in uniform, and follow directions.

Teachers and other adults praise students who show good behavior in the lunchroom or elsewhere and frequently — though not always — reward them with a "high-five" slip.

Every day, all the slips — as many as 100 — are collected, and the names of 20 or so students are called over the intercom system just before classes are let out.

That bit of recognition — which includes a trip to the main office to collect a small toy — goes a long way, school staffers say.

The students get recognized "for being respectful and responsible," said administrative assistant Cheryl Green.

"You have a small amount of kids using up a big amount of time," she said. "Why not pull some of those kids over to the side of being good?"

The ratio of five compliments to every correction was evident in the first-grade classroom of teacher Kurry Buck.

Buck and her students sat in a circle on carpeting in a corner of the classroom, practicing adding and subtracting by 10s.

"I love the way William is ready to learn," Buck told the circle. "You know who else is really good? Mercedes. She is ready."

Buck sprinkled her discussion with observations and comments: Good job. Thank you. Thank you. Even reprimands were delivered nicely.

"I know you know you're not supposed to call out, right?" she said to one child.

In the lunchroom, Green has enlisted best buddies Nasir Jones, 8, Nasir Joachim, 8, and James Scurry, 7, to be in charge of the sharing table, where students drop off food items they don't want.

With efficiency, the boys sort the milk cartons from the apples and the wrapped sandwiches, tossing the items into boxes on a tabletop for other students to grab.

Most days, the activity is its own reward. But sometimes, the boys get a "high five" for their efforts.

The boys know the five school rules — and that they can win a chance at the end-of-day lottery by showing good behavior.

"Sometimes we disagree," Nasir Joachim allowed. "But mostly we make good choices."

If lunchroom misbehavior is an issue, the solution might be to send students to the playground before, not after, lunch so they can socialize and run off that pent-up energy, Ager said — a fix that costs no money.

"We can make schools more positive places," she said.

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