

A Change in School Culture Boosts Student Achievement

Research shows that the amount of time students spend engaging in instruction is highly correlated with academic achievement. So, when a student receives a discipline referral and is sent to the principal's office, that student is losing valuable learning time.



When I became principal of Lowery Elementary School in 2013, our rural, high-poverty school had just received an F from the state of Louisiana. I knew that student behavior was impeding learning, but I didn't know how much until I dug into the data.

When I looked at behavioral infractions, I saw that there were more than 2,200 during the 2012-2013 school year. Of those, more than 1,600 occurred in the classroom, which equated to 25,395 minutes of instruction missed. I also noticed a strong correlation between the number of minutes students were out of class and whether they passed our state assessments.

Another problem was that our classrooms felt disconnected. So, a child might get written up for his or her behavior in one or more classes, but the other teachers and I weren't necessarily aware of this. This made it easy for small behavior problems to become big problems, resulting in even more instructional time lost.

We had a positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) program with a chart for each child that went from teacher to teacher. However, that chart would sometimes get lost, marked up, or thrown away. We knew we needed to be more consistent and proactive in our interventions to reduce the behavior problems that led to the referrals.

Behavior Response to Intervention Program

In fall 2013, we launched a behavior response to intervention (RTI) program in addition to our academic RTI program. To ensure consistency from classroom to classroom, we identified the main attributes of each tier, including specific interventions. For example, at Tier 1, we work with students to set behavior goals each week. Students receive individual and class points, and a reward for meeting the goal. We then create individual behavior plans for students who don't meet the goal.

In addition, we began using a school culture system called Kickboard to support our behavior RTI program. We use the online platform to collect, analyze, share, and act on student behavior data in real time.

When we first implemented Kickboard, we focused more on the punitive piece—giving marks for negative behaviors. After a few weeks, however, I noticed that the teachers who gave the most positive marks had the best classroom management. So, I asked teachers to shift their focus to rewarding students with points for exhibiting positive behaviors and character traits each day. We quickly saw a big decrease in behavior infractions.

Students can redeem their points for privileges, which include making school announcements, having lunch with me, or attending a Behavior Bash. On the other hand, if a student hits a threshold for negative behavior marks, it automatically triggers a call to the parent so we can involve them early in the process.

Tracking Student Data

To keep my finger on the pulse of our school culture, I check a daily activity dashboard in Kickboard several times a day. This enables me to intervene when needed to keep students in the classroom instead of in my office.

Teachers also meet daily in professional learning communities to discuss student behavior in addition to academics. We examine which classes are meeting behavioral goals, which helps us identify and share best practices.

With the behavior data at our fingertips, we can now be more proactive to better meet our students' needs. If a student is having a bad day, we can intervene early, which might be the difference between getting suspended or staying in school that day.

Plus, these data show that our efforts are paying off. We initially set

a goal for a 10 percent decrease in behavioral infractions each month. The first month of the 2013-2014 school year, we saw a 238 percent increase in infractions—and thought we were in for a rough year. By the next month, we had our behavior RTI program and school culture system in place, and we saw a 24 percent decrease in infractions. We had decreases every month after that. In fact, from 2013 to 2014, the number of behavioral infractions decreased by 29 percent.

As a result, from 2013 to 2014, students in grades 3-5 improved their performance on our state assessments. In addition, we improved our school performance score (SPS) from 46.5 to 52 points, and raised our school letter grade from an F to a D. In 2014-2015, we increased our SPS to 56.1 points.

This improvement is huge for us. When I ask teachers what they think the difference was, they say

the classroom culture. They are able to be more proactive—in the moment—so they can keep students in class and have quality learning time. That is directly correlated to the improvement in our SPS and school grade.

Our focus on the positive has also created a big shift in our school culture, which has had an impact on teacher retention as well. In 2012-2013, we lost 12 teachers. In 2015-2016, we lost only three teachers—and that was due to certification issues.

When I asked our teachers what made them want to stay, they said they now feel like they're part of a team. We have the data we need to help one another be more successful, so no one feels alone. We feel like we're in this together, and we all want every child to be successful. ■

Dawn Love is principal of Lowery Elementary School in Donaldsonville, Louisiana.



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