

'Capturing Kids Hearts' is goal of more West Michigan school districts

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Bobbie Fletcher, a science teacher at Chandler Woods Charter Academy in Belmont, is part of a growing trend at area districts where teachers and other school staff put an emphasis on "Capturing Kids' Hearts."

Fletcher greets each student at the door of her seventh-grade classroom. A smile. Eye contact. A firm handshake.

"Hey, Nicole."

"How ya doin', Trevor?"

"Megan, you have your hair pulled back. It almost threw me off."

Mostly, they respond with a handshake and a few words of their own.

"I'm noticing when they get haircuts or new outfits," Fletcher said. "If they are having a really bad day, you can see it on their little faces."

Fletcher believes that even the greatest teachers won't get through to students unless they establish a personal connection with each and every one.

"It's not just what we teach, it's how we teach," she said.

Ditto in Kentwood, where every teacher, bus driver, paraprofessional, administrator and board of education member has been similarly trained in "Capturing Kids' Hearts."

The Texas-based program also is used by teachers in Jenison, Thornapple Kellogg, several National Heritage Academy charters and other area schools.

"I think we were falsely under the impression that if I'm just a master of my subject matter I'm a good teacher," said Kentwood Superintendent Scott Palczewski. "You need buy-in from students. If you have a relationship and know someone cares about you, you work harder. You don't want to disappoint them."

Teachers and students share good news at the beginning of each class period and then, when the bell rings again, they exit with a high-five or some words of inspiration.

In addition to the connections made through one-on-one contact, students sign "social contracts" vowing to treat each other with respect. They learn to "self-manage" their behavior and remind their friends to do the same, Fletcher said.

Put down a classmate and you'll quite likely be "fouled," which means you'll have to say two nice things for every negative one uttered. If a friend flashes you a thumbs-up signal, that means you're not following directions and need to get back on track.

"We check each other so the teacher doesn't have to tell us," said Kevin Nguyen, a seventh grader at Chandler Woods. "It makes our class more bonded," added classmate Abby Carlson.

The difference has been dramatic at Townline Elementary in Kentwood, where teachers were trained last summer, said Principal Karen Friberg. She has seen an 85 percent reduction in the number of suspensions and detentions

"We're fostering stronger relationships, teacher to teacher, teacher to student and home to school," she said. "As a teacher you know these things, but we do them now as part of a daily routine. Then the children embrace it and start doing it with one another."

The cost of the three-day training is about \$500 per teacher, according to the Capturing Kids' Hearts Web site. Districts have funded it both through grants and general fund dollars set aside for teacher training.

"In the beginning, it takes a lot of time, there's a lot of stopping," Fletcher recalled her introduction to the philosophy three years ago. "But after a while it starts to run smoother because students are checking and self-managing each other."

All this managing of behavior and boosting of self-esteem doesn't automatically make kids better learners, Palczewski said, but it does create a better environment for learning.

"If teachers aren't dealing with students in the hallway or referring them to the office, they can devote more time and energy to what they do best, which is teaching kids," he said.

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