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# Capturing Kids Hearts program promotes relationships

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When youngsters arrive at Travis Elementary School each day, they're greeted by teachers, counselors and even the principal. It's not just for a special occasion, but part of a program called Capturing Kids Hearts.

Devised by the Flippen Group of College Station, the program is aimed at promoting positive, productive and trusting relationships among administrators, faculty, staff and students to create a high-performing learning environment and "self-managing" classrooms, according to material about the program. It is also meant to reduce anxiety, get kids to behave their way into positive opportunities and outcomes and provides ways for staff to deal with misbehavior and disrespect.

Principal K'Lynn Easley said teachers and staff underwent training Aug. 18-20, which cost Midland Independent School District \$24,000, but Easley said it's been worth it.

Discipline referrals are down and school is more orderly and quiet. Each classroom has a social contract — devised by students — spelling out how they are supposed to behave, and there are universal signs the kids use to show when someone has made a harsh comment or misbehaved.

Travis, which has 546 students in grades kindergarten through sixth, has been rated academically unacceptable in state accountability ratings the last two years.

"It can't just be changes in the curriculum the kids get, it has to be a structural change to the entire school," Easley said.

According to their training, Easley said children need five to seven positive touches a day, including the handshakes. "It also helps develop ... professionalism. It teaches a social norm widely accepted in our culture versus what they might be used to at home," she said.

Since school started Aug. 24, Easley said she has had one discipline referral and teachers said there are usually five to 10 by this point. She's found implementing rules and procedures means more instruction time.

And having students with jobs in the classroom gives them a sense of importance. There is a behavior chart in each class and if a student is good, they stay on green. Each class has their own version of the chart, but the same colors.

Kids make a hand sign for a check if someone does something wrong in a group and a foul sign if someone puts another kid down. This also involves giving the wronged party two positive comments back, Easley said.



Travis Elementary principal K'Lynn Easley shakes hands with students Thursday morning to greet them as they come to school as part of a new program, Capture Kids Hearts. Photo by Tim Fischer 9/10/09

Beatrice Gonzalez, 10, and Ethan Martinez, 9, in Alicia Wyman's class, say they look forward to coming to school each day. Last year, Gonzalez said there was "a lot more talking in the hallways, running and shouting."

Liz Tate, who has been teaching fifth grade at Travis for 14 years, said she's noticed a big difference between the end of school last year and the beginning of this one. "Last year on the first day of school we had several fights. This year, it's been so calm, quiet and peaceful," Tate said.

"It's a huge change. It is really working," Tate added.

Easley said the model can grow and change to fit the school's needs. Weekly staff meetings highlight accomplishments and success stories of different grade levels. "The rules are universal. They give children a sense of security," she said.

Noah Marquez, a 10-year-old fifth-grader, said he's noticed a change, too.

"Classes have been better. We have better learning programs," he said. "It's quieter. The kids are acting better. There aren't as many fights. Everybody's doing what they're supposed to do. Last year, there were a bunch of fights, a bunch of people being bad. This year with the social contract, there are not as many people being bad."

Capturing Kids Hearts is also in place at Burnet and Santa Rita elementary schools. Burnet has completed a year on the program and Santa Rita is in its first year.

Easley said the training was "very intensive" and teachers got a chance to practice the various discipline techniques with partners. For consequences, teachers refer to the social contract in their class and if they choose time out, it can be up to 15 minutes of a 30-minute recess period.

A child can also be placed in another classroom for a time out if it's prearranged with the teacher.

After being given a chance to correct their behavior, the parents are contacted.

In the case of one substitute teacher, a child was asked to write an apology letter to their parents saying they were sorry for not following the social contract and not letting the substitute complete the lesson plan. Then there is a statement on how the child plans to change his or her behavior in the future. The letter is signed by the child, his or her parents and dated. It is also reviewed by the principal.

Easley said the training was supported by a variety of local businesses including Barnes & Noble, Dickey's Barbecue, Schlotzsky's, Jack in the Box, Mr. Gatti's, Harvest Cafe and Culligan Water of West Texas. Donations also were made by friends of teachers, the Midland County Library and Midland Teachers Credit Union.

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