



Laker Elementary adding value to positive behavior program



Dr. Howie teaches kindergartners about how to properly ask a question.

Learning a new concept is like building a structure with Legos – it's done one piece at a time.

This is the case with academic subjects as well as social and behavioral skills. Knowing this, Laker Elementary is advancing its efforts to ensure students build a foundation of positive behavior skills along with their core subjects. Social skills go hand-in-hand with academics. When students have these skills, academic success will likely follow.

Just as students need to be taught reading, writing and math skills, they need support in learning how to ignore classroom distractions, follow directions and deal with teasing. As part of Laker Elementary's positive behavior program, social skills are broken down into step-by-step instructions tailored to each grade level. Teachers introduce the steps and students practice them, and the steps are consistently reviewed and reinforced.

"It's soft skills at an elementary level," said Laker Elementary Principal Kathy Dickens. "These are the building blocks to career skills."

This is part of a comprehensive and proactive positive behavior system that offers teachers and staff more tools to help every student do his or her best.

"The social skills teach students how to control themselves and how to work well with others," Dickens said.

Last year, Laker Elementary received a \$1.83 million federal grant that is helping the school to more thoroughly address behavior issues and assist at-risk students. A tighter focus is being placed on preventing and assessing behavior issues, as well as establishing effective interventions for struggling students. The grant allowed for the school to hire four behavior interventionists who work with teachers to assist students needing extra academic and behavior guidance. The interventionists also help teach and reinforce social skills, develop behavior plans, help students with organizational skills and other duties as needed.

"With our interventionists, we have more skilled feet on the floor to help our students succeed," Dickens said. "They focus on our students with social-emotional needs. They build a rapport with them to better understand those needs."

Third-grade teacher Amy Smithers said the interventionists are vital to ensuring that teachers and students get the most out of every classroom lesson.

"Behavior interventionists are key to the success of all students in our classrooms," she said. "They are trained to assist all children, but work especially with students who are struggling to make good choices pertaining to behavior. Students who struggle with behavior and interrupt the learning process get help right away. The interventionists reteach the specific behavior skill that the child may be struggling with. Together, the behavior interventionist and the child make a plan to make appropriate choices in our school."

"The behavior interventionist in kindergarten is a very busy person," said kindergarten teacher Michelle Reibling. "Since we are learning many correct behaviors, it is great to have a person there to help reinforce the correct choices in the classroom. She is also teaching Character Education to every kindergarten class, which is great. It is wonderful to have a person always there to help with behaviors and academics. If a child is having a difficult time, that child can get help immediately."

The behavior interventionists help ensure the school day is as productive as possible for students and teachers.

"The behavior interventionists allow the teacher to continue teaching when a student is being disruptive or

having a 'moment.' They're also helpful in the classroom (when there are no behavior issues)," said second-grade teacher Michelle Fritz.

As part of the grant, the school is working with Dr. Howie Knoff, an education consultant for more than 30 years. He has an extensive background in school psychology. He is training the staff on the Stop and Think program, which encourages all students to make positive choices and follow the steps needed to achieve their goals. The program teaches students to take responsibility for the choices they make. If it is a negative choice, they need to accept the negative consequence.

"The Stop and Think program keeps kids on same playing field – we're using a common platform, a common language," Dickens said.

"The Stop and Think Program gives a very specific, repetitive set of instructions (to allow students) to solve problems on their own," Fritz said. "The kids can see the Stop and Think posters and automatically think of what they should be doing or not doing. Teachers can say, 'Are you making a good choice or a bad choice,' and let the students take it from there."

Smithers said she likes how the Stop and Think program specifically helps teachers teach and model appropriate behavior expectations.

"Expected behavior is not assumed—all students are taught the skills so that all of us understand each other," Smithers said. "Students are aware and rise to the goals set for them."

Fourth-grade teacher Amy McArdle said Stop and Think puts everyone on the same page.

"All students know what 'Stop and Think' means and what they need to do," McArdle said. "Common rules and expectations make it a smooth way to run the school."

This fall, Knoff came to Lakers and visited one classroom at each grade level. He demonstrated teaching various social skills, based on what the teachers requested. For instance, at the kindergarten level, he taught proper listening skills and how to follow directions. At the fifth-grade level, he taught how to ignore distractions. He also observed classrooms and had meetings with teachers.

"Being in school isn't just about learning academic skills. Students need emotional, social and behavioral skills in order to get the most out of their academic lessons," Knoff said. "They need to learn how to interact with one another, conflict resolution, emotion control. These are the same skills adults need in the working world."

Another piece of the program involved teachers developing classroom behavior expectations for each grade level and specific consequences for not meeting the expectations. For instance, some of the expected behaviors include demonstrating good listening, following directions, using positive words and voice, apologize when needed, waiting for your turn, etc. Incentives and rewards are listed, as well. Students are explicitly informed of what is expected.

The classroom isn't the only environment in which specific expectations exist. Students need to follow correct procedures in the hallways, cafeteria, gymnasium, bathrooms, playground, buses and other

areas. With teacher instruction, students learned the procedures within these environments during the first week of school. The teachers reinforce the lessons consistently.

To help ensure the best outcomes for all students, the school also is reviewing a wide variety of records to make decisions on instruction, interventions, behavior plans and which students need assistance and what kind of assistance would be the most effective. Monthly meetings between grade-level teachers and other staff are conducted to discuss this information.

“We are working to improve recognition of students who need assistance and to foster a safe, family environment,” Dickens said.

Knoff is pleased with what he’s seen at Laker Elementary.

“I see the staff’s commitment to the children. They have a community-focused perspective and they work to engage the parents and guardians,” Knoff said. “They go above and beyond to do whatever they need to do to help students succeed. They really take responsibility for their students and have a lot of dedication and enthusiasm for what they do.”

NOTES for PARENTS

When parents and schools work together, students benefit by staying on a positive track in academics and in behavior skills. Here are some ways parents can help achieve this goal:

- Make sure students are as healthy as they can be. Make sure they are getting enough sleep, eating a healthy diet, getting exercise, and getting their hearing and vision checked.
- Read to children every night or have them read to you
- Talking to kids, staying connected with what they’re doing
- Support the school and talk positively about school to children. If there is an issue, deal with it at an adult level with the teacher and/or administration.



Dr. Howie talks with fifth graders about the proper way to ignore classroom distractions.