

BUILDING A NEW SCHOOL CULTURE



By implementing the Getting Along Together conflict resolution program, this Virginia elementary school has improved discipline and academic achievement, and empowered students to take responsibility for their own behavior

THE CHALLENGE

Problems with student discipline and behavior were becoming serious at Boones Mills Elementary School, in Boones Mills, VA. They were disrupting routine and hindering academic achievement. With a transient student population and a growing number of kids, teachers were spending so much of their time correcting minor infractions that they couldn't effectively teach.

"I was handling lots of discipline for things that didn't need to happen," says principal Amy Shaver. "Students didn't have the vocabulary or strategies to resolve their problems, and teachers didn't have the resources to address it. There was inconsistency throughout the building and a great deal of instruction time being missed."

With academic results suffering, principal Shaver and her leadership team recognized that strong action needed to be taken. The team took note of other schools in the district that had successfully implemented Success for All, with its proven cooperative learning strategies, and Getting Along Together (GAT), SFA's conflict resolution program. GAT's social-emotional learning strategies helped students manage their behavior, decrease conflicts and increase receptivity to learning.

Boones Mills voted to implement GAT, in 2016, and also adopted another behavior management program, Positive Behavioral Interventions & Support.



BEFORE SFA, STUDENTS DIDN'T HAVE THE VOCABULARY OR STRATEGIES TO RESOLVE THEIR PROBLEMS, AND TEACHERS DIDN'T HAVE THE RESOURCES TO ADDRESS IT.

AMY SHAVER,
Boones Mills Elementary Principal

THE SOLUTION

After training staff during the summer, the GAT program was carefully implemented at the start of the Boones Mills' school year. The school set a standard time for all of the lessons and Class Council meetings. This consistency made it easy for the leadership team to monitor progress and help teachers improve how they taught and incorporated GAT skills. It also provided the opportunity for everyone in the school to participate and observe the lessons and Class Council meetings. Enabling everyone in the building to model and support the behavior expectations.

For their part, teachers had to shift their mindset from standing at the front of the class and instructing students to breaking kids into groups and guiding their progress. They started helping the kids learn to solve their own problems, allowing them to use GAT strategies such as thinking before acting and working as a group to address issues.

For the program to be truly successful, the leadership team that knew it had to become a schoolwide endeavor, creating a pervasive culture dedicated to better behavior. To this end, they put GAT posters and other reminders all over the building, including Peace Paths in the gym and Thinking Spots in the cafeteria, allowed Brain Games to be played everywhere and even included GAT information in the morning announcements. Wherever they go in the school now, students are reminded to employ their GAT strategies for any issue.

THE RESULTS

Before the end of the first year of the Success for All GAT implementation, Boones Mills Elementary School started seeing remarkable results. Over the previous year, the school saw acts of disrespect decrease from 41 to two, physical altercations, from 25 to six, acts of vandalism, from eight to two, and threats made, from 21 to zero.

This amounted to a 95% decrease in disrespect referrals, a 76% decrease in physical altercations and a 75% decrease in vandalism.

Now there is a powerful new culture at Boones Mills. Students are able to resolve problems on their own, often walking the Peace Path without staff knowing there was ever an issue. Teachers have changed how they interact with students and appreciate the fact that they have more time to teach, and spend less time dealing with behavior and discipline issues. Many have reorganized their classrooms for the entire day, from rigid rows into groups, and have embraced more cooperative learning.

Even though the school still has a high number of transient students, their coming and going is not as distracting as it once was. With the GAT system in place, new students quickly learn the expected skills and behaviors.

Integrating GAT with the PBIS program was also a seamless affair. The two now work well together. PBIS provides the structures and expectations, while GAT empowers students with the skills and routines needed to achieve those expectations.

“Although this isn’t even the first full year implementing GAT, there’s definitely an impact on student achievement. Classroom grades are improving and benchmark assessments are looking very positive,” says principal Shaver. “It only makes sense that when students are mentally present, and are not frustrated and angry, they will perform better academically.”

She adds: “It’s great working in a school community that gets to focus on celebrating students being successful!”



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