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Program rewards students for positive behavior

By PATRICK RIPLEY Staff Writer

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For years kids have been punished for being bad, but some schools across the county have enlisted a new program that rewards students for being good and it seems to work.

Of the 125 schools countywide, 44 are on board with the innovative program Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. The program started in the county with just a handful of schools in 1999, but has grown into a county initiative to get all schools involved.

"Punishment alone does not change behavior," said Virginia Dolan, who facilitates the county program and describes it as "just really good common sense."

The program seeks to improve students' behavior through various positive reinforcement strategies in hopes of providing a more productive environment with less behavioral problems at schools.

"What we tend to do with human nature is only focus on the negative, but we tend to forget to say 'you did a really nice job,'" Ms. Dolan said. "That's the kind of thing we need to focus on."

One of the latest schools to come on board is Chesapeake Bay Middle in Pasadena, where Assistant Principal Charles Renaldo is working with a team of faculty members implementing the program.

"We were looking for ways to improve the school. The whole idea is you're trying to improve instruction and student success," he said, adding the program is intended to "maximize the time in class to instruct and (spend) less (time) on the discipline."

While schools use various means to accomplish this goal,

their methods all have one thing in common: consistently responding to good behavior with positive reinforcement.

At Chesapeake, good behavior is spelled out to the students early in the year with phrases like "live responsibly," "uphold integrity" and "earn and give respect."

Students are given "Blue Pride" tickets when they show those behaviors. The tickets can be used to enter raffles, with prizes ranging from end zone seats at a college football game to lunch with a faculty member or administrator.

Chesapeake sixth-grader Morgan Hall, 11, saved up 88 tickets, which earned her tickets to the Navy football game against Rutgers in November.

"I had done my work in class and I turned my homework in," Morgan said. "I paid attention in class."

Morgan is now saving up her tickets for lunch with school Assistant Principal Barbara Goldstein.

"She seems nice to me," Morgan said.

Mr. Renaldo said office referrals for inappropriate behavior have gone down significantly since last year. They were down 120 in October and 150 in November, he said.

Mr. Renaldo estimated each office referral takes five to 10 minutes of class time away from a student.

"If we can come up with a system to encourage the students to behave, we can spend that time teaching," said Mr. Renaldo, adding that each office referral takes 5 to 10 minutes of class time away from a student.

"Our goal is to get 80 percent of the kids with zero or only one referral," Ms. Dolan said.

While critics of the program may consider PBIS a form of bribery, Ms. Dolan and Mr. Renaldo said called it incentive-based. Students are not given tickets until after they show positive behavior. "Bribery" would entail giving them tickets in order to get them to behave, Ms. Dolan said.

"The difference between a bribe and reinforcement is very distinct," she said.

Ms. Dolan said she hopes to add 10 more schools to the list of those using the program by September.

"It's a voluntary thing, although the county would like to go to scale doing this," she said. "We hope to have all the middle schools on board" by next year.

In order to implement the program, 80 percent of the faculty must agree, Ms. Dolan said.

At Chesapeake, teachers not only hand out tickets for good behavior, but also participate in the program and are awarded tickets for filing paperwork on time or "if we catch them in the hallway going above and beyond," Mr. Renaldo said.

Despite successes at Chesapeake, Ms. Dolan said results have been mixed throughout the county. She attributed that to the fledgling nature of the program.

However, she said the program, created at the University of Oregon, is receiving support nationwide and that extensive research has proved the program successful and its techniques affective.

"Every school is in different phases of implementation," Ms. Dolan said, adding it takes three to five years "to really become institutionalized."

There are five high schools, 18 elementary schools and 19 middle schools using the program. Two schools for troubled students and a special education school also use it.

Each school targets its specific problem areas through extensive research and then fashions its version of PBIS to address those particular problems.

"You're using data instead of just making decisions on opinion or subjectivity," Ms. Dolan said.

"We're really happy how the whole climate changes in the school when your starting to compliment and accentuate the positive," Mr. Renaldo said.

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