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School program ensures good behavior pays off

Arundel program stresses positive reinforcement

By Liz F. Kay
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At Brooklyn Park Middle School, sixth-graders packed a small storage space, turning in coupons they received for good behavior and getting candy, school supplies and gifts for their family in return.

"It's just like going to work," said Jessica Rasinski, 11, who had tucked a bright blue-and-pink pen into her purse. "You earn your daily pay, and you spend it in the store."

Statistics at many of nearly 300 schools, scattered among all of Maryland's systems, show fewer trips to the office and fewer suspensions from school through a program called Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, intended to help school officials examine discipline patterns and reinforce good manners and respect.

Anne Arundel County leads the way with teams at 44 schools - and data to show that the rewards system has kept students in class and freed administrators from hours of interrogating students about misconduct.

The program, developed by University of Oregon researchers, also helps distinguish between occasional acting out and serious behavior problems, officials say.

"We've tended as a society only to get creative and focused about punishments," said Anne Arundel's program facilitator, Virginia L. Dolan. "Punishments alone don't change behavior."

Staff members at about 10 more of Anne Arundel's 120 schools will be trained in the program next year, Dolan said.

Last summer, nine schools were recognized by the state for their efforts. They will join thousands of schools nationwide that have adopted the program, said Philip J. Leaf, director of the Johns Hopkins Center for the Prevention of Youth Violence.

The center, along with the Maryland State Department of Education and the Sheppard Pratt Health System, is conducting a long-term study of the program in Anne Arundel, Baltimore and in three other Maryland counties.

The program enables students to learn consistent rules that apply throughout their schools, and gives educators more time with those who have serious behavioral disorders. Simply suspending a child for misbehaving does not change the circumstances that prompted misbehavior, Leaf said.

Since 1999, the state Education Department has collaborated with Sheppard Pratt to train staff members at 276 schools around Maryland in this program, said Charles Buckler, chief of the Education Department's student services and alternative programs branch.

Using discipline data, schools identify discipline problems. Students and staff then develop a short list of consistent rules and decide how they apply in different situations - on the school bus and in the cafeteria, for example, or in hallways and classrooms.

Buckler pointed out that the Latin root of the word discipline means "to learn" - and discipline prevents students from disrupting instruction for their classmates.

This program "alone will not cure all the discipline problems in a school, but it provides a framework to examine discipline in a school," he said.

PBIS also reminded administrators of the importance of activities such as ice cream socials and pizza parties that might have been forgotten in the push for new testing mandates and other academic demands.

"Because there's been so much pressure in recent years about academic performance, unintentionally schools have cut back on many of the things they used to do to create a more pleasant school environment," Leaf said.

Last summer, the Education Department named nine of Anne Arundel's schools "exemplar schools" for their implementation of the positive intervention program, including Mary E. Moss Academy in Crownsville, where students are sent after being expelled from their home schools.

The alternative high school recorded four referrals to the principal's office among its 93 students in September last year, compared with 39 referrals among 51 students the year before, said Assistant Principal KaTrina J. Miller.

The training also has changed adult behavior, officials said. It may help identify problems with classroom management, for example, or improve teacher retention by creating a more pleasant workplace, Leaf said.

"Teachers did not get into the business of teaching to be mean to students," Leaf said.

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