



Posted on Fri, Apr. 02, 2010

SEL is calming Central

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Administrators in Central District 104 say they have seen great strides in improving student behavior since a Social Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum was introduced in its schools.

The program is in its second year of implementation and Dawn Elser, principal of Central Elementary School, said things are going very well.

"SEL has helped students become more aware of their own emotions, more aware of diversity issues and more empathetic in their decision making," Elser said. "The environment seems better," she added. "The kids seem to be getting along better. And office referrals have gone down."

In 2009, the district took a lead among area schools and implemented a state-mandated SEL curriculum that focuses on five main areas of social and emotional development — self awareness, social awareness, self management, responsible decision making and relationship skills.

Noting SEL is as important to students' success and development as intelligence testing, Elser explained SEL is the process of acquiring the skills to recognize and manage emotions, develop caring and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions and handle challenging situations effectively.

"SEL is closely tied to academic success," Elser noted. "And it piggybacks on character education, violence prevention and other programs District 104 already has in place to address the positive behavior and character development of its students."

"It also is very closely tied to our PBIS — Positive Behavior Interventions and Support — program (begun in 2006)," she added.

PBIS offers a systematic approach for creating and maintaining a safe and effective learning environment by supporting social competence and academic achievement, supporting staff and student behavior and supporting decision making through plans that address home, school and community settings.

"We already have taught the kids the expectations of PBIS. Now we are putting it all together," Elser said in noting the district is integrating the two programs into a seamless whole.

"SEL is a lot like a character education program," she said. "It calls for hands-on group activities that teach children how to interact with one another. We talk about character traits, getting along with one another and having empathy for others. And we are teaching them what it feels like when they are respectful, what it sounds like."

"We are not putting more work on the teachers," she added. "But we are incorporating it in a way that is making kids more successful. And we are all very excited about this because we are moving in the right direction."

"I have had a lot of parents from both the grade school and the middle school tell me the schools have a calmer atmosphere. I attribute it to us taking more time to focus on the social emotional learning of the children," she said.

The centerpiece of District 104's current SEL program is a new curriculum introduced at the beginning of this school year called Lions Quest, which is an initiative of Lions Clubs International.

Shakeita Clayton, school counselor at Joseph Arthur Middle School, said the district selected Lions Quest from all of the options because it is directly aligned with the social emotion learning standards Illinois has established.

"Also," she added, "we surveyed parents and students and we used the results to figure out which curriculum would be best for our school population. The survey identified some low self-esteem issues, along with issues with aggression, bullying and those kind of things. It also showed some kids were having problems with self confidence, communication and managing emotions."

"This curriculum addresses those issues very well," she said.

"For the younger kids, it also has a positive prevention program that teaches them how to handle peer pressure, how to say no to drugs and alcohol. And it has a family and community component to engage them in the educational process, as well," Elser pointed out.

"That has been going great so far and I was really surprised by who participated," Clayton said. "The parents really want to get involved with the school so we are creating more activities that incorporate the community and parents into the program."

One of those successful activities was the district's first SEL Game Night on March 11. For the event, Central partnered with the Lagoon Magoo toy store in Shiloh to bring its families together for a night of pizza and fun games to engage the entire family and to stimulate the mind.

"We wanted families to come with their children to play," explained Mary Hall, the Central social worker. "And we wanted them interacting with their child, not sitting on the sideline watching."

Explaining her involvement, Shawnta Ray, owner of the toy store, said, "They (Dist. 104) needed a community partner and we were perfect for the part. We want the same things. We want parents to be engaged with their children and we want to get parents and kids talking more."

District 104 received a three-year grant from the Illinois Mental Health Partnership that provides \$10,000 a year to help it acquire SEL curriculum materials and carry out training for its program.

"We were fortunate to receive the grant because it allows us to take the program a step further," Elser said. "We have been able to use the money to buy things that are needed and to do activities and incorporate it district wide."

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