

Learning and The Brain Conference
Positive Resilient Minds: The Science of Promoting Student Grit, Gratitude, and School Success
Arlington Virginia April 7 – 9, 2017
KPAA Career Development Grant
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This was an informative and reflective conference that has helped me to grow as an administrator as I consider and reconsider “What does Sterling Elementary stand for?” and more specifically, “What do I stand for?” as the principal. This conference renewed my passion for what drew me to being a principal in the first place, and I am excited to share this learning with my school community and work together to make noticeable changes to our school’s culture. Instead of providing a summary of my learning, I am sharing my 3-year plan of improvement for Sterling Elementary based on my learning from this conference and my newly restored and validated passion for creating a caring and empathetic school environment above all else.

Sterling Elementary has been working under the Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS) framework since it was established in our school district. Over the past three years that I have been principal at the school, it seems the framework has been deteriorating. We have always thought it was due to high staff turnover, ineffective staff training throughout the year, or reduced student buy-in. While these are all parts of it, the main component that I learned through this conference is that we have to reframe our PBIS framework. We need to reframe PBIS in terms of teaching students and staff to switch from fixed mindsets to caring, growth mindsets. One of the key themes from this conference is that if the brain doesn’t feel safe, then it cannot learn. Growing our empathy and changing our mindsets will assist our students in learning.

Goal: Focus on building school community in order to establish our school culture around the importance of empathy and relationships.

1. Opening of school professional development:
 - a. Re-creation of Sterling Elementary vision and mission.
 - b. PD focused on PBIS expectations, growth mindset, and empathy.
2. Research shows that rewards and praise provide short-lived reinforcement for behaviors that we would like to become more intrinsically motivated. Through PBIS, though, these tangible rewards serve both as a student motivator and a staff reminder to praise more frequently than not. Our school uses pompoms and it tends to taper off by the middle of the year. Our PBIS committee will look at novel ways to engage students and staff with our PBIS reward system, such as special days of the week where everyone gives pompoms, special types of pompoms, etc.
3. Specifically teach our PBIS Stop-Walk-Talk. In addition, teach students specifically what to do when they come into the presence of a bullying situation and/or students being really mean. Using a format called Bully BUSTER (as learned at this conference), students will be taught the steps to be an upstander instead of a bystander.
4. Teach our students conflict resolution options. Assist students to develop their own Wheel of Choice. Provide students with some ideas to solve problems, but also have students develop their own so that they have that connection to a strategy.
5. All classrooms (Pre-K through 6th) hold class meetings for 30 minutes daily. Class meetings will include lessons and time to problem solve.

- a. Quarter 1: Lessons about PBIS expectations, empathy, growth mindset and community. Resources: Positive Discipline*, Caring School Communities* resources, professional development on these resources and growth mindset, possible creation of Canvas resources to provide teachers with their daily lessons.
 - b. Quarter 2 and Quarter 4: Class meetings as described in Positive Discipline*. Class meetings will include review of previous learning and will focus on issues and problems that students want to solve. Previous learning will include a focus of the week, such as PBIS expectations, growth mindset and brain learning, and living empathetically.
 - c. Quarter 3: Re-teaching of our PBIS expectations, growth mindset, empathy to start the quarter. After lessons are complete, class meetings will resume as described in Positive Discipline*.
6. School wide community building activities:
- a. Quarter 1: For 30 minutes every day for the first 2 weeks of school, students in the same recess and lunch periods will come together for a physical activity that uses student interests to find commonalities. Relationships are built through commonalities.
 - b. Quarter 2 - 4: Whole school will do 2 activities per quarter to build our community. Families and community members will be invited to participate and engage with students as they celebrate our community of Sterling Elementary.
7. Buddy classroom activities:
- a. Classrooms will establish buddies of an older grade and a younger grade. Using the resources from the Caring School Communities* curriculum, classes will engage in meaningful activities with their buddy classrooms that are designed to increase empathy and caring for others.
8. Parent and student engagement at school and at home:
- a. The HomeSide resource will guide our families in activities that build home school connections. Each homeside activity was started at school and will be finished at home.
 - b. Would like to hold a parent/ staff book club focusing on the book Unselfie by Michele Borba, which helps adults to teach children to have empathy. Michele Borba has a free discussion guide for parents and educators to make the most of the book.
 - c. Information regarding lessons from class meetings will be sent home, posted in newsletters and on Facebook. This will provide parents with the same language to use with students too.

My goal with all of these activities will be to increase relationships in our school and to increase connections between students and adults. As Mr. Dusek always quotes, "Students don't care what you know until they know that you care." This was the key take away from this conference, however, it was framed in brain research with practical ways to make it happen. These activities will take time out of our day. It will be additional learning and growth for our teachers and staff. It is all of our staff who need to have a growth mindset to support all of our students. PBIS is about having the same language and using it to teach routines and expectations. All staff are expected to have and use this language. With growth mindset, this needs to occur as well. It is only as a whole staff and whole school community that our culture will change.

*Will request funds to purchase materials through PTA and grants before looking at school funds.

Sean Dusek

4/19/17