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Discipline problems plummet after success of Schaeffer principal's plan

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By Joe Smydo, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Darrell Sapp / Post-Gazette

First-grader Cassidy Concanon receives a "Whale Done" award during morning assembly at Schaeffer school. She was noted by classmate Abby Fontana for being a "good friend" and helping her with "reading and math."

Thad Lacinak and Chuck Tompkins made careers out of jumping into a pool with killer whales weighing 5,000 to 10,000 pounds.

In a manner of speaking, Cynthia Zurchin jumps into a pool every day, too. As principal of Pittsburgh Schaeffer K-8's Primary Campus in Crafton Heights, she's responsible for about 185 sometimes-rambunctious students in kindergarten through third grade.

Dr. Zurchin hit upon the idea of using the pair's whale-training techniques, in which whales are rewarded for good behavior but not punished for bad behavior, to improve discipline at Schaeffer, and the experiment, now about 21/2 years old, has made quite a splash. City Council will recognize her efforts with a proclamation tomorrow.

"It's exceeded my greatest expectations," she said of the program, which boils down to positive reinforcement.

In 2006-07, Dr. Zurchin issued more than 100 suspensions for bad behavior. As she introduced and refined her "Whale Done" program, the number of suspensions dropped to about 75 in 2007-08 and about 10 this school year. Dr. Zurchin said many of this year's are attributable to one student.

Dr. Zurchin's inspiration was a book, "Whale Done: The Power of Positive Relationships," by management guru Kenneth Blanchard, Mr. Lacinak, Mr. Tompkins and corporate trainer Jim Ballard.

In the 1970s, Mr. Lacinak and colleagues at SeaWorld in Orlando, Fla., revolutionized the training of killer whales.

Abandoning the long-standing practice of trying to dominate the animals, which

included punishing them for bad behavior, the trainers began rewarding good behavior and ignoring or "redirecting" the bad. Mr. Lacinak said the change led to more dynamic SeaWorld performances, happier whales and a safer work environment for the trainers.

"They're very intelligent animals," he said. "They remember you. They don't forget."

So at an assembly at Schaeffer each morning, selected students and staff members receive "Whale Done" certificates and stickers for good behavior, academic achievement or acts of kindness. Recent recipients included:

- Second-grader Truvron Spencer, who stayed out of a fight by remembering to take "calming deep breaths" when he was upset.
- First-grader Alex Fuchs, who impressed Dr. Zurchin with his hard work during a special reading period that follows the morning assembly.
- Second-graders Anna Hoskins and Cara Cupp, singled out by classmate Elaina Fontana for being good friends.
- First-grade teacher Andrea Germansky, nominated by her students for her motherly disposition and for giving them five extra minutes of recess.

With each presentation, students and adults chant "Whale Done!" and move their hands in the undulating manner of a leaping whale.

Plastic inflatable whales hang from the ceilings, a constant reminder of Dr. Zurchin's expectations.

"This program has done a 360 to the kids," said Deb Joyce, whose son Tyler is a third-grader. "You don't see kids unruly. There's no fighting."

Mr. Blanchard, co-author of the bestselling book "The One Minute Manager," long had advocated the power of positive reinforcement in the workplace. He said the whale trainers' experience was a particularly compelling example and grist for a new book.

In the past nine years, the "Whale Done" book and related training videos have become well-known in the corporate sector, and Mr. Lacinak has used the principles to help turf-conscious federal law enforcement agencies get along. But Mr. Lacinak and Mr. Blanchard said Dr. Zurchin is one of the first, if not the first, to apply the principles to student discipline.

"I think she's done an amazing job," Mr. Blanchard said.

In 2006-07, Schaeffer was in trouble, Dr. Zurchin said.

A district reorganization plan had closed 22 schools, and Schaeffer had to absorb students from one of them. The influx changed the school culture and led to a rash of discipline problems.

"The first year was terrible," Ms. Joyce said.

Some angry parents pulled their children from the school. Ms. Joyce said she came close to removing her son because he was being bullied.

Dr. Zurchin calls herself a student of management who is always looking for a better way to lead. When she read "Whale Done," a light went on.

"Would you punish a killer whale? Not unless you want to be a short-lived trainer,"

she said.

She explained her idea of "Whale Done" behavior to beleaguered faculty members and got them to sign on. The results were swift and dramatic. Ms. Joyce says students are more focused these days, and Dr. Zurchin said she believes academics are improving.

"They want to hear their names announced. It's a pride thing," Ms. Joyce said.

The program started with awards for students, then expanded. Students now give "Whale Dones" -- some of them handmade -- to teachers, Dr. Zurchin and one another. Parents send them in to school for their children.

Mr. Lacinak was so intrigued by Dr. Zurchin's program that he visited Schaeffer last year. Dr. Zurchin joined Mr. Blanchard in Washington, D.C., last week for a pair of speaking engagements.

This fall, Mr. Blanchard, Mr. Lacinak and their partners are coming out with a new book, "Whale Done Parenting: How to Make Parenting a Positive Experience for You and Your Kids." Dr. Zurchin hopes her program spreads to other schools, and Mr. Blanchard said his team may write a "Whale Done" book for schools.

"We all like to be told what we're doing is good at one point or another," Mr. Lacinak said.

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