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Every Student at Schaeffer Elementary School is a Shining Star



Students at Schaeffer Elementary are engaged in learning and excited by school. *-photo courtesy of "Pittsburgh Educator"*

by Peg Stewart

When entering Schaeffer Elementary School on Clairhaven St., in Crafton Heights, one would never guess that just two years ago this was a school in complete turmoil.

Now, just the opposite is true.

At the start of the 2006-07 school year, the Pittsburgh School District began a redistricting program by closing and combining some schools to save money and resources.

Schaeffer Elementary serves as the area kindergarten through third grade school. Sheraden Elementary now teaches grades four through six. Children are bussed from their own neighborhoods to each of these schools.

During the first year of redistricting, children arrived at school revved up from their bus ride. Teachers found it difficult to get and to keep their attention in class. Disciplinary problems were a constant. Teachers and parents were frustrated and worried about student achievement scores.

At end of that first school year, Dr. Cynthia Zurchin, the principal, and her teachers and support staff began to devise strategies to help their students be ready to learn.

Riding the Buses

As a team, their first strategy was to ride the buses with the children to and from school each day. This had an immediate and positive impact on the students and their behavior. The children were pleased and proud that their teachers rode with them. Their parents were reassured that their children were safe. The teachers felt connected to all of the Schaeffer students. Disciplinary problems were reduced to a minimum.

Two years later, the teachers, aides and principal still ride the buses every day. At times, they walk to a student's home to see a parent or to drop off homework for a sick child. A Schaeffer Elementary community has been established. Parents know how their children are doing with easy and daily communication.

Whale Done

The second strategy the Schaeffer team implemented is both effective and fun. Using the principles in the book, "Whale Done," (by Ken Blanchard) the faculty and staff acknowledge and reinforce any positive achievement and behavior in students. Each time a child does "something right," he or she is given a Whale Done (or Well Done in regular English). A Whale Done is a hand motion of a whale swimming. Children know this means Good Job! and work hard toward earning this praise.

The school is filled with all kinds of whales...stuffed, balloons, stickers, banners...all fun and reinforcing. The main hall bulletin board has photos of individual students with a notation of what earned each a Whale Done. Students earn tickets to buy small treats and gifts in a school store. During the morning assembly, the whole school does a Whale Done motion when a child is complimented.

All of this positive reinforcement has translated into a happy and calm

school. Students are quiet, well-behaved, and ready to learn. This school year students are wearing uniforms, which adds to sense of school is serious business even when fun.

These strategies have resulted in improved test scores across the board. It is hoped that this year the scores will improve even more than in the past two years. The results are amazing, since 92 percent of the children are from families who are designated as living at poverty level.

Dr. Zurchin and her team at Schaeffer are determined that their students do well while in school. They make every effort to encourage and foster learning while creating a fun and positive day.

Dr. Zurchin said that she and her team expect all of their students to qualify for the Pittsburgh Promise when it is time for them to go to college. At Schaeffer Elementary, it is their mission to guarantee that these children get a good start in learning, even if it means riding the buses every day. Whale Done!



Mrs. Pam Marmarella and Dr. Cynthia Zurchin demonstrate how to correctly perform a Whale Done. *-photo courtesy of "Pittsburgh Educator"*