



Cheryl Childs works with Jalvaunn Harrison in her first grade reading class at Pittsburgh Manchester PreK-8.

## Thinking positive

PBIS helps create a safe work environment for students

By MEAGHAN CASEY

"Keep our schools safe. Set a positive example. Be respectful and considerate of one another."

These are three of the expectations contained in The Pittsburgh Pledge, and they give voice to the District's commitment to creating safe and orderly environments so that children are given every possible opportunity to succeed.

One tool being used in a group of District schools to improve student behavior and build positive school climates is the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program. As a proactive method of addressing student behavior, PBIS is grounded in the idea of teaching expected behaviors and negates the philosophy of waiting until a problem occurs to intervene.

"There's a huge emphasis on prevention," said Dr. Mary Margaret Kerr, associate professor at the University of Pittsburgh and leader of a technical assistance team for the implementation of PBIS on Pittsburgh Public Schools. "It reverses the reactive model. We don't want to wait for a student to act up. We want to prevent that behavior in the first place. The goal is to create

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More than 5,000 schools across the U.S. have enacted the PBIS model. Deputy Superintendent Linda Lane understands the value of PBIS, through both research and experience. Lane completed her doctoral thesis on disproportionate rates of suspension among African-American males in the Des Moines Public Schools. She examined how PBIS, which was in place in a number of Des Moines schools, was impacting student behavior.

"In Des Moines, I was looking at students who were routinely suspended - 20 or more days in a school year," said Lane. "Obviously in those cases, suspension wasn't working. Dealing with behavioral

issues up front, for most kids, is the best way to make an impact."

Kerr agreed. "The PBIS model is based on decades of research, revealing that the punishment-only approaches just don't work," she said.

"It also fosters parent relations," added Lane. "If we're preventing the disciplinary actions, it's much easier to gain parent support and work with them towards a common goal."

Additionally, the need for less disciplining leads to more learning time in class.

"We want to reduce behaviors that are disruptive to the learning process," said Kerr. "Some reports show that school administrators can recoup up to 40 hours of time otherwise spent dealing with office referrals."

The District introduced PBIS in 11 K-8 schools in January of 2007. University Prep 6-12 will pilot a high school version of the program this year. PBIS is coordinated through a three-way partnership among the schools, the University of Pittsburgh and the Wilson Institute.

"We have to teach kids the appropriate behavior for appropriate settings," said Lane. "Practicing with a model, and reinforcing that model is essential."

## A job "Whale Done" at Pittsburgh Schaeffer

By MEAGHAN CASEY

At Pittsburgh Schaeffer K-8 Primary Campus, inflatable whales adorn the ceilings and miniature ones sit on students' desks. Banners remind students and staff to "have a whale of a day" and individuals posture to one another in swimming motion.

These are not the visible signs of a marine-themed school. Instead, they are the result of a program developed by Principal Cynthia Zarchin and the Pittsburgh Schaeffer staff based on Kenneth Blanchard's book "Whale Done!: The Power of Positive Relationships."

In the book, Blanchard and SeaWorld trainers Thad Lacinak and Chuck Tompkins share the techniques used to train killer whales, which can be easily translated to the classroom or workplace. The secret is to build trust, accentuate the positive, and when mistakes occur, redirect the energy.

"If you were a trainer, how would you train a killer whale?" asked Zarchin. "You'd only punish them if you want to be a short-lived trainer. The same is true with children. When babies are learning to walk, you don't criticize them when they fall. You praise them when they take their first steps."

By focusing on what's right, "Whale Done!" is designed to teach people how to improve their relationships in order to become more productive and to achieve better results.

Visually, banners and whales reinforce the program's themes. During morning assemblies, staff and students recognize one another with "whale donecs." Zarchin reads all of the submitted "whale donecs" and nominators make a gesture with their hands, similar to that of a whale swimming. Teachers also distribute stickers, certificates and stuffed animals (whales, of course) to recognize positive behavior.

"Watching the kids' smiles and their pride, it's really paid off," said Zarchin. "They just want to work so hard."

Since implementing "Whale Done!" one year ago, Pittsburgh Schaeffer has reduced the overall suspension rate by 30 percent. Zarchin said tardiness has also dropped, which she attributes to the popularity of the morning recognition ceremony. With minimal distractions, the overall focus in the classrooms has improved.

"We want to build a successful culture of learning," said Zarchin. "It's working. The community is ecstatically happy. Now we want to work with the families and be able to move this approach into homes."



Student Aiden Carinaugh demonstrates a "whale done" swimming gesture during morning assembly.