

Stewartsville Elementary School

*Big Changes, Big Gains: Improved School Climate
Leads to Drop in Discipline Referrals and Increased Academic Success*

Susan Mele with Mary Beth Fortran

It just completely changed the atmosphere of the school. It was simply amazing to watch.

We were transformed into a kinder, gentler community of learners (Responsive

Classroom, n.d.).

-- Susan Mele, principal

About the School

Stewartsville Elementary School in Goodview, Virginia is a rural Pre-K to 5 school with 430 students nestled in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Sixty-eight percent of its largely white student body qualify for free or reduced lunch. The 75-year-old school is a focal point for the community, and many students are part of a family that has attended for generations.

Radical Changes Are in Order

When Principal Susan Mele arrived in 2010 student behavior was completely out of control and discipline was in chaos. More time was being spent on discipline than instruction; teachers were exhausted from dealing with inappropriate behaviors that negatively impacted instruction; students were rude to each other and didn't seem to care, and their parents weren't supportive. Parents did not understand why student behaviors were resulting in students being suspended for inappropriate language, non-compliance with teacher requests, fighting, and disruption of the learning environment.

Mele remembers that, "On most days I had no time for anything but discipline. I was literally wrapped up with disciplining students from the moment the buses arrived at

7:30 am until 5:00 pm when I would finish my last phone call to parents” (personal communication, 2014). She observed the frustration of her staff, unable to do what they wanted to do which was to teach. Their tone and language showed this frustration and their language tended to be negative and not appropriate for a learning environment. Something big needed to change.

Midway through that first year, she challenged the leadership team, indicating that they could not continue as they were, just trying to hold down the fort, not really educating their students. While her staff was at a point where they were so frustrated that they were willing to try anything, Mele didn't leap to choose the first program that someone recommended. She recognized how critical it was to have buy in from the staff. Instead she encouraged them to have many conversations about the importance of selecting one approach and committing as a group to whatever they decided. Several people who were familiar with the *Responsive Classroom* approach suggested that the school consider adopting it as a means to change the school climate and there were nods of agreement around the room.

The staff gave their unanimous support but with one condition: They wanted her and the school counselor to demonstrate their commitment by being among the first in the school to receive the full week-long training. Not only did they attend the week-long training that summer, they showed their commitment in many other ways, too.

In the first year of implementation, the principal carved out 20 minutes in the schedule for the key *Responsive Classroom* strategy of Morning Meeting and established the expectation that all teachers would conduct Morning Meetings daily. She also

purchased resource books for every teacher, along with a chime to use as a signal for getting students' attention.

In addition, she devoted time in staff meetings to modeling Morning Meeting components and sharing ideas for activities that connected to the curriculum. Finally, she introduced the approach to parents and built their support through regular communications emphasizing the importance of creating a more positive climate for learning.

Within six to eight weeks of starting the new school year and the implementation of the *Responsive Classroom* model, teachers began to notice a change. Students seemed more excited about coming to school; parents began reporting that students were upset if they didn't get to school on time because they would miss Morning Meeting; students were starting to greet one another and teachers by name; and older students were seen helping younger students on the bus and in the hallways. Discipline referrals dropped significantly that first year as did bus referrals. Daily attendance was up by a point and a half. and has continued to slowly increase each year.

The Changes Take Root

The next summer, most staff attended the week-long training, including classroom teachers, special area teachers, and paraprofessionals. Throughout the year, the staff committed to studying *Responsive Classroom* books and to creating school-wide rules. After the first day of school in the second year, the staff was in awe about how smoothly the year opened and it continued to get better from there.

Responsive Classroom helped teachers change their language and this shift was huge. As Susan Mele puts it: "Teachers [became] conscious of the weight of each word

they said. Once the students understood that the teachers cared about them, the students responded in a positive way, and this created a positive never-ending circle” (Responsive Classroom, 2014).

Teachers began to change their attitudes about how they looked at the children they taught, and this had profound effects on their behavior. Interactions became much more nurturing and supportive. Where teachers previously felt helpless and frustrated and felt that nothing would work, they now enjoyed their jobs more, which was evident through the language they used with the children. Teachers began looking at students individually and asking, “What can I do to help this child”? Students increasingly saw their teachers as people they could trust. Teachers gained a better understanding of their students' lives and learned that they could have a positive impact on students beyond academics.

Before the implementation of *Responsive Classroom* parents were frustrated and did not want to be at the school. Teachers now have tools to find ways to work with students and families in a positive way. Parents have recognized this shift as well, indicating that they’ve seen a tremendous change in the whole school environment. They report seeing the children being more respectful, kinder, and gentler. One measurable result: there are a lot more parents coming into the school for family nights, PTA events, or just coming into the classroom to visit for a while. Parents report to Principal Mele that they feel much more welcome in the building.

The Data Support the Reported Level of Changes

With the improved school climate and better discipline, there was more time for instruction, and students were more engaged and available for learning:

- Discipline: In the three year period between 2010/11 and 2012/13 school discipline referrals decreased from 164 to 76 to 42 and suspensions decreased from 40 to 22 to only 15; referrals for incidents on school buses dropped from 39 to 21 during the same period.
- State Test Achievement Data - Reading: Scores increased by 19 points in grades 3-5 from 2013 – 2014, and
- State Test Achievement Data - Math: Scores increased by 24 points in grades 3-5 from 2013- 2014.

A Principal's Advice

Susan Mele frequently shares her school's story with other administrators in her district. Here are the key points she emphasizes:

Changing the school culture. “It completely changed who we were as a school. Students and teachers know each other and are motivated to work things out when there is a problem. There is much more time for learning and students are more available for the learning. And now when I get a discipline referral it’s an anomaly. We’ve come a long way in just a few years (personal communication 2014).”

Implementing with fidelity. When using an evidence-based program implementing the program with fidelity is key to long-term success. Additionally, it is necessary that school Leadership teams discuss purposeful ways to maintain the momentum in order to achieve the best results.

Recognizing success also helps keep the momentum going: “We’ve gotten a lot of recognition this year from local TV stations and newspapers. We also received an award

from the Bedford County Court System for our success in reducing discipline problems in school (personal communication, 2014)."

Recognizing that not everything happens quickly. For example, it took several years to educate parents about school expectations and to develop positive working relationships with them across the school. Children need to understand that behavioral expectation may be different at home and at school in order to support school rules and establish a positive school culture without undermining parental roles.

Holding teachers accountable. Susan Mele is very clear about her goals and expectations and gives extremely clear and direct feedback to teachers about their performance.

Knowing that you can't do it alone. Principal Mele emphasizes that she doesn't pretend to have all the answers. She uses a very large leadership team of 16 people because, "I don't turn away anyone who wants to be on it; we're working together as a team - teaching staff, parents, office staff, custodians. I happen to be the team leader, but my role is to facilitate not to dominate" (personal communication, 2014).

Creating a shared leadership atmosphere. To be successful the principal needs to engender a sense of joint ownership with the school staff: "I can make sure the ship is going in the right direction, but I need all of the staff to be on the ship to make an impact - I always invite teacher involvement for all big decisions" (personal communication, 2014).

Susan Mele sums up her experience-guided philosophy for success this way: "I constantly tell other school leaders, 'If you want the kind of impact we've had at Stewartsville, give teachers the support they need to implement the program well and

keep the momentum going year after year. It takes strong commitment from the principal and the entire staff to make it work, but it's worth it!" (personal communication, 2014)"

References

The Responsive Classroom in action: Three success stories. (n.d.). Retrieved from:

http://www.responsiveclassroom.org/sites/default/files/pdf_files/3_RC_success_stories.pdf