

Creative Positive School Climates: Increasing the Frequency of Teacher and Student Praise Notes*

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Our nation's students desperately need schools to be safe, secure, orderly and drug-free. Safe schools promote both academic and social learning. Unfortunately, the increase in violence and aggression among students threatens the safety of all students and casts doubt upon our schools' ability to educate children safely. Research has taught us that we should concentrate not only on reducing threats to safety. We must also increase our efforts to build youth who are resistant to the influences that would have them participate in violent and destructive acts and help our youth become strong advocates for more peaceful environments in their schools, homes, neighborhoods, and communities.

The SAFE Project is a model demonstration program (funded by the U.S. Department of Education: Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities) for the prevention of antisocial behavior and the creation of positive school environments. The SAFE Project is a three-tiered, skill-building program based on the resiliency model. Students who are at risk learn self-management and social skills, as well as receiving academic remediation in Prevention Plus (Young, West, Marchant, Morgan, & Mitchem, 1997). Those students who already exhibit antisocial behaviors receive a more intensive version of Preventive Plus, Partners. All students are exposed to PeaceBuilders, which aims to create a positive school environment by making positive social behaviors a way of life. PeaceBuilders pledge to praise people, give up putdowns, seek wise people, notice hurts and right wrongs, and help others (Embry, 1997). The tenet this article focuses on is "Praise People."

The most effective behavior change system focuses on teaching and reinforcing positive alternative behaviors rather than punishing inappropriate behaviors. If we wish to create a positive school climate, an environment that teachers and students enjoy attending, then we have to start emphasizing the positive. To accomplish this in the middle school using SAFE Project model, we used praise notes. Praise notes are simply written praise statements. We first met with a small group of faculty members and students to provide leadership in introducing the program. This was followed by presenting the program to the entire faculty at faculty meeting and in an assembly to the student body. All of the classrooms in the schools had blank praise notes on which to write a compliment to another student or teacher. After the notes were delivered to the person being praised, each person was encouraged to post them on a praise board. Praise boards were located in the classrooms and in hallways in the school.

For data collection purposes, once a week the praise notes were removed from all of the praise boards, and they were counted. Initially, just the total was counted for the whole school; later they were counted and recorded by classroom. After the initial orientation with students and teachers, no blank praise note forms were available and no incentives were used to promote the use of praise notes. During this time, no praise notes were written. Then an incentive program was initiated. After the praise notes had been removed and counted, a praise note was drawn from the pool for each of the three grades in the middle school (6th grade, 7th grade, and 8th grade). The giver and the recipient of the praise note that was drawn received a prize. This procedure increased the frequency of writing praise notes within the school. The next condition was adding class incentives to the individual incentives. During this phase, in addition to the individual drawings, the class that wrote the most praise notes received recognition and treats for the

class. This procedure accelerated the number of notes written. However, some teachers felt that the quality of the praise notes decreased as the quantity increased. They asked that class and individual incentives be discontinued. For a two-week period, while a lesson was developed to teach students how to write quality praise notes, no incentives were given; then the procedure was reintroduced. The attached chart illustrates the effects of the incentives on increasing the writing of praise notes within the school.

While not all students and faculty endorsed the praise note program, we have had many reports from parents, students, faculty, and staff stating that the increased use of praise notes has created a more positive and caring environment in the school. We believe that as the program continues, the notes could easily exceed several thousand a week and that the effect on the school climate would be easily observed by anyone entering the school.

References

- Embry, D.D. (1997). Does your school have a peaceful environment? Using an audit to create a climate for change and resiliency. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 32*, 217-222.
- Young, K.R., West, R. P. Marchant, M., Morgan, C. J., & Mitchem, K. (1997). *Prevention Plus: A comprehensive school program for the prevention of antisocial behavior Teacher's implementation guide*. Logan: Utah State University Research Foundation, Institute for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families at Risk (SCYFAR).