



Each and Every Child

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Up: Attendance Down: Office Referrals

Social-emotional learning yields more instruction time

CRESCO – Observing Terese Jurgensen in action, you get a sense that she can get something done by simply willing it. She is impassioned, focused. And she’s determined that each and every child will learn to his or her potential.

Jurgensen, director of student services for the Howard-Winneshiek Community School District, is just three years into her gig in this northeast Iowa town and she’s already turned its program on its head. What’s

amazing is that she didn’t make enemies among her team at this neck-jarring speed.

Just what changed? Greatly improved attendance, a 50 percent drop in office referrals. Hence, more instruction time. That’s because Jurgensen introduced the school district to Social Emotional Learning.

“When I first arrived at Howard-Winn, we were removing countless students from classrooms for severe behaviors instead of teaching them the social-emotional skills to self-regulate,” Jurgensen said. “When I started using phrases like ‘executive functioning skills’ or ‘amygdala hijacks,’ the staff looked at me like I was speaking another language or even that I was crazy.”

At least one teacher confirmed that.

“First thing she did was start throwing terms at me, and I thought, ‘what in the world is she talking about?’” said

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Photos by Iowa Department of Education’s Deborah Darge

Howard-Winneshiek Community School District staff discuss their work on social-emotional learning.



Dory Fravel

veteran teacher Dory Fravel.

"Often in special education we work on reading, writing, working well with others," Jurgensen

said. "But here we look at the roots of the tree, the emotional reciprocity: My thoughts are different from yours, and yours are different from mine.

"I will talk to a child, and he will be really angry, thinking 'I know you hate me,' because that is what he is feeling. They think my thoughts are the same as theirs. But of course that's not true. The child will respond to me based on what he's thinking I think, and in turn I respond not based on how they are thinking but how they are presenting themselves."

And thus a vicious circle is born, invariably leading to a downward spiral.

Unless. Unless the teacher can circumvent it by incorporating relatively simple tactics.

In a nutshell, Social Emotional Learning is a process in which teachers and students learn how to effectively apply knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions. In the end, the process teaches empathy, enables positive relationships to form, and improves academics.

"We work on adaptive behavior goals that deal with the very most important part of the brain," Jurgensen said. "The brain is like a muscle, we can exercise it and train it."

Jurgensen first heard of Social

Emotional Learning in 2007 and immediately recognized it as a different path in working with difficult behavior.

"If detention changes behavior, why are the same kids there?" she said. "When I first learned of Social Emotional Learning, it caught my attention. I went to workshops, and read and studied. All kids want to do well if they can. But in order to do so, they need to be able to better present themselves. We are teaching kids to self regulate, to get them to realize 'I can do this myself, and when I do this the right way, people like me better.'"

The work, which is incorporated throughout all grades at Howard-Winneshiek and not limited to students who are on Individual Education Programs (IEPs), has a practical side beyond better academics and classroom management – it brings 21st century skills into the conversation.

"If I blow up at work, how long will I have my job?" Jurgensen said. "We are teaching those skills, so that when they leave us, they realize that 'I'm in control of myself.'"

"When I first came here three years ago and opened up the IEPs, I saw a bunch of behavior issues," said Jessica Cummings, who teaches both for the school district and Notre Dame Catholic School. "There wasn't anything to address those needs. It was an eye opener what Terese came up with – what she was opening up was a match to what our kids needed."

Jurgensen took several teachers to conferences which, in turn, armed them with tools to teach their peers during professional development.

"You could tell all the teachers had light bulbs go off," Cummings said. "Each of them had students in their classrooms

who could be helped. They left refreshed and excited. They could better understand the kids they had in their classrooms."

Jurgensen said the work has an immediate effect on both teacher and student alike.

"I worked with a kindergartner who was having chronic problems," she said. "Then one day he said to his mother, 'guess what mommy? I am not a bad boy – I just have to exercise my brain.'"

Preschool Teacher Megan Merkel said working the Social Emotional Learning process into every day work has put everyone on the same page.

"What I love is we use this common language, not only a teaching language, but a reinforcing language," she said. "A lot of the things we used to tell kids like 'control your body' – does that mean anything to a child? Now we talk very specifically about what they are supposed to do, such as 'is your whole body listening and thinking about me?'"

"Technology has changed our interactions in society, and kids are missing executive function skills, such as being able to work



Terese Jurgensen



Jessica Cummings



Megan Merkel

with one another. So, you get the entire class caught up in thinking about how they act, how they think, how they are perceived.

Stronger relationships are formed,

and you get the benefit from having kids learning from others – those peers will support one another.”

Merkel stressed that teaching Social Emotional Learning isn’t something that makes an educator’s day longer or more complex.

“It isn’t adding something to my plate,” she said. “Trust me, as teachers we get so tired of the latest thing. But here, we are not re-creating the wheel, we are just looking at the wheel from a different angle. The main point is that we are teaching the whole class and everyone benefits.”

Today, it is common to see a student calm him or herself down.

“Instead of being angry, a student will say, ‘ooh, I’m in the yellow zone (mildly irritated), I better do something to calm down,’” Merkel said, adding that teachers also model the behavior.

“If it warrants it, I will tell them I am in my yellow zone, and sniff a flower or whatever,” she said. “One tool doesn’t always fix it, but we have multiple tools we can use.”

High school students present a different set of behavior problems in that much of their behavior is by now deeply ingrained.

“We have some kids who come from some tough places in life, lots of trauma,” said Alicia Martin, a teacher in the high school. “We help kids understand that their circumstances don’t define them. They are shocked by that.

“Our kids still are failing a lot of classes and they don’t like that feeling, and therefore they don’t like school,” she said. “And I will say something like, ‘if you don’t like it, fine, but you won’t like paying bills, either, but you have to do it. So how are we going to get through this successfully?’

“We do a lot of scenarios, such as ‘if you are in situation, what is appropriate, what is not appropriate?’”

One high school student was having a particularly hard time, overreacting to everything – so much so that it interfered with academic progress. In fact, she was five-plus years behind her peers.

“At one point, some kids actually reached out to her,” Martin said. “She misperceived their actions, and it got pretty bad. So afterwards, we walked through it – was this a small, medium or big problem? We got it down to a small problem, and she realized that it then needed to be met with a small reaction.

“It has changed her life. She advanced five-and-a-half years in one-and-a-half years. Her mom cried.”

It would stand to reason that even more progress can be made in younger students with more pliable brains.

“The defining moment for me was when I told a student ‘everybody has thoughts about you,’ and the kid said, ‘they do? They really do?’” said Fravel, who teaches the lower grades. “You take a behavior and talk about the expected behavior, we do a roadmap, and how others feel about the behavior, and how everyone else feels about

their behavior. I had one student say, ‘Mrs. Fravel, I had rock brain, but I was able to overcome this because I had this strategy.’ And this came from a kid whose only way of coping was having a meltdown. ‘Rock brain’ is having something stuck in your opinion.

“The biggest thing is that they have an awareness of others around them. It affects their relationships, it affects what they think of themselves.”

Behavior issues often take new teachers by surprise.

“I am a recent college graduate, and behavior was never discussed in school,” Martin said. “I think there should be coursework required on

social-emotional issues. I think the special education teacher retention rate is so low because you are not equipped to handle the problems.”



Alicia Martin

Jurgensen said to ensure success, the social-emotional process can’t take place solely in a classroom.

“We do not work in a vacuum in special education,” she said. “We go into homes to teach Social Emotional Learning.”

While Social Emotional Learning initially was for students on IEPs, general education teachers are taking notice.

“Our peers are watching the special education teachers getting results,” Fravel said. “Now our general education coworkers are coming up and saying ‘how do we do this?’”

From tumultuous waters to calm seas

Four-year-old Corbin Drilling was having about as tough a school year as any preschooler could have. He was ripping up papers, throwing things across the room, tipping chairs over.

And then there were those 150 office referrals in a two-year period.

"Everything was a meltdown," said his mother, LeeAnn Drilling. "We didn't know what would set him off. His reactions were extreme. He has a very sparkly personality. But you would try to talk to him about his reactions, and he would get upset with

himself and say things like, 'I'm stupid.' Honestly, I got to the point where I was afraid when the phone would ring, and it would be Terese (Jurgensen) saying, 'your son is in trouble.'"

School Social Worker Denise Headington visited the home and quickly realized Corbin's behavior wasn't limited to school.

"He was doing his own thing and his younger sibling was following suit," she said. "He didn't see how his behavior affected anybody else. My thoughts were 'something is not

connecting with his heart, he is not identifying his feelings.'"

They created a picture chart for Corbin, identifying proper behaviors, and role played it both in the office and at home.

"When he demonstrated positive behaviors, we would praise him," Headington said. "We were trying to get him to substitute the behavior he was showing when he was struggling."

Did it work? Corbin, now in third grade, will be glad to tell you.

"I have in my tool box my eyes, my ears and my brain," he said, displaying a toothy grin. His classmates, he said, "like me. I have more friends. If they are having trouble in class, I will go up and help them – especially in math."

His mom smiles at him.

"I can say 'are you making good choices' and 'what color are you in?'" she said. "And it doesn't bother you."

"It's because it's not personal anymore," Jurgensen said.

And that puts the child in the driver's seat.



LeeAnn Drilling



Denise Headington