

Key points:

- Florida school uses positive office referrals as part of PBIS program
- Negative discipline referrals have dropped as positive referrals increased
- Approach helps build positive rapport with students, community

Consider using positive office referrals, other incentives to improve discipline

Incentives that reinforce positive behavior are an effective way to improve school discipline. One Florida elementary school is boosting its positive behavioral interventions and supports program by giving students positive office referrals as part of its PBIS incentive program.

The [Every Student Succeeds Act](#), Pub. L. No. 114-95, expresses support for the use of Title IV, Part A safe and healthy students funds to support PBIS under Section 4108(5)(G).

Pinewood Elementary School, which operates as a schoolwide Title I program in Martin County, Fla., began giving [positive office referrals](#) for exemplary student behavior in 2016 when principal Jennifer Radcliff introduced the program. In SY 2017-18, school staff gave 1,130 positive office referrals. The school's negative discipline referrals dropped from 293 in SY 2016-17 to 137 in SY 2017-18.

The approach may be a good solution for schools looking to improve student discipline and build a positive rapport with parents and students.

"Your hearts don't have to drop when you get a call from us," Assistant Principal Patricia Morris told parents during a presentation on the PBIS program during the school's open house and curriculum night. "You could be hearing really good news!"

Morris said that the positive referrals, which include a call home about the behavior, have allowed a member of the administration to communicate with parents or guardians of nearly every child in the school of nearly 800. "I've had at least a dozen parents cry" when they receive the call, she said. "They are so proud and so happy."

The program is part of the school's larger PBIS effort, which includes handing out Paw Prints to individual students for incidents of good behavior or academic achievement, or to the entire class for meeting attendance or behavioral goals set each month. The students can use these to buy items from the PBIS store, or for privileges such as having lunch with the teacher or to get out of doing homework. She said the students actively encourage their peers to work for these rewards, but that encouragement must be positive.

Here are some tips for starting an incentive program in your school:

- **Gain buy-in.** Pinewood empowers all staff members to give positive office referrals or to hand out Paw Prints, whether they are in the classroom or "walking down the hall and see something amazing -- anybody can write them." Morris presents the program expectations and goals to the staff at the beginning of the school year and even includes some incentives for staffers, like a raffle for a "get out of jail" ticket to leave school early on a particular day.

Teachers are also allowed to come up with their own incentives for Paw Prints, which increases buy-in.

- **Look at the data.** The school has a PBIS committee, with a teacher from each grade level on the panel, as well as a lead teacher for the K-2 and 3-5 grade spans. The committee meets monthly to review the data on positive and negative referrals to see when students are exhibiting the best behavior, as well as times and places where behavioral problems occur to develop strategies for improvement. For example, during recess, the school saw a lot of negative referrals on the soccer field, which was unmarked and lightly supervised, making it a "free-for-all," Morris said. After seeing the data, the committee recommended the school line the field and placed teachers there to referee, making it more like a real soccer match, which "cut out all of the problems."

- **Set expectations and be consistent.** Officials make students and parents aware of the expectations for behavior, and they must sign a PBIS contract at the beginning of the year. School staff members are expected "to look for students who are doing the right thing," Morris said. While she expects teachers to find something good each child is doing every day, she is also aware that some high-performing students will get more positive office referrals than others. "Just like if they were in a fight, and we gave them a negative referral, and they got in a fight the next day and we would give them [another] negative referral ... we've got to do the same thing for a positive referral."

- **Build community support.** Students who receive a positive office referral receive a gift certificate to a local frozen custard shop. Morris said the owner of the shop is a strong supporter of the program who instructs his staff to publicly acknowledge the student's achievement upon redemption of the certificate.

Pinewood also funds its program in part through hosting PBIS nights at local restaurants, during which the school receives a percentage of profits. The school also receives financial support for its programs by asking community members or businesses to sponsor PBIS initiatives during the year, including placing sponsorship banners in front of the school. Be sure to review your local district rules and regulations for sponsorships before starting a similar program.

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