



Spotlight

On...

Norco Elementary School

by

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Valentine's Day...a day of love! How perfect, then, that our staff would meet off-campus on Valentine's morning in 2007 to discuss ways to build greater kindness and compassion in our students and across our campus. The idea sparked from administrative interest in several books and research articles on the Developmental Assets, community building and student motivation and their effects on student performance levels. The voluntary breakfast meeting was attended by two-thirds of the teachers on track at the time, thus sending a clear message that the timing was right for a shift in culture. Desires were expressed for common language, discipline that affected change in future behavior and was not just punitive, and school-wide procedures that reflected a respect for peers and citizenship to the school community. We were no strangers to the basic character education programs and models of the past, but it was obvious that we were ready for another level of commitment to students and their development.

The next morning, a newspaper article appeared on my desk titled, "Program Encourages Learning." Not the most glamorous title, but it had caught the eye of our AP, Michele Derus, and she wrote a simple note: "Hey...this is kind of like the stuff we talked about yesterday." The article discussed a school trained in *Capturing Kids' Hearts*, a program



Handshakes - "A teacher shakes hands with students as they enter the classroom each morning."

developed by The Flippen Group that encouraged respect among staff and students, motivation to attend and excel academically, a common language component, and incorporation of the *40 Developmental Assets* in its research base. Best of all, it wasn't another curriculum! It wouldn't come with a giant binder! After internet visits and a few phone calls, we found ourselves sitting in my office a week later with representatives from The Flippen Group and Riverside County Office of Education, who had been facilitating the trainings.

It's been nearly a year since the first two teachers attended *Capturing Kids' Hearts* training. Michele and I attended as well, which is a requirement of The Flippen Group and implementation of the program at a school site. Nearly 75% of our teachers are trained, and already our campus has changed. Students are greeted personally each day with handshakes, and given the opportunity daily to share "Good Things" and receive the applause and support of the group. Students are "launched" before leaving the room, with a simple reminder about good choices, or sometimes a story about being a good friend or showing compassion to others. The non-emotional, choice-theory style of discipline, responsibility, and accountability for our actions is used in and out of the classrooms. Social contracts are in place, including one among staff members that outline how we behave with peers, leaders and when we experience conflict. Classroom hand signals for quiet, group attention and violation of social norms help to maintain behaviors and increase instructional time on

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task. Student discipline referrals to the office are rare, because peers hold each other accountable for inappropriate actions and require “put-ups” (compliments and praise) as retribution for “put-downs” or other hurtful behaviors. If those examples aren’t enough to convince a person of the incredible benefits associated with *Capturing Kids’ Hearts*, let me offer you anecdotal evidence in the story of a teacher who literally danced into the office, on tiptoes mind you, telling me how excited she was to have the program in her classroom. Or the 20 year veteran who stood up at a staff meeting to let everyone know that it was the best thing seen or used in all her years of teaching. Or finally, the teacher who had previously teased me about my unabashed enthusiasm for the program who called to apologize after experiencing the three-day training herself. “It must have been difficult for you,” she said, “to hear some of us making fun of the name and complaining about attending the training during our off-track time. I’m sorry,” she continued, “because this has been life-changing and I wish I wasn’t on vacation so I could come back to school right now and start this with my kids. This is the best thing I’ve ever seen and I wanted to call and thank you for spending the money on it and on us. *I will be your biggest champion from now on.*”

You may be thinking that this type of cultural shift is an easy accomplishment for a “little, rural school.” However, as a mid-sized campus that houses approximately 12% special education students, 106 GATE magnet students, an overload population, and CNUSD’s only Deaf/Hard of Hearing programs in pre-K through sixth grade, Norco Elementary is deeply diverse. In the last five years, it has become even more socio-economically diverse, with the development of the “Norco Hills” area in and around Hidden Valley Golf Course. Our school motto is “Encouraging Strengths, Experiencing Success!” and with amazing teachers and support staff implementing *Capturing Kids’ Hearts* and creating meaningful relationships with our diverse community, one can’t deny that at Norco El, we are living up to that motto’s promise!

