Long Island district granted $1.7 million to reinforce positive student behavior

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Disciplinary issues dropped by 90 percent at the Longwood school district's Ridge Elementary School, thanks to a character education program called positive behavioral intervention and supports (PBIS). It involves defining desirable student behaviors in all school settings - including classrooms, lunchrooms, restrooms and playgrounds - and rewarding students for positive behaviors.

Thanks to a U.S. Department of Education School Climate Transformation grant of $1.7 million that Longwood received last year, officials in the Suffolk County district are preparing to implement a consistent program in all seven of its school buildings fulfilling the requirements of the five-year grant.

"One of the reasons Longwood received this grant was that you need to have the vision," said Debra Winter, assistant superintendent for students and community services. "We already had buildings that were up and running very successfully." The grant is directed towards district-wide initiatives, and is "about true transformation."

As part of an initiative to improve students' learning environments and keep them safe, the U.S. Department of Education has awarded more than $70 million to 130 school districts and states in 38 states. Nearly $36 million in School Climate Transformation grants have been awarded to school districts, with the intention that these funds will be used directly for programs and systems of support to improve behavior, and ultimately, student learning and improved academic performance.

Longwood is one of six New York districts to receive these funds. The others are Auburn school district (Cayuga County), Buffalo; Lyons (Wayne County); Cleveland Hill and Cheektowaga both in Erie County.

About 10 percent of Longwood students are suspended each year, and district officials are concerned that at middle and high school levels there is a disproportionate number of minority and special education students receiving suspensions and disciplinary referrals. Almost half - 46 percent - of the district's 9,300 students receive free or reduced-price school lunch, and a similar percentage are minority group members. Five of the district's seven buildings are on Title I status.

Starting in 2014, Longwood launched a program, "The Leader in Me", at two elementary schools. The program "takes a holistic approach to personal growth and personal responsibility," said Stephanie Columbia, a social worker at Ridge Elementary School. "When you look for a change in the culture of the building, we wanted to provide leadership skills for every student. We want to make it part of the culture, so you don't have to reinvent the wheel every year."

Much of the work is helping students "identify a goal for the day," at whatever level they're at, Columbia said. To reinforce good behaviors, there are tangible rewards, including a token reward economy for students.

"The reward system mirrors real life," said Columbia. Good behavior can earn school-centered 'cash,' which can be taken to the school store, or saved for movie night for the

For positive behaviors, Longwood students earn school money that can be spent in the school store or exchanged for movie tickets. - *Photo courtesy of Longwood Central School District*

entire family, which also teaches students about delayed gratification. Parents are part of the process, too, by attending programs like movie night that reinforce positive behaviors for their children.

Training is provided to all adults in the schools, including cafeteria workers, bus drivers and support staff, said Katherine Drum, school psychologist at Longwood's Charles E. Walters Elementary School. The idea is that any adult might see a student do something positive, like picking up a stray piece of paper, and say, "great job."

Changes are already evident.

"Kids are treating themselves better and treating each other better," said superintendent Michael Lonergan, who has been in that role for three years. By having these funds, "we can pull all the initiatives together and get more bang for our buck."

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