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Coalition gives social-emotional learning kits to USD 480

By RACHEL COLEMAN

- Leader & Times

A generation or two ago, children who headed to kindergarten arrived with a bouquet of social graces. Raised by stay-at-home mothers in nuclear homes in a more traditional America, by the time they showed up for the first day of school, most young children had learned to share, to say “please” and “thank you,” and much more.

Today, a rapidly-changing culture has eroded many of the skills that keep society running smoothly. Teachers find themselves filling roles that go far beyond teaching the alphabet and numbers; they also guide young students in learning to handle their emotions, focus on the task at hand, and be kind to classmates.

“We have a lot of families — the primary bulk of our preschool students — that fall in the at-risk category,” said Sheri King, who heads up federal programs for USD 480. Of the 268 children who attend 20 preschool sessions, a majority come from single-parent families, homes where English is the second language, households that exist below the poverty line, or are headed by parents who did not graduate high school.

“Social-emotional needs are not the most important thing in many homes like that,” King said. “They’re focused on survival.”

As a consequence, the preschool students arrive in the classroom unprepared to function in a group setting, let alone ready to learn.

Thanks to a gift from the Liberal Area Coalition for Families, USD 480’s preschool instructors now have a little help.

At the Oct. 7 board of education meeting, LACF gave “Second Step” early learning kits to 10 pre-kindergarten classrooms; each teacher leads two sessions a day, so all preschool students will benefit. The kits, said King, will help teachers guide their district’s youngest students in developing key social skills.

“The program teaches skills to build self-regulation and social-emotional competence,” King stated in her report to the board. “Both are important for kindergarten readiness and school and life success.”

Through Second Step’s games, puppet scripts and songs, children learn and practice vital skills for listening and paying attention, having empathy, managing emotions, building friendships and solving problems with others. The Second Step program has been shown to reduce behavior problems, improve classroom climate by building feelings of inclusiveness and respect, and increase children’s sense of confidence and responsibility.

The program is taught through 28 weekly themes that include five- to seven-minute activities to be taught throughout the week. King said the program should be easy to incorporate within existing classroom practices, like “circle time.”

“We’re going to have people from the Liberal Area Coalition for Families come in and model how to use these materials, give our teachers some help in getting started,” King said. “This is something that’s already in use at the Head Start preschool program, so LACF is familiar with it.”

With 28 weekly themes, the material is designed to last through an academic year. Preschool classrooms in USD 480 will begin implementing the material gradually.

“We’re going to roll it out with a couple teachers at a time to see what’s the best way to fit it into the curriculum,” King said. “By January, we hope to have it in place in all the preschool rooms.”

King said she doesn’t want to overload the preschool teachers. However, she feels the 10-minute daily investment in social-emotional skill-building will pay off over the next 12 years.

“It becomes one of the things classroom teachers at every grade level must do,” King said. “When a kid’s basic needs are not met, they’re always going to be struggling. If you’re not capable of focusing in the classroom and learning because of other things getting in your way, you’re not going to be academically successful. If you don’t know how to be happy, don’t know how to share, you’re always going to struggle.”

When she served as Sunflower Intermediate School principal, King saw firsthand what happens when young children fail to master social-emotional skills.

“I remember working with kiddos that were 10, 12 years old, and they just didn’t know how to deal with their emotions,” she said. “They had no idea about what’s the appropriate way to handle anger: You use your words instead of your fists. They didn’t know that. If they’re not learning that at the early, early stages, it’s going to continue to manifest and grow, the angrier, the sadder they’ll become each year.”

King is excited by the prospect of what Second Step can achieve. By teaching self-regulation and focusing attention, it builds on those basics to help children learn to become friends and companions, and finally transition to kindergarten. A successful transition at the beginning, King noted, can result in successful transitions straight ahead to high school graduation.

Second Step skills, themes

- Students learn to welcome each other and new friends to school.
- Students learn four important skills to improve listening and learning.
- Students learn to focus their attention
- Students learn to use self-talk to help them focus on what they need to do
- Students learn how to repeat directions to help themselves remember them
- Students learn to ask for what they need or want in a strong, respectful way
- Students learn to tell how others feel by looking at their faces and bodies. They specifically learn to tell when someone feels happy or sad.

- Students learn to think about what is happening as a clue to how someone is feeling. They specifically learn how to tell if someone is surprised or scared.
- Students learn how to tell when they or someone else feels angry.
- Students learn that people can have the same or different feelings about the same thing.
- Students learn what an accident is. They learn what to do and say when something happens by accident.
- Students learn how to show that they care about how someone is feeling by saying something kind or doing something to help.
- Students learn to focus attention on their bodies to recognize how they are feeling. They learn to identify the feeling worried.
- Students learn the first step for calming down strong feelings: Put your hands on your tummy and say "Stop." Children also learn to identify the feeling Frustrated.
- Students learn the second step for calming down strong feelings: Name your feeling.
- Students learn the third step for calming down strong feelings: Take belly breaths. Children also learn to identify the feeling disappointed.
- Students learn to use the Calming-Down Steps when they feel angry. They also practice relaxing their bodies.

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