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Windemere students, staff start day with handshakes

Idea is to show interest in kids, build relationships

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LANSING TWP. - Students at Windemere Park Charter Academy don't start the school day with an assignment.

They start with a handshake.

The Lansing Township charter school this year started a program called, "Capturing Kids' Hearts," which aims to foster better relationships between school staff members and students.

"Kids are pretty smart. You get nowhere with a kid unless they know you care," Principal Jeff Whipple said.

Meet and greet

Teachers and administrators are focusing on getting to know the school's 700 or so students, showing they care and trying to strengthen kids' sense of responsibility.

It begins as soon as children arrive at school. Whipple and his colleagues meet kids in the parking lot and at the front door, greeting them by name and asking how they're doing.

"Even if a kid comes in a bad mood, whether he wants it or not, three or four people have tried to engage him," Whipple said. "They've been acknowledged. We don't know why they're in a bad mood, but someone has called them by name."

Students shake hands with teachers upon entering classrooms, and teachers begin class by asking students to share some good news in their lives.

"Instead of jumping to the academics, you show an interest in the student first," Assistant Principal Shameka McPherson said. "That's getting to the core of the child."

At 12-year-old Rebekah Grant's old school, "we'd kind of go into the classroom and start doing our work," the seventh-grader said. But at Windemere Park, "the teachers actually greet you instead of saying, 'Come in and get to work.' It's nice to see them in a happy mood."

Each class creates a social contract at the beginning of the year, outlining students' choice of good behavioral guidelines.

Kids gently point out when a classmate breaks the contract, then the teacher helps the child determine the correct behavior.

"It teaches the kids responsibility. It's teaching the students to manage the classroom," McPherson said. "We've been able to build a pretty good school culture around telling each other what's working and correcting each other. We've turned the general culture from a punishment-type thing to, 'What is it you're doing wrong, and what are you going to do to correct it?' "

Rebekah's class' social contract includes no yelling, being nice to each other and not getting involved in other people's conflicts, she said.

"If someone isn't doing what they're supposed to, you can just say, 'Look at the social contract. You agreed, so you have to do it,' " she said.

Making a difference

Capturing Kids' Hearts already is making a difference, Whipple said. For instance, he said the school issued about half the typical number of first-semester discipline referrals. He did not have specific numbers.

Since 2006, Windemere's Grand Rapids-based parent company, National Heritage Academies, has rolled out the program - created by The Flippen Group, a Texas-based educator and leadership training organization - at 35 schools across the country, spokeswoman Kristen Heffern said.

The company plans to implement it at its remaining 22 schools by the end of the 2009-10 school year, she said.

NHA declined to give the cost of the program, but Flippen's Web site says three-day training sessions for school staff cost \$495 to \$855 per person.
