

Parent-teacher collaboration key to improving student behavior



MAY 02, 2014 10:00 PM • BY [MARGARET REIST](#) / LINCOLN JOURNAL STAR

Morgan Horne loves “My Little Pony.”

The 9-year-old third-grader at Arlington Elementary also loves ice cream dates with her dad, eating lunch with the teacher and drawing.

She wasn’t crazy about her mom telling her “no” and regularly argued with her about whatever she asked her to do, or not do. Nor did Morgan like it when her classmates cut in line, or when things generally went some way other than hers.

In fact, she disliked those things so much that screaming and tears became a regular occurrence at school and home.

Her mom and teacher had been trying to find solutions, but more and more often, third-grade teacher Elizabeth Fedde had to remove Morgan from class activities, or from the line of students walking to the cafeteria.

And at home, Morgan frequently lost the privilege of playing with her favorite doll, or being on the computer.

So when the school district in Washington County was asked to participate in the study of a family-school collaboration developed by Sue Sheridan, a University of Nebraska-Lincoln education psychology professor and director of the Nebraska Center for Children, Youth, Families and Schools, Morgan’s teacher jumped at the chance.

“I thought it was a great opportunity,” said Fedde, a 10-year veteran of the classroom and a UNL alum who believes in the power of research and liked the idea of trying a new approach with a couple of her students.

The school-parent partnership model developed already had a good track record. A 2006-11 study found that participating students were significantly less argumentative, defiant, disobedient and threw fewer tantrums at home and school. Teachers and parents also had stronger relationships.

Most of the 21 schools involved in the randomized study, paid for with U.S. Department of Education grants, were public schools in Lincoln. More than 100 students in grades K-3 participated, and an additional 90 or so acted as a control group.

An article published in the December Journal of School Psychology -- singled out as the

journal's article of the year -- noted that the 2006 study was the first to focus on how the partnership model affected behavior at home. An earlier paper focused on behavior at school.

Both came to the same conclusion: The partnership model, now called Teachers and Parents as Partners but formerly known as Conjoint Behavioral Consultation, significantly reduced behavior problems.

That's important for schools, where behavior issues take away from time the teacher can spend teaching -- even more of an issue in today's classroom, where demands on teachers and schools have increased dramatically.

The study showed results were greatest in homes with the biggest risk factors -- single-parent, low-income homes and less-educated parents, Sheridan said.

And it illustrates how important parents are to their children's education and that they can help teachers do their jobs better, she said.

"It's also a message to families and parents about the critical role they play," she said. "The whole approach we're embracing is strengthening partnerships between families and schools, having families being perceived as partners, recognizing parents as having strengths and assets, and really being helpful in creating solutions."

The study was expanded into rural schools, including Arlington. Preliminary results show an even bigger effect, which Sheridan speculated is because schools outside of urban areas often have fewer support mechanisms such as school psychologists.

Although the basic structure and approach is the same, each plan is based on what works best for each student, family and teacher, she said.

Teams of parents, teachers and an outside consultant -- usually a doctoral student in counseling or school psychology trained in the partnership model -- work together for eight to 12 weeks, identifying problems as well as students' strengths and devising plans for home and school. Teachers and parents track results and meet regularly to change the plan as needed.

The consultant goes to the families' homes if they want to help them put the plan to work.

Sue Braun, principal at Lincoln's Rousseau Elementary during the 2006 study, said the work with parents was the most powerful part of the study, especially helping them to track the behavior.

"Once parents gathered data in the home setting, they could see, 'Wow, this really is an issue we're spending a lot of time dealing with,'" she said.

Lincoln Public Schools teachers long have used similar strategies with students, but the parent component took it to a deeper level, Braun said.

In Arlington, the consultant videotaped Morgan interacting with students, and Fedde and the counselor created lessons for the whole class about interacting with their peers, modeling what good behavior looked like.

They'd reward all students -- especially Morgan -- for good behavior. One of the benefits, Fedde said, was when Morgan's peers began to praise her when she behaved appropriately.

“That was so powerful,” she said.

They focused on “station time,” when Fedde worked with a small reading group and other students played games or shared iPads at different stations. Morgan -- a bright girl who finished her work quickly -- often had problems interacting with her classmates, Fedde said.

Once they devised the plan, Morgan would get “monkey money” -- a reward Fedde has used for years with all her students -- when she’d keep her voice calm while she was talking, or when she’d take a deep breath or count to 10 when she got frustrated.

She could use the “monkey money” to buy time on the iPad or the opportunity to eat lunch in the classroom with a friend and the teacher.

At home, Morgan’s mom used “My Little Pony” stickers to help her daughter chart her behavior. When she listened and did what her mom asked the first time, she got to move forward on her chart. When she got to a pony, she got computer time or her favorite doll to play with, said Darla Horne.

"My Little Pony" was working so well at home, Fedde started using similar charts at school to help Morgan stay on task in math.

Horne said her daughter’s behavior has improved at home, and now she enjoys school.

“She seems happier. She comes home excited, tells me, ‘We did this, we did that,’ and she’s not constantly getting in trouble,” Horne said.

One of the things Horne likes is that the plan focuses on the positive.

That's important, Sheridan said. Many parents don't want to work with a school to correct a child's behavior because they've had bad experiences themselves or because the only feedback they get from schools is negative.

“If the first and only thing you hear is, ‘Your child’s in trouble again, what do we do about it?’ that’s setting up a very negative interaction," she said. "Parents don’t want to hear that. They see the caller ID and don’t want to answer it.”

Truly changing behavior means involving parents, Sheridan said, because teachers change from year to year but parents are constant. And children learn in many settings, not just school.

"Parents are not only valuable in helping children achieve their learning, but they’re really critical, they’re essential," she said.

Fedde said she's always worked to communicate and develop relationships with parents because she knows it's important.

Participating in the study helped her carve out the time to do that consistently, and that really helped. She also liked the structure of the meetings.

Sheridan has applied for additional grants to train educators in the well-established model, and she's written a training book for them.

In Arlington, even though they’re officially done with the study, the charts remain on the refrigerator at Morgan's home.

“The chart is really kind of ingenious,” Horne said. “We’re starting to use it on our younger daughter.”