

Decatur introduces new learning style

It's more than math, science, social studies

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The K-12 students in Decatur Township are learning more than just math, science and social studies. These days, the district also wants to make sure they learn the importance of such things as empathy, respect and responsibility and respect.

It's called social-emotional learning. And the concept is being taught through two district programs — one for students in grades K-8 (called Second Step) and another for high schoolers (called the Newsela SEL Collection).

Social emotional learning is largely about helping children understand life skills — managing emotions, goal-setting, showing empathy for others and making good decisions. To do so, teachers use various scenarios and techniques that are incorporated into the curriculum. Those can range from videos to team-



Decatur Central's Deana Beecher and Chase Lyday talk about learning techniques. MATT KRYGER/INDYSTAR

building activities to age-appropriate games. And already, some students say it is having a positive impact.

Damon Henderson, a sixth grader at West Newton Elementary School, says, for him, the most valuable lessons they have learned so far are responsibility and how to work in teams.

“They have taught us that learning responsibility during our adolescence is one of the most important things that we can learn. We’ll have discussions in groups, and we’ll get to talk with each other and play games.” Damon explained. “It makes us feel at home with each other, but we are also learning how to work with each other, too.”

The case for ESL

The district's decision to focus on emotional social learning actually grew out of a separate idea. The Richard Fairbanks Foundation had initially provided money that was to be used for a drug prevention program.

program used at Decatur Central High School was launched in the fall of 2018. It features hundreds of engaging and age-appropriate articles to explain SEL concepts in the real world.

Teachers are encouraged to use content and instructional material at every grade level and to also consider the individual needs of each student.

Deana Beecher, the media specialist at Decatur Central, was a part of the Lilly Comprehensive Counseling Initiative. That initiative focuses on the emotional health of Indiana students.

Beecher said that research and the data on the needs for students also revealed that social-emotional pieces were lacking among students. And the challenges, she said, are especially important in high school. “This time in these young kids’ lives is the highest of the highs and the lowest of the lows,” she said. “Everything is super intense and it’s hard to manage those feelings in an appropriate way sometimes.”

Chase Lyday, a Student Resource Officer at West Newton Elementary, however, explained that the district's four-year research effort into the needs of students determined that drug addiction was the end result of something more significant. Specifically, they discovered a lot of decisions that were driving substance abuse were social and emotional needs.

"We decided on a social-emotional learning curriculum, and then when we saw all the opportunities that curriculum brought we really decided to invest in social and emotional learning," said Lyday.

The Second Step program emphasizes five social and emotional learning competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision making and relationship skills. "Even when meeting with parents, they are learning some of this information for the first time," said Lyday. "So we're really introducing a new style of learning and a new concept of learning with some new learning objectives."

Second Step is done by teachers in the classroom. The program starts with a lesson, and then they have activities throughout the week such as music videos, songs and games.

Second Step was added into the curriculum in January.

Natilynn Luse, a fourth grader at West Newton, said she has already seen some of her classmates' behavior change in the classroom.

"One of my friends has a problem with anger issues and communicating. It has helped her a lot, and she is better with it," Natilynn said. "We also learned about personal space, and when someone says they want personal space instead of her hugging them she gives them their space."

Chris Bright, a second-grade teacher at West Newton, says that children are starting to think more about their behaviors since using these new learning techniques. "Children are starting to understand respect, listening, and being assertive without being rude," Bright said. "I can always set reminders for them to watch their behavior before something escalates now."

At high school

The social emotional learning

Decatur Central already used Newsela PRO — a program that uses written articles to enhance learning in classes such as English, math and science. Newsela SEL adds the element of social emotional learning. Beecher said it was weaved into the College Career Readiness course. Students are required to take a College Career Readiness course (CCR) each year. The program is tailored to teach specific topics at each grade level. For example, in the area of financial literacy, in freshman year students are made aware of the existence of financial aid. By senior year, they are applying. Students are expected to read a new SEL article each, then complete an activity, take a quiz and answer a few comprehension questions.

And, just like among the elementary students, the high schoolers also say they are seeing a difference among themselves and their peers.

Tamara Yates, a freshman at Decatur Central, says the program has helped her better focus on school.

"I have found the importance of school, and I feel like our CCR teachers really guide us," Tamara said. "I'm also learning how to control my emotions and talk about things. We have a lot of group discussions in class, and we stop each other from making poor choices. I know that I can always talk to my CCR teacher about anything."

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Decatur Central high school's media specialist Deana Beecher and Chase Lyday, SRO/School Safety Specialist, talk about the social emotional learning techniques just incorporated into their curriculum. PHOTOS BY MATT KRYGER/INDYSTAR