Case Study

DURHAM ELEMENTARY
Houston Independent School District
Houston, TX

Durham Elementary Reduces Suspensions and Improves Academic Performance by Building Relationships and Creating a Strong School Culture

Shortly after arriving at Durham Elementary in 2015, Principal Amy Poerschke rolled out a Student Motivation System and the Kickboard school culture system. By aligning core beliefs concerning classroom management with proven practices and resources, the school has:

• Reduced the number of in-school and out-of-school suspensions.
• Increased student engagement and time on task.
• Improved performance on state accountability measures in student achievement.

CHALLENGES

As the principal of Durham Elementary International Baccalaureate World School, Amy Poerschke believes that building relationships and supporting the needs of students, teachers and parents is of the utmost importance.

Yet, when Poerschke arrived in summer 2015, she found that the school faced a number of climate and culture challenges.
To build a stronger foundation for continuous improvement, Poerschke established campus-wide expectations for students and staff from arrivals to departures, and she created and implemented the "Durham Student Motivation System."

The goals of the system are to:

- Prepare students for college by building the habits that will aid them in navigating the academic arena.
- Allow teachers to remain warm and demanding with all students.
- Build the skill set within each adult to remain emotionally constant when supporting student culture.

“Discipline policies were punitive in nature; they were not focused on creating opportunities for students to learn from their behavior choices. Teachers told me that when they sent students to the office, nothing ever happened. So, they didn’t feel supported,” she said. “Academically, we were in that zone where we had just met the standards, but with the bar raising again, that wouldn’t last if we didn’t improve.”
“I wanted to make our practices more clear and consistent, and for teachers to feel supported and better equipped to build positive relationships with students,” she said. “More than that, I wanted students to be successful and excel academically and culturally.”

**To support teachers in implementing the Student Motivation System, Durham Elementary began using the Kickboard school culture system in fall 2015.**

Kickboard includes a highly configurable, web-based platform and collaborative, research-based professional development. With Kickboard, educational leaders can set school- and district-wide behavior expectations to help teachers keep students on task. With just a tap, teachers can easily record and reinforce the behaviors that make up the school’s ideal culture — without adding extra work to their day.

“At Durham Elementary, our beliefs concerning classroom management drive the practices we engage in each day,” said Poershke. “Kickboard aligns with these core beliefs and provides a resource for pulling all of this together.”

**DURHAM BELIEF:**

**Classroom teaching and learning will not be compromised due to student misbehavior.**

“To successfully implement the Student Motivation System, teachers must be proactive classroom managers,” said Poershke, “but not every teacher knows how to support students in making positive behavior choices. Some teachers thought that students should just know how to behave and that they shouldn't be recognized for it. So early on, we talked a lot about how positive reinforcement builds strong relationships in a teaching environment, and how it’s our responsibility to educate students academically and behaviorally.”

According to Poershke, the first step in the student motivation process is the delivery of precise directions for behavior expectations, including expectations for movement, volume and participation. Following this direction, teachers are expected to provide behavior narration and make objective observations about students meeting those expectations. When a student meets the expectation, the teacher provides reinforcement. When a student does not, the teacher provides redirection, using positive language to teach and encourage replacement behaviors.

Throughout this process, teachers record student behaviors and merits earned and lost through Kickboard. “Together, our Student Motivation System and Kickboard give us the structure and tools we need to help our teachers be great classroom managers,” said Poershke.
Every Durham Elementary student begins each day with three merits for attending school and being prepared. These merits are automatically loaded into their account within the Kickboard system. If a teacher marks a student as tardy or absent, a merit is subtracted. On the other hand, when students display positive behaviors, their merit account remains positive and accumulates “wealth” throughout the week.

“The goal is that each student end the day with at least three merits. Those who maintain that daily allowance can earn school privileges such as Free Dress Fridays, or the opportunity to participate in school programs or classroom privileges such as being able to take off their shoes in class,” said Poershke. “Being able to use Kickboard to support positive behaviors is critical because it gives us an easy way to capture all the behaviors we want to see. When we acknowledge the good decisions students are making and the positive behaviors they’re displaying, it builds them up. By combining verbal acknowledgements and praise with positive notes and calls home, and special privileges and rewards, we’ve shifted the focus to the positive and we’re seeing more positive behaviors as a result.”

**DURHAM BELIEF:**
To effectively teach students, they deserve a clean slate every day.

“IT’s a belief of mine that we don’t yell at children. Instead, we treat students with respect at all times, even when we’re holding them accountable for their actions. As the principal, however, I can’t just say to teachers, ‘Don’t yell at kids.’ With the Student Motivation System and Kickboard, I’m giving teachers the tools they need to build and maintain emotional constancy within a supportive student culture,” said Poershke.

Toward that end, Poershke set a goal that all adults are to actively monitor and narrate positive student behaviors throughout the day at a ratio of at least 3 to 1. With Kickboard, she can then look up the positivity ratio — the ratio of positive to negative behaviors that a teacher assigns — to see if teachers and students are meeting school expectations.

“Kickboard is helping us to further normalize the practices within our Student Motivation System because it allows me to track the positive interactions teachers are having with students each day. With this data, I can quickly identify which students or teachers need support, so we can have real-time conversations to get them back on track,” she said.

**DURHAM BELIEF:**
Students are to always be addressed positively and respectfully.
When a student misbehaves or is rude to a teacher, it can cause hurt feelings. If we want to help students, however, we can't take those misbehaviors personally. Instead, we need to view them as data points we can use to determine if a student needs help in a certain way or with developing a specific skill set,” said Poerschke.

With Kickboard’s student reports, educators can get an entire snapshot of a student’s behavior and contribution to the school culture over any period of time.

“If a student is not behaving appropriately, we can drill down into the Kickboard data and look at his or her experiences that day,” said Poerschke. “We can ask questions like, ‘Who is the first adult the student encountered this morning? Was the interaction positive or negative? How many interactions were positive and negative throughout the entire morning? Was anyone in the lunchroom monitoring the student’s behavior and providing reinforcement or redirection?’”

Within Kickboard’s configurable framework, schools can also set early warning indicators to instantly alert educators to potential problems.

“We set up different triggers in Kickboard, so if a student earns two demerits, I get an alert. Then I can check on the student and see if the teacher needs anything to support the student in the classroom,” said Poerschke. “Or, if a student has two absences within a two-week period, I’ll get an alert so we can contact the parent. This helps us prevent small problems from turning into big problems.”

Educators can also use Kickboard to look at data over time to identify trends and needs from the individual level to the school or district level.

**DURHAM BELIEF:**

Students’ misbehaviors are data points used to inform adult systems and teaching.
Fewer Tier 2–3 behavior interventions and fewer suspensions

“In the classroom, misbehaviors are down. In our Response to Intervention (RTI) model, our Student Motivation System and Kickboard have allowed us to strengthen our Tier 1 behavior interventions and support, so we now have fewer students at Tiers 2 and 3,” said Poerschke. “With Kickboard, we’ve seen fewer in-school and out-of-school suspensions over the last year. As of December 2016, we had only five in-school suspensions and no out-of-school suspensions. By this point last year, we had closer to 15 to 20 in-school suspensions and at least five out-of-school suspensions.”

The district, too, is moving away from suspensions toward more preventative measures. “In prekindergarten through second grade, students will no longer be suspended in Houston ISD. This means that school principals will now be held to a higher level of accountability as to how they’re supporting students’ needs, so behavior management is going to become increasingly important,” she said.
More time on task and engagement in learning

Because student behavior has improved school-wide, fewer instructional minutes are lost to disruptions and discipline infractions. As a result, students are spending more time on task and are more engaged in their learning.

“Teachers have been nothing but supportive of our Student Motivation System and Kickboard. They say it’s transformed their classrooms and they feel like they’re able to spend more time teaching,” said Poerschke.

Improved performance on state accountability measures

In 2015-16, Durham Elementary surpassed its 2014-15 scores on all four of the Texas Education Agency’s performance indexes, and surpassed the state targets as well.

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“Our school made pretty tremendous gains in 2015-16.”

“We have a lot of good things going on because of our Student Motivation System and Kickboard — more structure, more time on task, more engagement. All of these things go toward higher academic achievement,” said Poerschke.
**Increased parent engagement**

At Durham Elementary, parents can also choose to use Kickboard’s Parent Student Portal to receive updates about their child’s success in school, such as the merits they earn each day.

“Our conversations are deeper because parents now have real-time access to their child’s data. Parents will email their child’s teacher to say, ‘I noticed that my child received a demerit for not showing independence. What specifically was she doing and how can I support her at home?’ We also use this data in parent conferences to illustrate where students are excelling and where they need support. It helps parents feel more empowered,” said Poershke.

**Improved relationships**

“With Kickboard, we’re more focused on our core values because we have a tool to capture when students are exhibiting these values. Students can see their merits growing because they’re making good decisions and displaying these positive behaviors, and they’re taking pride in that,” said Poershke.

“Consequences don’t change behavior; teaching does. Relationship building occurs when we take the opportunity to demonstrate to students that we care about them and their success here at Durham. With Kickboard, we’ve helped change and develop the mindset of our teachers to focus on the positive, and that’s making a difference in our classrooms and across our school.”