

Helping Transformation Process Through Boosting Student Confidence

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By John Rosales

Corporate executive Traci Smith knows the technique for getting that desirable dimple beneath the knot of a spiffy silk necktie. She knows all about the proper etiquette, grooming habits and good manners that a gentleman should possess. This knowledge she happily and patiently imparts on male students at Southlawn Middle School in Montgomery, Alabama, as part of her workshop titled, All Tied Up.



Students, including some from Southlawn Middle School, attend the "All Tied Workshop" hosted by Traci Smith. Photo: Mack Dillingham

“The workshop teaches these young men how to dress for success and make responsible choices that will prepare them for the real world,” says Smith, CEO and Founder of S.H.E. Agency, which provides donated neckties to the students. “Most of the boys don’t own a tie, not even a clip-on.”

Working in conjunction with school administrators and staff, Smith says her goal for the 20 students who participated in the workshop last semester was more than simply teaching them how to tie a Windsor knot.

“The school tries to instill in these young men a sense of self-esteem and pride in their personal appearance,” Smith says. “We want to show them (students) that they can do anything they set their minds too, even if it’s just tying a necktie.”

A few years ago, skeptics would never have believed that male students at Southlawn would wear belts, much less neckties.

Until recently, Southlawn was a troubled, low-performing school where tardiness was rampant, test scores were low, and students ran wild in the hallways. Many of the school's 465 students come from economically disadvantaged homes, with about 415 receiving a free lunch.

Despite economic hurdles, the school culture began to change in 2010 when Southlawn and three other middle schools in Montgomery won a \$11.5 million School Improvement Grant (SIG) over three years.

Last September, Southlawn began a rapid transformation where suspensions have been reduced, the number of honor roll students has increased, homework is turned in on time, and a long list of school clubs such as All Tied Up have been planned for the upcoming year.

"Most of this year was spent on character building and academics," says Bridgette Johnson, SIG instructional specialist. "We are trying to build a culture of learning."

The new learning culture at Southlawn includes after-school and Saturday programs which provide tutoring for students in English, reading, and math. After just one year, Johnson says student failure rates are lower than expected, attendance has improved, and the school has incorporated several methods to monitor student academic goals, including the Response to Instruction and Intervention system, a data-driven approach to instruction aimed at closing achievement gaps.

Personnel changes have also contributed to the radical transformation. In addition to Johnson, a guidance counselor, and Frederick Tisdale, STEP (Strategies to Elevate People), were added to a roster of new teachers and administrators, including the principal.

While the transition has not been easy, according to Tisdale, it has been steady and filled with hope for the students, of which 99 percent are Black.

"I think the best strategy is not just teaching the students the curriculum, but showing the student that you really care about them," Tisdale says. "Teachers tell me that the behavior of the students has improved compared to last year."

Johnson says the dramatic change in student behavior is also due to enforcing strict student discipline policies, initiating sound school management practices, and setting high expectations for teachers as well as students. Teachers are required to have a classroom discipline plan that is made available to parents as well as administrators.

"We work hard to build capacity for teachers," says Johnson, who is president of the Montgomery County Education Association (MCEA). "The SIG funding has allowed teachers to do the teaching and administrators to do the administering."

Part of the funding agreement includes rewarding positive student behavior, called positive behavioral support (PBS).

“Today, we called out 57 kids to eat ice cream and cookies,” she says. “It was just for 20 minutes, but for them it was a good thing. They had met their reading goals.”

At Southlawn, 45 out of 47 teachers and all education support professionals (ESPs) belong to MCEA.

“We (MCEA) partner with the school to do positive things,” says Johnson.

Southlawn is involved in NEA’s Priority Schools Campaign, a multi-year, multi-million dollar effort mandated by NEA’s Representative Assembly to provide intensive support to help transform low-performing schools across the nation. Like many priority schools, the poverty level at Southlawn is substantial — more than 22 percent.

While poverty and class size (average class size at Southlawn is 25 students) are undeniable factors at a failing school, Johnson says you don’t need to be rich to develop admirable character traits.

“We have a character education program that is scripted,” she says. “We take a word like “citizenship” and have teachers talk about the character traits behind the word. There will be a story about a real-life person who shows citizenship, and the teachers will talk about it to the kids throughout the day.”

While helping students choose their ties, Smith will stress the importance of a good vocabulary as well as a firm handshake and polished shoes.

“Good grooming can be taught and learned,” she says. “We also want to take things a little further by educating these kids on how to succeed in whatever they choose to do.”