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**Agricultural Education for
Middle-Level Learners**

Keeping It Positive

by Leanne Jenkins

There are two principles I find important in teaching; building relationships and focusing on, and rewarding, positive behaviors. In my discipline of Agriscience, with the support of my school administration, we have found unique ways to incorporate both into our agriculture program.

When I graduated college, I taught for three years then took a ten-year hiatus. During that time, I raised babies and worked at a children's home as a house mom. At any given moment, my husband and I had anywhere from six to nine children living in our home, plus lots of friends coming in and out. It was such a precious time in our story. Every day was a challenge but our time there, and the memories we made, have impacted all areas of our lives.

Returning to classroom teaching following those years of working with children from hard places, I entered with a whole new outlook on student management. I didn't just see behaviors anymore, I saw the hurt behind the behavior. I saw the attention-seeking for what it was and I realized forming relationships was the best way to conquer negative behaviors. I learned rules without relationships just led to rebellion, even in the classroom. Students don't care how much you know about your subject until they know how much you care about them.

Based on these transformative experiences, I spend the first two weeks of each school year getting to know my students. Some would say it is too much time, that there is too much material to cover in a semester to surrender that much time to icebreakers and games. However,

I have found by dedicating the time to dig deep to get to know my students in the beginning, they learn more in the long run. They are more invested in what I have to teach when they know my heart and that I care. Following the two weeks, I seek ways that lead to one-on-one conversations with students. I believe the best part of being an agricultural educator is the amount of time you spend with your students. Whether it is studying for a career development event (CDE), planting in the garden, or mucking out stalls; I see each of these as an

opportunity to have meaningful conversations and opportunities to develop deeper relationships. Magic happens and conversation starts to flow when you are working with your hands.

I am so thankful to work at a school whose administration sees the benefit of focusing on relationships and supporting positive behavior. When I moved to my school four years ago, I completed a series of continuing education courses that introduced me to a new form of discipline and a structure for addressing behavioral issues. This new idea

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blended so well into the strategy of relationship building. Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is a “multi-tiered framework to make schools more effective places. It establishes a social culture and the behavior support needed to improve social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes for all students” (Center on PBIS, 2020).

Instead of focusing on negative behaviors and students in trouble, PBIS emphasizes the reinforcement of positive behavior. Teachers, staff, and administrators are encouraged to keep their eyes open for positive behavior and reward students for it. Whether trying hard to complete their work, going out of their way to hold the door open for another student, or picking up trash without being asked, PBIS teaches adults to watch for positive moments, and teaches students that doing the right thing feels good and sometimes has fun rewards.

So how does it work? As a teacher, if I see something I want to reward I can go onto FOCUS (our grading website) and give a student PBIS points. The teacher or staff member can use their discretion on how many points to assign. It also allows me to write a brief note to the student about why I am sending points their way. For example, I have shared the following with a student which read, “Sally, I saw how sweet you were being to our new student and I just wanted to tell you how much I appreciated your kindness.” Often, the notes are just as important to students as the PBIS points.

Once each month, students can log onto the school’s PBIS store and purchase items with the points they have earned. Stickers, jewelry, candy, and chips, are just a few of the items that can be purchased. While all of the items can be tempting, let me tell you about my favorite item to purchase... the *Ag Pass*.



About a year into our PBIS journey, my administration approached me about featuring an Ag Pass in the PBIS store. Students would be able to purchase a 15-minute pass to come to our agriculture land lab to interact with the animals. At first, I was skeptical but it has been wildly successful. Since its implementation a couple of years ago, hundreds of students have purchased these passes. Our assistant principal, Sandi Reynolds, the original developer of our PBIS store said this, “When I first started working on the online store, I wanted to provide items I thought the students would work for, incentives for receiving PBIS points. I went to our principal and told her that I would like to do passes for Ag. It just developed from there. By far, Ag and afternoon announcements are the most popular passes to purchase this year. Students purchase them every time the store is open.”

On most days, in most classes, we end our class time with 15 minutes of “Hands-On Learning.” This is the period when my students and I go into the land-lab

area and have hands-on experiences. Some of these experiences include planting in the garden, working in the greenhouse, moving chicken tractors, interacting or caring for the goats, cleaning troughs, cleaning the duck pool (a student favorite), and chasing chickens. Hands-on learning brings smiles to faces, the feeling of accomplishment, and joy to my heart. Students who purchase ag passes jump right in with the agriculture students who show them the ropes.

Our school has close to 1,200 students, so not everyone can be enrolled in an agriculture class. Our administration saw how much students enjoyed agriculture, the animals, and hands-on learning, and that is how the ag pass was born. Ag passes are a way to involve everyone if they are willing to work for the opportunity. Our principal, Marietta McCaskill, said, “Having animals on campus teaches skills that make an impact in a different way than just talking or sharing about these skills. Empathy, sympathy, and the circle of life are just a few. As students learn these skills



through caring for animals, they transfer them to their classmates, teachers, and families. This is the goal to develop kind, empathic, and caring individuals for life and I feel we do this through our ag program and ag passes.”

I count it as a blessing and a privilege that our agriculture program has so much support and our administration sees the benefit of providing these opportunities for students. I know this is not the norm. However, I am hopeful teachers across our country can use this article to approach their administration and discuss what an amazing partnership opportunity this truly can be. It is a great way to impact student lives, recruit for your program, and bring joy to the campus community.

References

Center on PBIS. (2022). Retrieved from <https://www.pbis.org/topics/school-wide#:~:text=-School%2Dwide%20PBIS%20is%20a,%2C%20family%2C%20and%20community%20needs.>



Leanne Jenkins is a middle school agri-science teacher at Beulah Middle School in Pensacola, Florida. The Beulah Middle School Program has been awarded several accolades in the four years the school has been open, including being named “Florida’s Finest” and receiving a 3 Star Chapter award from the National FFA. This is Leanne’s ninth year of teaching.