

## Monroe, Louisiana Case Study: One School in a District

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When Lynn Hodge became principal of Lexington Elementary School five years ago, she and her staff knew they needed to do something different. Attendance rates and standardized test scores were down, and there were far too many suspensions and referrals to the office. She said, "We were ready to do something new, so when I heard about a training workshop for a new comprehensive life skills program, I invited our staff to attend."

Teachers and support staff went together. Reflecting on the experience five years later, she said, "We got what we were looking for. The training brought us together before school started in the fall. We laughed, talked, and worked as a team. The program's comprehensive framework helped us create a shared vision of what we wanted to achieve with our students. The lessons presented the critical skills and provided a common experience and language for everyone in the school about more positive ways to deal with one another. In the process, we became more cohesive as a school community."

Today at Lexington Elementary, classroom time is set aside each week for teaching children the emotional and social skills related to five thematic topics: "Building a School Community," "Growing as a Group," "Making Positive Decisions," "Growing Up Healthy and Drug-Free," and "Celebrating You and Me." Teachers begin with a 20- to 30-minute core lesson, and then students practice using the specific skills in various subject areas, such as language arts, health, art, and social studies. Thematic topics are the same across the grade levels. However, the skills within each topic are sequential and developmentally appropriate. This thematic approach builds a shared understanding and sense of community throughout the school. Parents get actively involved, too. Through a parent-child activity booklet, they are able to reinforce at home the skills their children are learning at school.

To ensure that students apply the skills they are learning in real-life situations, each class takes responsibility for planning and carrying out a service-learning project. Students choose what they want to do. For example, one fifthgrade class used their collaborative groupwork skills to collect supplies for victims of Hurricane Mitch. They posted signs around the community, and gathered food, bedding, and other staples. The local newspaper wrote an article about their efforts. Hodge believes that these projects strengthen students' connections to their community. She said, "Since so many of our young people stay in our area, they need to know they have a voice in making the community a good place to be."

Recently, Lexington Elementary had the highest nationally normed test scores in the district, as well as the highest student and teacher attendance. Hodge credits these results to a more supportive learning environment. Student attitudes and conduct have improved, and the number of suspensions and discipline referrals have decreased. She explained, "We all can feel and see the difference. Our students are more responsible. I see them using their conflict management skills, and they can listen and work together. Using a comprehensive program like this has given us something we could all hold onto—and that has really made a difference in our school."

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