

VISTA VERDE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP SITE PROFILE

Introduction

Vista Verde is a year-round K-8 school in the Irvine Unified School District. Enrollment at Vista Verde in 2006 was 731 students, of which 7.7% were in special education; 6.8% were classified as English learners; and 4.7% were participating in the free and reduced price meal program. Vista Verde received a CalSTAT Leadership Site award for the core message area of Behavior Supports.

Impetus for Change

Vista Verde began the process of creating a new approach to behavior intervention about eight years ago. At that time, many schools in the district and elsewhere were considering how to create and maintain school safety in the wake of the school shootings at Columbine. Positive behavior supports seemed to be the best route for supporting school safety as well as creating strong academics and a positive school climate, and administrators began considering ways to implement a positive behavior intervention system (PBIS or PBS). At around that time, the University of Oregon sought schools to participate in piloting a research-based behavioral intervention approach and, through a collaborative effort with the Orange County Office of Education, Vista Verde agreed to participate in that initial training. The school's principal, who had been on site for about a year, was enthusiastic about the possibilities.

Up until that time, the school had a traditional approach to student discipline and behavior.

“Like any other school, we were aimless at that time... We outsourced our discipline actions to the principal or his assistant.”

-Interviewee, Vista Verde School

The School's Model

Vista Verde's core school values are described using the acronym STAR: Safety first, There and ready, Act Responsibly, Respect self and others. This acronym is used as the name of its positive behavior support program.

The STAR program is based on the three-tiered preventive model described by Sugai, et al., and is comprised of primary, secondary and tertiary prevention activities.

“From an administrator’s point of view...it was very compelling...because it looked at behaviors not just of students but ... [also] asked teachers to examine their own behaviors, and how they interacted with kids. It was research-based, it was sustainable, and ...we were able to customize it...it fit nicely with [our core values].”

-Interviewee, Vista Verde School

The program is managed by an oversight team that meets monthly for about an hour to review schoolwide data and information on individuals. The team also addresses an annually-created agenda of systems or administrative issues related to their positive behavioral support system. Team members include teachers from multiple grade levels in the school, administrators, and a school psychologist. A behavioral specialist from the district facilitates the meetings.

The team, in consultation with teachers schoolwide, has developed matrices that describe desired behavior congruent with STAR values for various settings within the school, for example, on the playground, in the classroom or at other student events. These behavior expectations are taught to students throughout the school year. Students showing desired behaviors are rewarded using STAR tickets, paper tokens that can be entered in a monthly drawing for prizes at the STAR assemblies held at Vista Verde.

Parents and teachers, as well as students, are recognized at assemblies.

“These assemblies are so fun, and they have such a good time...It’s a celebration for our whole school.”

-Interviewee, Vista Verde School

In addition to its behavioral issues team, the school has recently instituted grade-level Professional Learning Communities. These teams coordinate their grade-specific planning with the work of the behavioral issues team.

The school relies on data to guide its behavioral program, using SWIS (School Wide Information System, a proprietary web-based database developed at the University of Oregon) to track and analyze its discipline referrals. While most efforts of staff are in primary prevention and positive support, secondary and tertiary interventions are necessary and teachers complete forms that are entered into the system to track minor and major referrals. Updating and analyzing the data in SWIS requires investment of time and resources by the school, but serves as the basis for its data-driven approach.

“This is such a highly professional, dedicated staff, that [if] we ask them to look at things, they look at it. And they dig a little deeper, and they ask lots of questions... I think the bottom line is if it’s good for kids...they’re very interested.”

-Interviewee, Vista Verde School

At team meetings, referral data from the group and individual levels is reviewed to determine the best preventive actions to take. At Vista Verde, staff will use information about a student's multiple referrals to examine not only the behavior of a student, but also the context, staff approach, environment, and related academic issues.

"You can use that data to...address those kinds of reaction[s] from staff... Or is it really the kid himself?...Especially in middle school when you have different staff working with one student, you can see...maybe the issue is just...math, and...he's getting a lot of referrals in his math class for his behavior. Then you can start looking academically at his math skills, and then seeing the curriculum doesn't match."

-Interviewee, Vista Verde School

All staff has a password to access SWIS data at any time. The school has made a conscious effort to decentralize decision-making about behavior and empower teachers with information about individual and group behavior patterns. Teachers and other staff are encouraged to solve behavioral issues when possible at the individual level.

Teachers assist each other in applying interventions by observing and problem solving at the classroom level around persistent behavioral issues.

"A lot of times if you have really difficult children in your classroom...you're isolated; you feel like you shut the door and there's no one there to help you. We've met together as a team and we go in and we help teachers... We've come up with some incredible out[side] of the box sort of ideas for really difficult kids with really difficult problems."

-Interviewee, Vista Verde School

Other staff as well has been trained in appropriate interventions, as part of the school's efforts at reaching universal competency and consistent application of positive behavioral principles.

"When we say staff members, this is the bus drivers, the on-duty aides, the lunch cafeteria workers, the people that are helping in the library. Everyone's been trained, everyone knows what to do: everyone knows where the forms are...how to get STAR cards and reinforce positive behaviors."

-Interviewee, Vista Verde School

However, the school seeks to keep the administrative burden on staff to a minimum.

"That little form we created?...you could fill it out in less than a minute. And the things that we asked of our staff were things that made it easier for them and helped them be more successful as teachers, not burden them with additional work."

-Interviewee, Vista Verde School

For students whose behavior does not change for the better with the use of positive reinforcements and conversations with teachers, a series of interventions increasing in intensity has been designed, beginning with a one-on-one “check-in/check-out process with an adult at the school, to track behavioral and academic progress. From there, interventions can include, in accord with schoolwide protocols, additional planning, more specific behavior contracts, and reflective time; the use of an SST; and perhaps finally a referral for special education services or other interventions.

How They Did It

While the school has relatively few discretionary funds it has been successful in taking advantage of opportunities provided by the County Office of Education, internal expertise and grant funding to pay for the costs of initial planning and implementation of the STAR program as well as the recurring costs of the program.

Planning

The districts specialist serving Vista Verde was the first to hear about the behavior work taking place at the University of Oregon through the Orange County Office of Education and informed the school of the opportunity to participate in the program. The school sent a team of three staff to an introductory training presented by University of Oregon researchers and sponsored by the County Office of Education. The only cost to the school of this training was for substitutes to cover the teachers’ classes.

With its interest in the program piqued, the school formed a twelve person team to plan and implement the approach. The team consisted of an administrator, special education and general education teachers, and paraprofessionals.

The planning team, and later other school staff, took advantage of training in the PBIS approach offered jointly by the University of Oregon staff and County Office of Education, and by internal training provided by the district facilitator, who had expertise in student behavior and discipline.

The planning team met regularly during the first year of planning and implementation, taking advantage of a weekly early release day every Wednesday afternoon. The school also paid for additional release time two to three times during the course of the year. The team also met after school occasionally as part of their adjunct duties under the terms of the teachers’ contract.

Ongoing

The school's STAR program requires a considerable amount of training for teachers and other staff to become proficient with the program's behavior expectations, prevention strategies, behavior interventions, and the SWIS data system. Professional development time for the program is scheduled for one of two district-wide professional development days held during the week before school starts. During the school year, the school maintains its focus on the program with presentations and discussions always on the agenda of its weekly staff meetings, and further training is held when district-wide professional development days are scheduled. The in-house training is often conducted by the school's personnel.

New teachers are trained in the program via an extensive training manual assembled by the school and through mentoring by school administrators or lead teachers during the first weeks of the school year.

On occasion more intensive professional development is made available. The school recently sent three teachers to the University of Oregon for two to three days of training as on-site facilitators in the program. The school paid for their travel expenses and cost of the workshop. Another source of professional development is the County Office of Education, which continues to offer training for teacher teams free of charge.

The program also has ongoing costs for curriculum materials and supplies and for the prizes awarded at its monthly STAR assemblies. Release time must also be set aside for the STAR team to plan its kickoff assembly at the beginning of each school year.

The Teacher on Special Assignment who serves as the coordinator of the program has been successful in obtaining grant funding to help offset the additional costs of the program. Because it is not a Title I school, Vista Verde has relatively few discretionary dollars within its general fund budget. Among the grants the school has been awarded are a three-year federal Safe Schools Grant that is used to pay for one of the school's two part-time counselors, a Pacific Life grant for five years to underwrite the cost of STAR prizes and rewards, and a state PAR (Peer Assistance and Review) grant of \$5,000 per year for three years.

In 2007 the school received its CalSTAT Leadership Site grant, using most of the funds from the grant for teacher release time and professional development as well.

Results

During the course of implementation over eight years, mean GPA's have increased. In addition, API's have increased steadily over already-high levels.

The school estimates that the percentage of children in “the green zone” (that majority of children responsive to group primary prevention activities) may have increased over the time of implementation, indicating that behavioral problems are being caught early, prior to escalation into more serious issues.

School staff notes that the implementation of positive behavioral supports has shifted the disciplinary focus at the school from compliance to the pursuit of common goals.

“All of a sudden you didn’t have to have a book of rules...It really helps the kids develop thinking. And it takes the focus off of a rule violation, onto a value to be preserved.”

-Interviewee, Vista Verde School

Staff is careful and reflective in approaching behavioral issues.

“The staff has become more thoughtful about how they provide interventions or support or suspensions for kids, because they look at two different kinds of data, both the academic and the behavioral...They’re intertwined so much, and really we can’t separate them.”

-Interviewee, Vista Verde School

They find that this behavioral approach builds relationships between students and the adults at the school, in contrast to the former system of discipline.

“I don’t believe in suspension or exclusion. I don’t believe it builds understanding, and often it builds a very resentful interchange between the child and the school, or the adult.”

-Interviewee, Vista Verde School

In addition, the staff’s own working relationships have improved.

“I think schools sometimes become fragmented when a teacher shuts the door and makes decisions in isolation. And I would say this doesn’t allow for that. You have to interact with your colleagues, and you have to make common decisions on common philosophy. And so it really brings the staff together.”

-Interviewee, Vista Verde School

Student study teams (SST’s) are conducted differently; having become an extension of positive problem solving approaches used in the oversight team meetings. They are structured around the review of a functional assessment and focus on next steps for the student under consideration.

The positive atmosphere is felt and appreciated especially by new staff and students.

Reasons for Success

Staff believes that the STAR program has worked well at the school due to strong and ongoing support from the principal, who along with the staff has maintained the program as a priority, which has led to continuing fidelity to the plan and ongoing effectiveness.

Challenges

Vista Verde staff noted that coming to common definitions of acceptable behavior in various schools settings and for students in a wide range of grades (K-8), was not an easy task, and is still ongoing.

“STAR wasn’t given to us, we developed it out of talking about what’s important.”
-Interviewee, Vista Verde School

Teachers need release time for training in positive supports, and for planning and data review. In this, CalSTAT funding has been useful, as has coaching and facilitation support from the district.

It is a constant challenge to consistently provide feedback to students, both positive and negative, and document that feedback through referral forms or STAR tickets.

“We have to remind teachers that we are only as good as the data we have....”
-Interviewee, Vista Verde School

The data system used to track referrals, SWIS, is not customizable; the school would like to monitor information that SWIS is not designed to track.

Budget constraints at the district also present a challenge. Teachers are finding their class sizes are rising, which makes it more difficult to dedicate the time needed to effectively use the behavioral strategies embodied in the approach.

Next Steps and Scaling Up

Vista Verde is planning to create a set of matrices detailing expectations for staff. The school plans to build on its successes in using assemblies to provide positive recognition, and to create larger assemblies with more recognition opportunities.

The school is planning to increase staff expertise in accessing and using SWIS data, at problem-solving with students who have behavior issues, and in working as a professional learning community.

Staff and administrators, having completed a site visit with another CalSTAT Leadership Site, plan on linking their behavioral and academic interventions more strongly, building on Response to Intervention (RTI) strategies in order to do so.

How It Works: One Student's Story

“So he came into sixth grade and immediately, like within the first three months, he had 32 referrals. So we set him up on a check-in/ [check-out with a teacher that he requested.]...for the rest of sixth grade. The following year as a seventh grader...he had one referral...In eighth grade...[there were some referrals] for things that are so insignificant...Here's his post-interview: 'How were you doing as a student in sixth grade?' ...His perception was, 'Back then, I didn't think homework was important and now my grades are better than those days. I was into skateboarding ... I didn't think it was cool to have good grades, but I remember you helping me, making sure that I was writing homework in my planner and checking with my teachers to see how I was doing. At the time it was a hassle but in the long run it was successful, because now I have way better work habits.' And then the question was asked: 'How did you feel about the check-in/check-out program you were on?' 'I didn't like checking in because after school I just wanted to go home. Sometimes I forgot and I was afraid to come see you. I felt like I was in a big hole and it was really hard to climb out. And then I learned that it's easier to stay out of the hole.' 'And then, how was your attitude this year?' 'My attitude now is that I think it is cool to do good in school...In sixth grade I was hanging out with my friends, and my friends were important to me, but now, my friends are doing well in school too.' A last question: 'Do you...need check-in/check-out now, and why?' 'I don't need it now because the effect has already taken place with me. I also think that you don't have to have the same grades as your friends.'”

-Interviewee, Vista Verde School