



SOLANO COUNTY GRAND JURY
2014 - 2015

Capturing Kids' Hearts

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I. SUMMARY

Following decades of focus on removing students from classrooms and/or schools as the go-to method of discipline, California school districts are now focusing on keeping the child *in* the classroom. According to the California Department of Education, during the 2013-2014 year, California schools issued more suspensions than diplomas. The emphasis now is on correcting the student's behavior while at the same time creating a "school climate" which is safer and more likely to lead to an increased graduation rate.

An edict by the State requires a major paradigm shift within the districts without specific directives as to how this is to be accomplished, leaving the districts to balance existing school cultures, union contracts, and teaching methods with a completely new mindset.

II. INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

As of January 1, 2013, it is California state policy to provide "effective interventions for pupils who engage in acts of problematic behavior to help them change their behavior and avoid exclusion from school" (AB 1729 [Ammiano].) The legislature further found:

(a) The public policy of this state is to ensure that school discipline policies and practices support the creation of safe, positive, supportive, and equitable school environments where pupils can learn.

(b) The overuse of school suspension and expulsion undermines the public policy of this state and does not result in safer school environments or improved pupil behavior. Moreover, such highly punitive, exclusionary practices are associated with lower academic achievement, lower graduation rates, and a worse overall school climate.

(c) Failing to teach and develop social and behavior skills in pupils' leads to the depletion of funding through decreased average daily attendance, increased rates of teacher turnover, and increased pupil dropout rates.

It should be noted AB 1729 also includes law and declarations addressing issues of disproportionality in suspensions and expulsions imposed on "pupils of color", "pupils with disabilities", and other "vulnerable pupil populations". This report does not address those topics.

Clearly mandated to make comprehensive changes, school districts throughout the state have been required to examine their existing school culture and provide alternative approaches to discipline. Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) is one example of the many avenues available to schools seeking to reach this goal.

PBIS is defined as follows by the Center on PBIS (pbis.org):

- *PBIS is a framework or approach for assisting school personnel in adopting and organizing evidence-based behavioral interventions into an integrated continuum that enhances academic and social behavior outcomes for all students. PBIS IS NOT a packaged curriculum, scripted intervention, or manualized strategy.*
- *PBIS is a prevention-oriented way for school personnel to (a) organize evidence-based practices, (b) improve their implementation of those practices, and (c) maximize academic and social behavior outcomes for students. PBIS supports the success of ALL students. (Emphasis in original.)*

III. METHODOLOGY

Documents Reviewed:

- Ron Claassen-Fresno Pacific University Center for Peace Making and Conflict Studies
- Oakland Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth (ORJOY)
- Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS)
- Fix School Discipline
- Contract between Fairfield-Suisun Unified School District and the Flippen Group pertaining to Capturing Kids Hearts
- F-SUTA Contract (Contract between Fairfield-Suisun Unified School District and Teachers Union)
- *The Effect of the Capturing Kids' Hearts Staff Development Program In Fostering Positive Teacher-Student Relationship at Jane Long Middle School in Bryan ISD*
- *Building Supportive Relationships as a Foundation for Learning, Matt S. Giani and Christina M. O'Guinn, John W. Gardner Center, Stanford University, 2010*
- Responses to Grand Jury requests from Solano County School Districts
- California Department of Education, DataQuest. <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest>.

Interviewed:

- Administrative Staff of Fairfield-Suisun Unified School District
- Administrative Staff of Solano County Office of Education

IV. STATEMENT OF FACTS

PBIS, in general, acknowledges the importance of relationship building as a basis for any effective program.

In following the mandate issued by the State, the Fairfield-Suisun Unified School District (FSUSD) invested in a program titled "Capturing Kids Hearts" as a tool to be utilized under its PBIS umbrella.

Capturing Kids' Hearts is a Texas-based professional-development training curriculum created by Flip Flippen, a licensed professional counselor, as identified by the Texas Department of

State Health Services. The basis of the *Capturing Kids' Hearts* is that, "If you have a child's heart, you have his head." (Flippengroup.com.)

The Flippen Group's official website promises, "truly remarkable outcomes are possible in a classroom where trust, respect, and caring relationships flourish...[it] is a 3-day off-site learning experience that provides tools for administrators, faculty and staff to build positive, productive, trusting relationships—among themselves and with their students..." (Flippengroup.com.)

The initial contract of June 4, 2014 cost to FSUSD was \$128,900 which paid for professional development training for the Superintendent, Board of Trustees, Administrators and Teachers.

The course stresses the importance of greeting each student at the door with a handshake at the beginning of every class, claiming this draws the child into a relationship with the teacher that can be built upon as the class progresses. Teachers are also advised of the importance of getting "in touch" with where students are personally, emotionally, and academically. Students are considered the "customer", and their needs must be met in order for them to be served effectively. Necessary skillsets include listening, conveying empathy, and asking open-ended questions. Students are also to understand how what they are learning converts to "real world" benefits, i.e., how the curriculum will help them in the future. *Capturing Kids' Hearts* emphasizes forming an atmosphere of trust within the classroom. In order to facilitate this need, a "social contract" which essentially outlines the rules the students will abide by is created with the teacher and the students working together.

According to documents prepared by FSUSD Administration for the 2014-15 Grand Jury ("Fairfield-Suisun Unified School District, Background Information"), during the 2013-2014 school year one of the District's "high priority" goals was "Meeting Student Needs". As part of the state-required Local Education Agency Plan (LEA), FSUSD set out to clarify how student academic and social-emotional needs would be met at all of its schools.

In alignment with priorities established by the State and, based on the input from multiple stakeholder groups, the District identified the following goals:

- Create safe, inclusive and welcoming learning environments where students attend and are connected to their schools;
- Refine and expand targeted interventions and supports for students' academic, health, and social-emotional development.

As the above-referenced document also states: "...when we learned about *Capturing Kids' Hearts*, and the positive impact it has had in many other Districts throughout the nation, we determined it was in the best interest of our students and District to move forward with this research-based program to support the implementation of PBIS..."

Although the Grand Jury was advised that the *Capturing Kids' Hearts* program was "vetted", on completion of many interviews with FSUSD personnel, the exact method and the extent to

which it was actually scrutinized remains unclear. FSUSD's initial exposure to the program took place at an annual Superintendent's conference, where Flip Flippen was one of the speakers. Following that event, several California schools utilizing *Capturing Kids' Hearts* were contacted, each of which provided positive commentary on the program. Shortly thereafter, arrangements were made for 15 employees to attend the program being offered in San Diego, California. The Grand Jury is not aware of any further efforts in terms of investigating the value of the *Capturing Kids' Hearts* training series.

Although none of the FSUSD employees that the Grand Jury interviewed who attended the *Capturing Kids' Hearts* workshop reported negatively about it, overall they had difficulty articulating what exactly they learned from it, if anything. They agreed it was about relationship building, most mentioned the "social contract," but only one could provide an example of something from the program she had seen implemented, and even that was only on one occasion.

Some FSUSD interviewees referenced the importance of relationships and acknowledged it often leads to increased trust and therefore a better overall school atmosphere. It was stated that some teachers have expressed feeling unequipped to deal with certain types of student needs, and that they were looking for professional development opportunities addressing that issue. Others indicated they sought ways to improve "school climate." One person indicated that the "relationship piece" is the "glue," and without it, none of these programs are enough. It was reported that it is the responsibility of the District to address the needs of its employees, and provide solutions, one of which was *Capturing Kids' Hearts*.

Several sources pointed out that a child's experience is now vastly different than when today's teachers grew up. While at one time the affects of divorce was considered a major problem in a child's life, now children may be dealing with the affects of drugs, extreme poverty, murder, gangs, and other issues within their families. Teachers are also faced with the challenge of making connections with students from different cultural backgrounds, and families often have differing opinions regarding the value of education. An overarching theme with respect to each of the interviews conducted was that it is imperative that teachers in today's schools need to shift their way of thinking and teaching, not only to conform to the various legislative mandates, but also in order to simply reach their students and engage them in learning.

These facts coupled with the District's priority goals in terms of meeting students' needs were included in the Superintendent's decision to offer this particular course to employees. As specifically set forth in Flippen Group promotions regarding *Capturing Kids' Hearts*:

Participants will learn proven, repeatable skills that help:

- *Develop safe, trusting, self-managing classrooms*
- *Improve classroom attendance by building students' motivation and helping them take responsibility for their actions and performance*
- *Decrease delinquent behaviors such as disruptive outbursts, violent acts, drug use and other risky behavior*
- *Utilize the EXCEL Mode (a Flippen Group trademark) and reinforce the role of emotional intelligence in teaching*

The Flippen Group website includes a significant amount of data addressing the manner in which this professional development program is research-based.

Additionally, many studies have shown the affect a positive teacher-student relationship has on positive academic outcomes. Students who perceive their relationships with their teacher as close and supportive have more confidence in their academic ability, which in turn leads to more engagement with school activities. Research has also shown that these relationships can reduce behavior such as aggression and defiance of authority important to establishing a high-level learning environment. (See *Building Supportive Relationships as a Foundation for Learning*, Matt S. Giani and Christina M. O'Guinn, John W. Gardner Center, Stanford University, 2010. Citations omitted.)

Despite the fact that *Capturing Kids' Hearts* fits squarely within the legislative directive and also satisfies the District's identified "high-priority needs", information obtained by the Grand Jury indicates it may not have been implemented as intended by the facilitators of the program itself. Specifically, as is noted on the Flippen Group website and as some FSUSD interviewees heard during the actual training, the ultimate goal of *Capturing Kids' Hearts* is an **intentional culture shift**, which requires as near a 100% buy-in by administration and faculty as is possible within a school.

As was learned via our interviews, and as contained in reviewed documents and contracts, neither the Superintendent nor any other FSUSD employee may require that any particular program or method of teaching be used district-wide, or even at school or classroom levels. Instead, various types of professional development opportunities are made available to staff, and they select those that appeal to them. This can result in a laundry list of different types of PBIS systems in place at any given school.

We do not comment upon what effect, if any, this lack of uniformity has on either the students or the faculty, particularly as each school is likely to have its own "culture". It does, however, negatively affect the potential of *Capturing Kids' Hearts* to actually cause an intentional culture shift, which is one of its primary purposes.

In that creation of a positive school climate is now mandated by the State, it becomes incumbent upon the various District Superintendents to find methods of doing this. While

investigating the *Capturing Kids' Hearts* program, the actual difficulty of that task became apparent. Not only does the State give no direction as to how to accomplish this duty, but it also fails to take into consideration the local customs and practices of the district communities, teacher contracts and labor agreements that are already in place, or the demographics of the district itself.

When examining the selection of *Capturing Kids' Hearts* as a professional development tool, the Grand Jury looked at how its success, assuming implementation, could be measured. Although the District periodically sends surveys and/or questionnaires to its community, and did so shortly before this course was selected as an available training tool, we were unable to discern any specific plan in place for assessing effectiveness of this program or other PBIS programs.

As part of our endeavor to understand how *Capturing Kids' Hearts* fit into the overall scheme of PBIS programs, the 2014-15 Grand Jury made inquiries into FSUSD and to adjacent school districts in Solano County. As would be expected, both small and large differences in how the districts approach the new State mandate were noted. We found no indication that the other local districts were using *Capturing Kids' Hearts*.

In terms of evaluating the success, or lack thereof, of its PBIS activities, one school in another district created a Learning Support Coordinator position charged with facilitating and leading PBIS efforts with the help of a "PBIS Team". Staff at that location was given the "PBIS Self-Assessment Survey" (see www.pbis.org) in the Spring of 2014. Data from the survey was used to assess where they were in terms of implementation at that time, what their priorities were, and then implementation goals were established. A PBIS Handbook was created, and the team meets monthly. Students and parents were given School Climate Surveys for baseline information, and the staff was again given the Self-Assessment Survey. That district reports that all data points show PBIS is creating a positive change for that entire school community.

With respect to FSUSD, there was admittedly no process in place to measure the effects of "Capturing Kids Hearts". If other methods are in place relating to evaluating other PBIS programs in the district, the Grand Jury was not made aware of them.

Finally, it should be noted that PBIS is an "umbrella" encompassing a variety of different approaches for handling many important school-wide issues, such as absenteeism, bullying, fighting, and various forms of discrimination. As indicated, it seeks to keep students in school, rather than simply suspending or expelling them for behavioral reasons. *Capturing Kids' Hearts* is one of a myriad of options available. Overall, the Grand Jury investigation revealed that there are good, working methods of addressing these problems in operation in many of the Solano County school districts, including FSUSD.

V. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding 1

Capturing Kids' Hearts is designed for global implementation into an educational environment, and is not particularly conducive to individual professional development. The *Capturing Kids' Hearts* website states *the optimal outcome is an intentional culture shift, which requires a substantial buy-in of an entire group as opposed to random utilization.*

Recommendation 1

Professional development programs should be thoroughly vetted prior to the commitment of public funds in order to ensure that the purpose of the program is actually compatible with the structure of the district and the schools.

Finding 2

There currently is no staff assigned to monitor and evaluate the success of *Capturing Kids' Hearts* and/or other PBIS programs within the FSUSD.

Recommendation 2

Assign a staff member to oversee the PBIS programs and continuously monitor effectiveness. PBIS.org has an assessment tool, which can be used.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Fairfield-Suisun Unified School District Board of Trustees (All)

COURTESY COPIES

Clerk, Solano County Board of Supervisors
Solano County Office of Education
Superintendent, Fairfield-Suisun Unified School District