

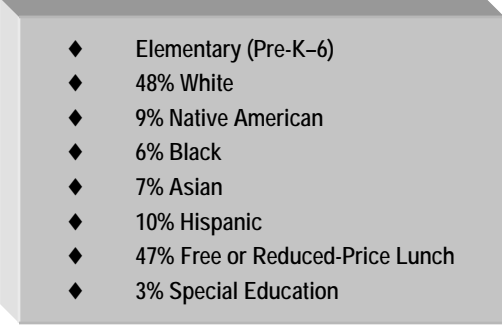
Baxter Elementary School

2991 Baxter Road

Anchorage, Alaska 99504

Principal: Vicki Hodge

When Vicki Hodge, the principal of Baxter Elementary School, arrived five years ago, there were desks lined up outside her office to accommodate the number of children that would be sent there for disciplinary infractions. Five years later, the school has attained its goal of reducing the number of out-of-school suspensions by 10% annually for the last three school years (2005–06, 2006–07, 2007–08), and results of a school climate survey administered during the 2007–08 school year indicate that the school is higher than the district average on all survey dimensions including respectful climate, school safety, peer climate, and social and emotional skills.

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- ◆ Elementary (Pre-K–6)
 - ◆ 48% White
 - ◆ 9% Native American
 - ◆ 6% Black
 - ◆ 7% Asian
 - ◆ 10% Hispanic
 - ◆ 47% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch
 - ◆ 3% Special Education

About half of Baxter’s classes are for students who struggle in the areas of reading, writing, and spelling. Students come from all over Anchorage to be taught in these classes. The principal explains that “because so many of our students have met school failure, that is another reason we have strongly felt social and emotional learning (SEL) is such a key factor in helping those students be successful.” Multisensory lessons are employed to support student learning so that they do not fail.

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

In her first year, Principal Hodge started the schoolwide positive discipline plan. Through this plan, the school has set four expectations, which it calls “The Matrix.” The expectations are: Be Safe, Be Respectful, Be Responsible, and Be Positive. All school procedures, rules, and expectations are based on this Positive Discipline Matrix.

The principal believes that SEL is best accomplished through a layered approach. To achieve this, teachers use lessons in social-emotional skills and the integration of lessons into the curriculum and classroom practices. Students and staff use a common language that is based on the SEL curriculum and they come to understand the concepts related to making good choices, behavior management, relationships, and problem solving. Every Monday for one hour, everyone in the school turns their attention to SEL and teachers and specialists together teach SEL lessons that address a key focus for the week. For example, if staff is struggling with disrespect in the classroom, then the week’s lessons in all other subjects taught at the school will focus on respect.

Baxter Elementary was one of two schools selected to be a pilot school for the development of the district’s SEL program and it has continued with that commitment for five years. The Anchorage School District developed four goals for the SEL program:

self-awareness (I am), self-management (I can), social awareness (I care), and social management (I will). Many of the teachers have also piloted SEL in the form of standards-based report cards. According to the district coordinator of the SEL program, teachers “really know where students are in their development of the SEL standards. They don’t just put down a grade on the ‘behavior’ side of the report card. There is thought and hard data to support their decisions.”

Rewards for Positive Choices

The principal also believes that students should be rewarded for making good choices. “A lot of times students who do the right thing all the time do not get recognized and the students who are having issues are the ones getting the attention.” To correct for this bias, Baxter Elementary School has created a policy whereby students who do not have any office referrals for the month can earn Bubble Gum Recess. Bubble Gum Recess takes place once a month, and provides students with 30 minutes of extra recess time. During this period, students are allowed to chew bubble gum. Students not eligible for Bubble Gum Recess because they have received office referrals during the last month, participate in an enrichment program, Making It Next Time (MINT), designed by the school staff. MINT activities are related to the student’s infraction (such as using inappropriate language during class time) and allow the student to practice appropriate behavior using the Behavior Matrix as guidance. Throughout the month, teachers mentor students who have participated in the MINT program and encourage them to make good choices so that they can participate in Bubble Gum Recess the next month.

Students also receive “coupons” for following the Matrix. The principal has a monthly coupon drawing and winning students are allowed to have a special lunch with the principal. Students who are having difficulties following the Matrix are invited to join the Rebound Program. This after-school program helps students review and understand how to follow the Matrix. The Rebound teacher sits down with a student and talks about what happened and the problems they are having. The teacher reviews the Matrix with the student and talks about the different choices they could make next time the situation arises.

Collaboration

The school formed an SEL Leadership Team five years ago. The team meets twice a month and is viewed as the key to the success of the SEL program. The team represents all grade levels, and there is regular communication between the other school staff and the team. Additionally, at staff meetings the team provides updates and professional development about the various SEL procedures and strategies. There is a yearly retreat for SEL Leadership Team members. During the retreat, members review which activities were successful and not so successful over the course of the year. This discussion generates planning for the next year. The principal states, “The leadership team is critical to our success because it energizes and keeps SEL at the forefront of what we are doing.”

Teachers meet regularly in grade-level teams to discuss the SEL lessons. They also partner with teachers of different grade levels to make connections with students of different ages. The school also holds weekly Student Assistance Team meetings where staff can look at the social and emotional needs of their students and brainstorm ideas for interventions or resources the school may need to provide for students.

At Baxter Elementary, all new teachers have a mentor. Mentor teachers model the core curriculum lessons, including SEL, for new teachers and observe the new teachers, giving them the opportunity to become comfortable with the lessons. Mentors help with the planning and teaching of lessons. All teachers in the school also have a buddy that they can go to if they need additional support.

Use of Data

Principal Hodge thinks it is critical to use data to drive SEL decisions, therefore, the principal keeps a behavior database. When planning for Bubble Gum Recess and MINT each month, she can look at the students who have had office referrals, noting the type and frequency of the referrals. She looks at how staff can more effectively meet the needs of specific students and notes any areas they may need to focus on schoolwide. For example, if many infractions were occurring in the cafeteria, the principal asks teachers to review expectations of how to behave in the cafeteria with students. If there were many infractions of students being disrespectful to their peers, then teachers are asked to focus on lessons that deal with respect.

The district also collects data yearly through a School Climate and Connectedness survey. Students are surveyed anonymously regarding such subjects as peer behavior, respectful climate, and caring adults. For 2008, Baxter outscored the other elementary schools in the district in all areas of the survey. Principal Hodge says, “Students do feel there is a connectedness in our school, that our overall climate is positive, that adults care about them, that they learn social and emotional skills, that adults have high expectations for them and they do get along well with others.”