

# The Power of Positive Students

The POPS Program does more than make students feel better about themselves; they are better—better students, better athletes, better citizens.



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In 1974 I became superintendent of schools in Sumter County, South Carolina. By every measure, Sumter District Two was in trouble. None of the 15 schools scattered over a 670-square-mile area met the criteria for regional accreditation. More than 50 teachers were not properly certified for the subject they were teaching and some were not college graduates. Teacher pay was among the lowest in the state, and students scored well below the state average on standardized tests. Servicemen resisted transfer to nearby Shaw Air Force Base because of the poor reputation of Sumter County's schools. On a par with the academic record was the high rate of student suspensions, vandalism, teacher absenteeism, football teams that were chronic losers, and lunchrooms that operated in the red.

With severely limited physical and financial resources, it was difficult to decide which problems to confront first. As I analyzed each one, however, I discovered a common thread running through the entire district: an entrenched expectation of failure and a low self-concept that discouraged children, teachers, and employees from setting goals, working for success, or taking pride in their work and responsibility for their behavior.

The power of positive thinking had affected my own life through the writings of Norman Vincent Peale and others. I reflected on friends, family, and mentors whose example and encouragement had influenced my values and career. I was impressed by the scientific research that consistently confirms the link between self-concept and success. And I knew as well that studies had shown that a negative self-image is the predictable result of school for most children.<sup>1</sup>

Thus I set out to develop a plan that became known as the Power of Positive Students (POPS). Two years after its implementation, we had solid evidence that POPS was producing measurable results. For instance:

- Based on academic gains, Sumter's remedial program in mathematics and reading was cited by the state as exemplary. Only three of the state's 93 school systems shared this honor.

- For the first time ever, the mean score for first graders in all elementary schools was above the national average.

● In grades three and six, where state testing is required, the increase in the percent of students scoring in the upper two quartiles was greater than the increase for the state as a whole. Fifty-three percent of the district's third graders scored above the national average, a 10 percent increase in one year.

● Student attendance at all schools increased 2.3 percent the first year, to an all-time high of 94.3 percent.

● Disciplinary actions fell sharply. No vandalism was reported in the schools. Previously, vandalism had cost the district \$30,000 annually in broken glass alone. Suspensions fell from an average of more than 447 per month to less than 70.

● More parents participated in school activities.

● Football teams began winning games and titles, and more chorus and band members won statewide honors.

#### POPS Philosophy

The POPS program is based on four major premises.

1. We accept, and research supports, the relationship between self-concept and achievement in school.<sup>2</sup> Because the school experience is a primary influence on how students perceive themselves, and because students with a positive self-concept are more effective learners, self-esteem must be a major concern of those who plan and implement the school curriculum.

The psychological, social, emotional, and moral development of a child is not incidental to education but the foundation on which it is built. Building self-esteem as part of the curriculum is a worthy end in itself.

2. We agree with William James that "To alter your life, alter your habits." It has been estimated that 83 to 90 percent of our behavior derives from habit.<sup>3</sup> Attitude is a mental and emotional habit, and habits are learned behavior. Therefore, we believe that a positive mental attitude can be learned just as mathematics or history can.

3. Children should be able to experience success at their own developmental levels through learning experiences that are demanding yet within their capability. Most students will have only limited success and some will fail completely. Our plan, however, goes beyond pedagogic reform. The purpose is to modify

the total instructional environment to sustain the positive feelings that most children have about themselves when they enter school.

4. Any effective plan requires the cooperation of all persons who compose a child's human environment.

To a great extent, people learn who they are and what they are from the ways they are treated by the important people in their lives. The most important people in children's lives are family, school staff, and peers. Self-concept is learned; and it is taught, albeit haphazardly, by interactions with other people.

These premises undergird the district's decision to incorporate into the school curriculum the POPS plan to develop positive self-concept.

To implement POPS in a systematic way required the understanding and support of school officials and community leaders, as well as a massive training program for parents, school personnel, and students. Below are some of the techniques and strategies we employed to implement each of the plan's three basic elements of conditioning, modeling, and reinforcing.

#### Conditioning

Peale once said that motivation, like taking a bath, won't last a lifetime. The ideas of POPS have immediate appeal but they must become rooted in habit to produce any real change in behavior. To achieve a positive climate, and a positive self-concept, we repeated in endless variations, morning, noon, and night, the message, "You can succeed if you want to," and "Everybody is somebody."

Here are some of the strategies we used to create a positive atmosphere:

● We held districtwide programs that drew from 3,000 to 5,000 parents, staff, students, and members of the community to see and hear nationally known personalities who credit their success to positive thinking.

● We thoroughly briefed members of the community, and enlisted their support for the program. Banks paid for billboards to advertise the power of positive thinking. A number of prominent achievers recorded public service announcements reminding kids and parents that positive attitudes can lead to success in school. Local and state radio



and television stations broadcast the messages free of charge, as well as attitude boosters contributed by teachers and students. A milk company printed upbeat slogans on its cartons. Local employers began programs for their employees using our staff development model.

● Recognizing that school leaders must be able to instruct as well as set an example, we informed our central administrative staff of the theoretical base, aims, and methodology of the plan, and kept them current through weekly meetings. Every group involved was informed of the program's goals and objectives.

***"... self-esteem must be a major concern of those who plan and implement the school curriculum."***



- Teachers, parents, and students were encouraged to submit ideas and strategies to encourage positive thinking. We deliberately surrounded children with assurances of their self-worth and ability. We developed audiovisual programs and other teaching aids to support the program. We held academic pep rallies to prepare students for tests.

- We held slogan contests and used the winning mottoes on everything from posters and school supplies to bumper stickers, and gave credit to everyone who submitted a good idea. For instance, a second grader designed a T-shirt with the words "I can" printed on barbells and the motto "Inside this shirt is a positive person" on the reverse.

- We looked for ways to introduce positive thinking into our everyday tasks, which ranged from serving children lunch with a smile, or answering the telephone with "Hello. We're having a great day at School District Two."

#### Modeling

Teachers and principals, along with parents, have the most opportunities to influence the self-concepts of children. If that influence is left to chance, the overall effect will be negative. Ensuring that children constantly had models of positive thinking and behavior required a massive training program for all the major groups that influenced them. The effect was to revitalize dispirited teachers, and to improve the morale and job performance of professional and non-professional staff.

Inservice staff development focused on the theme, "Everybody is somebody important." Regular meetings were held to increase understanding of the program, strengthen commitment to its goals, and solve problems in implementing it. By including nonteaching staff, the meetings acknowledged their vital contribution and enhanced their sense of purpose and morale.

- A positive parenting program included districtwide meetings every three

months, with an average attendance of 600. Parents and teachers who attended district meetings took ideas back to the regular parenting programs at their individual schools.

- Students learned to appreciate their own influence on others. They were encouraged to relate their ideas and experiences on television and to parent, staff, and community groups.

- Training sessions were devoted to verbal and nonverbal ways of making a positive statement, including body language, personal grooming, and other related topics. College credit and other incentives were used to encourage attendance.

By involving everyone, not just instructional personnel, in continuous inservice training, we achieved a dramatic change in the physical and emotional climate of the school.

#### Reinforcement

- Parents met in brainstorming sessions to identify the actions most effective in molding desirable behavior and in taking a positive role in their children's development.

- Teachers devised and shared classroom techniques and terminology that built on strengths and enhanced student confidence. For instance, "good-finding" instead of fault-finding produced "seven right" instead of "three wrong" on a spelling test. Developing a positive mental attitude became an integral part of the instruction program.

- Innumerable strategies from simple to sophisticated were developed to provide positive reinforcement. The best ideas were widely adopted, giving full credit to their originators. Rewards included trophies and public awards, praise and recognition, warmth and smiles. As an example, I keep a thank-you jar: every day I draw out the names of five employees to whom I write a personal letter of appreciation.

#### Diffusion

As our program began to attract national attention, requests for assistance in program and staff development poured in from school systems in 40 states and six foreign countries. To respond to this interest, we have taken steps to strengthen our data base and to assist schools that wish to adopt the program.

- The University of Alabama in Bir-

mingham is assisting in identifying data to gauge the success of the program and instruments to measure it.

• Ten school districts nationwide are conducting a pilot program of POPS this year. The schools selected represent different geographical regions and different student populations. The common denominator is a superintendent who is actively involved and wholly committed to the plan.

Administrators from the school systems have met several times to plan strategies and to compare and evaluate progress and fine-tune their programs.

Fortunately, my school board has granted me three days each month to help out POPS programs elsewhere and

assist in the formation of a national nonprofit foundation, which will:

• Provide a forum where board members, educators, administrators, teachers, and parents from all over the country can meet and exchange ideas, evaluate progress, and plan for the future

• Provide financial support for expert assistance to schools that wish to implement and evaluate this type of program

• Serve as a clearinghouse where materials developed in programs throughout the country can be compiled and produced more economically. A newsletter will inform the country's 16,000 public school systems of program activities and achievements.

## Summary

Every time superintendents, board members, and other school leaders get together, conversations focus on the dismal state of our schools—declining test scores, dropouts, the loss of able teachers to other professions and occupations, and problems of drugs and discipline.

The conventional remedies for these problems have had only mixed success. Innovative programs, building designs, special and compensatory programs, smaller classes, "back-to-basics" curricula, and infusions of huge sums of money seem to address in piecemeal fashion problems that stem from a very general loss of confidence in schools and their ability to teach our children.

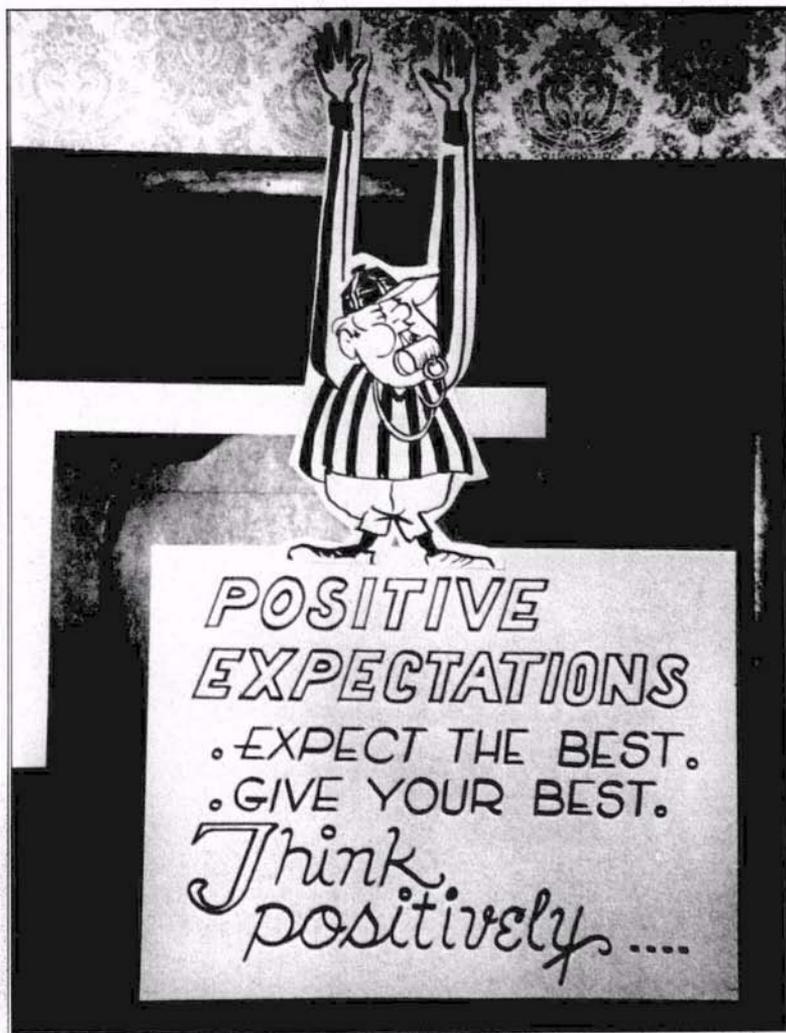
POPS has shown that it can produce remarkable results for a cost easily within the strictest budget. No special supplies or materials, sophisticated hardware and software, or special funding are required. The methods used to condition, model, and reinforce are tailored to each community and compatible with any instructional program.

A serious commitment to education demands that we consciously develop the student attitudes that lead to the mastery of cognitive skills. Unlike educational money that is spent to impart knowledge that becomes quickly obsolete, POPS cultivates the confidence and positive habits that support learning for a lifetime. □

<sup>1</sup>W. Purkey, *Self-Concept and School Achievement* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970): "... although 80 percent of the children entering school have positive self-images, only about 20 percent still do by the fifth grade, and less than 5 percent feel good about themselves by the time they are seniors."

<sup>2</sup>W. Brookover, T. Shailer, and A. Patterson, "Self-Concept of Ability and School Achievement," *Sociology of Education* 37 (1964): 271-278; W. Purkey, *Self-Concept and School Achievement* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1970); M. Shaw and G. Alves, "Guidance in Practice—The Self-Concept of Bright Academic Under-achievers: Continued," *Personnel and Guidance Journal* 42 (1963): 401-403; R. Strang, *Reading Diagnosis and Remediation* (Newark, Del.: International Reading Association, 1968); M. Woolf, "Ego Strengths and Reading Disability" in *The Philosophical and Sociological Bases of Reading*, edited by E. L. Thurston and L. E. Hafner (Yearbook of the National Reading Conference, 1965, pp. 73-80).

<sup>3</sup>SMI Institute, Waco, Texas.



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