Troubled students ride Lafayette project to better self-control

BY RICHARD COTTON
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LAFAYETTE — The three students sitting at the cafeteria table looked much like the other third- and fourth-grade students at S.J. Montgomery Elementary School.

Actually, the boys were the source of severe discipline problems in their respective classrooms until they ran head-first into Project R.I.D.E., the Lafayette Parish school system's new program to deal with children at risk of failing or dropping out of school.

“When I got mad, I'd just hit other students,” said William, one of the third-graders. “I even strangled one time.”

The students' names are changed in adherence to school system confidentiality policy.

His teacher, Susan Chatham, is participating in Project R.I.D.E. with more than half the kindergarten through sixth-grade teachers in eight schools. She helped William become involved in peer-tutoring his classmates.

“Finding a way to channel his energy was the main problem,” said Chatham. The tutoring worked and William settled down to learn.

“She showed me how to help the other kids in the class,” said William.

Key to the program's success is actively involving the student in seeking a remedy to his problems, agreed Chatham and Project R.I.D.E. program supervisor Patti Ducote.

“I wrote a contract and, if I break it, I'm in trouble,” said a fourth-grader, Kevin. “I don't get good stuff like pencils, stamps, posters and key chains.”

Kevin said his main problem was fighting outside of class.

The other third-grader, Jim, daily takes a report card home to be signed by his parents; parental cooperation and involvement is integral to Project R.I.D.E., said Chatham.

Jim, who Chatham said occasionally flies out of control even though he is on hyperactivity-suppressing Ritalin, is responsible for monitoring his own behavior.

“When I'm bad I move to another seat and then to another,” said Jim.

He continues until, if his behavior is bad enough, he's moved to the assistant principal's office for serious discipline.

“He moves himself but he can also move back when his behavior is un-

der control,” said Chatham. Jim hasn't been sent to the office, formerly one of his regular stops, during the second half of the year.

“R.I.D.E. is not a discipline program,” said Ducote, who, along with Leo Burleigh, supervises the program under the direction of Louis Benjamin, supervisor of child welfare for the board.

R.I.D.E. is an acronym for Responding to Individual Differences in Education. The program is part of the U.S. Department of Education's National Diffusion Network, which seeks to disseminate information about successful education endeavors throughout the nation.

Ducote and her colleagues first observed the Project R.I.D.E. in St. Mary Parish two years ago.

“We were impressed with the tactics. The thrust is in academics, not discipline,” said Ducote.

Once the problem is identified, the teacher consults a tactics bank of proven interventions, such as the student's contract or monitoring of his own behavior, said Ducote.

“These are tried and proven techniques developed by teachers,” said Dot Denias, Lafayette Middle School Chapter I reading teacher.

DeLisa Washington, a third-grade teacher at Alice Boucher Elementary School, said she is impressed with R.I.D.E. because it's a way of avoiding lengthy discipline evaluations.

“It’s simplified my job,” said Sue Abshire, a kindergarten teacher at S.J. Montgomery. “All the strategies work at all school levels with great success because students feel empowered since they have a choice (in their own behavior modification).”

Chatham said instituting R.I.D.E.'s team concept into her classroom “saved my class this year.” Students were divided into teams and worked together on many activities and projects. They policed their own members; one team even kicked off a member who wasn't performing.

“She sat by herself,” said Chatham. “She wanted back on the team so they laid it out on the table of what she had to do.”

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