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Will a manners class improve Washington's schools?

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KIRO Radio

Society has lost a lot of its civility. You see examples every day in Jet Blue flight attendants, that driver next to you, the lady who cut you off in the checkout line.

It's in the classroom too. A lack of respect for teachers and other students can be seen in kids acting out. It cuts into valuable class time. That's teaching time your kids can't get back.

Many teachers say they spend up to 30 percent of their class time correcting bad behavior or dealing with disruptive students.

"A 30 percent loss on our average calendar year is the same thing as losing 60 full days in the classroom," Corinne Gregory of Social Smarts told KIRO Radio. "If I could give you back 30 or 45 productive days, do you think you'd have better test scores?"

Gregory's program of teaching manners, respect, and character in the classroom has found success in 11 states.

But while Gregory's Social Smarts program focuses on teaching students, other programs look at setting-up schools in a way to cut-down on disruptive opportunities.

Schools in Bellevue, Tacoma and Puyallup use a program called Safe and Civil Schools, and it too has seen great results. "Huge gains in both academic performance and in behavior performance," said the program's Randy Spick.

Spick's program not only works on the kids, but it looks at environmental issues. Are the lunch-lines too long and creating more opportunities for bad behavior?

But if you think teaching manners or making kids play nice is a touchy-feely answer to money troubles and growing class sizes, listen to Dr. Ronald Stevens. He's the executive director of the National School Safety Center in California. "If you think teaching social skills and positive citizenship behavior is investing too much time," he said. "Try ignoring the issue and see what happens."

In an era when the answer to struggling schools seems to be throwing more money at them, Gregory told KIRO Radio better behavior will go farther than any amount of money.

"Instead of continuing to play 'Whack-a-Mole' with the latest and greatest problem and assuming all of those separate solutions require more money," she said. "Let's really look at what's hampering us and what's hurting us because I can show you how to accomplish more even with a budget of less."

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