

97%

↓ Suspensions

New Kensington-Arnold School District

When Brian Heidenreich signed on to be the new principal of [H.D. Berkey Elementary School](#) in Arnold, Pa., two years ago, he had a big job ahead of him. The high-poverty (Title One) school, which serves students in first and second grade, handed out 69 suspension days between September and December alone.

Heidenreich had been teaching at another New Kensington-Arnold School District school for three years, so he was aware of the student behavioral issues and high suspension rates that the H.D. Berkey school was managing.

"When I took over as principal, my first major initiative on day one was to adopt ClassDojo," says Heidenreich, who as an instructor had been using the communication platform to connect teachers, students, and families to build positive classroom communities. "We were able to reinforce positive behavior with ClassDojo and good communication with parents."

A new communication tool

Heidenreich expected some initial pushback from teachers on the new communication platform, but says most of them were pretty excited to have a new way to communicate with parents and incentivize students for good behavior. ClassDojo takes the pressure off teachers who would otherwise have to call or email parents to keep them updated on student progress and challenges.

"Teachers now have a good way to just shoot parents a quick message in the middle of the day or later," he says. The educators are encouraged to share both positive and negative feedback with parents, and to use the platform to cultivate relationships with families. Many of them use ClassDojo to post class stories on a weekly basis, including pictures of fun happenings and reminders about upcoming tests, screenshots of homework tips, and other important information.

With a high percentage of its students dealing with socioeconomic challenges in their home lives, H.D. Berkey works hard to create positive educational experiences for those youngsters. It also infuses fun into the equation whenever it can. For the recent Read Across America Week, for example, students wore wacky outfits and posed for photos that were used as part of the week's class stories.

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Brian Heidenreich
Principal of H.D. Berkey Elementary School in New Kensington-Arnold School District



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The goal was twofold: let the kids have fun with the national event while helping reinforce the need for at-home reading and homework among parents. “When students have a vested interest in things outside of just learning,” says Heidenreich, “it makes school a much more fun and engaging place to be.”

Student suspensions plummet

ClassDojo has had an extremely positive effect on the H.D. Berkey’s suspension rates, which have plummeted to just two—from the previous 69—within just two years. Heidenreich says the school continues to run and review its attendance reports to measure the impact of ClassDojo on those metrics but adds that the lower number of behavior and suspension days is a true testament to the platform’s contribution.

“I think there are obviously a lot of factors at hand, but I do think that ClassDojo has played a part in those lower suspension numbers,” says Heidenreich, who adds that morale is up and there’s a general positivity in the air at the elementary school these days. Incentives tied to events like March Madness—and focused on earning 40 ClassDojo points for good behavior—help further fuel the positive energy on campus.

“We picked 40 as a goal because it’s easy enough for every student to hit, but it’s also at the level where they have to work a little bit harder for it,” says Heidenreich. ClassDojo also supports good teamwork and camaraderie among students, who are quietly reminded to nudge classmates who may not be meeting expectations—a peer-to-peer support style that helps cultivate leadership qualities in students.

Always looking for the next benchmark

As he reflects on the school he joined two years ago and the one he leads today, Heidenreich says the most transformational change is that student behavior is now viewed through a positive lens versus using a negative, punitive approach.

“The path the school was headed down was centered on constant negative consequences, where now we’re working towards using ClassDojo for positivity,” says Heidenreich. These days, for example, students are continually working toward that next benchmark, goal or reward. When they hit their goals, students get to visit the “reward room” to get the prizes that they worked so hard for.

Heidenreich says ClassDojo also eliminates the need to send home papers that don’t always make it home to parents and caregivers. And even if the notes do make it home, they may be crumpled up and illegible by the time they get there. “A backpack or folder may come back to school untouched,” he explains, “but parents always have their cellphones, so we know they get the notifications that we send out using ClassDojo.”

Contagious positivity across the school

On the community side, H.D. Berkey is using the communication platform to develop and distribute flyers for youth cheerleading camps, wrestling leagues, and other opportunities that it wants to share with parents and children. The strategy is working well: this school year, the youth wrestling league saw its biggest turnout ever of 90 new students.

“They personally thanked us for putting their flyer out on ClassDojo because all of our parents saw it,” says Heinrich, who feels that the platform’s ultimate superpowers are speedy communication and a contagious positivity both of which entice students to exhibit their own good judgements and behaviors in school.

“As soon as the students hear the ‘ding,’ they know that another student just received a reward. They look at how they got it, and then work to emulate those behaviors,” says Heidenreich. “ClassDojo is a positive behavior tool that increases communication both within families and schools, and within students and teachers.”

