

## Ripple Effects In Action: *Bibb County Public Schools, GA*

### Improving Student Behavior and Reducing In-School Suspensions

“Thanks Mr. E. I’m never coming here again.” Since a student said this at a school, it might not sound like such a good thing. But for Appling Middle School in Macon, Georgia, it’s not just a good thing—it’s a great thing. “Here” is Appling’s In School Suspension Center. Late last Spring, this middle school, along with Bibb County’s 39 other schools, started using a software program called Ripple Effects in its In School Suspension or “ISS” program, to help kids change their behavior, and reduce repeat referrals.

“At first, I had a lot of repeats,” says Warren Ellington, aka, “Mr. E,” Appling’s ISS teacher. “At the start of the school year, I used to have between 8 and 13 repeat referrals a day on average. It’s decreased every month. I had four last month. Now, I’ve got just two. They are spending more time on the Ripple Effects program, and I don’t have repeat referrals any more. I’m not sure what happens when they leave here, but they just don’t come back.”

For Valeria Patterson, Ripple Effects Software Coordinator for Bibb County Public Schools, that means success. “Our goal with the program was to reduce the number of kids who were getting sent to ISS over and over again. We wanted to provide a positive instructional alternative. That’s Ripple Effects.”

In 2003, Bibb County School District received a Safe Schools/Healthy Students Grant. As part of the project, the District purchased a license for *Ripple Effects for Kids, Teens, and Teachers* to use system-wide. In Fall 2003, the District hired Patterson to oversee the effort. Ripple Effects trained close to 100 educators in March 2004, to implement the program in ISS and counseling, in 40 schools.

“The ISS program needed restructuring to make it more effective, “ says Patterson. “Before, kids would sleep, or do homework or busy work. They weren’t encouraged, challenged, or inspired. ISS took too much time out of instructional classrooms. We needed to do something to make this experience more meaningful and help kids so they wouldn’t come back.”

That’s why they chose Ripple Effects. According to Patterson, “it has helped us take a more proactive approach, helped to get to the root cause of why specific behaviors are happening. The trigger event that gets a kids sent to ISS isn’t the whole reason why. Teachers are so swamped, they often overlook, or simply don’t have time to figure out, what the underlying causes are of kids problem behavior. In ISS, facilitators can assign students specific lessons to address the trigger event, but they can also give kids a chance to explore the program, and seek out the issues that may be causing them grief.”

And it’s working. Over at Central High School, ISS teacher Gary Faulkner is finding himself with time on his hands. At the start of the 2005-06 school year, he was averaging 18 kids a day referred to him for behavior problems. Since he started using Ripple Effects, that number has dropped every month. Now, it’s down to just six kids. “I’ve been doing ISS for 2 ½ years,” explains Faulkner. “The kids who were repeat offenders—I’m not seeing them as frequently. There’s a distinct difference in the attitude of the kids.”

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Faulkner has students complete the topic associated with their offense. They get about 15 minutes on the program. He can check when they've completed their assigned topic. If there's time, kids can get back on and look up topics of interest to them.

"I used to do some of these same things, but it was with print materials. Still, a lot of my students were getting in trouble. This is just much more effective. They weren't good readers, so they couldn't get the material. Now, they can listen to it, so it reaches them," says Faulkner, referring to the fact that all the material in the program is read aloud in peer voices.

With his repeat referrals down dramatically, and kids behaving better, it's surprising to hear that Faulkner has most kids on the program for under 50 minutes. "It must be something subliminal," marvels Faulkner, "because they change so quickly."

And the changes are substantial. "They are starting to take responsibility for their actions—seeing how their choices impact what happens to them ... that they have control." Before, he explains, "a kid would come in and say 'I'm here because the teacher wrote me up.' After they do the program, they realize 'I'm here because I chose to break a rule.' Once kids realize they are making mistakes, then they quit coming to see me."

Bibb County Public Schools are not alone in turning to ISS as a way to address discipline problems, while keeping kids in school. Districts around the country are using ISS as an alternative to out of school suspensions, for financial reasons—the dollars each student represents stay in the school. Unfortunately, many ISS programs do nothing to actually help kids. It's just dead time in a room. "In the past," explains Warren Ellington, "teacher's may or may not have given me anything to do with kids. Now, I have an instructional tool I can use. It helps me provide a structured lesson plan for ISS."

Bibb has their school counselors using Ripple Effects, as well. Burghard Elementary School counselor Danielle Sweet Jones is the first point of contact for kids who are referred for minor infractions. She updated her school's referral form, so that it includes all the topics in the *Ripple Effects for Kids* program. Teachers simply check off the problem behavior, and students go to Jones' office to do that topic in the program. Students are then given the chance to come back and choose one more topic in the program, the following week.

Today, both the quality and the quantity of her interactions with students has gone up. Before she started using the program, Jones was able to work with about 15-20 kids a month. And, even with those kids, Jones explains, "I would NEVER know what individual problems my students were dealing with." Now, says Jones, "I reach more kids— about 45 a month, that I couldn't know about before. Now, they'll seek it out. They'll look it up. And, they're opening up about other issues that I'd never know were going on for them. Ripple Effects helps me reach more students than I ever could before."

Burghard is a National School of Character, an award given by the Character Education Partnership. "We get so many character programs," Jones notes, "with animals—these big purple bears. This cutesy stuff—sing-along-songs. Kids hate it. They're not into it. Kids like that this program is real— they say things like 'that's a real girl on your laptop.' And, they listen to their peers."

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Ripple Effects Coordinator Val Patterson agrees: “It reflects the image of the kids; kids get to see other kids like themselves, who look like them, who are successful. They can relate to it.” Plus, Patterson adds, “The diverse way information is presented - the learning system – means no kid is left out. Whatever their learning style, there’s something presented that caters to that style.”

The results at Burghard? “There’s less absenteeism, and discipline problems have gone way down. ISS as well—there’s almost no one in ISS now,” according to Jones. The other big difference, Jones notes, is that “kids take responsibility. One student who had been late, then did the program, said: ‘I told my mama I got to be here on time, so I don’t miss anything.’ The kids have become advocates for the topics they’re learning about in the software.”

Middle school ISS teacher Warren Ellington has also observed big changes in kids after using the program. “It teaches them that they can succeed in the classroom without being disruptive,” explains Ellington. “I’ve seen a change in their aggressiveness. They are less likely to attack, or talk back, or blurt out. These kids are coming from tough situations,” he continues. “Now, they’ve adopted some basic housekeeping rules. Before, they didn’t care—they just reacted. Now, they think it through.”

Baheejah Hasan, Principal of Burke Elementary, feels that “many of our kids have never seen other ways to solve a problem. They don’t come from a strong language environment where explanations and solutions are offered.” Now, because of Ripple Effects, “our students have a better opportunity to experience uncomfortable or difficult situations that they may face every day, and learn to make sound decisions that lead to positive outcomes.” Burke ISS teacher Ms. Lorine Brown adds that it really helps her deal with students who are angry. “When they are really upset about something I can put them on it, and I see them calm down. It’s a safe, independent, personalized way to get help and reflect on their behavior.”

Brown recently organized a party for all the graduates of the Ripple Effects program, who’d gone through it and did not return to ISS. She talked to teachers, observed kids in the hallways and the cafeteria, and picked those students who had not only avoided more referrals to ISS, but who’d really improved their behavior. “They were so excited...to be recognized for what they were doing right,” says Brown.

As the district’s first full year implementing Ripple Effects comes to a close, Val Patterson sees “an excitement in ISS and counseling. The schools really want it, because they see it can help. They see that it’s not designed to take their place as trained professionals. It’s helping teachers build positive relationships with students. And, it’s supporting our focus on academic achievement at the same time.”

The district’s new Director of its Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative, Sonja Shavers, is already working with Patterson to expand the use of the program in the district— after school programs, special and alternative education settings, classrooms—they see lots of opportunities. They are hopeful that the data they get in the coming months will show strong improvements in behavior and discipline referrals. It’s also possible that, as in other districts, the impact won’t be just on ISS—attendance and grades will improve, as well.