
National Blue Ribbon Schools Program

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Lakewood Elementary School
Blue Valley School District
Overland Park, Kansas

Audio: Activating Student Engagement Through Brain-based Learning

Kathleen Cigich: My name is Kathleen Cigich, and I am principal at Lakewood Elementary.

At Lakewood, our focus is brain-based learning. And if we look back at the work of Eric Jensen, you would find that brain-based learning is the application of a meaningful group of principles that represent our understanding of how our brain works in education. And in our school, we go back to the brain with everything we do.

In 1999 a group of teachers, they realized they wanted to focus on something that made kids excited about their learning. And after attending a few different conventions and seeing different ideas, they really started to hang on to brain-based learning. They wanted our kids to understand how their brains could impact their learning each day. After lots of research our reading specialist took the time to teach the staff about the brain, and really took the time to make sure we were all on the same page about what we wanted students to know.

So today at Lakewood, if you were to walk into the doors, you would see anchor charts that talk about the brain, you would see students understand how their brains impact their ability to learn. Starting in kindergarten when students arrive to Lakewood, even within the first few weeks of school, we talk about the brain being a tool. And so they actually learn about different parts of the brain and how that brain can impact a growth mindset or a fixed mindset. Our students even learn about metacognition and cognitive awareness, so that they know that reflecting on their own thinking will help them as learners. Since the whole building is doing it, we're all talking about the brain, it seems like a common thing to our students, just the way we teach and talk. So as we prepare for a harder subject, we talk about how the brain can reflex and how can it move and change. We also use it as we talk about collaboration and the ability to get kids excited about their learning, knowing that their brain is more excited when we're doing something that's meaningful.

I do think that parents, as of the team at Lakewood had to have an understanding of why we were studying the brain. I also think it was a shift in traditional teaching at the time because those real life experiences that we started to teach just felt different for the kids and for the community. So making sure that the community understood why, was an important piece of making sure this worked.

I think the biggest way for us to figure out impact was just knowing that kids were feeling successful even in difficult times. So them understanding how to be resilient and seeing them bounce back, wanting to be at school, being okay with mistakes, understanding that we can learn anything if we put our brains to it. That's how we knew it was really working, as well as just seeing kids get excited about their experiences they were having.

Part of brain-based learning is the ability to collaborate throughout the building. So this wouldn't be successful if we just had just the classroom teachers using it. Our specialists are just as excited about talking about the brain and using it to make our students love learning. Our music teacher writes musicals each year with her students, and that pulls in the brain because it's asking our students to really become the author of the musicals. Everything is done by the students, from set design to costumes to program designs. We know the brain turns on when there is life experiences involved.

When you're thinking about using brain-based learning in a school, the very first thing that needs to be done is understanding what kind of path you're going on. Does your school already embrace the mindset piece and is it a small bit of learning or is it something that you're going to have to start with from the beginning? I would definitely recommend looking into growth mindset, and then start to learn more about how the brain works, understanding pieces of the brain and thinking about how you can bring that along to daily learning experiences.

Some important things that I consider, is a couple things including keeping up to date on new research, giving the time to teachers for planning and collaborating, bringing new staff on board and making sure they understand the purpose of brain-based learning, and allow for that time for professional learning to happen around brain-based learning.