

---

# National Blue Ribbon Schools Program

---

EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION SINCE 1982

---

Pinewood Elementary School  
Jenison, Michigan  
Jenison Public Schools

## Hearts and Minds: Social-Emotional Learning Improves Content Learning

**Narrator:** Pinewood Elementary School serves 380 students in Jenison, Michigan. Since her arrival in 2011, Principal Rachael Postle-Brown has overseen dramatic improvement in student outcomes. She and her staff attribute their success at least in part to their Social-Emotional Learning curriculum.

**Rachael Postle-Brown, Principal:** Social-emotional learning is instruction to help support kids in their social skills and their emotional regulation.

**Narrator:** School psychologist Marie McIntyre-Doerr explains.

**Marie McIntyre-Doerr, School Psychologist:** Kids were coming into school with various levels of hyperactivity, dis-regulation, not able to focus, pay attention, lots of sensory needs. When we started to look at what are some things that can bring the kids down a little bit, mindfulness just kept coming to the forefront.

**Narrator:** Kelsey Radvansky teaches first grade.

**Kelsey Radvansky, Grade 1 Teacher:** The point of mindfulness is just to kind of get kids to be, like, metacognitive. We always talk about you are going to think about your thinking, starting from kindergarten.

**Marie McIntyre-Doerr:** We've changed our break boxes, our breaks into mindfulness breaks and using lots of sensory tools to kind of help them learn how to self-regulate, learn how to breathe and how that affects their brain and-why we need-the ability to self-soothe and calm down all on our own.

**Narrator:** Postle-Brown and her staff researched the kinds of skills students would need to be successful.

**Rachael Postle-Brown:** Soft skills kept coming up, that kids be able to you know, form relationships, that they be able to work on teams that they can critically think, that they can collaborate, so we wanted to make sure that we are providing a strong foundation of that and explicitly instructing it.

**Narrator:** Pinewood adapted a Social Thinking curriculum. Aimee Jackson is Pinewood's Social Worker.

**Aimee Jackson, School Social Worker:** So basically, where I started was giving teachers a vocabulary list of things like: expected/unexpected behaviors, size of the problem, following the group plan, keeping your brain and body in the group and really making sure that that was being used in their classrooms throughout the day, in specials classes, at lunch and recess so that it was continually being built on and reinforced throughout the day. It's teaching kids the why behind behaviors. So we're not just focusing on isolated skills, we're teaching them how does our behavior affect how other people think about 's feelings toward us, or their feelings toward us, and why would I want to change my behavior, which actually goes along really well with our mindfulness stuff too.

**Narrator:** Heather Palmer teaches first grade.

**Heather Palmer, Grade 1 Teacher:** I believe that social thinking lessons help students be successful in their academics in that they are learning the skills to problem-solve on their own and if they are not able to problem solve through a social interaction with peers or adults on their own, they've learned the skills to go to an adult. They can say, you know, "I have this big problem and I need some help fixing it." I think some kids really have to carry the burden of figuring out, "How am I going to get past this experience?"

**Narrator:** Social-emotional learning also benefits students' literacy skills.

**Rachael Postle-Brown:** Lots of times we start with a story and we say, "Okay, here's the story and do you understand what the character meant or what the character was thinking?" Well, our kids who can't do that in real life can't do it within a story. So we've seen huge growth in our reading comprehension.

**Narrator:** School Superintendent Tom TenBrink encourages continuous teacher learning.

**Tom TenBrink, Superintendent, Jenison Public Schools:** We are always challenging our administrators to get out there and do research and find ways in which to engage our students in their learning. One of the things that we have learned over time is more students are engaged the better they will learn.

**Rachael Postle-Brown:** We found research on something called whole-brain teaching and it was a lot of how to develop oral language for students and how to help them reinforce concepts with motions and movements.

**Kelsey Radvansky:** When I start a book we always start the same way. We talk about the author and say the author writes the words and then the illustrator draws the pictures so there's always a motion for it and the kids just feel like—having that motion helps them connect and helps them remember better. We teach the kids this addend plus this addend, put it together to get the whole. Number line—we always just kind of draw it out so when they see it, they have done it, they have verbalized it back to me. Oftentimes they have verbalized it to a peer.

**Marie McIntyre-Doerr:** So as our behaviors are going down our academics are going up which is exactly the way we want it to be.

**Rachael Postle-Brown:** We kind of went from being one of the lowest of the five elementary schools in the district to being one of the top. We had, you know, 75 per cent of our kids doing fairly well—maybe a bump in the road here and there—but then another 20 to 25 per cent that were needing Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports for their behaviors. And our intense behaviors were extremely intense. And so once we looked at it and said, “Okay, we need Universal support here; we need to be teaching these to all kids, we saw it go down. Those real intense behaviors that we were seeing, that was traumatic for the student and for school staff, really has decreased dramatically. It’s really great when we can say, you know, 90-95% of our kids are doing awesome and we have the time and energy to really focus on that other 5% and provide the supports that they need.