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E D U C A T I O N A L L E A D E R

Writing Response 1

The Pals Social Skills Program: Enhancing Social-Emotional Learning in Students

The Pals Social Skills Program was established as an initiative I created alongside the special education assistant principal to support students with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or those requiring additional Social Emotional Learning (SEL) to develop and maintain friendships. This program provides a structured, small-group environment conducted after school twice a week, with a maximum of 12 students per teacher. The targeted approach ensures individualized attention and fosters meaningful social interactions among participants.

The development and implementation of the Pals Social Skills Program required careful planning and collaboration. To establish the foundation for the program, I drafted a comprehensive proposal that outlined the objectives, structure, and anticipated outcomes. This document served as the basis for securing administrative support and necessary resources.

Following the proposal, I worked on building the curriculum, which was structured into three distinct cycles, each addressing key areas of social skills development. The first cycle emphasizes maintaining interactions and developing social language skills. The second cycle focuses on affective understanding, perspective-taking, and body awareness. The final cycle expands on maintaining interactions and social language skills in broader social contexts. Prior to the start of a new cycle, a pre-assessment is given based on teacher observations of the students. At the completion of each cycle, a post-assessment is administered using the same criteria as the initial evaluation. At the end of each cycle, families receive a letter informing them of areas of growth and any aspects their child is still working on developing.

To identify students who would benefit from the program, I collaborated with the assistant principal to develop a nomination process that allowed staff members to recommend participants. Once nominated, students were grouped based on their specific social needs. Permission slips were created and distributed to parents, and staff members were carefully assigned to groups in a manner that would best support student growth and development.

Since its inception, the Pals Social Skills Program has been highly successful. Both students and staff look forward to the sessions, and attendance rates have remained consistently strong. Parents request the program on an annual basis, and word-of-mouth from enrolled students has encouraged other families to seek participation. The program has fostered a supportive community, making a meaningful impact on students' social and emotional growth.

Looking ahead, I aim to expand and enhance the program in several ways. One key initiative is increasing parent and family engagement by creating opportunities for families to connect and share experiences. Parents of students who have successfully completed the program could offer insights and strategies that contributed to their child's development. Additionally, I would like to make the program more inclusive by welcoming students who do not necessarily struggle with social skills but may have difficulty finding peers with similar interests or are new to the school. This adaptation would involve cycles focusing on shared interests and social integration. Another enhancement would be the introduction of a club-based format, allowing students to join groups based on common interests such as board games, art, or technology, fostering organic friendship-building in a relaxed and engaging environment.

By implementing these improvements, the Pals Social Skills Program will continue to evolve, offering a more inclusive, supportive, and impactful experience for students, families, and educators. The program remains dedicated to fostering essential social-emotional skills that contribute to long-term personal and academic success.



Writing Response 2

Throughout my career as an educator, I have been driven by a deep passion for building relationships and fostering a safe, nurturing environment where students are encouraged to learn, take risks, and reach their fullest potential. As a classroom teacher, I dedicated myself to forming meaningful connections with my students and their families, ensuring that each child felt valued and supported in their educational journey. It was through these experiences that I recognized my calling to make a difference on a larger scale—one that would allow me to impact not just one classroom, but an entire school community. This realization has inspired me to pursue the role of assistant principal.

One of the most rewarding aspects of my teaching career has been the lasting relationships I have built with my students and their families. I have had former students return to our school to share their accomplishments with me or introduce their younger siblings, a testament to the strong bond we established. One particularly meaningful moment was when a middle school student told her younger brother, "Oh, I hope you get Ms. Draghi as a teacher! She is the best teacher ever." Upon learning that I had transitioned out of the classroom, she remarked, "How lucky that you get to help make even more students feel special." These moments reaffirm my commitment to education and my belief in the power of positive relationships in shaping students' lives.

Beyond relationship-building, I have always embraced continuous learning and professional growth. Coming from a background in special education, I have expanded my expertise by learning new instructional methods, such as TC when I first began teaching in the DOE to Orton Gillingham, and most recently piloting Really Great Reading. Additionally, I played an integral role on the committee that evaluated various phonics curricula, ultimately selecting the one that best met our students' needs. My colleagues have observed my implementation of the curriculum, and I have shared insights about its effectiveness, particularly regarding its structure, scope, and approach. These experiences have strengthened my instructional leadership skills, preparing me to support teachers and students in a broader capacity.

My vision as an assistant principal is to cultivate a school culture where students, staff, and families collaborate to create an environment where everyone feels safe, valued, and respected. As a school climate coordinator, I worked closely with my co-coordinator and assistant principal to address an increase in OORS reports despite the presence of multiple Social Emotional Learning (SEL) programs such as Leader in Me. Recognizing the need for additional initiatives, we implemented new strategies to improve student behavior and safety, particularly in the cafeteria.

For students in grades 3-5, we increased recess from once to twice per week, allowing students to switch activities halfway through the period. For students in grades K-2, we introduced new engagement activities, including bristle blocks, Uno, and creative craft stations on a rotating schedule. Since implementing these initiatives, OORS data has shown a decrease in cafeteria incidents, highlighting the effectiveness of our approach.

Additionally, I have prioritized restorative practices to ensure a safer and more inclusive school environment. I became trained in Restorative Justice: Level I, providing training for staff, students, and families. Students receive targeted lessons on kindness and conflict resolution, while teachers participate in de-escalation training, where they are introduced to resources such as the Pre-Referral Intervention Manual (PRIM) and the Learning Intervention Manual (LIM). Furthermore, as a certified facilitator in CPI: Reframing Behavior, I have provided ongoing training for paraprofessionals, equipping them with strategies to support students effectively. My long-term vision is to expand this training to include school aides and additional support staff, further enhancing the culture of safety and respect within our school community.

The data from the Online Occurrence Reporting System (OORS) from the 2023-24 to the 2024-25 school year demonstrates a significant improvement in student behavior and a reduction in infractions, highlighting the positive impact of new initiatives, staff training, and student-focused resources. During the 2023-24 school year, there were 584 reported incidents, with the highest infractions recorded under A18 (186), A24 (103), and A36 (25). Additionally, two students exhibited a high number of infractions, with one first-grade student accumulating over 85 reports and a kindergarten student with over 75 reports. In contrast, the 2024-25 school year has seen a sharp decline in overall infractions, with only 192 reports to date. Notably, level 1 infractions decreased from 161 to 32, and level 3 infractions dropped from 117 to 25. The two students who previously had the most infractions have shown remarkable behavioral improvements, with only two recorded infractions each this year, all of which are lower-level violations. These positive trends indicate that the implementation of new initiatives, staff training, and student presentations has effectively contributed to a safer and more structured school environment. The decrease in high-level infractions and the significant behavioral progress of students with previous multiple infractions demonstrate that these efforts are fostering a more positive and supportive learning atmosphere for all students.

Lastly, my decision to pursue the role of assistant principal is deeply influenced by the positive impact I have witnessed from my own administration. I have seen firsthand how dedicated leadership can transform a school, making a meaningful difference in the lives of students, families, and staff. The support, guidance, and vision demonstrated by my administrators have inspired me to take on a leadership role where I can contribute to creating a thriving school environment.

Ultimately, my goal as an assistant principal is to extend my impact beyond my classroom, fostering a school-wide culture of collaboration, inclusion, and academic excellence. I am eager to support students, empower educators, and build strong partnerships with families to ensure that every child receives the best possible educational experience. By embracing this leadership role, I will continue my lifelong mission of making a difference—one student, one family, and one community at a time.