Strategram

Talking Together

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In the *Talking Together* program, students learn basic social strategies for participating in whole-class activities.

Respect. Tolerance. Confidence. Belonging.

All too frequently in today's classrooms, these basic components of a supportive and productive learning environment are missing. Instead, many students experience threats, aggression, antisocial behavior, intolerance, and violence. School can become a fearful and unhappy place. Students who are the targets of harassment often see their grades deteriorate, and their fear can lead to absenteeism, truancy, or dropping out of school. Loneliness, victimization, and alienation become a reality for these students.

The *Community Building Series* is a set of instructional packages that has been developed to address these issues. It includes procedures and materials that teachers can use to create a sense of community within inclusive classrooms. The three major outcomes associated with the program are that students feel both physically and psychologically safe, that students become involved in activities without fear of ridicule or rejection, and that the learning and performance of students is enhanced.

Talking Together

The first program in the *Community Building Series, Talking Together* (Vernon, Deshler, & Schumaker, 2000) was designed to meet these goals in general education classrooms and is now available. This program serves as the basis for the remainder of the *Community Building Series,* much like the *SCORE Skills* program serves as the foundation for the *Cooperative Thinking Strategies Series.*

In the *Talking Together* program, students learn basic social strategies for participating in whole-class activities, such as whole-class discussions. They also learn about the concepts of respect, tolerance, and learning community. They learn that learning communities are characterized by attributes such as honesty, trust, working together to facilitate learning, encouragement, empowerment, a sense of responsibility for the growth and learning of others in the class, and an environment in which all individuals are valued. Students learn to participate respectfully in class discussions, to give each other a chance to speak and be heard, to work constructively with partners, and to express support and kindness toward others.

The skills and concepts learned in this program are foundational to communi-

Fear & anxiety

Fear and anxiety are part of life and certainly part of the school experience for many of our students. The issue is not whether it exists or not, but whether we as teachers respond to student fear and insecurity in ways that fuel the fear or **diminish** it.

—*Esther Wright, 1989.* Good Morning Class—I Love You! *Torrance, CA: Jalmar Press*

Overview of *Talking Together*

Lesson 1: Class Participation and the Discussion Skill. Students learn low-risk ways to stay actively involved in class discussions, and they learn how to responsibly participate individually using the Discussion Skill.

Lesson 2: The Partner Skill. Students learn how to work with partners to share and combine their ideas to answer questions. The steps of the skill involve thinking about a response, sharing ideas with partners, combining or choosing the best ideas, and sharing those ideas with the class.

Lesson 3: Respect. Students discuss the concept of respect and identify ways to show respect.

Lesson 4: Tolerance. Students participate in a teacher-led discussion of and activities that demonstrate how differences related to prior knowledge, experience, viewpoints, abilities, preferences, and beliefs affect students' contributions in the classroom. A goal of this lesson is to ensure that students understand that everyone learns differently, processes information differently, and has different strengths and weaknesses.

Lesson 5: The Support Skill. Students learn how to make positive comments that reassure, congratulate, compliment, or comfort others, and they use role-play situations to practice the Support Skill.

Lesson 6: Describing Our Learning Community. Students review the concepts and skills they have learned and describe the type of learning environment that they want to create in their class by describing characteristics always present and characteristics never present in a learning community.

Figure 1

>>> cation within learning communities and other group environments and can be used by students throughout their lives.

The program presents these skills and concepts through six lessons (summarized in Figure 1). The *Talking Together* manual presents each lesson in two formats:

- A "Play-by-Play" format provides an in-depth description of the instructional procedures used in the program.
- An "At-a-Glance" format out-

lines the main instructional procedures in a brief, one-page lesson guide that can be used as an outline once the teacher is familiar with the procedures.

Portrait of a community

For students, the vision of building a classroom learning community may be discussed using a picture similar to Figure 2 on page 3. In this example, construction vehicles (skills) build the foundation for the com-

munity. Communication highways (for listening and sharing) are built throughout the community and lead to buildings surrounded by picket fences created from trust, honesty, caring, and support.

Weeds in the community (cheating, teasing, bullying, disrespect, putdowns) need to be eliminated so that the garden (of diversity and tolerance) can bloom.

Celebrations are held to recognize the efforts of individuals and groups, and respect, belonging, safety, tolerance, patience, and cooperation permeate the air of the community.

Field-test results

The *Talking Together* program was field tested in 1999 with a total of 20 teachers and 377 students. The results of the field tests indicated that elementary students in the experimental classes who had participated in the *Talking Together* program knew significantly more about how to create a classroom community than students in the comparison classes. Students in the experimental classes could define concepts such as respect and tolerance and name and explain the skills necessary to create a learning community.

More students in the experimental classes participated in class discussions than did students in comparison classes, and their participation was more respectful (hands were lowered when others talked, there were fewer disruptions, and fewer answers were yelled out). In addition, the number of negative comments made by students during class discussions decreased in experimental classes over the course of the field test and was significantly lower than the >>>
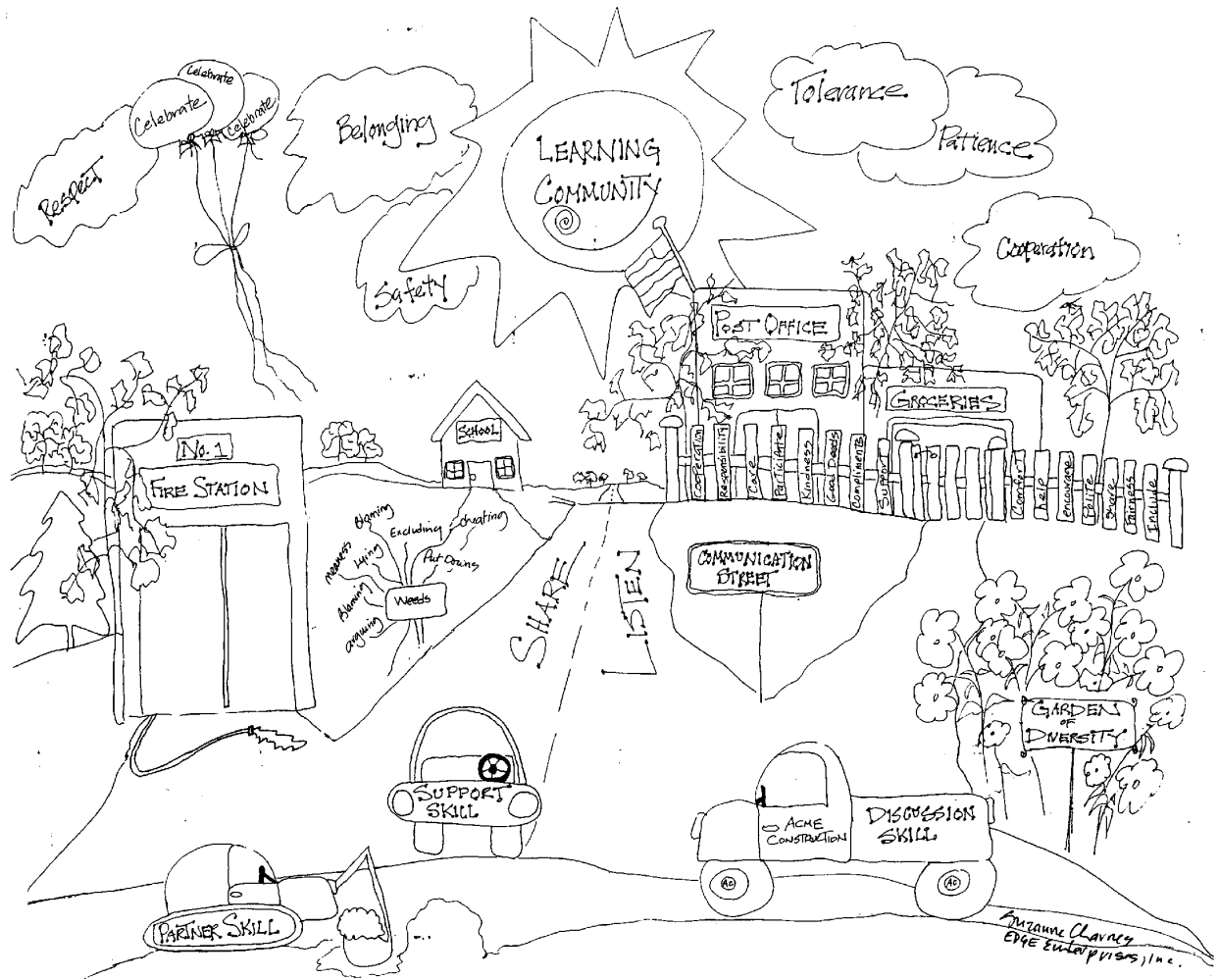
Figure 2

>>> number of negative comments made by students in the comparison classes at the end of the field test.

Teacher behavior also changed as a result of using the program. Overall, experimental teachers complimented their students more, they provided more low-risk opportunities (such as partner responses and group responses) to keep all students actively involved, and they called on more students after providing instruction in the program than before the instruction.

The satisfaction ratings by both students and teachers were high. Students recommended the program for other students, and teachers strongly endorsed the program.

Among the benefits reported by teachers were fewer arguments and fights, more respect, less inappropriate talk, less interrupting, kinder behavior, and less time spent on discipline when they used the program. In evaluations of the program, they wrote that it provided "good lifelong skills" and "important skills to learn to promote school success," that it was "very user-friendly," and that overall the *"Talking Together* program is great! It is needed at the beginning of the school year by both students and teachers!"

Of the 30 experimental teach- ers who have participated in the field studies to date, *all* have indicated that they will continue to use the program in the future.

Not just elementary

Although the *Talking Together* program was field tested with third- through fifth-grade students, the program can be adapted for older students. The topics, concepts, and skills of the lessons of *Talking Together* are appropriate for all age groups. With minimal planning, age-appropriate examples and activities can be substituted for those suggested in the manual, and questions can be formulated to promote thoughtful responses >>>

>>> and in-depth discussions.

Before introducing *Talking Together,* for example, students can be asked to think about their experiences and to describe something that others did (or said) that they liked and that they didn't like. In conversations such as this, students typically mention that they like others to listen to them, act pleasantly, and help out when needed. On the negative side, students report that they really dislike being unkindly teased, humiliated, or put down.

This discussion segues nicely into the *Talking Together* program. As the lessons are taught, a variety of discussions can be integrated with the lesson activities. For example, the teacher can provide a definition of "learning community," and students can refer to the desirable and undesirable behaviors they previously identified and design the "perfect" classroom community.

They can be prompted to consider how the "atmosphere" of the classroom can affect academic performance. Teachers and students can co-construct expectations and classroom "rules" based on "always present" and "never present" characteristics of the environment they want in the classroom. Students can be asked to define "responsible participation" for class discussions (for example, remain on topic, listen attentively to others, keep an open mind). They can consider what "respect" would look like in a high-school or junior-high-school class. The class can discuss how bullying, harassment, and intolerance (and other negative behaviors and beliefs) contribute to the type of violence witnessed in schools across the country. Students can be asked to write their comments in response to questions such as "Why does discrimination against one person endanger the rights of all people?" or "How can an awareness and understanding of cultural differences benefit individuals in a diverse workplace?" Similar questions and the subsequent discussions can provide focus and added meaning for each lesson.

Community of the future

Many students in today's classrooms need to change their behavior. Unfortunately, changing behavior is not easy. Requiring students to engage in positive, community-building behavior, teaching them confidence- and competence-building skills, and providing numerous opportunities for them to practice the skills to develop and maintain respectful and healthy relationships can begin the process of change.

Although metal detectors, locker checks, and increased security may help prevent violence, restructuring the learning environment to create a positive and supportive culture not only will improve school safety but also will enable all students to become meaningful and integral parts of the fabric of the school community.

Respect, responsibility, and civility need to be taught and practiced by all members of the school. Clearly, schoolwide efforts to develop safe and caring learning communities are a pressing need. The *Talking Together* program begins the process of building such communities with a focus on individual classrooms. Future studies will expand these ideas to create a more schoolwide focus. ●

*The Talking Together *manual is available from Edge Enterprises, 708 W. Ninth Street, Suite 107, Lawrence, KS, 66044, (785) 749-1473, toll free (877) 767-1487, fax (785) 749-0207.*

Community

By invoking the metaphor of community, we imply...that we are bound by a fellowship of endeavor in which we commit to mutual goals, in which we contribute to the best of our abilities, in which each contribution is recognized and credited, in which there is a forum for all voices to be heard, in which our success contributes to the success of the common enterprise and to the success of others, in which we can disagree and hold differing viewpoints without withdrawing from the community, in which we are free to express how we feel as well as what we think, in which our value to society is directly related to the quality of our commitment and effort, and in which we take care of each other.

—Fortune 500 Executive Jim Autry, from his book, Love & Profit, *in Kouzes, James M. & Posner, Barry Z., 1993.* Credibility. *San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, p. 129.*

Co-teaching experiences

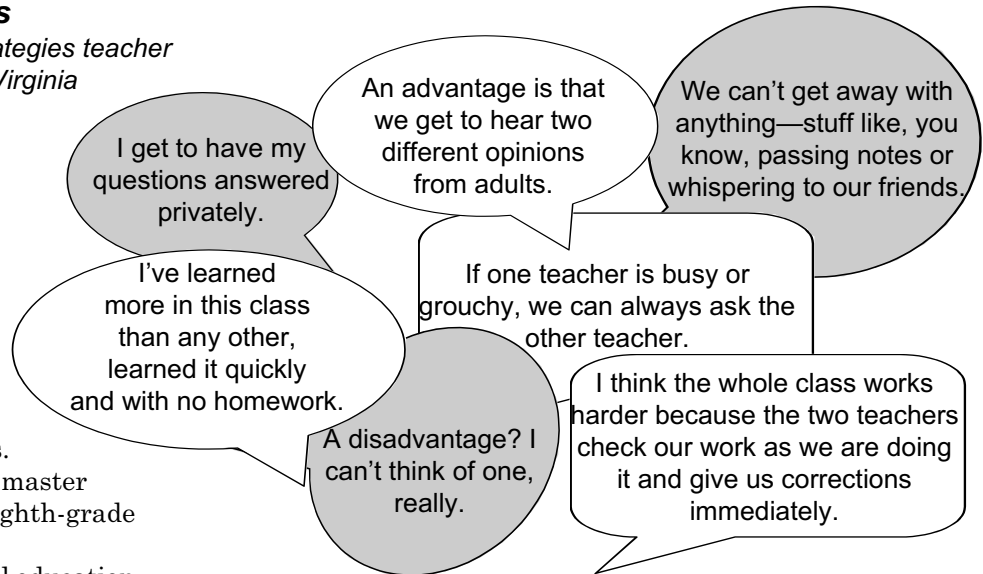## *Using the Strategic Instruction Model in West Virginia*

By Barbara Davis
SIM Trainer & LD strategies teacher
Summersville, West Virginia

The comments at right are from actual students—one gifted, two diagnosed with ADD, one borderline mentally impaired, an SLD student, and two average junior high school students. All are struggling to master the intricacies of eighth-grade English.

> I get to have my questions answered privately.

> An advantage is that we get to hear two different opinions from adults.

> We can't get away with anything—stuff like, you know, passing notes or whispering to our friends.

> I've learned more in this class than any other, learned it quickly and with no homework.

> If one teacher is busy or grouchy, we can always ask the other teacher.

> A disadvantage? I can't think of one, really.

> I think the whole class works harder because the two teachers check our work as we are doing it and give us corrections immediately.

Inclusion of special education students into the general education setting has created a unique opportunity for collaboration and close cooperation among general education teachers and their special education counterparts. Three years ago, a colleague, Carl Lawrence, and I began to co-teach an eighth-grade English class as part of our professional growth and development plan. Our plan was two-fold: devise a way to include more special education students and ensure their academic success.

After agreeing to use the Strategic Instruction Model (SIM), we received training on implementing the *Sentence Writing Strategy,* the *Paragraph Writing Strategy,* and the *Error Monitoring Strategy.* Selection and use of this model proved to be a wise decision providing surprising benefits for all involved.

Carl and I are still co-teaching after three years and have plans to increase the number of classes co-taught next year.

Amazing! Ask any teacher you know how he or she feels about another teacher in the classroom, and you will quickly agree that it is indeed an amazing accomplishment. The SIM approach solved the problems inherent in co-teaching: problems concerning what would be taught, when it would be taught, how it would be taught, and by whom.

Two major concerns facing our profession today—teacher burnout and raising test scores—might be addressed using a co-teaching approach. We enjoy teaching again, are less stressed at the end of our co-teaching sessions, and know we are more successful at meeting the individual needs of our students.

Benefits of a co-teaching arrangement accrue for students as well. Their comments attest to that fact. We have seen marked improvements in both the academic and the affective domains. Records kept for the past three years of our students' standardized scores reveal significant improvement on the language section of the Stanford Achievement Test-9. Discipline problems are minimal. Students are committed to learning and remain on task, striving for mastery of the lessons. They appear to be friendlier, are more willing to assist classmates, and volunteer freely to put their work on the board.

Co-teaching is a far cry from the era of the one-room schoolhouse. The benefits of co-teaching, when coupled with a research-based instructional approach such as SIM, are tangible, measurable, and mutually beneficial for all participants.

Disadvantages? As one of the LD students in our co-teaching class said so succinctly, "I can't think of one, really."

Barbara wrote this article for the West Virginia Professional Educators newsletter. She generously agreed to share her story here.

LINCS Scoring Card Frame

Card ____

LINCing card score = 4
  Vocabulary word(s) circled = 1   ____
  Definition written = 1   ____
  Reminding word = 1   ____
  LINCing story = 1   ____

Reminding word score = 2
  Beginning, ending, rhymes, same
  meaning, or short phrase = 1   ____
  Real word = 1   ____

Total score for all 3 areas:
  Card =   _____ (4)
  Reminding word =   _____ (2)
  LINCing story =   _____ (3)
  Extra credit =   _____ (1)

Total score: ____ **(10)**

LINCing story score = 3
  Reminding word in LINCing story = 1   ____
  Short and simple = 1   ____
  Two to three words from definition
  or meaning included = 1   ____

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  or meaning included = 1   ____

*Created and submitted by **Alvina Danna,** General Stricker Middle School, Baltimore, Maryland.*
See page 7 for more information.

LINCS card frame helps students understand scoring process

Alvina Danna, an eighth-grade inclusion teacher at General Stricker Middle School in Baltimore, Maryland, submitted the LINCS scoring idea on page 6.

Alvina said she and her students experienced terrific success with the *Word Identification Strategy,* then prepared to move on to the *LINCS Vocabulary Strategy.* She soon found, however, that her students had difficulty scoring the LINCS cards.

After consulting SIM Trainer **Janette DeFelice** of Baltimore about the problem, Alvina developed a different type of scoring card frame.

Alvina wanted the students to have a "nice round number" for the total score of the card, so she added one extra credit point if the total added up to nine. She also added a Total Score section. Instead of using initials to indicate scoring criteria, as she had learned to do in her Strategic Instruction Model professional development session, Alvina wrote out the criteria.

The changes have been very successful for Alvina and her students.

"It worked!" Alvina said. "My students were able to understand how to score the LINCS cards after using my model.

"Once the students get the hang of scoring the card using the frame, they can just add the score on the upper right-hand corner of each section of the LINCS card. They will remember the frame after practicing several times."

Web resources

The following web sites have some terrific resources for teachers:

- **Connected Teacher**
  http://connectedteacher.classroom.com

- **TeacherVision**
  http://teachervision.com/

- **Education World**
  http://www.education-world.com/
  - **Toolbox for searching ERIC documents**
    http://www.education-world.com/special_ed/mild/learning.shtml

- **Teachers Helping Teachers**
  http://www.pacificnet.net/~mandel/
  - **A section on teaching strategies submitted by teachers**
    http://www.pacificnet.net/~mandel/SpecialEducation.html

If you know of great web resources you would like to share with other Strategram *readers, send the information to Julie Tollefson at jtollefson@ukans.edu.*

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