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Kathleen Weigel, principal of Atlantic Community High School in Delray Beach, Fla., talks to students during lunch. She called the school's uniform code of conduct a "godsend."

A Fla. district leads in violence prevention

BY KRISTEN A. GRAHAM | INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Palm trees aside, a tan stucco school more than 1,100 miles away can teach the Philadelphia School District some lessons.

Violence plagues the neighborhood surrounding Boynton Beach High School. Many students who can opt out of the school choose to do so, heading for private or charter schools.

But there are no metal detectors at Boynton Beach, a school that serves mostly students who are poor and black or Hispanic.

And there are just two police officers for the 1,800 students — and relatively little trouble within the school's walls.

Though the name Palm Beach County may conjure up images of extreme wealth, the sprawling area in southeastern Florida, whose school district, with 171,000 students, is larger than Philadelphia's, has plenty of trouble spots, too.

"We have some of the same challenges as Philadelphia — gangs, drugs, and poverty," said Alison Adler, the Palm Beach County School District's chief of safety and learning environment.

Keeping order demands a concerted effort.

"People think there's a silver bullet, but there's not," said James P. Kelly, county chief of school police. "It's a systematic approach, and we've built it over time. We're consistent, we focus on building relationships, and we correct behaviors. That does cut down on discipline referrals and the ultimate criminal acts."

Kenneth S. Trump, a national school security expert, calls Palm Beach the gold standard — the district that best prioritizes school safety and balances law and order with violence prevention.

"The key is, you have to have a balanced and comprehensive approach," said Trump. "It's not an either-or."

But Palm Beach is a rarity. Often, school systems treat safety as an afterthought and fail to focus on prevention until it's too late.

"Suddenly, there's a crisis, and parents and the media come knocking, and school safety gets bumped to the front burner," Trump said. "But in six months, if there's not another major incident, it falls to the back burner again."

Prevention is just as important as law enforcement in Palm Beach, said Kelly.

“We take care of the back end — the people who insist on being arrested,” Kelly said. “But it’s more than just putting armed guards in a hall, and security equipment. The best way to be is proactive, and we’re given ample room to do that.”

Palm Beach County employs safe-school case managers, whose sole job is to get to know students and prevent trouble. These professionals, many of whom have a law-enforcement background, work in the district’s middle and high schools, attend dances and football games, visit students’ homes, keep in touch with other police agencies, and monitor gang activity.

The Florida district has a huge and successful youth court that handles low-level offenses and routinely keeps teens out of the formal justice system. And the district invented single-school culture, a program in which staff and students agree on school rules that are enforced consistently.

In contrast, Philadelphia and other districts tend to focus on student behavior only when things go wrong. They focus on punishment, which is often meted out unevenly.

Philadelphia uses single-school culture, but inconsistently.

Single-school culture

Palm Beach has come a long way.

The area surrounding Boynton Beach High — and the school itself — were particularly troubled a few years ago, Adler remembers. Police cars were often parked outside the school.

Keith Oswald, Boynton Beach’s dynamic young principal, arrived three years ago.

“We had a lot of disciplinary issues — fighting, gang issues,” Oswald remembers. “We gave out more F’s than any other school. Kids used to see graduation as an option.”

But a focus on consistency in school rules and discipline helped spur a rebirth at Boynton Beach, a school that despite its large size feels calm, even at class changes and in the cafeteria during lunch periods. Last year, the school earned a B on Florida’s report card, up from the D grade it had earned since 2002-03.

And incidents of crime and violence are down — there were 99 total incidents in 2009-10, down from 150 in 2004-05.

Oswald and Adler credit the school’s adoption of single-school culture, a program Adler developed and that is copyright by the Palm Beach district and used around the country. Its motto: “This is the way we do things around here.”

Single-school culture, which has been around since the mid-1990s, is mandated in every Palm Beach school, though some, like Boynton Beach, implement it better than others.



Keith Oswald, principal at Boynton Beach High School in Florida, congratulates a student for her good grades. The district’s single-school culture has been praised.

“PEOPLE THINK THERE’S A SILVER BULLET, BUT THERE’S NOT. ... IT’S A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH, AND WE’VE BUILT IT OVER TIME. WE’RE CONSISTENT, WE FOCUS ON BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS, AND WE CORRECT BEHAVIORS.”

James P. Kelly, Palm Beach County chief of school police

Plastered everywhere around Boynton Beach High are posters reminding students to DREAM — Dress appropriately, show Respect, Electronics off and away, positive Attitude, Motivated to succeed.

The approach may sound like common sense, but it takes a great deal of work to get support from all the adults and students, said Adler.

“If you train once, it’s a drive-by,” she said. “To work, it has to be an ongoing thing. We follow up in lots of ways.”

Students definitely get it.

“This school was a bad school, and I was very afraid,” a senior boy with a goatee said during a reporter’s recent visit.

But now, “teachers don’t play about the rules,” a junior boy said. “They say, ‘When the bell rings, the door swings.’”

A ninth grade girl smiled shyly when asked about her school.

“I feel good right here,” she said. “Safe. Kids aren’t hanging around the hallways.”

Teacher Brian Sandala worked at Camden’s Promise Charter School for two years. This year, he took a job at Boynton Beach High to be near family, and he’s impressed with the school.

“Everyone knows what it takes to be a Tiger,” Sandala said, referring to the school’s mascot. “When students see that teachers really believe in the school’s culture, they want to be part of it, too.”

Consistency is key, Palm Beach school officials say. Discipline is progressive, and there’s no guessing on what principals should do. Everyone follows a matrix that lists which punishments can be meted out for which offenses, and when the action must be reported to police.

If a high school student is “physically aggressive” in class, for instance, administrators must

make a behavior referral for the student and assign a one- or two-day out-of-school suspension, which administrators are encouraged to use sparingly because they favor in-school discipline.

At the principal's discretion, they can assign additional consequences, ranging from time in an "in-school intervention program" to loss of extracurricular privileges.

"We used to have a kid in one end of the district caught in the bathroom smoking get two days in-school suspension, and in the other end of the district, that same offense would be a 10-day suspension. Not anymore," said Dave Benson, assistant director of the district's Safe Schools Institute.

Philadelphia's student code of conduct does include a discipline matrix, but it hasn't had the same effect. Discipline still varies widely from school to school.

At her school, the matrix is an important tool, said Kathleen Weigel, principal at Atlantic Community High School in Delray Beach, also in Palm Beach County.

"It's been a godsend for us," said Weigel.

Like Boynton Beach, Atlantic enrolls predominately poor and African American students. But in recent years, it has reduced its suspension rate by half and increased its graduation rate to 88 percent. The school has relatively low violence rates for the 2,300 students.

Weigel said the formula was simple: "If you take your school and start to build a culture of trust, you'll be on the upside of every incident that's going to happen."

Key to what her school has been able to achieve, Weigel said, is the genial man known as "O" — Lorenzo Odum, the school police officer assigned to Atlantic High. He sits in on Weigel's leadership team meetings. He mentors 20 students a week.

Odum is the only officer at the huge school.

He is a sworn officer who carries a weapon and has arrest powers — unlike school police officers in Philadelphia — but he's a nurturer just as much as a law enforcement official, said Weigel.

"I know everything that's going on in this school," said Odum, who worked for the local police department before becoming a school police officer. "Students don't see me as a brute with a gun waiting to arrest them. I have a calming effect on them."

He does have to get tough, but that's the exception, Odum said.

Adler's program has taken root in Philadelphia, to a degree.

A few years ago, after Adler discussed single-school culture at a state education event in Harrisburg, a Philadelphia School District offi-

cial grew excited about the program's possibilities.

"It started to resonate with the people in Philadelphia," Adler said. "They thought they could take back some of their toughest schools."

But there was no follow-up with her, she said.

Ericka Washington, deputy of attendance and truancy, said the Philadelphia district has implemented the program in its schools.

Some staffers were first trained at the state Department of Education event in 2007, Washington said. They then returned to Philadelphia and trained others in the model, focusing on the state-designated "persistently dangerous" schools.

In 2009, the state Department of Education brought a single-school culture event to Philadelphia, and more district staffers were trained.

"We have central office staff that's trained in both single-school culture and PBS," Washington said. Positive Behavior Supports, or PBS, is a program that focuses on violence prevention, consistent school-wide rules, and rewarding good behavior.

But the district agrees that it has a long way to go to fully implement the program. Doing that is included in Superintendent Arlene C. Ackerman's five-year strategic plan.

She also cited single-school culture as helping to "improve climate and safety in all schools" in court testimony related to a landmark desegregation case.

District officials say the program works at Wagner Middle School in West Oak Lane.

Principal Maya Johnstone said consistency was the byword.

"You walk into any classroom, and there are automatic routines — you can tell by how kids walk the hallways, how they enter the classrooms," Johnstone said. "It's not, 'I can wear a hood in Ms. Johnstone's class but not in Ms. Smith's class.' Everybody's on the same page. We have the same vision, and we come up with it together."

More than 75 percent of Wagner's students live below the poverty line, but the school scores well above district average on state exams. Violence has dropped from 27 incidents in 2005-06 to 11 in 2009-10, for a rate decrease from 3.6 to 2. Single-school culture is a big part of that success, Johnstone said.

But many district staffers say they've had no training in the practice, and no clear idea of what it means or sense that it affects what goes on inside their buildings.

"I know what single-school culture is," Philadelphia Federation of Teachers president Jerry Jordan said. "But I know most of my members don't know what it is."