

## **Palm Springs Middle School**

**Philosophy:** Dr. Allan Bonilla's philosophy is that every student must feel like she or he is part of the school. No child should be neglected or disregarded. Principal Bonilla will not put kids on the street, but instead insists that the school work with them. Teachers at Palm Springs Middle School know Bonilla's philosophy is to go to great lengths to meet the needs of kids and that he does not want many students referred to him for disciplinary reasons.

Bonilla has served as Principal of Palm Springs Middle School for eleven years. When he began his tenure at Palm Springs, the school had a poor reputation. It had low attendance rates, high grade retention rates, low morale, and a considerable gang problem. At the time, teachers wanted nothing to do with "have nots." Bonilla instilled in staff that every child should feel cared for and wanted. The School's attendance has improved dramatically: in 1989, it was ranked 36th in the District, but by 1998 it claimed the #1 position for attendance in the District. Bonilla made agreements with several of the students who had been retained – there were several students as old as 17-years old who were still in the middle school – to promote them if they improved their grades and conduct. Students kept their end of the bargain; as a result, in his first year as Principal, Bonilla awarded fifty administrative promotions. To quell gang activity, Bonilla reached out to gang members. For example, every morning Bonilla stood on the corner where gang members gathered. He spoke to them, listened to their concerns, remained accessible and as a result, gained their respect and trust. To this day, Bonilla spends the two hours of lunch period in the cafeteria, so that he can interact with students. For his successful efforts to turn Palm Springs Middle School around, Bonilla was named Dade County's Principal of the Year in 1994.

Although misconduct still occurs (though much less frequently), Bonilla takes an approach different from some of his colleagues. Palm Springs' out-of-school suspension rate is now down to 3.4% of students. The most frequent infraction of the Student Code of Conduct at Palm Springs is fighting. Although the District's Code of Conduct permits out-of-school suspension for fighting, students at Palm Springs are typically assigned to the School Center for Special Instruction (SCSI) (in-school suspension program) for 3-5 days. Students in this program are isolated; they spend the day in the SCSI doing their class assignments. They do not

change classrooms throughout the day. There are on average 10 students in SCSI per day. The teacher in SCSI assists students with assignments and counsels students. Other common infractions that result in assignment to SCSI include talking back to teachers, defying teachers, and not being prepared or refusing to work. Out-of-school suspensions are used for weapons (automatic suspension), severe fights, and severe defiance of authority.

Principal Bonilla acknowledges that students with behavioral and academic problems can disrupt a regular classroom setting. Instead of throwing them out of school, Bonilla developed an alternative education program that keeps them in school. This program has classes for each grade level (6-8); students stay in the same classroom for math, social studies, science, and language arts, but are permitted to take physical education and an elective with mainstream students. There are fewer students in each class, and each class has a teacher and an aide. These students are provided with academics, nurturing, and counseling. Teachers remain in regular contact with the parents of these students. The teachers in the program are more tolerant and patient. Students in the program are given the special attention they need and, as a result, are not lost.

To further reduce conflicts between students, Palm Springs Middle has implemented a unique program of conflict resolution. The HeartSmarts Program, directed by the School's TRUST Counselor,<sup>55</sup> Ms. Russell, is based upon a curriculum developed by HeartMath Institute in California. The crux of the program is that students and teachers are taught to focus upon their hearts in order to deal with stressful situations. The program includes the following elements.

- A presentation of scientific research showing the heart's critical role in brain development, learning, creativity, and internal balance in children and adults. This research shows how positive attitudes and emotions facilitate optimal learning and better health.
- Practical methodology that helps children manage their behavior and stay focused. Invaluable tools for resolving conflicts and enhancing creativity that enable teachers to make quick attitude adjustments, sustain care for students and find solutions to problems.
- Highly effective tools for students to develop emotional balance and deal with anger, stress, and impulsive behavior.
- New strategies that provide workable solutions to discipline problems, reducing stress and conflict in students and teachers.
- Tools to enable students to distinguish intelligent choices from emotional impulses.
- Communication skills for preventing conflict with peers and closing the

communication gap with teachers.

Ms. Russell and teachers at Palm Springs have been trained by the HeartMath Institute and in turn have trained other administrators, teachers, and students at Palm Springs Middle to use the tools of the HeartSmarts Program to resolve conflict and manage anger and stress. The HeartSmarts Program has contributed to improved behavior of students, including at-risk students.

In addition to HeartSmarts, Ms. Russell runs a counseling program for families of students in the alternative programs. This program employs counseling methods developed by Pairs International, a Florida-based counseling company.<sup>56</sup> Russell stays one night per week to meet with families for counseling sessions. Russell also trains students to serve as peer mediators. These innovative programs are supported by Mr. Bonilla because they fit into his philosophy -- if the needs of students are met, they will flourish in school.