

Effects of Implementing Covey's
Leader in Me (LIM) Process in Elementary Schools

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Now more than ever, educational leaders are pulled in many directions. With each passing year, we are asked to do more, but with less funding. Prioritization becomes more important as we face the reality of our situation. Schools must listen carefully to what students, parents, universities, and business leaders need from us and respond accordingly. Student achievement is expected and must be a focal point of every effective school, but high scores and passing grades cannot be the end of the journey. A student is more than numbers and data on a page. Educational leaders must create a healthy balance that sets our students up for future success.

In recent years, schools have become more aware of the demand to teach our students skills beyond the traditional subjects of reading, writing, and mathematics (Covey, Covey, Summers, & Hatch, 2014). Our students deserve more. We must also strive to set high expectations and teach essential social-emotional skills to support our students in positive behaviors and habits such as self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making, rather than spending the majority of instruction time teaching strategies for simply bubbling answers correctly on a multiple-choice test. A commitment to this holistic approach is an acknowledgment that developing emotional intelligence is just as critical for our students as academic intelligence. Programs and interventions that support social-emotional learning (SEL) do not simply focus on boosting academic achievement, but also seek to increase constructive student behaviors. Educational leaders must commit to the continued support of programs that promote *both* academic and emotional growth.

Defining the *Leader In Me* Process

Because interventions that target social-emotional learning have become increasingly prevalent as a way to increase positive student behaviors and improve school culture, it's no surprise that Dr. Stephen Covey's "The Leader in Me" (LIM) initiative has become a popular option for many schools. Dr. Covey is the author of the international best seller *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, which was first published in 1989. In the late 1990s, a North Carolina principal named Muriel Summers attended a Covey leadership seminar in Washington D.C. and found herself considering the possibility of teaching the 7 Habits to young children. She wondered if knowing these 7 Habits early in life could potentially change the direction of their lives (Covey, Covey, Summers, & Hatch, 2014). As her campus, A.B. Combs Elementary School, struggled to redefine their magnet theme and increase enrollment, she turned to parents and the community to better understand what they really wanted from a school. The overwhelming consensus was the importance of building character and life skills within the students, rather than focusing only on academics (Covey, Covey, Summers, & Hatch, 2014). A.B. Combs had found their new magnet theme – leadership. The entire staff was trained on the 7 Habits then the teachers were encouraged to figure out clever ways to teach the 7 Habits by integrating the concepts into existing lesson plans, and history was made.

Leader in Me is not another program; it is a process. It can be infused in the already familiar daily life of a school without the use of scripts or gimmicks. LIM truly seeks to develop the whole child, and it starts with the belief that there is greatness in every student and every staff member (Covey, Covey, Summers, & Hatch, 2014). While

Leader in Me uses a leadership lens to teach the 7 Habits to students, it could just as easily be understood using common social-emotional terms like “self-management” and “relationship skills” (Patterson, 2018). SEL skills learned as part of Habit 4 include communication, respect, fairness, problem solving, and conflict management. As Dr. Patterson explains in her blog (2018), “the LIM 7 Habits can be clarified and taught to even young children through the lens of the highly sought after SEL skills we want our students to possess.” For example, Habit 4: Think Win-Win is about balancing the courage to get what you want with the consideration for what others may want, which is the essence of conflict management. Another important aspect of the LIM process is the belief that leadership is not limited to any group of students, such as gifted and talented students or adult staff members. Every child can be a leader (Covey, Covey, Summers, & Hatch, 2014).

Implementing the *Leader In Me* Process

The level of commitment and energy given to the launch of LIM depends on each campus. Some schools have total staff buy-in from the beginning, leading to an exciting, often aggressive implementation of LIM, while other schools may start off the process more slowly as staff members gradually gain confidence in the process as well as themselves. This participative decision-making approach has major benefits, allowing staff members to become genuinely involved and eager to share their creative energy and ideas as implementation moves forward. A more collaborative culture involves school administrators working with staff and parents to increase emotional involvement as well as accepting a greater responsibility for the school's effectiveness (Owens & Valesky, 2007). The more people that are informed and involved in the process, along with the

feeling of empowerment among those people, the more effective the LIM process will be. Implementing LIM is always initiated using an inside-out approach. It starts inside with adult staff members applying the habits, then the LIM language and principles expand to students, parents, and the surrounding community (Covey, Covey, Summers, & Hatch, 2014). As adults exemplify the habits and other leadership skills, their modeling and everyday lives become the best lesson plans for teaching students, but the 7 Habits are also incorporated into specific lesson activities, campus events and traditions, and ultimately the culture of the school. As schools continue to implement the LIM process, some schools also become Lighthouse Schools, which is a special designation that demonstrates that the school has achieved a high level of fidelity and skill in the implementation of the LIM program. Earning Lighthouse status requires a campus to successfully complete the entire two-year LIM training program as well as a comprehensive on-site review to ensure the fidelity of implementation (Hatch & Covey, 2013).

Individual schools may choose to initiate the LIM process, or district-wide implementation may be used to build an even stronger support system. My campus, Cibolo Green Elementary School, began implementation of LIM as part of North East Independent School District's 360-degree education initiative. NEISD has a vision and philosophy that supports educating all students to be "well-rounded, empathetic listeners, to make good decisions, and to be able to chart their own course" (Covey, Covey, Summers, & Hatch, pg. 229). NEISD already had district leaders that were certified 7 Habits trainers ready to initiate the district transformation by teaching a common leadership language. The district then strategically chose 5 schools to launch the LIM

process, provided the necessary training and support, then used those schools as mentor schools for the next small group of schools implementing LIM the following year. The NEISD website reports that the district currently has 32 LIM schools, as well as 13 schools that have achieved Lighthouse status.

Cibolo Green Elementary School opened in 2010 as one of NEISD's first green schools with a focus on conservation and environmental responsibility, but soon thereafter embarked on the LIM journey. In 2012 our campus administration provided 7 Habits training to every staff member. Every adult on campus was then encouraged to apply the 7 Habits personally to our daily activities then explicitly teach them to the students the following year. The next year, teachers began to post the 7 Habits signs in the classroom, model goal setting and progress monitoring for students, and try incorporating the 7 Habits into existing lesson plans. Each classroom was given a copy of the picture book *The 7 Habits of Happy Kids* by Sean Covey that teaches the 7 Habits in kid-friendly language. Campus guidance counselors also began to visit classrooms monthly to provide direct lessons that reinforced each habit. The following year, a Lighthouse Team was formed to help continue the momentum for LIM implementation, and every classroom was provided with a Leader Binder for every student to set goals, track progress, and document celebrations for meeting goals. Student-led conferences were also encouraged as staff members, students, and parents became more familiar with the LIM language. Most recently a Jr. Lighthouse Team was formed to give students more ownership in continuing the positive energy of LIM, and a new event, Leadership Family Night, was hosted on campus. Since 2012, Cibolo Green Elementary School has continued to collaborate in sharing ideas for how to effectively model and teach Covey's

7 Habits through the LIM process. Continual professional development, such as revamping the campus vision statement, has been part of the process, as well as other necessary purchases such as Covey materials, access to LIM online resources, and student workbooks. As education budgets continue to shrink each year, schools just like Cibolo Green must analyze data, consider their options, and ultimately decide whether to continue implementing LIM and whether to pursue Lighthouse status.

Literature Review of *Leader In Me*

A recent report released by the University of Michigan examined the effects of the LIM program on the number of discipline incidents at a school, the most common infractions being physical attacks, fighting, bullying, and intimidation (Schilling, 2018). Data was analyzed for the 2015-2016 school year in Florida elementary public or charter schools that had implemented LIM compared to Florida elementary public or charter schools that had not implemented the LIM program. The 77 LIM schools were statistically matched to 77 non-LIM schools, based on school size, locale, and demographics (Schilling, 2018). 2009-2010 school year disciplinary data was also used as a pretest control variable, since all of the 77 elementary schools implemented the LIM program after 2010. The results showed a “22.84% reduction in the total number of disciplinary incidents for LIM schools” compared to matched control schools (Schilling, page 10). This study reinforced the value that the LIM program brings to schools by focusing on the development of positive behaviors, which leads to lower rates of discipline referral and ultimately a more positive effect on school climate.

A second University of Michigan study also investigated the effects of implementing LIM on disciplinary outcomes, but also noted the impacts on attendance

rates in Missouri elementary schools. 118 LIM schools and 1,134 non-LIM schools were included in this analysis, which also took into account the year each school adopted the LIM program across a span of 8 years, since the LIM program has seen two major revisions since 2006 (White, 2018). This study took into account those major revisions of the LIM program over time, seeking to discover whether the results would vary based on the LIM version (LIM 2.0 or 3.0) being used by each LIM school. None of the schools in this study used LIM 1.0, but some were still using 2.0. The schools that began implementing LIM after 2015 used the latest (3.0) approach (White, 2018). The analysis method again involved matching LIM schools to non-LIM schools based on variables such total school size, demographics, economically-disadvantaged percentages, baseline test score averages, percentage of teachers with a master's degree, attendance rate, and number of disciplinary incidents. Data was reviewed the year before the baseline year and compared to the data of the baseline year. At the time of the baseline analysis, 10 of the schools were no longer implementing the LIM program, and 26 schools had achieved Lighthouse status. It was expected that as students developed the leadership skills emphasized in the LIM program, they would make a greater effort to attend school and that their behavior while in school would improve (White, 2018). The attendance results showed "schools that adopt the LIM 3.0 program and stick with the program are likely to see an increase of almost 1% in attendance rates" (White, pg. 9). While Lighthouse schools that stuck with the program were also likely to see an increase, it was only 0.7%, and schools that eventually dropped the LIM process saw a decrease in attendance (White, 2018). As for disciplinary incidents, that data showed that "LIM led to

significant decreases in the rate of disciplinary incidents, by about 60% for an average sized school” (White, pg. 11).

A third study to consider is a report by Texas A&M that investigated the effects of emotional intelligence programs on academic achievement. Specifically this report noted the potential impact on Reading/ELA scores for the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR), Math scores for the STAAR, as well as disciplinary placements (in-school and out of school suspensions) in LIM versus non-LIM Texas schools. Discipline removals were of particular concern to Coral Wilkens due to the understanding that “if students are not present in the classroom, their access to adequate instruction is limited” (page 43). 30 traditional and charter elementary schools in Texas were chosen as LIM schools then statistically matched with 30 non-LIM schools, based on demographic factors such number of economically-disadvantaged, race, limited English proficiency, and mobility. Using the Texas Education Agency website (<https://tea.texas.gov>), data was gathered detailing STAAR scores for each school’s 2011-2012 fifth-grade students. The results found that no statistically significant difference existed in STAAR Reading/ELA scores, STAAR Math scores, or disciplinary placement between fifth-grade students at LIM schools compared to those at non-LIM schools (Wilkens, 2015). However, further analysis was then conducted to examine the relationship between the acclaimed LIM Lighthouse schools and non-LIM schools in Mathematics and Reading/ELA STAAR pass rates. There was a statistically significant difference in achievement scores on both the STAAR Reading/ELA and STAAR Math between fifth-grade students at LIM Lighthouse schools and non-LIM schools (Wilkens,

2015). These results suggest that “implementation level is key to the success of the program.” (Wilkens, page 43).

After considering the implications of the above studies, a common theme seemed to emerge. One that supports the idea of not only initiating the LIM process to improve student achievement, behavior, and overall school climate, but also sustaining the LIM process with a high level of stakeholder commitment and ultimately pursuing Lighthouse status. Although the LIM process seems to offer many potential benefits for students if the level of involvement is high, it also has the potential to be disappointingly ineffective if implemented halfheartedly.

Recommendations for Further *Leader in Me* Implementation

While Cibolo Green is in its 6th year of implementing the LIM process, the decision to move beyond this initial venture and pursue Lighthouse status has yet to be fully embraced by all staff. Looking at Cibolo Green’s publicly available data found in each year’s Texas Academic Performance Report (TAPR) downloaded from the Texas Education Agency website (<https://tea.texas.gov/perfreport/tapr/index.html>), we may now want to consider how to move forward with LIM from the perspective of even greater positive effects on academic achievement, attendance, and number of yearly discipline referrals. Although it’s difficult to present a true comparison of our campus STAAR data before implementing LIM and now, it is possible to get a general idea of the campus progress in scores, attendance, and discipline placements overall. Because Cibolo Green has historically scored well on the STAAR, our academic progress since first implementing LIM does not show dramatic increases through the years. For example, 5th grade passing rates for STAAR Math have never fallen below 94% on our campus.

Similarly, 5th grade passing rates for STAAR Reading have never fallen below 93% (TEA, 2018). Minor fluctuations in these yearly scores could possibly be attributed to other factors such as changes in staff and administrators, a variety of staff professional development, targeted student intervention, changes in student population and demographics, and most importantly, the changes in performance indexes and passing standards decided by TEA each year.

As for campus attendance rates, our campus attendance has ranged from 96.8% to 97.5% each year, which continually exceeds both district and state attendance rates. Similar to the yearly STAAR scores, the attendance percentages vary from year to year, with no dramatic changes based on the year of implementation of LIM. While Cibolo Green's attendance does not seem to pose a significant threat to the academic success of the students, there is always room for improvement.

Lastly, discipline referrals were reviewed for each year, and the percentage of incidents had actually increased by about 2.4% from the 2012-2013 school year to the 2016-2017 school year. This data is the most baffling and frustrating to consider. Although it's difficult to adequately compare discipline percentages from year to year due to changes in staff and administrators, new student enrollment and needs, and behavior initiatives on campus other than LIM, student discipline concerns is an area that would likely benefit from continued focus on social-emotional learning as part of our campus' continued commitment to LIM. High standards for appropriate behavior must be clearly communicated to all students, and staff members should feel confident in modeling those expectations as well as providing the feedback needed to help engage students in campus leadership roles that help them reach their full potential.

Based on the results of the above studies and the yearly campus data for Cibolo Green, it seems reasonable to recommend that our campus should not only continue to implement the LIM process, but also move more aggressively towards an increasing level of commitment in pursuing the path to Lighthouse status. Specific recommendations to help reenergize the campus would be to begin each year with an administrator-led faculty meeting specifically designed to convey clear goals with excitement and confidence. This rally would serve to remind returning staff of the shared campus vision, as well as educate and generate buy-in from new staff. Take time to reflect on the previous year's campus goals and celebrate progress made towards those goals. Then take time to brainstorm new campus goals for the upcoming school year, and spend time in grade-level groups and vertical teams sharing ideas for ways to deepen commitment to the LIM process, specifically ways to further involve additional staff members, students, and their families. Discuss dates for important events such as Leader in Me Family Night, symposium dates, and student-led conferences. Also allow time for honest questions and concerns regarding the previous year's hurdles in taking the LIM implementation to the next level. As the year progresses, plan to survey staff members frequently to gauge level of understanding and commitment to the shared vision.

Additional recommendations would be to strengthen the purpose and scope of the Jr. Lighthouse Team, allow for more student ownership of the LIM process, and focus on continued staff involvement. For example, provide the opportunity for more staff members to attend the yearly Leader in Me symposium, gather ideas from other LIM and Lighthouse schools nearby, brainstorm ways to involve more teachers in the campus

Lighthouse Committee, and dedicate more professional development to the implementation of various aspects of the LIM process.

All of these recommendations could potentially turn the tide in helping to move our campus closer to becoming a Lighthouse School, which ultimately helps strengthen our culture of leadership. As we help to increase the academic and social-emotional growth of our students, we model how to LEAD: Learn. Empower. Achieve. Dream.

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