

THE NURTURED  
HEART APPROACH

## TOLSON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PUTS EMPHASIS ON POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT WITH ITS STUDENTS USING NOTES OF PRAISE

by Mary Bustamante, Tucson Citizen

Students at Tolson Elementary School know how they should be treated. And they won't settle for less. Principal Maria Figueroa has had to send substitute teachers home in the middle of the day after they ignored the school's "Rules of Engagement," simple rules for how children and adults treat one another. Things are peaceful now at the West Side school at 1000 S. Greasewood Road. But that wasn't always the case.

In 2000, when Figueroa came to the Tucson Unified School District school as principal, she spent most of her day on student discipline. Many pupils were medicated for attention disorders. Then she discovered Howard Glasser, a Tucson therapist who co-authored "*Transforming The Difficult Child: The Nurtured Heart Approach.*"



Fourth-graders Victoria Gavaldon and Nick Gaitan, both 10, read their praise notes at Tolson Elementary School.

The school dived head-first into the program, which teaches adults how to build up children using oral and written praises. Expectations are high, and children learn to interact with classmates and adults. The program is strict, with immediate consequences for missteps, although little emphasis is placed on negative behavior. Instead, children get praise cards they may keep at school or take home for parents to see.

Now, nearly seven years after Tolson started using the Nurtured Heart Approach, the school staff is on the cover of Glasser's latest book, written with Illinois therapist Tom Grove, called "*The Inner Wealth Initiative: The Nurtured Heart Approach for Educators.*" The book is dedicated to Figueroa, her staff and other educators across the country. Glasser said the Tolson story has inspired hundreds of schools and thousands of classrooms across the country.

Figueroa, who also used the method on her own son at home when he was younger, wrote a small segment of the book. When she first came to Tolson, she writes, "Once the lunch recesses began at 10:30 a.m., there was a constant line of at least 15 students waiting their turn to meet the principal to receive the

sentences for hitting, cursing, racial slurring or other infractions." Now the emphasis is on seeking out character to build an "inner wealth" of self-esteem.

At Tolson, praise notes are given daily. "We go through cases of them," Figueroa said. The result is happy students and teachers who don't want to leave the school. "Teachers don't treat us bad," said fourth-grader Nick Gaitan, 10. "They don't yell at us and they give us lots of praise notes for things like perfect attendance, good citizenship, finishing our math or reading quietly. My mom likes it when I get them."

Glasser said when children receive positive attention, they don't seek the negative kind. "I praise constantly and celebrate improvement," said teacher Karen Pischansky, who now calls parents with positive news about their kids. "I show the students I care about them and their education." And the students get it. "When they see we pay more attention to their positive behavior, they respond," she said. "They feel successful."

Fourth-grader Victoria Gavaldon, 10, pulls out 34 praise notes she has received this year. "It's really nice to know we've been doing a good job in class," she said. "It makes me feel like I want to do it more." That's what Glasser expects from his program. The founder of Children's Success Foundation, Glasser is the former director of the Center for the Difficult Child in Tucson. He now lectures internationally and teaches his system to therapists, educators and parents.

Glasser created the approach to deal with children who had attention deficit hyperactivity and attention deficit disorders without using medication. "When kids are medicated, they are at the mercy of the drugs, he said." And the worst-case scenario is the kid starts believing in the drug, not in himself." He knows what he's talking about: he was one of those kids.

What educators found was the praising technique worked equally well on children who didn't have attention disorders. And it all but wiped out the use of medication for the disorders in Tolson students.

"Here, teachers are more likely to refer challenging students to GATE programs than to special education programs," Figueroa said, referring to Gifted and Talented Education. "We have seven kids in special ed now and 59 in GATE. That's a complete reversal from a few years ago." Glasser smiles at that change.

"They're finding that inner wealth. They're accruing a sense of greatness," he said. "And this is not a static bank account of wealth. In the best of world, it keeps growing and the child sees himself getting greater and greater."

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