



Tennessee Schools Partnership

The most significant study to scientifically validate the effectiveness of the True Colors process took place in Tennessee, where we were involved in the development and implementation of a statewide initiative called Positive Attitudes in Tennessee Schools (PATS). PATS was created as an alliance composed of school-site leadership teams, State Department of Education personnel, and University of Memphis faculty to plan and implement a statewide school improvement initiative over a ten-year period. True Colors was asked to participate because we had successfully initiated similar research-based efforts in several California schools.

“When it [PATS] started, there was a bold vision there to create learning environments to support a diversity of learning and teaching styles, and that’s where True Colors fit in so well.”

E. Dean Butler, Ed.D., Director
Center for Research in Educational Policy University of Memphis

Pre-Initiative Assessments Revealed a Daunting Task

The Tennessee Department of Education knew they had a problem in their schools. Their dropout rate was high, parents and others in the community reported dissatisfaction with the schools, and many students did not feel cared for by school personnel. School climate assessments conducted prior to PATS revealed that the organizational structures and attitudinal and behavioral patterns in the schools suggested a *consistency and stability that would be difficult to modify*. Cultivating positive personal connections would prove critical to resolving the climate crisis.

The Tennessee initiative utilized our social marketing model to set the stage for a customized, integrated approach to delivering measurable benefits to schools. Through an infusion process positive, productive, and healthy relationships developed, which formed the basis for the motivational improvements and mutual respect essential to PATS' success.

Post-Assessments Provide Evidence of School-Wide Improvements

The PATS initiative spanned a ten-year period and involved 350 schools, each for a three-year period. The effort reached more than 1,000,000

school and community members. Many improvements occurred and pre- and post-PATS assessments provided evidence to support participants' testimonials.

The lead researcher, E. Dean Butler, was quoted as saying, *“There is no question in my mind that True Colors can alter the culture of a school.”* The more positive the relationships and the climate at school, the more enrollments and attendance increased, and the more truancies and dropouts declined. In some schools perfect attendance tripled. All grade levels reported reduced student absenteeism, and students themselves stated that more positive school attitudes resulted in higher attendance. Principal Bobbi Little reported that for student groups who are deemed most at-risk, *“They wanted to be in school. It [True Colors] added a whole new dimension to classroom teaching. This really addressed what we were looking for.”* And teacher Ann Switzer observed that *“True Colors became part of our school; it’s part of our tradition.”*

Elementary School Attendance Improved

Elementary schools documented the following improvements that contributed to reduced student absenteeism:

- Reduced student discipline problems
- An increase in student responsibility for

self-discipline

- More positive views of student behavior
- Increased respect between school employees and students
- Greater teacher pride in the school and the students
- Higher levels of trust at school
- Increased expectations of students
- New formation of clubs and increased participation in school activities
- Increased participation in solving school problems
- Improved problem-solving collaborations involving faculty, students, and support staff

High School and Middle School Attendance Improved

PATS clearly demonstrated that the formation of a positive school climate that supports the unique needs of its adults and youth will cause them to be "present," to be ready to teach and learn. Superintendent Nancy B. Davis reported, "We've had a tremendous increase in perfect attendance. It has almost tripled."

The Ripple Effect: School Climate Improvement Enhanced Teaching, Learning, and Achievement

Selected schools at all three levels reported substantial improvements in school climate. Teacher Kathi Freeman observed, "*One of the biggest things I see is the fact that most of the students understand and like each other better, and it motivates the teachers too.*" Dr. E. Dean Butler, Director for the University of Memphis Center for Research in Educational Policy asserted, "*There's no question in my mind that True Colors can alter the culture of a school.*"

Teachers at several sites were reported to have grown as risk-takers and grown in their willingness to try new strategies. Effective improvements were reported in teacher leadership, program leadership teams, grade-level and school-wide committees, and implementation of professional development for staff and other schools and/or districts. Also

reported were a variety of instructional approaches grounded on diversity of teaching and learning styles, utilizing True Colors teaching skills taught in Teacher Development modules for teaching and learning styles.

The ripple effect of attitudinal improvements in the school context was noted by Kathy Butler of the Sumner County Board of Education, "*Through the use of True Colors, there are significant improvements in school climate and learning attitudes.*" Bert K. Simpson of the Orange County Department of Education elaborated further: "*An understanding of True Colors helps students focus on strengths, a teacher develop more individually relevant class and homework assignments for the students, a counselor guide students into more satisfying and rewarding employment, a principal create a positive school climate, and a family improve their interpersonal relationships.*"

For at-risk students, attitudinal improvements not only reduced attendance risks but also improved students test scores. Principal Bobby Little described this outcome: "*From fall to spring, they (at-risk students) changed their feelings about school, about themselves, about homework, about teachers, about life in general. They [test scores] changed by as much as 50% to 60%.*" Teacher and staff developer Jerry McQueen reported that "*After the second term, overall "at risk" student grade averages, improved one full grade level. At the end of the semester, 20 of the original 150 students had made the honor roll. The True Colors training was the high point of my career as a teacher.*"

Students at all levels reported positive evaluations of the project. Dimensions rated highest by students included emphasis on positive attitudes, the True Colors Program™, and satisfaction with school. Twelve-year-old student Billy Ammerand stated, "*The True Colors Show taught me things about life I never thought about before. It helped a lot of people understand their family and friends better. I'm glad to know about True Colors. It made a big difference in my life.*"

True Colors Communication Tools Improved Relationships and Personal Success

Faculty Relations: Systems of communication and reflective sharing were reported as positive outcomes of True Colors activities, which were viewed as the means for unifying the faculty and helping them to better understand each other. Teacher morale improved as a result of improved understanding of each other. Art teacher Nancy Jones credited the positive effect on her teaching to improvements in self-worth and communication: *“True Colors allowed me to be myself. It made me more relaxed, and I think I did a better job of teaching. I believe it helped the other teachers understand my active way of doing things.”*

Faculty-Student Relations: As connectedness and communication improved, resulting improvements in relationships led to higher levels of personal success. Health Counselor Bob Moore claimed, *“There isn’t anything we’ve done that ’shad as much affect on the whole school as your True Colors Program. I don’t remember anything that’s had faculty and staff involved with the students quite as much either.”* Connectedness also created a supportive atmosphere for making positive choices. Marjorie Pike, Special Assistant to the Commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Education applauded True Colors’ approach: *“Positive peer pressure is the natural result; our thanks to True Colors for the tools, technology and creative expression that have made a difference with Tennessee youth.”*

Networking: Improved networking with schools throughout the state was viewed as a positive outcome. In some cases, schools within districts were brought closer together. Sharing with other professionals and realizing that similar problems existed throughout the state were cited as important features of networking.

Collaborative Cultures: Collaborative cultures in the schools were strengthened through innovative communication strategies, problem-solving activities, and discussions of school-wide issues and concerns. True Colors consensus building during action plans and

school-wide implementation strategies assisted even the most negative faculty in seeing movement so that they became more willing to work on areas needing improvement. According to English and Drama teacher Elizabeth Helton, *“Teachers were coming up with the most incredible ideas for improving the relationship among us as faculty members.”*

Site interviews and assessments at the elementary, middle, junior and senior high school levels included the following outcomes¹

Faculty ratings of the project were most positive in five areas:

1. School-wide awareness
2. Implementation aspects
3. Coordination provided by the site leadership teams
4. Emphasis maintained throughout the school year
5. Staff development activities

Senior high faculties reported the following improvements in school climate:

- Higher levels of school and community involvement
- Greater commitment to achieving school goals
- Students’ increased collaboration in solving school problems
- Increased expectations of students
- School-wide improvements in interpersonal relations
- Students demonstrating more respect for each other
- Use of a greater variety of teaching methods and materials

Student ratings showed substantial improvements were realized relative to six factors:

1. Enhanced self-esteem of students and school employees
2. More positive attitudes, resulting in higher attendance
3. Value placed on diverse teaching and learning styles
4. Improved school-community relations
5. Higher expectations for students

6. Improved collaborative problem solving

High ratings were found at the elementary level for five selected dimensions:

1. School-wide awareness
2. Site coordination
3. Project implementation throughout the school
4. Year-long emphasis
5. Staff development

Administrative ratings of PATS were positive in five areas:

1. Research-based Approach

“I value the fact that a Program that is founded in research can last. Because of True Colors innovative approach to providing schools with research-based information, they now are able to make very important decisions with regard to school improvement based on their own data.”

Sadie Chandler, Director, Teacher Academics
Tennessee Department of Education

2. Decreased Disciplinary Issues

“The teachers who used True Colors had fewer discipline problems because they were meeting the needs of all.”

Counselor

3. Improved Conflict Resolution

“Our goal was to decrease physical conflict in our schools, and we did that significantly, especially by taking True Colors into the “at risk” classes.”

Vivian Cooper
Assistant Principal

4. Family and Community-wide Benefits

“True Colors helped kids to help other kids deal better with their parents, some parents just aren't comfortable saying or expressing their deepest feelings. The True Colors show made it all easier to understand.”

Vince Jewell
Activities Director

“Your True Colors program has been of immense therapeutic benefit to our clients and helpful to the counseling staff as well. I've never seen anything better and couldn't imagine how anything better could be done. I have been with the state for many years, and it is very rewarding to see something that works so well and is so valuable.”

Arthur Hyde, M.S., L.P.C., Director,
Fountainebleau Treatment Center
State of Louisiana Dept. of Health and Hospitals

“We had an excellent turnout for the True Colors show. The parents were thrilled with it; they felt it would help them with their family life. The parents not only understood their children better, but came to understand their children's teachers a lot better as well.”

Judy McGregor
Principal

5. Site Based Management, Employee Relations and Leadership

“True Colors certainly addresses site-based management because it is a vehicle in which you can do team-building, decision making, and the things that are facing schools as they restructure.”

Sadie Chandler, Director, Teacher Academics
Tennessee Department of Education

“Almost all of our superintendents have been trained in True Colors and without fail; everyone has rated it extremely high. It has a lot of possibility for being a national model”

Sadie Chandler, Director, Teacher Academics
Tennessee Department of Education

¹ The results discussion is based on a study conducted by The Center for Research in Educational Policy at The University of Memphis

