



# Paramount Charter Academy in Kalamazoo, MI implements national program aimed at building trust and respect between teachers, students

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**KALAMAZOO** -- Soft, kind voice. Loyalty. No bossing.

A social contract posted in teacher Karen Cleveland's third grade classroom at Paramount Charter Academy lists over a dozen such behavioral guidelines, and its authors -- her students -- have inscribed their signatures with bright markers.

The guidelines apply to teacher and students alike, and Cleveland, for one, is happy to have them.

"I can focus more on you and all the great things you're doing in this classroom, and that's what I like most," Cleveland told her students on a recent afternoon.

Contracts are new to all Paramount classrooms -- as are morning exchanges of firm and friendly handshakes between students and staffers -- following the academy's implementation earlier this month of Capturing Kids' Hearts, a nationwide program designed to build trust and respect in school communities.

Developed by the Flippen Group, a Texas-based educator-training and leadership-development organization, the program employs a roster of tools to bolster relationships.

Specific hand gestures convey sentiments like, "You hurt my feelings," or "Check your behavior," making it easier for children to express themselves and resolve conflicts, said principal Sharon Lockett-Gibson.

Atoning for wrongs with 'put-ups' -- the opposite of 'put-downs' -- is another program basic.

"Prior to this, we had a really solid, well-done discipline program, but this was just that last ingredient we needed to make it even better," Lockett-Gibson said. "The focus is on, 'What are your personal constraints?,' 'How can we help you?'"

Third grader Jonah Stolz said the hand gestures are helpful to silence friends who try to talk to him while a teacher is talking.

"It makes it easier to keep eye contact with the teacher, and can help (friends) know that they need to stop," Stolz said.

Paramount staff trained for three days with a Flippen representative at Western Michigan University's Fetzer Center before launching the program.

"For me, it was a life-altering experience," school paraprofessional Nancy Frost said. "Altering not only (at school), but also at home. This is something we can all use for the rest of our lives," Frost said. "I think we are really raising the standard."

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