

Erie embraces Leader in Me program

By: [Nick Mordowanec](#) | [Fraser - Clinton Township Chronicle](#) | Published April 9, 2018



Sally Al-Gburi, a fifth-grader at Erie Elementary School, spoke at the Leader in Me symposium March 9 at Schoolcraft College in Livonia.

Photo provided by Erie Elementary School



Molly DeBono, a first-grade teacher at Erie, poses with Al-Gburi and Muriel Summers, the principal of the first national Leader in Me school in North Carolina.

Photo provided by Erie Elementary

CLINTON TOWNSHIP — Who knew that seven simple steps could change an entire national culture of education?

Those seven steps are based on Stephen Covey's 1989 self-help book titled "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People" — a best-selling work that has taught tens of millions of people how to manifest progression via independence and interdependence.

The steps are: be proactive; begin with the end in mind; put first things first; think win-win; seek first to understand, then to be understood; synergize; and sharpen the saw.

Covey's popular book later led to "Leader in Me" — an entire school transformation process that takes Covey's seven habits and employs them in a way to promote educational empowerment, leadership and life skills.

Five years ago, Erie Elementary School, of Chippewa Valley Schools, became the first Leader in Me school in Macomb County. Throughout the past three years, the school has had a keynote student speaker at a symposium at Schoolcraft College in Livonia and at Macomb Community College.

Molly DeBono is one of the teachers who has helped push the efforts of the model, which has led to special status in terms of being a Lighthouse School for the past two years. That means seven habits stay in the minds of the students and staff on a year-round basis, due to completion of a two-year training regimen.

"It's a lot of digging deep into ourselves, applying the seven habits to ourselves and looking into ourselves as teachers and leaders and who we want our students to be," DeBono said.

She said the steps increase students' confidence, in turn offering them leadership roles they can feel proud to administer. Every single student has a leadership role, whether it's being a classroom greeter, a door holder, a computer leader or watering plants.

After experiencing the program's benefits for years now, DeBono couldn't imagine Erie being any other way.

"It's our school's way. ... I think it's so important in our society right now, the way schools are going," she said. "It's finding something important in our students and finding something to look forward to. I've seen a change in pride and how they're excited to go to school. It changes who you are."

Jerry Evanski said that when he became Erie's principal 19 years ago, he recalled 10 kids participating on student council. He said it took an inside out process involving adults internalizing the model among themselves, finally formulating that the seven habits are basically soft skills that are now part of society.

"On the surface — and we didn't know this going in — we wanted it to be a character program," Evanski said. "And it really is a whole school culture transformation."

He admitted that kids are more challenging to educate in the present society, so in an effort to not let kids fall back into their old patterns, the entire staff focused on a paradigm shift. As he put it, it's how kids "see the world, how you see the kids."

The school even "advertises" leadership jobs with proper descriptions and applications filled out by students, mirroring the real world. Every few weeks, community circles take place, in which students apply to be announcers and are trained in public speaking. Those same kids then speak in front of 500 or 600 of their peers, giving speeches, teaching lessons or just having simple, yet effective heart-to-heart conversations.

The program required an expensive grant, but Evanski said the school was likely to move forward with the model whether or not the grant was accepted. He said the "new normal is several steps of where we used to be," with issues like loud hallways and student suspensions becoming more of a rarity.

Parents have embraced the program too. Staff members were able to utilize the seven habits to not only change kids in school, but also in their home life. Evanski recalled a student's mother who told him that her son comes home and finishes his homework before entertaining himself — which invokes the third habit, "Put first things first."

"That kind of stuff just didn't happen before," he said. "There was not only not a mechanism or structure for that, but we didn't see that. The paradigm was that there were only a few leaders."

For more information on Leader in Me, visit www.theleaderinme.org.