El Monte school is trying raffles instead of suspensions to improve student behavior

Mountain View School District’s Magnolia Learning Center has never had a mascot – that is, not until Tuesday, when 6th grader Damian Pyle unveiled a mural of a phoenix outside the school. Students voted on the phoenix as the school mascot, and Pyle drew its burgundy and gold likeness.

The mythical symbol of rebirth is an appropriate emblem for the school, which is an alternative education center for at-risk 5th to 8th grade students who are in need of more support than traditional schools can give. Even more fitting is the phoenix’s debut was part of the school’s kick-off event for its Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) program, an initiative promoted by the U.S. Department of Education that trains teachers to rethink student discipline by rewarding good behavior rather than punishing bad behavior.
Students and staff practice stretching during the launch of the Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) program at Magnolia Learning Center in El Monte on Tuesday, Oct. 4, 2016. PBIS is a program aimed at reducing disciplinary actions to students while increasing their academic achievement. (Photo by Watchara Phomicinda, San Gabriel Valley Tribune/ SCNG)

Pyle said that he felt pretty special for having his drawing be the new mascot and that he’s working on “keeping a positive attitude and behavior.”

That’s the idea behind PBIS -- under the program, teachers give students raffle tickets whenever they notice students following behavior expectations, and those tickets are later used for student rewards. At Tuesday’s kick-off, winning students got cups, posters and t-shirts of the San Antonio Spurs’ Kawhi Leonard that the NBA star’s grandmother, Wanda Robertson, brought to the event.

“We don’t want to assume kids are coming to school knowing what the expectations are for how to behave,” Terri Thomas, the center’s administrator, said. “We’re trying to change the culture of the school – cutting down on discipline and working to reinforce good behavior.”

PBIS has become more popular as schools try to cut down on suspensions and expulsions. Research shows that suspensions are not an effective way to deter bad behavior, and they increase the likelihood that a student will drop out of school altogether.

This new understanding of the effects of student discipline is part of the reason why California will now factor in a school’s suspension and expulsion rates in its accountability rating. While the PBIS program has been in California for decades, Los Angeles County didn’t adopt it until the 2014-15 school year. Mountain View School
District, along with 24 other districts, comprised the county’s first cohort using the system.

Data for the center’s suspension and expulsion rates isn’t publicly available, but the district overall has seen a major decline in its suspension rate over the past few years. In the 2011-12 school year, 6.6 percent of Mountain View’s students were suspended. By 2014-15, that rate had dropped to just 2.6 percent.

Teachers began training for the program last year, and one of those teachers, Monica Romero, said she’s already noticing the methods making a difference in her classroom.

“There’s been a very big change in their behavior,” Romero said. “They want to be positive and want to show that good behavior and get those raffle tickets as rewards ... we’re now really starting to see the kids for who they are and the potential they have.”