

*be nice. Phases 1 & 2 Program Evaluation*

*Prepared for the Mental Health Foundation of West Michigan*

*by*

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## Introduction

The Mental Health Foundation (MHF) of West Michigan, under the leadership of Christy Buck, Executive Director, began the *be nice.* program in 2011 as a mental health based response to school bullying incidents and the death of a college student. Since the program's inception and collaborative development in the Grandville Public School System, *be nice.* has been implemented in over 74 West Michigan schools.

When school leaders consider new programs, two of the major criteria include program cost and proven efficacy or evaluative evidence. In west Michigan, local philanthropists have defrayed the cost to area schools by providing a large amount of local funding for *be nice.* starter kits, materials, and school memberships. Despite the local financial support for *be nice.*, the program lacks evidence of efficacy thus not allowing the program to be considered as an option by grant funders.

This evaluation study was designed to gather the evidence for *be nice.* to meet the threshold for designation as an evidence based program. The evaluation study was developed to provide a broad and deep understanding of how *be nice.* works within schools to enhance the efforts of school leaders in developing a positive school climate. Ultimately, this positive school climate provides a tone and atmosphere that does not tolerate bullying and provides an awareness of the mental health aspects of negative social behaviors. In order to accomplish these evaluation goals, the evaluation study was broken into three phases.

- Phase 1. A case study of how the Grandville Public School System worked with the Mental Health Foundation of West Michigan to develop the *be nice.* program.
- Phase 2. An analysis of administrative referral data and interviews with a sample of the 74 schools (45,787 students) that have implemented *be nice.* in the past 5 years.
- Phase 3. A quasi-experimental delayed implementation study of 5 matched pairs of schools.

We chose to employ a mixed research methods approach to provide a broad and deep understanding of the *be nice.* program. *Qualitative* methods included observations and interviews at elementary, middle, and high schools. These interviewees included superintendents, principals and other administrative staff, faculty, students, and parents. *Quantitative* methods included descriptive and inferential analysis of behavioral referral data from the study schools pre- and post- *be nice.* implementation. Study schools were determined by school district leadership with signed data use agreements by school leaders at the district and school level. In an effort to provide the most comprehensive view of the *be nice.* program performance, schools were matched by level (elementary, middle, and high school) from urban and non-urban communities.

## Qualitative Analysis

### Grandville Public School System, the Mental Health Foundation of West Michigan, and *be nice*. Program Development

The existence of the *be nice*. program came from the driving force of Christy Buck who held dual positions as Executive Director of the Mental Health Foundation of West Michigan and school board member of the Grandville Public School System. During the first decade of the 2000s, there were a number of reports of school age children and college students committing suicide due to bullying. As reports of these events grew, Christy Buck was disturbed by them with her tipping point being the suicide of a Rutgers College student. Her reaction to these bullying and suicidal events was that they needed to be addressed and what organization was better suited to do so than the Mental Health Foundation of West Michigan. For several years, the MHF had administered the *Live, Laugh, Love* program that addressed bullying, promoted tolerance, and character development. Using the foundational elements of the *Live, Laugh, Love* program, the MHF worked collaboratively with the Grandville Public School System (GPSS) to develop the *be nice*. program.

In the fall of 2011, the MHF developed the *be nice*. (notice, invite, challenge, and empower) acronym. Later in 2011, the MHF began collaboration with GPSS began when Century Park Elementary requested assistance with a problem of bullying. Grand Valley State University students assisted the MHF by creating a skit that addressed bullying for Century Park Elementary School. The success of this interaction resulted in development of additional events during the following school year with Grandville Middle School, Grandville High School, and other GPSS elementary schools. Throughout the development of these events, the MHF worked closely with GPSS leaders to develop events within the *be nice*. framework appropriate for their schools. By 2013, the success of these events caused the MHF to commit funds for a publisher and book development of the *be nice*. program. By 2014, starter kits were ready and provided to west Michigan schools as they launched the *be nice*. program.

## Observations

Every school openly displayed *be nice*. materials throughout the school. In several schools, students, faculty, and administrative staff wore *be nice*. t-shirts, bracelets, and displayed other *be nice*. support materials. Administrator-student, faculty-student, and student-student interactions were observed with all demonstrating *be nice*. -centric behaviors in all areas of the school. Assemblies were also observed and while generally positive, were of varying quality of depth, development, and organization. One effective assembly included: active administrator, faculty, and student participation; family attendance; was well organized to the level of choreography; included student *be nice*. award presentations, skit, and frequent pictures by family members. Less effective assemblies were: loosely organized; had less individual student acknowledgment; and fewer family members present.

## Interviews

Interviews were conducted at 44 schools and with 157 individuals (table 1 – appendix) over a 5-month period from February 2017 to May, 2017. Prior to conducting the interviews, an interview guide was developed with 6 core questions. These questions included the following:

- What *circumstances* lead to the implementation of *be nice*?
- What was the interviewee's *experience* with the *be nice* program?
- What *benefits* did the school gain from the *be nice* program?
- Did *be nice* address *original concern(s)*?
- What *recommendations* do you have for the *be nice* program?
- Should the school *continue* using the *be nice* program?

The language in all questions was adjusted appropriately for interviewee's age. Additional probing questions were developed during interviews to gain a deeper insight into interviewee responses.

## Interview summary.

### Circumstances

- Tragic event recognized by everybody and was an effective rallying point
- Anti-bullying or mental health needed to be addressed (all levels)
- All want a positive school environment where kids are safe and have resources to address psychological concern(s)
- All want an environment where students are able to thrive

### Experience

- All find value in having a common language and actions that provide direction for what to do to become a problem solver
- An environment intolerant of negative behaviors stated as "we don't do that here"
- Most school districts acknowledged a major community personality driving the use of *be nice* who is also frequently associated with program funding
- Positive responses were correlated with participatory implementation and interviewee enthusiasm
- Unfavorable responses correlated with heavily influenced power behind implementation and narcissists who belittle the program

### Benefits

- Transformational leadership style resulted in quicker implementation, greater acceptance, and behavioral changes leading to quicker enculturation
- **Stars of the benefits are the children who, as a group, embrace the change**
- The *be nice* acronym provides a common language
- Provides the tools that builds confidence to speak up to bullies
- Provides the tools that builds confidence to intervene with mental health issues
- Whole district implementation results in enthusiasm and parents understanding how the program benefits children regardless of age

- A method of teaching children how to be confident and respectful of others – citizenship education and life skills
- Works well as a stand-alone program or in conjunction with other character based programs

#### Continue Using *be nice*.

- All respondents, enthusiastic or not, responded yes
- All would like to see *be nice*. grow in depth

#### Interview Quotes

- *High School Referral Student*. I have seen people reach out and help. I would reach out now if I saw someone being bullied, I would stop it. I used to not treat people very well. I was changed by the facts on bullying on the *be nice*. posters (suicide statistics on bullying) and reinforced it for me to *be nice*. to others.
- *7th Grade Student*. I don't see the fist fights and bullying like I used to. A few kids seem to be going down the wrong road. I try to make them feel wanted and valued. I have seen them change their attitudes. I never see fights any more.
- *Elementary Student*. More people are using the buddy bench on the playground. The new people are being played with; we help them fit in. Some of the kids who have anger issues have learned to be better but still need help. The *be nice*. program helps the good kids be even better; it helps them to notice people.
- *Elementary Principal*. *be nice*. ties into our character education program. They work together well. It allows the kids that make poor choices to be recognized for the opportunity to do something good. We are changing the climate here to recognize something good for all the students.
- *K-8 Administrator*. The lower elementary assembly is the most difficult because the students are young and the material is hard for them to relate to at the assembly. The *be nice*. assembly goes well for parents and for the middle school students.
- *Elementary Teacher*. I love the fact that we implement *be nice*. throughout the year. You can make it a natural thing to build community in the classroom. The teachers took the general ideas and made it their own.
- *Elementary Parent*. I have seen the carryover from the *be nice*. program at home. The kids know what *be nice*. stands for. It helps the kids to understand that it is okay at our school to help other kids and to give encouragement. Last night, I saw the commercial for the *be nice*. program on TV.

## Recommendations

- MHF provided support
  - Faculty training on use of *be nice.* program instructional and support materials
  - Resources such as starter kit, portal, website, personal consultation
  - Sustainability through periodic assemblies, leadership consultation, and updated faculty professional development
- Materials development
  - Include grade appropriate teachers in materials development
  - Increased depth and breadth of grade level specific materials
  - Professional guidance on how to integrate *be nice.* materials into classroom instruction
  - Parental support and home use materials
- Increased portal development
  - Online development, instructional, and support materials
  - Password protected access for all faculty
- Continued development and stabilization of school assemblies and events
  - By grade level such as lower elementary, upper elementary, middle school, and high school
  - Start up or kick off for program initiation
  - Regularly scheduled thematic assemblies or events
  - Restart or refresh following a period of inactivity
- Social media development
  - Facebook for parental communication and periodic updates
  - School web pages for general and parental program information
  - Regular parent electronic communication on program events and activities

**Quantitative Analysis**

Quantitative analytic techniques included:

Analytic Test	Test Description
Descriptive statistics	Measures of central tendency & frequency of occurrence
Crosstabulations	
Cohorts / Behavioral Referral Types	Compared grade cohorts with behavioral referrals for correlation and statistical significant changes
Grade Level / Behavioral Referral Types	Compared grade levels with behavioral referrals for correlation and statistical significant changes
School Year / Behavioral Referral Types	Compared school year with behavioral referrals for correlation and statistical significant changes
Oneway ANOVA	Compared the differences within and among behavioral referral types for statistically significant changes
Logistic Regressions	Modeled demographic variables by total inappropriate behaviors for statistical significance

*Descriptive Statistics*

Descriptive statistics were used to numerically describe central tendency and frequency of negative behavioral occurrences. Schools varied in the descriptive detail of how they reported behavioral referrals. For the schools that provided behavioral details, disruptive behaviors were the most common at approximately 60 percent. Bullying was one of the more frequently reported negative behaviors but only at approximately 13 percent.

*Crosstabulations*

Crosstabulations compared grade cohorts, grade levels, and school year to behavioral referrals. Cohorts were established as lower elementary (grades K-3), upper elementary (grades 4-6), middle school (grades 7-8), lower classmen (grades 9-10), and upper classmen (grades 11-12). Statistical significance was tested by Pearson’s Chi-Square and correlation (nominal-to-nominal) was tested by Cramer’s V.

*Cohorts / Behavioral Referral Type*

Significant cohort / behavioral referral type crosstabulation findings included notes home to parents for elementary students (Pearson’s Chi-Square = 0.026 and Cramer’s V = 0.026). At the middle school level, significant crosstabulation findings included electronic

devices (Pearson's Chi-Square = 0.028 and Cramer's V = 0.028) and other negative behaviors (Pearson's Chi-Square = 0.000 and Cramer's V = 0.000). The only significant finding at the high school was bullying (Pearson's Chi-Square = 0.031 and Cramer's V = 0.031). All other crosstabulation pairs tested insignificant for statistical significance and correlation.

#### *Grade Level / Behavioral Referral Types*

There were no significant findings for grade level / behavioral referral type crosstabulation findings for elementary students although physically aggressive behaviors was close (Pearson's Chi-Square = 0.065 and Cramer's V = 0.065). There were no significant findings at the middle school level. The high school had several significant findings: disruptive behaviors (Pearson's Chi-Square = 0.000 and Cramer's V = 0.000), insubordination (Pearson's Chi-Square = 0.047 and Cramer's V = 0.047), tardy (Pearson's Chi-Square = 0.000 and Cramer's V = 0.000), bullying (Pearson's Chi-Square = 0.000 and Cramer's V = 0.000), aggressive behaviors (Pearson's Chi-Square = 0.002 and Cramer's V = 0.002), disruptive (Pearson's Chi-Square = 0.007 and Cramer's V = 0.007), and other behaviors (Pearson's Chi-Square = 0.000 and Cramer's V = 0.000). All other crosstabulation pairs tested insignificant for statistical significance and correlation.

#### *School Year / Behavioral Referral Types*

There were no significant findings for school year / behavioral referral type crosstabulation findings for elementary students. At the middle school level, the only positive finding was other behaviors (Pearson's Chi-Square = 0.046 and Cramer's V = 0.046) with tardy close (Pearson's Chi-Square = 0.063 and Cramer's V = 0.063). The only significant high school finding was language (Pearson's Chi-Square = 0.051 and Cramer's V = 0.051). All other crosstabulation pairs tested insignificant for statistical significance and correlation.

#### *Oneway ANOVA*

Oneway analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to compare the differences within and among behavioral referral types for statistically significant changes. The elementary and high school levels demonstrated no significant findings. Whereas, the middle school significant findings include disruption (0.002), tardy (0.000), electronic devices (0.000), and other behaviors (0.002). Aggressive behaviors finding was close but not significant (0.0074).

#### *Logistic Regressions*

Logistic (categorical) regression was used to model demographic variables by total inappropriate behaviors for statistical significance. The models tested insignificant at the elementary level (0.117) and middle school (0.621); however, in both settings, variables and Wald statistics were significant (0.000). The high school model was significant (0.000) with all variables and Wald statistics significant (ranging from 0.042 - 0.000).

## Statistical Data Summary

The above statistical analysis reflects detailed data from these stable school environments. These stable environments demonstrate statistically significant negative behaviors that are reflective of student age and maturation. Disruptive behaviors category was the most commonly cited negative behavior at 60%. Bullying, while a frequently cited negative behavior, was only cited 13% of the time - a much lower frequency than anticipated.

For cohorts, the statistically significant behaviors seemed to be age appropriate with notes going home to elementary parents for disruptive behaviors (0.026), inappropriate use of electronic devices by middle schoolers (0.028), and bullying for high schoolers (0.031). Grade levels demonstrated differences in negative behaviors that seemed grade level appropriate and are best demonstrated in the graphs in the next section. School year provided limited insight with no variables testing significant at the elementary level, the nonspecific other category was significant for middle school (0.046), and language was the only significant negative behavior for high school (0.051).

The one-way ANOVA found no significant findings for elementary and high school. However, there were several significant findings for middle school that all seemed age appropriate and include: disruptive behaviors (0.002), tardy (0.000), electronic devices (0.000), and other disruptive behaviors (0.002).

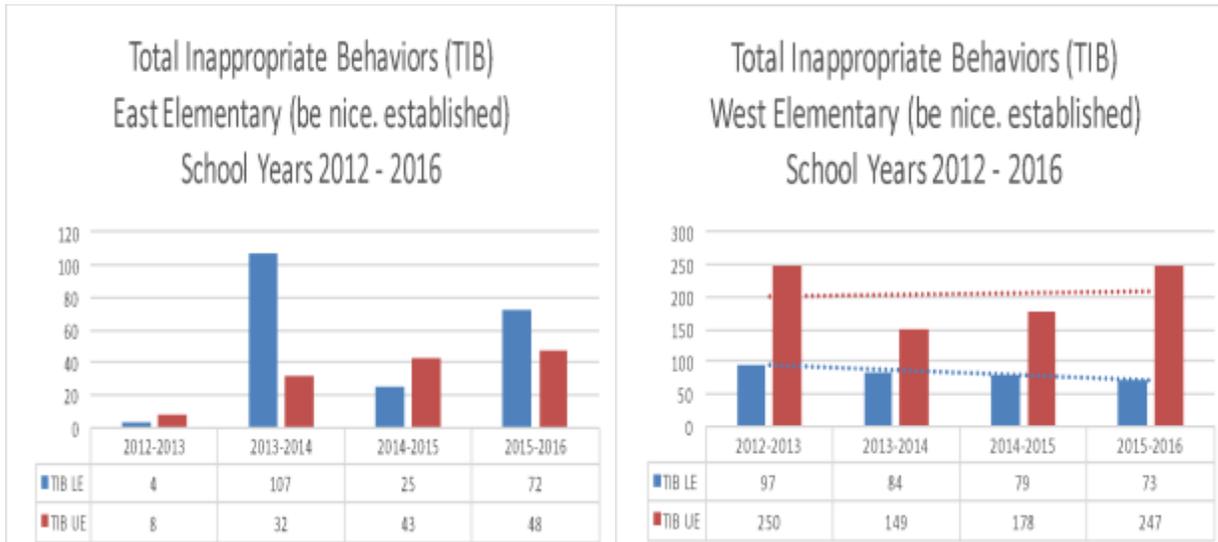
The logistic regression models for the elementary and middle schools were not significant (elementary 0.117 and middle school 0.621). This type of result suggests the model could become significant with further development. The model was found to be significant in high school (0.000) with all variables testing as significant (Wald statistics ranging from 0.042 - 0.000). This result suggests that the model is fully developed at the high school level.

### *Selected Descriptive Graphical Changes in Total Inappropriate Behaviors*

In order to facilitate the comparison of schools regardless of reporting mechanisms, all behavioral data was summed per school into a new variable - total inappropriate behaviors. These graphic displays allow for a visual comparison of multiple years of totaled data that demonstrate both changing and stable school environments.

Figures 1 and 2 provide a graphical presentation of total inappropriate behaviors (TIB) for East and West Elementary Schools of the Grandville Public School System (GVPS). These data were divided between lower elementary grades and upper elementary grades over the years of 2012 - 2016. Both of these graphics demonstrate a relatively stable school environment.

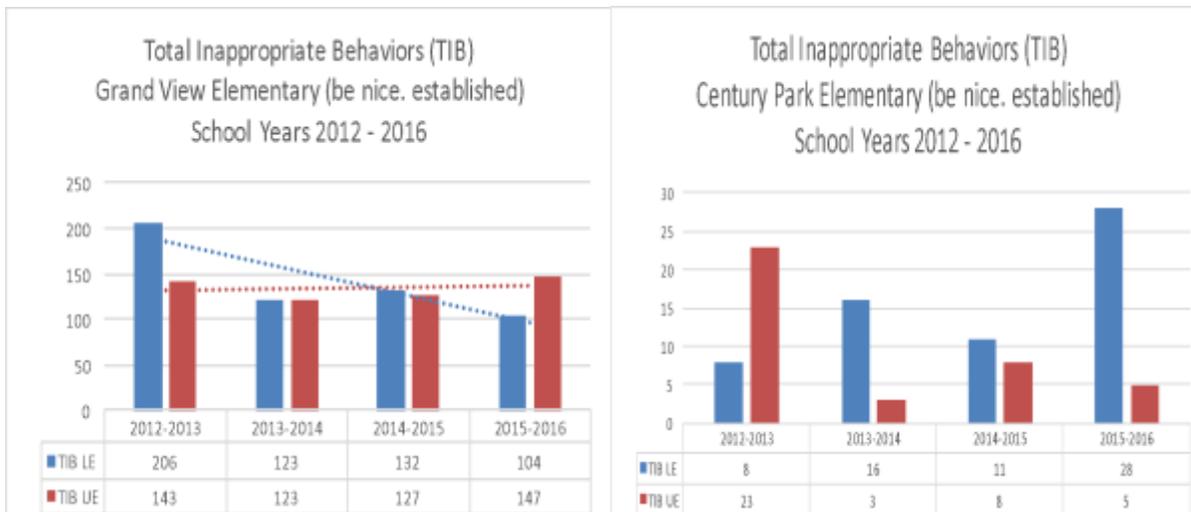
Figures 1 & 2  
TIB East & West Elementary Schools



Source: GVPS Behavioral Referral Data Report from Office of GVPS Assistant Superintendent

Figures 3 and 4 provide a graphical presentation of total inappropriate behaviors (TIB) for Grand View and Century Park Elementary Schools of the Grandville Public School System (GVPS). These data were divided between lower elementary grades and upper elementary grades over the years of 2012 - 2016. Both of these graphics demonstrate a very stable school environment partially due to long tenure of school administrators.

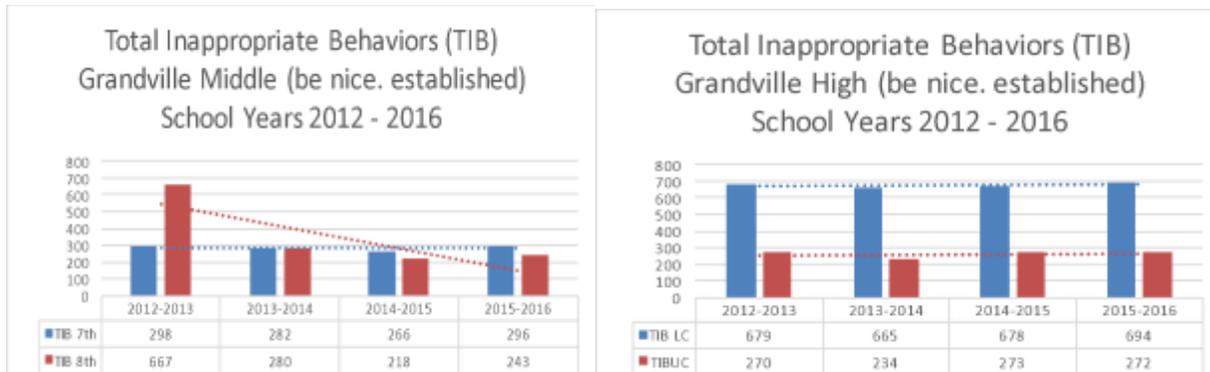
Figures 3 & 4  
TIB Grand View & Century Park Elementary Schools



Source: GVPS Behavioral Referral Data Report from Office of GVPS Assistant Superintendent

Figures 5 and 6 provide a graphical presentation of total inappropriate behaviors (TIB) for Grandville Middle and Grandville High Schools of the Grandville Public School System (GVPS). These data were divided between 7th and 8th grade for the middle school and lower classmen (grades 9-10) and upper classmen (grades 11-12) for the high school over the years of 2012 - 2016. Both of these graphics demonstrate a very stable school environment partially due to tenure of school administrators.

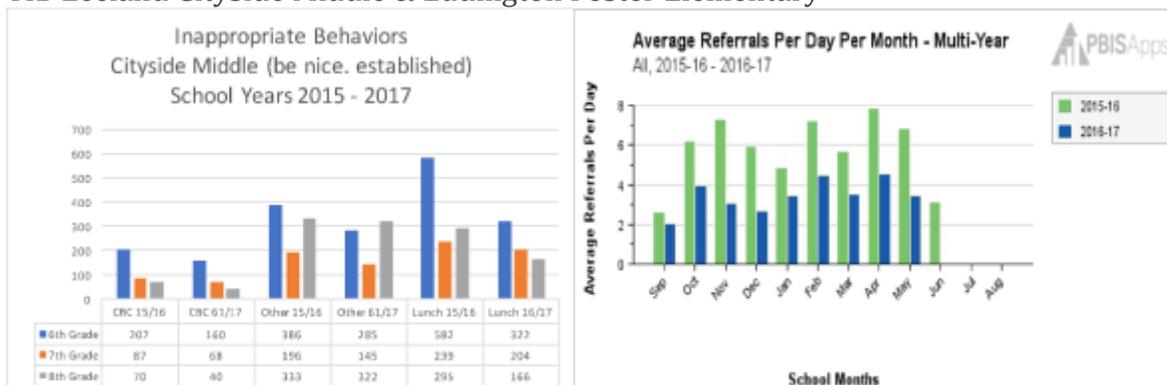
Figures 5 & 6  
TIB Grandville Middle & Grandville High Schools



Source: GVPS Behavioral Referral Data Report from Office of GVPS Assistant Superintendent

Figures 7 and 8 provide a graphical presentation of total inappropriate behaviors (TIB) for Zeeland Cityside Middle & Ludington Foster Elementary. Cityside Middle data was divided by grade (6th, 7th, & 8th) and by three categories of negative behavior over the years of 2015 to 2017. This school developed a *be nice.*-like program that had been in place four years prior to the district wide implementation of *be nice.* in 2016. Despite the positive effects of the previous program, the implementation of *be nice.* resulted in a statistically significant decrease (0.000) in negative behaviors. In Ludington, the district had previously implemented PBIS (Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports). These data demonstrate a statistically significant decrease (0.000) in negative behavior one-year after implementation of the *be nice.* program.

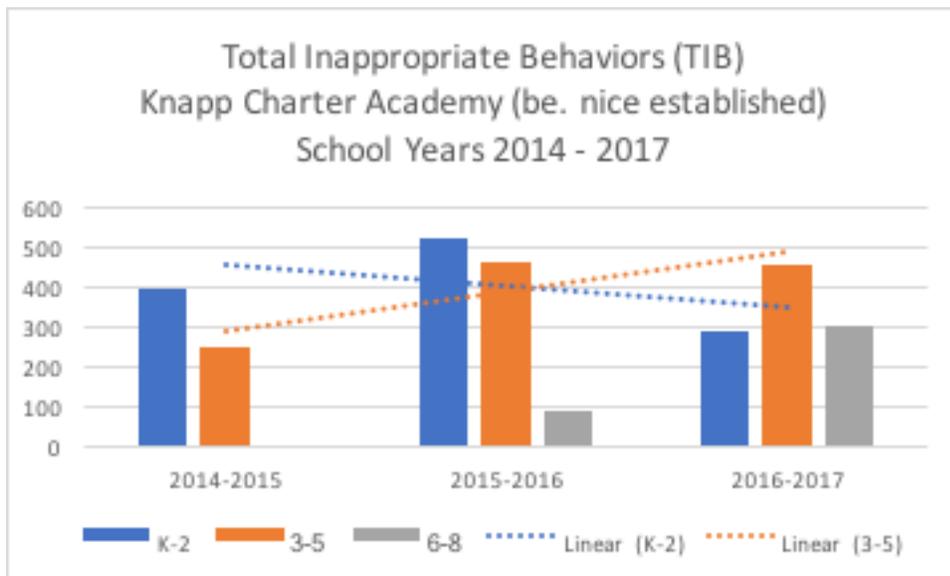
Figures 7 & 8  
TIB Zeeland Cityside Middle & Ludington Foster Elementary



Source: Zeeland Cityside Middle & Ludington Foster Elementary School Administrators

Figure 9 provides a graphical presentation of total inappropriate behaviors (TIB) for Knapp Charter Academy of Grand Rapids, Michigan. These data were divided among grades K-2, 3-5, and 6-8 over the years of 2014 - 2017. This graphic demonstrates a very stable school environment partially due to long tenure of the school administrator.

Figure 9  
Knapp Charter Academy



Source: Knapp Charter Academy Administrator

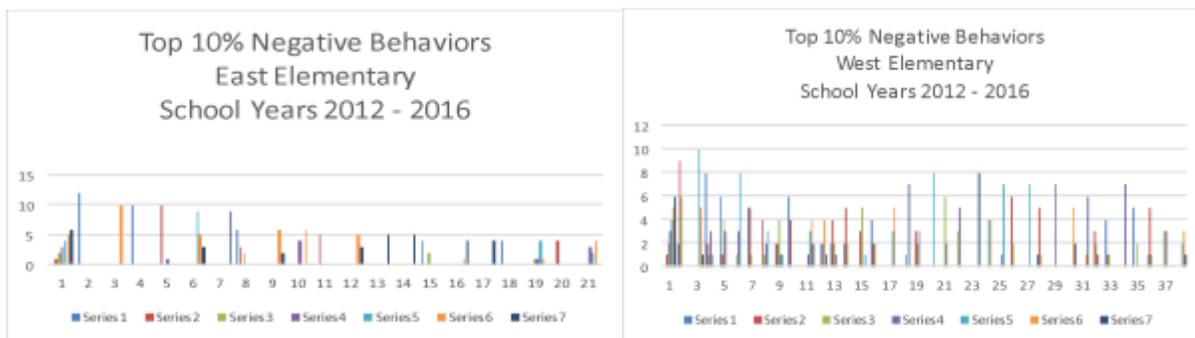
*Does the be nice. program provide the tools to facilitate the development and stabilization of a positive school environment?*

From a social science lens, stability of an environment allows for a neutral setting to test behavioral change effects. The Grandville Public School District provides such an environment following the implementation of *be nice.* in 2011. Graphical displays (figures 1 - 6) demonstrate essentially no change in behavioral referrals over the past four school years. When a logistic regression was performed with total inappropriate behaviors as the dependent and the demographics of cohort, grade levels, and school year as the dependent variables the resultant p-value = 1 indicating absolutely no change from year-to-year and an pseudo-R-squared (Nagelkerke) of 0.978 that predicts the likelihood of a perfect model at 1. Additionally, the parameter estimates yielded a Wald statistic of 0.000 indicating stability of the categories. When logistic regression was performed on the models for the elementary and middle schools within this system, the statistical results (p-value and R-squared) were similar. Thus, these statistical tests demonstrate the post-*be nice.* implementation stability of the environment in the Grandville Public School System.

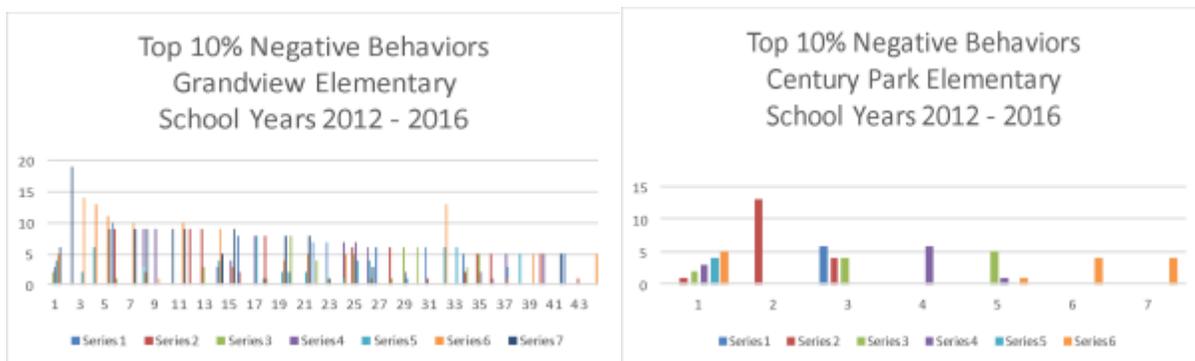
This stable environment provides the perfect environment for a natural experiment on the behavioral change effects of *be nice.* During the interviews, one of the concluding questions was, “Does *be nice.* help good kids get better, fence straddler kids improve, or bad

kids reform?" The consensus of the interviewees was (1) *be nice.* gives good kids the tools to be better, (2) fence straddler kids improve, and (3) has no effect on the bad kids. In order to test this response, we took the top 10 percent of behavioral referrals for each of the school years and mapped them per student over the 4 years of data. If the assertion of *be nice.* having no effect on bad kids is true, we anticipated seeing several years of data with similar repeated numbers of behavioral referrals. Once all of these data were mapped in a tabular format, graphs were produced using stacked columns with the expectation of finding equal bands of colors representing equal numbers of behavioral referrals per year (figures 10 - 15). What we found, were isolated single spikes of behavioral referrals that were either progressive with the spike year was 2 - 3 times higher than the closest progressive year or spikes that occurred without a previous record of behavioral referrals. The negative behaviors then subsequently were minimal to absent in the following years. Our interpretation of this phenomenon is that these students had isolated spike years of behavioral referrals that were not tolerated in the *be nice.* influenced environment. Or, that *be nice.* can help bad kids get better because that negative behavior "is not tolerated here".

Figures 10 & 11  
East & West Elementary Schools

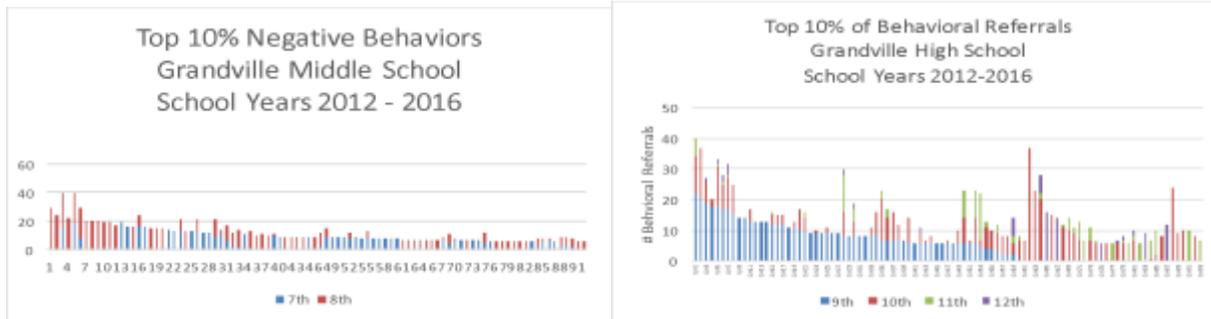


Figures 12 & 13  
Grand View & Century Park Elementary Schools



Figures 14 & 15

Grandville Middle & Grandville High Schools



*Mental Health Foundation Actions*

The research team held regular meetings with the Mental Health Foundation executive director, board representative, and staff to make them aware of concurrent evaluation findings. As a result of these meetings, the Mental Health Foundation began developing programmatic responses that include:

- Creation of the *be nice.* institute
  - Trainings offered in each county for schools interested in becoming a chapter and schools who are already a chapter which include:
    - Comprehensive information on how to launch and sustain *be nice.* in schools and their community
    - How to use the portal
    - Countywide school summit
    - Occurs bi-annually for schools who sign up in the fall or spring
- Remodeling portal and website
  - Easier to use and navigate
  - More accessibility for entire staff
  - Effective space for schools to:
    - Share ideas
    - Ask questions to encourage depth in information available
- Program Sustainability
  - Scheduled consistent communications with current *be nice.* liaisons through constant contact
  - Monthly newsletters to schools and liaisons
  - Offer institutes and other trainings via webinar regarding:
    - Assemblies
    - How to use social media
    - Integrating classroom materials

### *Conclusion*

The *be nice.* program is a new option for schools to consider when considering character based training. Our evaluation of its first 5 years of existence finds it to be an effective program for schools to use as a means of addressing negative behaviors and developing a positive school climate that does not tolerate negative behaviors. Even in the most stable school environments, negative behaviors occur. In schools where *be nice.* has been implemented, the administrators, faculty, and students are provided with training and tools built on the *be nice.* language (*notices, invites, challenges, and empowers*) that results in a positive climate where everyone can confidently confront negative behaviors.

Additional programmatic advantages *be nice.* brings include:

- Fits well with other character-based programs
- Provides an opportunity for student leadership development
- Flexible in development from system to school and works in grades K - 12
- Flows from anti-bullying program at the elementary level to mental awareness in high school
- Elemental in developing a positive culture and climate with an emphasis on compassion, understanding, and awareness among students.

The Mental Health Foundation has recognized the need to further develop of the *be nice.* program through:

- Increased training through the *be nice.* institute and staff support
- Online curriculum development
- Portal support for teachers and administrators
- Web site and social media support for parents.

In summary, phases 1 and 2 find the *be nice.* program effective in addressing negative behaviors, developing a positive school climate, and increasing mental health awareness. Quantitative and qualitative evaluation research analysis confirms the efficacy of the *be nice.* program. As noted above, further programmatic development is necessary to sustain the continued use of *be nice.* through school districts that the MHF has begun to address. Phase 3 of this evaluation will address the implementation of *be nice.* through a quasi-experimental delayed implementation study of 5 matched pairs of schools.

Appendix  
Table 1

<b>High School</b>	<b>Interviews</b>	<b>Interviewees</b>
Administrator	3	6
Faculty	3	10
Parents	2	4
Students - be nice. committee members	3	14
Students - not be nice. committee members	3	6
<b>Middle School</b>		
Administrator	2	3
Faculty	1	5
Parents	2	6
Students - be nice. committee members	4	13
Students - not be nice. committee members	1	4
<b>Elementary</b>		
Administrator	10	11
Faculty	9	20
Parents	9	17
Students	9	28
<b>Superintendent</b>	2	3
<b>Mental Health Foundation</b>	1	7
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>157</b>