



## Teaching peace through PAX

[Steven Coburn-Griffis](#), DHI Correspondent

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FORT JENNINGS, Ohio — There's something different about the elementary school in Fort Jennings. Not that it was ever a hotbed of misbehavior, a primary for hooliganism, but it is, these days, quieter and more orderly than usual.

In the hallways, most students are on their best behavior. In many classrooms, there is peace; deliberate and voluntary. Or, more appropriately, there is PAX, the Latin for peace. It is all a part of and resulting from an increasingly recognized behavior modification exercise embraced by teachers and popular with the kids: the PAX Good Behavior Game.

Simply put, PAX is an interesting mix of psychology and silliness that challenges students from preschool through sixth grade to perform at a socially advanced level as individuals, in teams and as an entire class. Implementing a simple rewards-based system, PAX encourages students to behave appropriately.

"It's actually one step beyond classroom management," explained Dr. Jan Osborn, superintendent of the Putnam County Educational Service Center. "We know that the prefrontal lobe develops later in children and that one of the things that we have to do to help them develop their brain is learn how to make good decisions. And so (PAX) works with executive function, behavior inhibition and it helps kids learn how to make better decisions that carries on with them as adults."

But, while crucial, the science of PAX, the psychology, is just one small part of an overall whole that is winning over educators internationally.

"I was skeptical," confessed Melissa Sukup, a fifth- and sixth-grade teacher at Jennings. "I can't imagine *not* doing it now. I even had a student's mom text me and ask, 'What's this Pax. He won't shut up about this PAX.'"

"A lot of people are skeptical; you're walking around with a harmonica around your neck," concurred Stacy Vaske, a second-grade teacher at Jennings who was trained in the system and implemented it late last school year.

And that harmonica, as a symbol, is key to and indicative of why PAX is gaining in popularity. At the heart of the program's appeal is an intrinsic desire to cause no harm, to support and nurture self-confidence and to significantly reduce, if not eliminate, any perceived need for negative reinforcement techniques. To accomplish this, the program is unabashedly silly, going so far as to establish a whole new vocabulary of nonsensical words, with "spleem" and "tootle" at the top of the list. And, of course, the use of the aforementioned harmonica. "The instant I introduced it last year, from day one, my kids loved it," Vaske said. "It's like a switch. It turns on almost automatically."

In the parlance of PAX, spleems are behaviors deemed inappropriate, most of which fall into a category of behaviors typical of school-aged children: fidgeting, standing, talking without permission, touching, tapping, inattention and more. While a behavior that the program is designed to correct, the non-word "spleem" was intentionally designed to avoid negativity — the long "e" sound requires the use of the same muscles we all use to smile.

As for tootles? Tootles are the antithesis of "tattles." Rather than establish an environment in which students alienate one another, tootles are compliments intended to bolster self-confidence. At the beginning of every week in Vaske's class, each kid is provided with the name of a fellow student and encouraged to write that student a complimentary note. Each is also permitted to write a second tootle to the child of their choice. Both are then placed on a billboard for all to see. When the board fills, the students take their tootles home.

And the harmonica? The harmonica is the tool with which teachers garner the attention of their pupils. When it is blown, all students are taught to stop whatever they're doing, look toward the sound and raise their right hands in the air, the first two fingers splayed in the universal gesture of peace. As with the words tootle and spleem, the harmonica was chosen to help avoid any negative connotations.

"If you have a child who was abused in any sort of way," Vaske explained, "if you clap, if you whistle, if you turn the lights off, that could spark a bad emotion. This is just a calming sound."

Periodically, provided spleems are kept to a minimum, and the kids are generous with their tootles, there are rewards. Not candy. Not toys. Not even gold stars. What the kids receive, what they're working diligently for, is the opportunity to act out in the form of Granny's Whacky Prizes. When the students perform at a level where Granny gets Whacky, a student draws a slip of paper from a bag of similar slips. Written on it is something along the lines of "Sing a song like a dog or cat," or "Sit under your desk" or even "Snowball fight." Along with the action is a recommended duration, the amount of time the kids are permitted to do whatever the slip says; typically less than one minute.

For the teachers, the reward received is even more impressive: a more effective environment in which to teach.

"There's less repetition," Sukup said. "Once you blow that harmonica and tell them what they're going to do, they're paying attention. Whereas before, when you didn't have that harmonica as a clue, you probably had 50 percent paying attention while you're explaining. Now you have at least 95 percent, I would say, knowing what's going on. I just feel like there's so much more instruction time."



Stacy Vaske's second-grade class at FJES (including Vaske herself) throw paper airplanes around the room, a reward for maintaining their composure in keeping with the PAX Good Behavior Game. (DHI Media/Steven Coburn-Griffis)

# Long-term peace, health and joy is

*A new classroom game from the US is helping Irish teachers to regulate pupils' behaviour and create an ideal learning space in schools, says Arlene Harris*

**'HERE'S WHAT I THINK'**



**A**LL of us are familiar with the archaic teaching method which refers to 'sparing the rod and spoiling the child'. Thankfully, those days are well behind us, but while the current style of education doesn't involve physical punishment, most teachers will discipline their class verbally in order to keep things running smoothly.

But Dr Denis Embry (pictured below) has undertaken a revival of an old classroom 'game' first devised in the 1960s. It is taking the US by storm and has recently been implemented in several Irish schools.



"The 'Good Behaviour Game', as it used to be called, was established in 1967 and involved helping children to regulate their behaviour by trying to create the ultimate classroom environment," Dr Embry explains.

"It is a very kid-friendly idea which firstly encourages the vision of what a great school would be like to each child. This doesn't involve teachers telling them what they should be doing or thinking, but rather what they see themselves as the 'perfect' classroom or school.

"Positive elements or actions are referred to as PAX and this doesn't just mean 'peace' but the children are taught that PAX refers to peace, productivity, health and happiness — and very quickly, they begin to recognise what makes something a PAX and also what they can do to create this themselves."

Once the children have established what a PAX is, they then learn to recognise the opposite, which are referred

to as 'spleems'.

"A spleem is something which negatively impacts the environment or a child's learning capacity," says Dr Embry. "So if a child is staring out the window instead of looking at his book, that is a spleem.

"Another example would be if someone wasn't being kind and caring to their fellow classmates or disrupting the lesson. Again, after a very short time, children begin to recognise what a spleem is and they can begin to play the game.

"This is started initially with a very short session where children are divided into groups and must work together to try not to gather many spleems.

"The teacher will blow a harmonica and set a timer to start the game and will then award PAX or spleems accordingly to groups.

"Once the short game is over, each group who had three or fewer spleems get a reward (and this is almost always every team as each spleem is usually followed rapidly by a PAX)."

## PRODUCTIVITY

These are no ordinary rewards either as they simply involve doing something which is normally banned in the classroom.

"The rewards are referred to as Granny's Whacky Prizes and comprise of little out-of-the-ordinary actions like being allowed to sit on the desk for 20 seconds or roll on the floor for 30.

"They all involve the kids getting out of their seats and there is usually a whole lot of giggling going on (both from the children and the teacher) before normal lessons begin again.

"As the children get used to the game, the length increases and because the teacher is not spending time telling them off for misdemeanours (she uses the harmonica

to signal spleem which is awarded to a team rather than an individual child), the day is a lot more productive and the atmosphere is much more positive."

Dr Embry, who founded the PAXIS Institute in the US, is senior scientist and a co-investigator at Johns Hopkins Center for Prevention and Early Intervention.

He says research has shown the PAX method vastly improves children's behaviour as well as various mental, emotional and behavioural disorders.

"Evidence-based research has shown that PAX reduces children's off-task behaviours by 43pc and transforms the classroom for both children and teachers," he says.

"It has also shown to significantly reduce mental and emotional issues, with pilot schemes in the US revealing large numbers of children with serious or moderate behavioural issues going down to normal within 12 weeks.

"It is a very simple approach which doesn't require therapy or medication and is showing hugely positive results. It is a system which has been around for decades and we are only just coming back to it — in fact, when I talk to indigenous people about this method, they listen carefully and then inform me that this is very similar to the way they have always brought up their kids.

"There is a growing interest in this globally and I have found people in Ireland to be very responsive to it, so I do hope it can eventually become a regular part of the school routine."

According to Noel Kelly of PAX Ireland, the cost of PAX training works out at approximately €1,200 per teacher to include three days training, materials (each teacher gets a PAX pack with everything they need costs \$300 plus Vat) and coaching supports (a coach visits each classroom four or five times in the 12-

week period after training).

For a class of 25 children, the cost works out at €48 per child, however, as the teacher will continue to roll PAX out in subsequent years, the cost reduces after five years less than €10 per child, and after 20 years, less than €2.50 per child.

These costs are based on bringing US trainers to Ireland: when Ireland develops its own Irish trainers and move to scale, it is expected that costs will be reduced by at least 50pc per teacher.

For more information on PAX, visit [www.paxireland.ie](http://www.paxireland.ie) and [www.paxis.org](http://www.paxis.org)

## Dublin schools

DENISE Carter is a second class teacher in Our Lady Immaculate Junior School in Darndale. She started the PAX programme with her current pupils last year when they were in first class and while she admits to being sceptical at first, is now fully behind the method.

"I went to a three-day training course last January (when PAX was first introduced to Ireland)," she says. "I have to say, the training was brilliant. I was quite cynical prior to it as, in a DEIS school, you can often feel inundated with new programmes. But after the course was over, I left feeling really motivated and couldn't wait to start the programme with the

children.

"PAX is a programme which helps children to self-regulate themselves and their behaviour and it also promotes better mindfulness and wellbeing. The steps for introducing it to the children were very simple and easy to follow and there was no additional preparation or resources needed.

"I started off by getting the children to create vision of what a perfect class would be like (this is PAX) and got them to tell me what things we don't like to hear, see, say or feel (these are spleems) — the harmonica, timer and PAX 'voices' (the manner in which we communicate) are also introduced during this time. "It was all very

# productivity, child's play



Teacher Denise Carter with her pupils at Our Lady Immaculate JNS in Darndale, who are taking part in the PAX programme

## The benefits of PAX

Following training with Dr Embry in January 2015, teachers in Ireland who participated in the programme reported the following results:

- An average reduction of 43pc in off-task behaviours across the 21 classrooms
- Highly significant reductions in the incidence of hyperactivity
- Highly significant reduction in emotional symptoms
- Highly significant increase in pro-social behaviours
- Highly significant reduction in total problem scores
- Almost one-third of the children reported by teachers as displaying challenging behaviours at the start of the study were reported as showing behaviour within normal ranges.

## reap the rewards of PAX

straightforward and by week three, we were playing the game during normal lessons and the time extended all the time so by the end of the year, we were doing it for 17 minutes and longer."

Since introducing the programme, the Dublin teacher has become a big fan and says it really helped to transform the way her pupils behaved in class.

"The game has worked wonders for my class as they were quite challenging and had various needs," she says.

"But the response to PAX was immediate. The children were eating out of my hand when playing the game.

"The minute the timer started, they became focused and on task. And children

who had difficulties working independently or even getting started on a task were now working away with little input needed from me.

"I was no longer wasting time on trying to resolve conflict because I could simply say spleen and the children knew it was an unwanted behaviour.

"They were all on board with the programme from day one and as soon as we were back in September, they were asking to play the game. They are definitely kinder and more respectful to each other.

"So I would say the programme is brilliant and it works. I think it should be widespread as the research shows the benefits are long-

term. It's very suited to six and seven-year-olds, but could definitely be adapted for older children. I can't really ever see myself not using the programme as it makes my life so much easier and definitely less stressful in the classroom."

The programme was introduced to Ireland in January 2015 and Noel Kelly of PAX Ireland says research has shown that PAX does work.

Over a 12-week period, the feedback from schools was very encouraging and he is hopeful it will become widespread in years to come.

"Research following children who participated into their 30s has shown multiple benefits, including reduced suicidality, reduced mental

illness, higher education qualifications, less drug use and smoking," he says.

"In our 12-week study, we saw significant reductions in hyperactivity, significant reductions in number of children displaying social and emotional needs and increased pro-social behaviours.

"The ability to self-regulate reduces impulsive inappropriate behaviours which mean children make more friends and are happier.

"It can be used for three to 18-year-olds, however, it needs to be modified to be age-appropriate. It is being implemented in senior infant to third classes in Ireland and plan is to move to older classes in next few years."

# THE IRISH TIMES

## Classroom game could help curb youth suicide, says founder

PAX Good Behaviour Game reports 43% reduction in class disruption in Irish schools

*Aine McMahon*

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Youth suicide rates in Ireland could be curbed by implementing an internationally renowned classroom behavioural game, an education expert has said.

An innovative classroom behaviour game – tested in Irish primary schools – has reported a 43 per cent reduction in children’s off task classroom behaviours.

The PAX Good Behaviour Game is based on promoting desirable behaviours with proven games and fun activities which improve classroom behaviours. Children are divided into teams which are rewarded for delivering positive behaviours which support the classroom activity.

Behaviours are described in a novel language and the pupils are rewarded in ways which are imaginative and appealing, while the students are engaged in regular school work.

The game was first implemented in 21 Irish classrooms over a 12-week period under the direction of the founder of the PAXIS Institute in Arizona Dennis Embry earlier this year.

Speaking at the launch of the evaluation report on Thursday, Dr Embry said its widespread implementation in Ireland could help curb our high youth suicide rate.

Ireland has exceptionally high rates of suicide among young men and women according to [a 2014 report](#) by the European Child Safety Alliance.

“The programme could help curb future risks of suicides, substance abuse and a whole range of disruptive behaviours in young people who have taken part in the programme,” he said.

“The most recent cost benefit analysis on the Good Behaviour Game by the Washington institute for public policy has shown a social return of \$57 for every \$1 invested, making it possibly the highest return on investment for any schools-based programme worldwide.”

### **Beneficial**

Midlands Area Parenting Partnership manager Conor Owens said the programme is beneficial for all children not just those with behaviour challenges.

“The high impact achieved in this research shows that the programme is a very good fit for Irish classrooms. I would encourage its use for the benefit of as many children and families as possible,” he said.

The programme was delivered among first and second class children in Dublin and the midlands last spring through Preparing for Life (Northside Partnership) and the midlands area partnership.

The evaluation of the programme in Irish classrooms found a significant reduction in the hyperactivity, restlessness and disruptive behaviour among the children.

It found one-third or 29 per cent of the pupils scoring with the most challenging behaviours before the programme moved into normal range after the 12-week delivery period.

To deliver the programme, teachers are trained in the approach and then apply it within the ongoing classroom work with support from a coach who visits them in the classrooms.

Denise Carter, a teacher at Our Lady Immaculate Junior National School in Darndale, Dublin said she went from having a challenging class to having highly motivated children.

“Every single child in the room got the PAX programme and was engaged. We started to get much more done in the classroom with far less disruption and time wasting. Class line ups can be done in seconds rather than minutes by using the game.”

Preparing for Life and the midlands area partnership are training a further 40 teachers this autumn and another 40 next January which will enable the programme to be delivered in 100 classrooms benefitting more than 2,000 pupils annually.



The PAX Good Behaviour Game is based on promoting desirable behaviours with proven games and fun activities which improve classroom behaviours. File photograph: Dave Thompson/PA Wire