Kate McGrail-Peasley is a school counselor with the Bald Eagle Area School District. This weekly column, published on Wednesdays, is a collaboration of Centre County Communities That Care® serving Bald Eagle, Bellefonte, Penns Valley, and Philipsburg-Osceola Area School Districts, and Care Partnership: Centre Region Communities That Care® serving the State College Area School District.

Bonnie sat at her first grade classroom desk, arms crossed, head down with tears down her cheeks. The teacher, Mrs. Smith, walked to Bonnie, knelt down, and said, “You look sad, can I help you?” Bonnie blurted, “I was making a pattern with beads and James spilled the beads. My pattern’s all messed up! I wanted to punch him!” “Well I’m glad you didn’t,” said a relieved Mrs. Smith. “That’s why I’m doing ‘turtle’” said Bonnie. “I was mad”. “Great, Bonnie! I’m glad you remembered to do turtle. Crossing our arms helps us remember not to hit when we are mad. Would you like to try the controls signal poster steps?” “OK” said Bonnie. They looked at the poster. “It looks sort of like a stop light,” said Bonnie. “That’s right” said Mrs. Smith, “What does the red light say?” “Stop. Calm Down. I already did that” said Bonnie. “Yes, you did and you told me the problem, so let’s go on to the yellow light. It says ‘Make a Plan’. Bonnie, what could you do to solve your problem?” asked the teacher. Bonnie replied, “Ask James to help me pick up the beads.” “Bonnie, now that we have a plan, let’s look at the green light. It says ‘Go’. That means we are ready to try our plan.” explained Mrs. Smith. “OK” said Bonnie and she went to try her plan.

The concepts used above are from Promoting Alternative THinking Strategies (PATHS), a curriculum teaching self control, emotional awareness, and problem solving skills. The program has been used in area classrooms since 1993 when Bellefonte participated in a Fast Track research pilot. Once funding was secured by Centre County Communities That Care®, other area schools offered the program, including Bald Eagle in 1999 and Penns Valley in 2000. Phillipsburg-Osceola began in 2001 and the State College Area will begin this year.

PATHS is based on a story about a young turtle with friendship and schoolwork problems beginning when the turtle does "not stop to think" and worsened by the young turtle's aggressive behaviors. A "wise old turtle" teaches the young turtle to develop self-control by calming down and reflecting in the turtle’s shell. Students practice this “Turtle Technique” by crossing their arms over their chest. PATHS introduces 50 feelings from basic emotions, such as happy and sad to more complex emotions, such as guilt and pride through group discussions, role-playing, art, stories, and games. Anger management is taught with all feelings being OK, but some behaviors, like hitting, NOT being OK. The Control Signals Poster, modeled on a traffic signal, is also used to help students remember calming and problem solving steps.

PATHS improves individual protective factors like the ability to tolerate frustration and to use cognitive and conflict resolution skills. It also reduces risk factors and conduct problems such as anxiety, aggression, and depression. Reducing behavioral problems allows teachers more time to teach and students that are in control and feel safe are able to focus on academics.