

The Special EDge

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Topic: Student Behavior

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Challenging Behavior:

Roles for Teachers and Parents

by Hill M. Walker, PhD, Codirector, Institute on Violence and Destructive Behavior, College of Education, University of Oregon, and lead author of Antisocial Behavior in School: Evidence-Based Practices

In the past 20 years, there has been a sea change in the incidence and nature of inappropriate and challenging student behavior in schools. An increasing number of students are harassing, bullying, and directing aggressive behavior toward their peers and teachers, all in an effort to achieve a kind of social dominance. Teachers are also at the receiving end of severe oppositional and defiant behavior. Educators have reported numerous instances of even very young children attempting to intimidate and physically assault them.

During most of the past century, such classroom behavior would have been largely unheard of. Shockingly, the issue of very young children being expelled from preschool classes has emerged as a serious concern in public and private school settings. Such early signs of problem behaviors are often harbingers of negative developmental outcomes of a very serious nature in the futures of such at-risk children (e.g., school failure and dropout, delinquency, etc).

There is and continues to be enormous speculation about why this is occurring. Many researchers have pointed to such factors as a general coarsening of our culture, the pervasive infusion of conflict into our daily lives through media streaming and other avenues, and family stresses exacerbated by such things as poverty, alienation, family dysfunction, discrimination, and abuse. Generally, these forms of behavior are often well established in children five years of age and younger and are reflected in a severe lack of school readiness and the reduced ability to succeed in school. Whatever the root causes of this larger phenomenon of disruptive and oppositional behavior, more and more children appear at the schoolhouse

door not ready for schooling, and their behavior disrupts the schooling process for themselves and others. School success, however, can function as an important buffering or protective factor in the lives such children.

Risk factors for school failure and negative developmental outcomes over the long term have been identified in community, family, individual, and school contexts. Examples of such risks in each of these contexts respectively would include chaotic neighborhoods with low levels of social cohesion; weak parenting skills and family dysfunction; a difficult temperament in the child, with a penchant for risk-taking; and association with antisocial peers who bully and harass other students. Research has shown that the more risks children are exposed to and the longer the exposure, the more likely it is they will experience problems in school and destructive outcomes outside the school setting. These risk factors place vulnerable children and youth onto a developmental pathway or trajectory that far too many follow in their school careers and beyond (see figure). Research has focused on finding ways to keep children and youth off this path and, if they are discovered to be following it, to get them off as soon as possible.

Answers

Unfortunately, a perfect answer does not exist. But in collaboration with parents and supportive (and appropriate) community agencies, teachers and schools can play a significant role in forging effective solutions for this growing problem. One of the best options available is for these elements—parents, agencies, teachers, and schools—to work together in making children as successful as possible in their schooling. The resulting school success means that the child learns to build positive relationships with peers and teachers, to control and regulate emotions (e.g., anger), to take responsibility for completing essential tasks, and so on. Parent and teacher support of a child's attempts to learn and master these critical skills is absolutely essential. The broad-scale adoption of this sort of collaboration could transform our schools over several generations. But there is one caveat: while you never, ever give up on any child or student at any point in their school career, the earlier this collaborative process begins, the better the chance it has to produce the desired effect of either preventing an at-risk child from entering a destructive pathway or diverting the child away from that pathway.

Research points to the following key drivers or levers associated with school success: (1) the child has mastery of important school success skills; (2) the child is reading at grade-level expectations by the end of third grade, when reading becomes a tool for learning other subject matter; (3) the child forges positive relationships with adults and peers in the school; and (4) parents have a knowledge of effective parenting strategies, are supportive of the schooling process, and insure that homework assignments are completed in a timely manner. All other things being equal, children who experience these positive benefits are more likely to be successful in their school career than not. The normalizing and positive benefits of school success, in turn, offer protection against a host of later negative outcomes.

School Success Skills

There is a generic set of school success skills that support academic performance and social adjustment in schooling contexts. These skills are essential for teachers to teach and for students to learn and display and are as follows: (1) comply with teacher requests promptly, (2) raise hand for assistance, (3) cooperate with and support peers, (4) work on assigned tasks, and (5) be positive with others. There are very few teachers who would not endorse these skills as important for achieving school success and for facilitating a good teacher-student relationship. Among these skills, teachers most highly value students' compliance with directives and requests; not surprisingly, a lack of compliance creates the situations that most often prompt teacher-student conflict. Thus, it is extremely important that classroom teachers (1) systematically and directly teach these skills to the entire class as teacher expectations, (2) strengthen these skills by praising and showing approval of students who display them, and (3) regularly re-teach

and review these skills as needed. Equally important, parents should support and teach these same school success skills at home.

Reading Mastery

Research clearly shows that reading proficiency at grade level expectations by the end of grade 3 is extremely important for a student's future school success. No educational achievement in a student's K–12 school career is more important. Every student has the right to expect instruction in the best methods of teaching beginning reading. On this note, sound research has shown that phonics-based approaches to teaching reading are the most effective and have the lowest failure rate. As to the long term, reading proficiency is the key to academic success and postschool adjustment to life and work. Numerous interview studies of adult prison populations have been conducted to determine what would have made a difference in the lives of inmates; huge numbers of those interviewed pointed to reading failure as the downward turning point in their lives.

Teacher and Peer Relationships

When children come to school, they need to learn to get along with their teachers and their peers or classmates. Failure in one of these critical relationships can impair a student's entire school adjustment; failure in both can negatively influence one's life course. We know what is important in determining the quality of these adjustments. The chart on this page lists the key dos and don'ts for teacher adjustment and peer adjustment respectively. There is broad agreement on the importance of these indicators; they are based on extensive research conducted over many years; and they provide a roadmap of sorts for how to assist and support students in making critical adjustments.

Parent Involvement

One of the most important roles parents can play in their children's lives is to do everything possible to insure that their children are prepared for—and then actually succeed in—school. A great deal of research shows that the following six practices help children realize school success and develop into happy and well-adjusted teens and adults: (1) modeling positive attitudes toward school, (2) providing assistance and intervention when the child struggles with school, (3) insuring that homework is always completed, (4) reading to and with their child, (5) spending time each day debriefing their child about how school went (e.g., what was good and what was not good about the school day), and (6) remembering to use the principles of effective parenting: providing discipline that is never harsh or punitive, monitoring their child's activities, knowing the whereabouts of the child and friends, staying involved in the child's life and activities, remembering to use positive parenting techniques whenever possible, and assisting the child with problem solving/conflict resolution.

Conclusion

We know a tremendous amount about how to make the vast majority of our children and youth successful in school in spite of the many barriers and obstacles to achieving this goal. However, we often do not begin to implement what we know. That is our great challenge going forward—to implement well what we know to be effective.

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Exposure to family, neighborhood, school, and societal risk factors . . .

. . . leads to the development of maladaptive behaviors . . .

. . . produces negative, short-term outcomes . . .

. . . and leads to negative, destructive, long-term outcomes.

Social-Behavioral Competencies

Teacher-Related Adjustments

Related Behavioral Correlates

Adaptive

- Complies promptly
- Follows rules
- Controls anger
- Makes needs for assistance known appropriately
- Produces acceptable work
- Works independently
- Adjusts to different instructional situations
- Responds to teacher's corrections

Maladaptive

- Steals
- Defies or provokes teachers
- Stages tantrum
- Disturbs others
- Damages property
- Cheats
- Swears or makes lewd gestures
- Shows aggression towards others
- Ignores teacher

Outcomes

Positive

- Teacher acceptance
- School achievement/success

Negative

- Teacher rejection
- Referral for specialized placements
- School failure; dropout
- Low performance expectations

Peer-Related Adjustments

Related Behavioral Correlates

Adaptive

- Cooperates with peers
- Supports peers
- Defends self in arguments
- Remains calm
- Achieves much
- Leads peers
- Acts independently
- Compliments peers
- Affiliates with peers

Maladaptive

- Disrupts the group
- Acts arrogantly or snobbishly
- Demonstrates passive- aggressive behavior
- Starts fights
- Displays a short temper
- Brags
- Seeks help constantly
- Achieves little
- Gets in trouble with teacher

Outcomes

Positive

- Peer acceptance
- Positive peer relationships
- Friendships

Negative

- Social rejection/neglect
- Low self-esteem
- Weak social involvement or engagement

Letter from the State Director

By Fred Balcom, Director, California Department of Education, Special Education Division

Promoting an understanding of behavior is directly conducive to a healthier, more productive platform for learning.”

Behavior is any action we take in response to the world around us. For students in the classroom, the opportunities for interactions soliciting a wide array of behaviors are endless. The same holds true for classroom teachers as they interact with dozens of students. As a former special educator in the classroom, I know how challenging it can be to manage behavior in a way that is conducive to learning for all students. In fact, behavior—and the impact it has on learning—should be considered an essential component of our educational system. This issue of *The Special EDge* takes a critical look at research-based techniques for managing behavior in the classroom and tailoring our responses so that both teachers and students benefit. One article addresses the critical components that promote successful behavioral outcomes for students, including parent involvement and mastery of reading skills. Another tackles the often-sensitive subject of disproportionality and inequity when it comes to disciplining our students. All of the various contributors, manifestations, and repercussions of maladaptive behaviors necessitate understanding in order to grasp the entirety of the problem.

Often, when we speak of behaviors in the classroom, we are focused on student behavior. However, an equally important issue is the impact that classroom behavior has on the teacher. Challenging behavior exhibited by a student naturally flavors the interaction with his or her teacher. So how does the teacher internalize and/or rationalize the reason for a student’s challenging behavior? Jeff Sprague has done extensive research on classroom behavior and offers some interesting insight regarding the impact on teachers. The article on page 3 highlighting Sprague’s work also addresses cognitive strategies for reframing the “problem” posed to teachers by challenging behavior in the classroom. Keeping our teachers happy, healthy, and motivated to teach is just as important as keeping our students happy, healthy, and motivated to learn.

When considering techniques to reduce challenging behavior in schools, educators can now access an effective framework. This issue highlights that framework, Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (see pages 10–11), and the ways in which Building Effective Schools Together (BEST) and Positive Environments, Network of Trainers (PENT) serve to help teachers, schools, and school districts develop this kind of effective system—one that is designed ultimately to promote learning. Within this system of preventative strategies, the option of providing targeted, individualized services remains. An update to recent changes in how some of those services that relate to mental health are provided for students with disabilities is covered in this issue, as well.

A student’s behavior can act as a thermometer, an indicator of something awry. Leaving individual behavioral issues unaddressed can negatively affect the entire learning environment for all students. Promoting an understanding of behavior is directly conducive to a healthier, more productive platform for learning. — *Fred Balcom*

Considering Behavior: Habits of Mind

A great deal of attention in educational circles is paid to student behavior. But what about teachers?

Why can’t they just do it?” This question has spurred a new direction in educational research. However, it’s not your typical research about students, school systems, or teaching strategies.

Jeff Sprague, codirector at the University of Oregon’s Institute on Violence and Destructive Behavior, has been working for decades with state departments of education, school districts, juvenile justice

systems, and classroom teachers to determine just how they can help students develop the kinds of behaviors they need in order to learn and grow into healthy, contributing citizens. And he's pretty much got it down: his research findings, along with those of numerous others, have clearly identified the behavioral practices that work (see pages 10 and 11).

Yet Sprague has found among some teachers a "lack of adoption of evidence-based practices—such things as positive reinforcement, recognition, and rewards." Sprague hears these teachers excuse themselves for turning their backs on effective practices. They say, "I don't have time." "I'm too old to do this stuff." "I have too much to do already." "If the kid doesn't like my lesson, he can go somewhere else."

Sprague's interest in finding a way to help struggling teachers goes a great deal deeper than just wanting them to use proven behavioral practices. Granted, student behavior—more accurately, a lack of training and support in effectively managing and responding to student behavior—is one of the primary reasons teachers in both general and special education leave their professions. Also granted, students can't learn if they don't know how to channel their energies, focus their attention, and respect themselves and others—in short, behave. But the fundamental inspiration for Sprague lay in his desire to alleviate the suffering he saw—suffering in good people who became teachers because they just wanted to help kids and work with them.

Consider the following scenario: a sixth-grade boy throws his papers off his desk; his teacher sends him to the office—after all, she has 29 other students she must keep on track. The paper-throwing boy is back in the classroom the next day; he acts out again. The teacher gives him another office referral. The pattern continues.

A number of things happen to many teachers in this situation, according to Sprague. Consciously or not, when they defer the task of addressing a child and his behavior to the office, they often lose a sense of their own effectiveness. And then they start to feel a little embarrassed when they see the assistant principal, believing that she or he thinks maybe they can't handle their classrooms. And because of that embarrassment, they don't talk about the problem; so they also start believing that none of their colleagues face the same kind of challenge, which makes them feel isolated. Any relationship with the "problem" child is certainly eroding. And while teachers may try to suppress any feelings of anger or frustration they have toward students, especially since they fundamentally like kids (which is why they wanted to become teachers in the first place), this particular child is making them feel like a failure and causing them to doubt themselves. Such thinking creates larger feelings: they start wondering if they're in the right profession. Five months into the school year and they're losing energy for their work; they find themselves frequently irritable; they're having trouble concentrating on lesson plans, which they're rarely excited about anymore; their stomach (or head) hurts during the day. The last thing they are able to do is incorporate into their teaching some new practice that requires energy, enthusiasm, and commitment.

Seeing too many of these scenarios has inspired Sprague and his colleagues to take a closer look at what is keeping teachers from using the very practices that will help them become more effective in the classroom and happier in their careers. Sprague has made some interesting discoveries.

Something New

"A teacher in pain is not going to be the best teacher," said Sprague in a phone interview. He ultimately believes, however, that a great deal of this suffering doesn't have to happen. He is convinced that there are ways to help teachers not just avoid misery on the job but succeed in their efforts to educate children and actually take joy in their profession. One solution, according to Sprague, turns out to involve a

different kind of behavioral management: one that helps teachers change the way they manage the behavior of their own minds.

Cognitive Fusion

“We actually started to look at the literature of cognitive behavioral psychology,” said Sprague. In the process, he connected what was happening with struggling teachers to the phenomenon of “cognitive fusion,” the mental process of mistaking thoughts (often colored by our emotional reactions) for an actual event or fact. So the thoughts of the teacher in our example run along the line of, “I’d like to help this child, but I don’t have the time, energy, or support to make a difference.” According to Sprague, “the ‘but’ is the ‘fusion glue.’” The teacher doesn’t know how to see her thoughts as simply thoughts; instead she turns them into the “fact” (cognitive fusion) that she can’t address the problem. She then takes her lack of success with this one boy and turns it into an indicator of her professional failure.

However, she can decide to change her thinking. Let’s say she’s able to stand back from her initial thoughts and feelings about the boy’s behavior; this would allow her to look at that behavior as an interesting puzzle to solve, an opportunity to practice new strategies and become more effective in her work, or a topic about which she could brainstorm with her colleagues and discuss possible responses. If she could do any one of these things, she would not end up experiencing the front-end symptoms of depression and burnout.

Depression can be a frightening, clinical term. But everyone at some point in his or her life is depressed to some degree—held down by something physical or circumstantial. Unlike pregnancy, you can be a little depressed, or a lot depressed, or anything in between. According to Sprague, it’s “not even a stable condition in an individual; it exists on a continuum. And over time it’s affected by contextual factors.” Certainly the context of a challenging job can make a person depressed.

Sprague has seen many teachers struggle at some point on the continuum of depression. And when people are depressed, they generally have a hard enough time just getting through the day, let alone being creative, energetic, and open to adopting new ideas. A habit of cognitive fusion can contribute to and perpetuate the kinds of feelings associated with depression.

Experiential Avoidance

Another habit of mind that keeps many of us from doing our best work, according to Sprague, is the process of “experiential avoidance,” broadly defined as any attempt to avoid thoughts, feelings, people, or circumstances, even when doing so ends up harming us in the long term. Not knowing how to distinguish her thoughts from facts, the teacher in our example tries not to think about how this one boy makes her angry and upset. Because he has become a walking reminder of her professional failure, she avoids the boy as much as possible; it’s too painful for her to face this “fact.” Yet the student is in her class every day, so he becomes a constant and bewildering irritant for her (after all, she thought she loved kids!). And because of what she’s concluded about the opinion of the assistant principal, she avoids talking with this person, as well as her colleagues, thus sealing her emotional isolation. “We all practice experiential avoidance,” Sprague says, and “it can have negative consequences; but the consequences are particularly negative if you’re a teacher.”

Empathy

The quality of empathy, says Sprague, “is a huge piece” of teacher effectiveness. But it is only possible if teachers know how to keep their own thoughts from sabotaging their efforts. Consider what might happen if our sixth-grade teacher learned how to defuse her thinking and separate her initial thoughts

from the facts of what is happening. Instead of sending that boy to the office for throwing his papers on the floor, she might be able to take a deep breath, find sincere interest in why the boy would behave in such a disruptive way, and calmly walk over to him and say “You must be having a rough morning. Can you sit at your desk for just two minutes while I get the class started? Then we can talk about what’s going on and what you need.” One key element here lies in not letting a student’s behavior get personal. It’s not about the teacher; it’s about what the boy in this case is suffering—he was bullied before class, he missed breakfast, his grandmother died. An entire range of possible events may have led to his behavioral eruption. Sprague’s research suggests that teachers are best served when they bring an empathetic curiosity to the classroom, something that is only possible when they know how to control their own thoughts. And when they have the support of their peers.

Normalizing Behavior, Finding Value

Sprague talks about the importance of a supportive school community for teachers and of candor among colleagues, which involves not just the permission but the encouragement and the scheduled opportunity to talk about those things with which they struggle in the classroom. When a school climate allows for this kind of honesty, any challenge a teacher might face becomes “normalized.” And when teachers are able to talk openly about their professional struggles without fear of judgment or retribution, a number of things happen: their sense of isolation and fear dissipates and communities of support emerge; from there teachers can develop a renewed enthusiasm for being good at their job. Educators also need to “continuously talk about pursuing their original values in the context of discussing their frustrations,” says Sprague. “We are at our best when we can pursue our core values of caring for students and each other, even in the face of daily adversity.”

What to Do

Teachers have a difficult job. Few of them work in a perfect environment. Because they rarely see the immediate fruits of their efforts, they must possess a tremendous capacity for delayed rewards. And they are often called upon to do much more than just teach; they have to be disciplinarians, behavior analysts, counselors, consolers, and more. And many of them work with children who are difficult.

In his efforts to help teachers, Sprague was inspired by the work of Anthony Biglan from the Oregon Research Institute. Sprague and Biglan are currently working together to find ways to support “teacher wellbeing.” Their current research is pointing to the benefits of mindfulness training in particular, a concrete, practical, and research-proven approach to learning how to work with one’s thoughts to avoid cognitive fusion and experiential avoidance. “If you practice this stuff,” says Sprague, “the brain changes. You change. I change. It’s better.”

The work reflected on the Web site that Biglan, Sprague, and others created—www.teacherstaffwellbeing.com—offers resources for practicing mindfulness in the classroom; it also suggests strategies for creating educational communities that are honest and compassionate in the face of struggles, communities that help teachers clarify their “most cherished values.” Sprague believes that, “when we do this, we are going to be stronger in how we act and happier with the results.”

Effective educators typically see challenging behavior in students as one of the following:

- An interesting puzzle to solve
- An opportunity to practice new strategies
- A topic to bring to colleagues for discussion and brainstorming

Resources

Read more about the causes of depression at

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/depression/what-causes-depression.shtml>.

Read more about cognitive fusion at <http://www.livingwellfeelinggood.com/2012/01/cognitive-fusion/>.

Read more about experiential avoidance at

<http://www.larryberkelhammer.com/mindfulness/experiential-avoidance-what-we-resist-persists>.

The Web site of Teacher & Staff Wellbeing, which came out of a project titled Reducing Teacher and Staff Stress and Building a More Effective School Culture, evaluates Acceptance and Commitment Training (ACT), one promising approach to creating a more effective and supportive school environment. Read more at <http://www.teacherstaffwellbeing.com>.

Read about Steven Hayes, the founder of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), at

<http://www.stevenchayes.com>.

“ACT Made Simple: An Easy-to-Read Primer on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy” by Russ Harris (2009) is available

at http://www.actmindfully.com.au/upimages/ACT_Made_Simple_Introduction_and_first_two_chapters.pdf.

Anthony Biglan’s Web blog, Nurturing Environments, is at <http://www.nurturingenvironments.org>.

Student Behavior, Discipline, and Equity

Russ Skiba is director of the Equity Project at Indiana University, a consortium of research efforts offering evidence-based information to educators and policymakers on equity in special education and school discipline. He has testified before the United States Civil Rights Commission and both Houses of Congress on issues of school discipline and school violence. Staff from The Special EDge interviewed Dr. Skiba in his offices at IU on February 7, 2013.

Q. You write that the discipline gap and the achievement gap may be “two sides of the same coin.” What do you mean?

Skiba: Similar to the achievement gap, the discipline gap represents the rate at which the majority students, white students, are disciplined in the classroom compared to the rate at which minority students are disciplined, particularly African American students. That gap was first highlighted by the Children’s Defense Fund in the mid 1970s, but it has its roots back hundreds of years. These current discrepancies are the footprints of our history. Our data allow us to track our progress—and also to see that there is much more progress to be made.

Q. Can’t we blame poverty?

Skiba: We’re tempted to think, “Well, because African American students are more likely to come from poverty backgrounds, therefore it must be due to poverty.” But these are two separate things. Poverty does increase your likelihood of being suspended. But when we take into account all of the possible

contributing demographic factors, poverty doesn't account for the racial differences. So it's not just that more poor black kids are being referred to the office and suspended; so are more middle class black kids and so are more wealthy black kids—it's across the entire socio-economic range, even with everything else being equal.

Q. What does this mean in terms of addressing disproportionality?

Skiba: So we now have a pretty firm knowledge of what doesn't cause disproportionality; it's not poverty. But we don't have a clear sense of what does. Some data suggest that it's classroom management. When teachers have poorer classroom management skills, their rates of classroom disproportionality are higher. Conversely, data also support the notion that when you have a teaching force that is more diverse and representative of the students, you'll have fewer teacher referrals to the office and fewer suspensions—lower rates of disproportionality.

It's pretty widely accepted that there certainly are real cultural differences among the various groups in our society. But are cultural differences creating the discrepancies, or is it the teachers' reactions to those differences? Does the problem rest in the differences that the students bring with them, or does it come from subtle but negative messages that those students receive and that the staff might not even be aware of? In other words, whose cultural difference do we really need to attend to here?

Q. Do we need to talk about racism?

Skiba: That's a tough question. On the one hand, it's important to understand that racism still exists in our society, even if it's subconscious or structural. On the other hand, you have to wonder if it's a useful term. Calling or even implying that someone is racist creates defensiveness that may stand in the way of real problem solving. Barbara Trepagnier points out that the way we use the word racist is dichotomous—you either are or you aren't. So if I'm looking at the data in my school and there are racial disparities there, it isn't easy to accept those data if it means that I or my school will be viewed as "racist." It may be better to think in terms of cultural responsiveness as a continuum.

Cultural responsiveness is a skill, like reading or writing—something that any of us can learn and improve upon. So although it's certainly true that we can't deny that racism still exists in our society and in our institutions, when we're working to create change with the staff of those institutions, it's probably more productive to approach it from the standpoint of cultural responsiveness—specific skills that school staff and teachers can learn and use in order to improve their instruction and classroom management.

Q. Is a system of positive behavioral interventions and support (PBIS) enough to address the problem of cultural bias?

Skiba: The literature strongly supports PBIS as an excellent solution for dealing with issues of behavior in general. But even though PBIS can reduce office disciplinary referrals and suspensions, we don't see any cases in the research yet where PBIS has also been able to reduce racial and ethnic disparities in discipline. Clear rules, positively framed and faithfully supported, are certainly important. But by themselves, they don't ensure that those rules are being framed in a way that works for students of all groups.

PBIS gathers important data about disproportionality. But those data are not utilized very much. One gets the sense that it's too controversial and too threatening a topic for many school teams to want to take on. There's no doubt about it—talking about race and culture openly and directly is tough.

When we deal with issues of physics, we engineer certain forces that work out mathematically and we solve the problem —it’s purely a technical issue. When we have social problems, we oftentimes have many more difficulties because we have human beings in the mix. The issue of race is one of the issues that is toughest in that regard.

Certainly, the goal is to get to a point where PBIS could address issues of racial disparity so that we transform it into a purely technical issue—what changes in supervision or training or consistency do we need to put in place to reduce racial disparities? But before we can do that, we have to be willing to reflect on what racial disparity means, and how our school might contribute to that. That may mean we need to look at places where we don’t intend to create disparity but where some of our practices do in fact create disparity. And those places require very uncomfortable and awkward conversations.

But however tough it is, it’s also critical that, if race is the issue, we are willing to talk about race and racial disparities. I don’t think anyone has yet figured out how to integrate those conversations within PBIS, or any other systems-change approach. This is what we’re attempting to do here with PBIS Indiana—we’ve had some success, but there’s also resistance. And when that happens, it’s a tough decision for a trainer or coach. How hard do you push? You don’t want to alienate people who you have a good relationship with—on the other hand, there’s no change, cultural or otherwise, if someone isn’t advocating for it.

Q. What’s to be done?

Skiba: Many teachers are successful with all of their students. The literature on culturally responsive classroom management has outlined some of the things that make them successful:

1. Settings are respectful of and responsive to the heritage of students.

You see black and Latino faces on the wall, not just all white founding fathers. If students are Latino, materials are in Spanish, and there is a respect shown for the student’s language and heritage.

2. High expectations are coupled with a high degree of support.

Some writers have called it “warm demandingness.” As a nation we have had a strong focus on high expectations, but it’s also important to provide a message that says to a kid, “I as a teacher and we as a school will do all that is within our power to help you achieve the high expectations we have for you.” Schools that have high expectations and high levels of support also have lower rates of suspension and lower rates of bullying.

3. Instruction is culturally relevant.

Students see their race and culture represented in the curriculum, in the history books, in the literature they read.

4. Parents are engaged.

This is a very important piece. Most initiatives have parental engagement written into their plans, but it often slips to the bottom of the to-do list, and we end up not paying attention to it. It requires conscious effort to ask, “What do our parents need in order to be engaged with our school?” Maybe we can have a parent liaison and provide outreach to the community, or maybe we can work through faith-based organizations to get the word out about school events.

Q. Is there evidence to support zero tolerance behavior policies?

Skiba: It's tempting to want to "get those kids out" who are misbehaving so that the school climate is better for those students who remain. But when you do that, there's always a next kid. The root of the problem starts from the perception that misbehavior is simply an obstacle to learning that we have to get rid of before we move on to instruction. As appealing as that philosophy sounds, reports like the one from the APA Zero Tolerance Task Force have shown us that it is just not effective. Schools with high rates of suspensions and expulsions have poorer ratings of school climate, lower academic achievement, more time spent on discipline, and poorer school governance.

It's like not using certain muscles. You get used to using the "zero tolerance muscle" of removing the troublemakers, but when you do that, you're not using the muscles of engaging kids and teaching kids how to get along. We can talk about the three most widely recommended alternatives to zero tolerance: PBIS, restorative justice, and social-emotional learning [see pages 10 and 11]. Each of these takes a piece of what we need to teach kids in how to get along. And exercising these kinds of muscles creates a stronger school and classroom climate; that in itself reduces rates of suspensions and expulsions. It may not be necessary to set rules that say "no more suspensions and expulsions," because when schools exercise their muscles of prevention, working to improve students' classroom and interpersonal skills, and working to build a positive school climate, then over time they see the need for suspension and expulsion going down.

Q. Does the word "disproportionality" belong strictly within the context of special education?

Skiba: Disproportionality is not just a special education issue. We might think of disproportionality in special education as a canary in the coal mine—its presence really points at larger systemic issues, problems that start well before a student is referred to special education. What we do have in the provisions of IDEA [the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act] 2004 are mechanisms for identifying and addressing disproportionality. We don't have any mechanism like that for general education—many have argued we ought to have similar accountability measures for general education in the ESEA [the Elementary and Secondary Education Act].

But any district interested in addressing racial disparities can start looking at its own data. If there are high rates of discipline for its kids with disabilities, the leaders of the district could ask, "Is this pattern unique to our kids with disabilities, or is it a symptom of a broader issue?" Oftentimes, high rates of discipline for one set of kids are simply part of a pattern of high rates of suspensions and expulsions for all students in the district.

The good news is that we're at a point where inequity in school discipline has reached public awareness, and we're starting to see good support at the federal level. After the release of the Council of State Governments report, *Breaking Schools' Rules*, Attorney General Eric Holder and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced the federal Supportive School Discipline Initiative. Recently we saw a Senate hearing on the School-to-Prison Pipeline. And there is a whole new generation of young researchers, many of them highlighted at a recent national conference put on by the UCLA Civil Rights Project, who are doing great work in moving our understanding of the problem forward. All of this is cause for hope.

Again, we have to bear in mind that our current levels of racial disparity and inequity are the product of a long and tortured history of discrimination and oppression in our country. It's great to see our leaders begin to provide strong leadership on the issue. But I also think it's important to consider the notion of "distributed leadership," that is, individuals at all levels taking responsibility. I believe we'll truly begin to make progress when enough of us say, "It's about time we finally fix this." We don't need to point fingers or admit to being racist, but we do need to accept that these issues are serious and deserve

continuing attention. As complex as this is, we must be willing to reflect on our own practices and our own policies and do what we can to make a difference.

Resources

The Web site of the Equity Project at Indiana University is at <http://ceep.indiana.edu/equity>.

Current findings about educational inequities can be found at the Children's Defense Fund are at <http://www.childrensdefense.org/newsroom/child-watch-columns/child-watch-documents/public-schools-unequal-unjust.html>.

“Who Really Cares? The Disenfranchisement of African American Males in PreK–12 Schools: A Critical Race Theory Perspective” by Tyrone Howard (in the Teacher College Record, 2008) is at <http://www.blackmaleinstitute.org/pdf/scholarly/Howard--TCR.pdf>.

Barbara Trepagnier's Web site On Silent Racism is at <http://www.silentracism.com>.

Read more about PBIS Indiana at <http://www.indiana.edu/~pbisin/about/>.

The Building Blocks of Positive Behavior by Matthew Cregor (at Teaching Tolerance, 2008) is at <http://www.pbis.org/common/cms/documents/Staff/staff%20training%20materials/The%20Building%20Blocks%20of%20Positive%20Behavior%20TT.pdf>.

“The Teacher as Warm Demander” by Elizabeth Bondy and Dorene D. Ross (in The Positive Classroom) is at <https://web5.wgu.edu/aap/content/cua1-warmdemanders.pdf>.

Principles for Culturally Responsive Teaching from Teaching Diverse Learners is at <http://www.alliance.brown.edu/tdl/tl-strategies/crt-principles.shtml>.

The APA Zero Tolerance Task Force Report is at <http://www.apa.org/pubs/info/reports/zero-tolerance.aspx>.

Breaking Schools' Rules: A Statewide Study of How School Discipline Relates to Students' Success and Juvenile Justice Involvement from the Council of State Governments Justice Center is available at <http://justicecenter.csg.org/resources/juveniles>.

“Attorney General and Education Secretary Announce Joint Project To Address School Disciplinary Practices” is available at https://www.ncjrs.gov/html/ojjdp/news_at_glance/235188/sf_1.html.

The Southern Poverty Law Center has launched a School to Prison Reform Project to help at-risk children receive special education services and avoid incarceration. Read more at <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/news/splc-launches-school-to-prison-reform-project-to-help-at-risk-children-get-special>.

Research from The Civil Rights Project at UCLA can be found at <http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research>.

Students with Disabilities and Mental Health

California legislation in 2011 and 2012 rapidly changed the way mental health services are delivered to students with disabilities. What has happened in the wake of these changes; and, more importantly, has the quality of services improved?

Many students suffer from an emotional or behavioral disability that interferes with their learning. While the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) may entitle these students to mental health services, how these services are being delivered in California has changed significantly in the past two years.

In 1984, California passed Assembly Bill 3632, a law that required school districts to partner with county mental health agencies to serve the mental health care needs of students with disabilities. In 2011, however, then-Governor Schwarzenegger ended this mandate, ultimately passing the obligation back to the Special Education Local Plan Areas (SELPA) and school districts, where it had existed prior to 1984. The subsequently passed AB 114 legally ended the AB 3632 relationship and transferred responsibility and funding for mental health services required by an Individualized Education Program from county mental health and child welfare agencies back to school districts and SELPA.

This wholesale shift of responsibility was first met with concern and even panic in some quarters. Many parents and educators were fearful of the consequences of placing yet another burden on already overburdened school districts. There were additional worries: Would there be enough money for the districts and SELPA to develop these programs? Would there be a lapse in services? Could programs be quickly developed and would they effectively serve those students who are among the most vulnerable in a school's population?

In an effort to assuage these fears and support the change, the Special Education Division of the California Department of Education established the AB 114 Workgroup, which was charged with helping SELPA and districts gear up for and transition into their new responsibilities. The workgroup provided extensive guidance and support on dozens of topics: budgeting and financing, parent input, treatment options, and more.

Now, more than 18 months into the task, districts and SELPA staff are reporting favorable results. Under the leadership of the Special Education Division, the efforts of the workgroup and the intrepidity and dedication of SELPA and school district personnel appear to have, for the most part, successfully ushered in a new era of improved mental health service delivery. And, for a variety of reasons, those in charge of the effort have been happy to take on this "one more responsibility."

Finances

SELPA director Margaret Cherene from Santa Clarita Valley in Southern California expressed enthusiasm for the change—and she acknowledges having been a naysayer at the beginning. "We fought the repeal of [AB] 3632," she said. "Costs had been escalating, and we were nervous about taking responsibility for a very expensive program. But the state has been generous in allocating resources." Other district and SELPA personnel also report being satisfied with the start-up money.

Rusty Gordon, SELPA director in Butte County, sees direct benefit in assuming financial responsibility for student mental health services. "We're acutely aware of the cost," he said. "We need to get benefit from these services." Because the school districts and SELPA now hold the purse strings, Gordon is confident that they can demand higher quality services. The other critical point of control that Gordon appreciates has to do with timing. Under the previous system, "it sometimes took up to 90 days before a referral to mental health was acted on," he said. Controlling the money now gives SELPA and districts the clout to require that services be delivered quickly—an important advantage if a child is in crisis.

Service Delivery

The new law gave SELPAs and school districts a great deal of flexibility in how to deliver services: they could hire new staff to provide the services, they could contract services to another agency, or they could continue to work with county mental health. And they could pursue any combination of these three options. Sacramento County hired new staff, primarily additional psychologists and a mental health coordinator. Solano County chose to subcontract with a known agency whose work was respected. Gordon continues to contract some services with county mental health in Butte County, although his experience is unique in that he started the AB 114 transition as SELPA director in Yuba County, which “discontinued [county mental health] services almost immediately after the budget blue line by Gov. Schwarzenegger.” Regardless of the approach, educators and administrators involved in the process are seeing similar benefits for both students and systems in the wake of AB 114: services overall are becoming better coordinated and more efficient.

Integrated IEPs

Before AB 114, “the goals of [mental health] were outside of the IEP plan,” said Victor Romualdi assistant SELPA director from Solano County, referring to the Individualized Education Program (IEP), which is the cornerstone of special education services. As well, mental health services “were more clinically focused,” said Judy Holsinger, SELPA director for Sacramento County. But that has changed. “We’re making these goals directly related to the student’s education and more relevant to the other IEP goals and objectives,” said Holsinger. “And now the [mental health] service provider is a regular member of the IEP team,” further contributing to increasingly coordinated services for students.

Efficiency and Convenience

District and SELPA staff are also agreeing that the new system is more efficient and less prone to waste. “For once kids are receiving services directly at the school site instead of at a clinic after school hours,” said Romualdi. “A lot of families have transportation difficulties. [Before AB 114] there was a lot of not showing up with county mental health. If it involved teens, sometimes they just didn’t feel like getting there. Providing services directly at the school site is so much more efficient. All of the services are actually being used—and the kids are benefitting.” The other point of efficiency that Gordon appreciates has to do with the ability to provide intensive, short-term help. With the schools and districts in direct control of services, they can act more quickly to help students. As a result, said Gordon, “we’re seeing more kids realizing benefits from short-term treatment. And then this service does not end up being a permanent feature in their IEP.”

Parents

The Special Education Division’s AB 114 Workgroup, the SELPAs, and the school districts appear to have been attentive from the beginning to the concerns and needs of families. “We figured that if this is confusing to us, it must be confusing to parents, too,” said Romualdi. “We knew there was lots of anxiety out there, and we wanted to be as transparent as possible.” Clear, coordinated communication with parents seems to have paid off. Romualdi reports that “there has been no litigation or parent complaint” during the months when services were transitioning from county mental health to educational entities, nor have there been complaints about the new approaches to providing services. Holsinger, Cherene, Gordon, and others report similar responses from parents and a general optimism about their new programs.

Creative Approaches

Questions about program maintenance make people more skittish, however, particularly in the face of unpredictable residential placements. “That’s our biggest cost,” said Cherene, referring to the federal mandate that “if placement in a public or private residential program is necessary to provide special education and related services to a child with a disability, the program . . . must be at no cost to the parents of the child.”¹

Others share Cherene’s worry. According to Romualdi, “Too many calls for this highly expensive service can put a district back on its heels financially.” As Cherene reports, residential care can cost “upwards of \$200,000 a year.” Cherene is looking for alternatives, and for reasons beyond the financial. The most critical aspect to consider and address is the student’s need. “We’ve taken a hard look at the longitudinal research on the outcomes for these placements. The failure rate is tremendous. We’re trying to figure out what supports need to be in place so that family members can help their child thrive and be successful at home and in their home community. Currently we’re offering classes for parents to develop lifelong strategies to help their child.”

While funds earmarked in AB 114 must be used only for students with disabilities, Holsinger and others don’t see mental health as just one more distinct service to be added to their list. Instead, they are placing it in a seamless continuum of services. “We use a three-tiered approach to [behavioral] interventions,” said Holsinger. For students who are in the third tier and who need the most intense level of mental health support, “we now have the trained staff to provide the services they need.”

But for Holsinger and many of her colleagues, the new mental health staff and the focused mental health training are serving to strengthen services for all students, especially “the early intervention piece,” said Holsinger. Previously, mental health services had been delivered away from school sites. Now, supporting students at their school sites and having the mental health staff on campus helps to “normalize behavior. It directly contributes to a culture that is more aware and accepting of mental health issues and the importance of addressing them,” said Holsinger.

In a country where one out of five youths may have an undiagnosed mental health condition that could benefit from treatment,² Holsinger sees this act of “bringing the services home” as an important step toward destigmatizing mental health, making everyone more aware and more accepting of—and more prone to seek and benefit from—mental health services. Because of the work of the Special Education Division’s AB 114 workgroup and SELPAs across the state, these services are now more readily available to students with disabilities in California; that can only be a very good thing.

Resources

Information on AB 114 funding sources and spending parameters can be found at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/ac/avlblfndsrcspndngpar.asp>.

Resources from the AB 114 Workgroup can be found at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/ac/ab114twg.asp>.

How Does Mental Illness Interfere with School? is available at <http://www.bu.edu/cpr/reasaccom/educa-func.html>.

California Mental Health Advocates for Children and Youth Web site is available at <http://www.cmhacy.org>. The organization’s annual conference—A Call to Leadership on the Behalf of Children, Youth, and Families—takes place in Monterey, CA, May 8–10, 2013.

Investigating the Links Between Mental Health and Behaviour in Schools is available at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/76169/0019851.pdf>.

Children's Mental Health: What Every Policymaker Should Know is available at http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_929.html.

Perspectives on Residential and Community-Based Treatment for Youth and Families is available at <http://www.magellanhealth.com/media/2718/CommunityResidential Treatment White Paper.pdf>. Excerpt: "Mental health experts agree that it is preferable to treat youth with serious mental disorders outside of institutional settings in general and outside of the correctional system in particular."

Sources

1. Section 300.104 of Title 34 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR). Retrieved from <http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/ac/rescare.asp>.
2. New Freedom Commission on Mental Health. 2003. *Achieving the Promise: Transforming Mental Health Care in America*. Final Report (DHHS Pub. No. SMA-03-3832) Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

After Ten Years of Positive Behavioral Supports: Los Angeles Unified Delivers

In 2004, the Los Angeles Unified School District, despite its size and diversity, decided to adopt a districtwide system of positive behavioral supports. What does it have to show for its decade of effort?

Implementing Schoolwide Positive Behavior Supports is a "team sport," says Nancy Franklin, a director in the Division of Special Education at the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). So it was fitting that teams—each consisting of a mix of assistant principals, deans, counselors, general and special education teachers, and support staff—from 17 schools gathered at district headquarters recently for two days of training in Building Effective Schools Together (BEST). The goal was to help schools implement the three-tiered intervention model of school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports (SWPBIS, see pages 10 and 11) that is showing impressive results internationally in reducing behavioral problems in schools.

It's been ten years since Los Angeles first participated in BEST. In 2003, Laura Zeff, a district behavior specialist, attended that first training on the multitiered model that is the heart of BEST. State Improvement Grant money has since allowed hundreds of educators from the district's schools to receive formal BEST training, including 30 this school year. LAUSD has taken the principles of positive behavior supports embedded in BEST and turned them into a districtwide program, now called Schoolwide Positive Behavior Supports, that has influenced every one of its school sites.

The Start

In 2003, district data showed that students with disabilities were disproportionately represented in school suspensions. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires states to address

significant disproportionality, so the district was charged with improving its numbers. “We had the responsibility to lower suspension rates for [these students],” says Franklin, but she and her staff found that disproportionality was a systemic problem. They reasoned, “Why not try to reduce suspensions for the whole school?” In Franklin’s words, “We put boots on the ground” and sent behavioral specialists into targeted schools. These specialists spent hours sitting in the dean’s office, observing the schools’ disciplinary procedures, and then using data to initiate change. Schoolwide positive behavioral supports became the basis of the revised discipline policy that LAUSD ultimately adopted in 2007 for every one of its more than 1,000 schools. The program is data driven, and the district’s numbers are impressive: between 2006 and 2012, the number of days of suspension for all students fell by nearly 75 percent. Between 2008 and 2012, days of suspension for students with disabilities fell by more than 50 percent. And between 2005 and 2011, data from the California Department of Education show the number of expulsions dropping by 73 percent.

Principles of Success

LAUSD’s three-tiered system follows the research-proven model of SWPBIS:

- Tier I universal supports are provided to all students and establish clear behavioral expectations that are displayed, frequently taught, and uniformly reinforced.
- Tier II selected supports take place in the classroom or in separate small groups and are aimed at students with at-risk behavior who need more than the universal supports.
- Tier III targeted support includes an individual behavior management plan for high-risk students and may involve community agency collaboration.

The first day of a recent BEST training, which Zeff and others conducted, focused on Tier I efforts to build a foundation that helps all students “be safe, be respectful, be responsible,” the three-pronged mantra that the district has adopted from BEST. “If that foundation is in place, then we can figure out who needs more support.” And, she added, “fewer [students] will need additional support.”

BEST is very prescriptive: Schools must have clear behavioral expectations. Those expectations should be posted throughout the school, taught and reviewed ten to twenty times during the year, and recognized and positively reinforced by all adults in the school. The latter includes noticing and frequently acknowledging good behavior. And the expectations should not be presented to students as a list of don’ts (with the exception of such rules as “no guns”). “They need to know what we want them to do,” said Zeff. In the training, she asks each participant to write down some schoolwide expectations for behavior and then to discuss their responses as a team. “If your [the school staff’s] expectations aren’t the same, how will the kids know what they are?”

Importance of Data

“We use data for academics,” said Zeff, “but we tend to use emotion rather than data when it comes to behavior.” The district is working to change that, because keeping accurate data is the best way to know what is working. In the training she challenges school teams by asking, “How are discipline data, including office referrals, used? Are data shared at faculty meetings?” Interventions, she said, should be designed based on data. One focus of behavioral data looks at issues of location: where are the problems occurring and what change in that location will effect positive change in student behavior?

Training attendees were given many examples. Suppose the problem is trash in the lunchroom. One school affixed the name of one of three popular musical groups to three different trashcans. Students could choose which group they wanted to hear at lunchtime by tossing trash in the can of their choice.

The can with the most trash would then determine what music was played. This strategy creates a win-win situation: the students get to vie for the music of their choice, and lunchroom trash ceases to be a problem. That's an example of "when doing the right thing is more rewarding than the negative behavior," says Zeff.

New Practices

Nowhere is the success of positive behavior supports more evident in LAUSD than at Garfield High School, where suspensions have fallen dramatically—from a high of 683 in the 2008–9 school year to only one (1!) in each of the past two years. "We were suspending kids at a high rate, but [the misbehavior] was still happening," says a former school administrator. "We had to attack [the problem] from an instructional position and emphasize the positive." That meant building classroom lessons around the BEST focus on safety, respectfulness, and responsibility.

Tackling the problem was certainly a team sport at Garfield, where (in addition to the usual teachers, students, counselors, administrators, and other staff) the behavioral support team included community leaders and parents, more than 100 of whom were trained as school volunteers. These kinds of school-family-community partnerships are realizing a renewed popularity. Research is proving them to be effective in supporting educational achievement, school-to-career readiness, and greater safety in both schools and the communities.¹

"It was nothing new," said the administrator; "we just started doing it." Another change involved switching from paper office discipline referrals to an online system that made it easier to track referrals from individual teachers. Those with high numbers of referrals received classroom management training designed to help them become more effective with students, thus contributing to a more positive school climate.

With these new practices in place, not only did the suspension rate fall dramatically, but fewer students required Tier II or Tier III interventions; and the school's Academic Performance Index rose. "The Garfield story is shared proudly," says Franklin. "They organized the school; they pulled together, and they said to kids who were at risk: 'We believe in you.'" The emphasis on the positive, which produced change at Garfield, is a core element of the BEST training.

At the end of Zeff's second training day, she asked the teams to commit to paper three positive steps they would implement at their schools. The team from Horace Mann Middle School focused on securing training videos for professional development, implementing a student reward program for good behavior, and challenging the staff to a day where everyone initiates four positive interactions with students for every negative interaction. The 107th Street Elementary School team chose to form a schoolwide positive behavior support committee, implement a lunchroom supervision plan, and offer opportunities for teachers to share best practices. Whatever steps they take, says Zeff, creating a positive school culture with recognition and reward systems "has to be schoolwide and public, with rewards for teachers and staff as well as for students."

Catching On

At first only a minority of staff in LAUSD believed that Schoolwide Positive Behavior Supports would work, says Zeff. Now SWPBS has won over the majority. Franklin believes that the change is partly explained by the emphasis on prevention. "When you focus on prevention, you engage people who don't usually focus on behavior. And when you marry instruction and behavior and ask, 'How can I prevent disruptive behavior in the classroom?' all teachers and administrators want to be part of that conversation." To be part of the team.

Resources

The LAUSD Discipline Policy Resource Manual is at http://notebook.lausd.net/portal/page?_pageid=33,911662&_dad=ptl&_schema=PTL_EP.

Read more about **California's State Improvement Grant** at <http://www.calstat.org/sig.html>.

Action Team for Partnership, designed to help organize and sustain a program of school, family, and community partnerships that work together to connect family and community involvement with school improvement goals, is available at http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/nnps_model/school/atp.htm.

Effective Strategies for Creating Safer Schools and Communities: Fostering School, Family, and Community Involvement is available at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/publications/44%20guide%207%20fostering%20school%20family%20and%20community%20involvement.pdf>.

Resources from Other States

Florida's Positive Behavior Support Project: A Multi-Tiered Support System is at <http://flpbs.fmhi.usf.edu>.

Michigan's *School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports: Implementation Guide* is available at http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/SchoolwidePBS_264634_7.pdf.

Positive Behavior Support in Schools from New Jersey is available at http://www.njpbs.org/school_wide_pbs/index.htm.

School-Wide Positive Behavioral Support: A Plan for Pennsylvania is at <http://www.elc-pa.org/pubs/downloads/english/imp-PBSBriefingBook%2012-18-08.pdf>.

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