Students with Problem Behavior: What to Do?

by Katie Bubak

BEHAVIOR ISSUES IN SCHOOLS
Schools are vital environments in which children, families, educators, and community members have opportunities to learn, teach, and grow. With an increasingly heterogeneous population of students, educators are being asked to achieve new and more results while being held responsible to work under already established initiatives (Sugai et al., 2000). The curricular responsibilities of schools have become broader, larger, and more sophisticated as families, communities, and cultures have matured and become more complex (Sugai & Horner, 2009).

Our schools should be safe havens for teaching and learning, free of crime and violence. School personnel face daily and continuous challenges in efforts to establish and maintain safe and orderly environments where teachers can teach and students can learn (Algozzine et al., 2012). For nearly 180 days each year and six hours each day, educators strive to provide students with learning environments that are stable, positive, and predictable. Yet, despite decades of efforts to improve student behavior in schools, many continue to be negatively impacted by a range of issues.

Osher, Dwyer, Jimerson, and Brown (2012) contend that, “within the context of high-stakes testing, too often, resources are only invested in those programs that purport to directly impact student achievement” (p. 38). As a result, factors related to student behavior, safety, and support have historically been shoved off of the agenda and replaced with discussions on test scores. More recently, as an outcome of the sporadic rate of high-profile violent acts occurring in schools paired with an increasing frequency of students’ anti-social conduct, educators and stakeholders are amplifying their focus on student behavior and school safety.

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"It looks like you have everything under control."
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CREATING SAFE & EFFECTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Students who engage in violent, disruptive, and dangerous behavior compromise the fundamental ability of our schools to educate children, making violent, defiant, disruptive, and dangerous behaviors an issue for all students and all schools (Crone & Horner, 2003). In order to foster learning, all members of a school need to feel safe and supported. Parrett and Budge (2012) noted, “Without these conditions, the mind reverts to a focus on survival” (p. 110). Creating safe and effective learning environments for all students is a critical factor influencing student outcomes.

Youths engaged in these antisocial and aggressive behaviors represent a heterogeneous group of students. Jimerson, Hart, and Renshaw (2012) argue, Given that both the presence and potential for school violence hampers the educational environment, it is imperative that educators and scholars are equipped with current empirical information that will help them better understand, intervene with, and prevent antisocial and aggressive behaviors among youth. (p. 10)

Educating large populations of students exhibiting challenging behavior intensifies the workload of today’s teachers. Educators are given the challenge of aligning student safety, support, and achievement through the use of research-validated strategies.

According to Sugia et al. (2000), “limited resources, diverse students, families and neighborhoods; increases in school violence; and increased social responsibilities have decreased the efficiency and effectiveness of many schools” (p. 139). Crone and Horner (2003) believe that many schools, whether because of a lack of training or a lack of resources, do not have the tools or skills to identify and implement effective solutions to behavior problems. A full spectrum of challenging student behavior, from mild forms of anti-social behavior to students engaging in violent acts, must be managed by well-informed educators.

ANTI-SOCIAL AND CHALLENGING STUDENT BEHAVIOR

Problem behaviors are a major barrier to the social, vocational, and physical success of each individual (Dunlap, Sailor, Horner, & Sugia, 2009). Maag (2006) highlighted the importance of identifying and assisting school-age children and adolescents exhibiting antisocial behaviors due to the fact,

Youths who lack social competence have been at risk for many difficulties, including, but not limited to, aggression, rejection by peers, academic failure, loneliness, social dissatisfaction, difficulty maintaining employment and relationships with others, mental illness, and contact with the legal system. (p. 4)

Students with problem behavior are also more likely than students without problem behavior to drop out before completing high school; to be suspended, expelled, or placed in alternative school settings; to commit crimes against individuals or the community; to have difficult relationships with their parents and siblings; and to have a higher probability of being arrested (Crone & Horner, 2003). According to Dunlap et al. (2006), if left untreated, challenging behavior will most likely get worse.

Dunlap and colleagues (2006) define challenging behavior as “any repeated pattern of behavior, or perception of behavior, that interferes with or is at risk of interfering with optimal learning or engagement in prosocial interactions with peers and adults” (p. 30). According to Scott (2001), students’ challenging behavior can consume up to 80 percent of a teacher’s instructional time. In 2007-2008, 34 percent of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that student misbehavior interfered with their teaching and a lower percentage of secondary school teachers than elementary school teachers agreed that school rules were enforced by teachers (56% versus 79%) and by the principal in their school (86% versus 89%) (Roberts, Zhang, & Truman, 2010). In order to capitalize on and regain prime instructional time, teachers must be equipped with tools and strategies to contend with students’ wide variety of conduct.

STUDENT BEHAVIOR AND NEGATIVE ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

Loss of instructional time is only one of many negative academic outcomes of student misbehavior. In examining the effects of student behavior on instruction, Fosco, Frank, and Dishion (2012) consistently found, “students who exhibited more problem behavior were less involved in academic interactions with teachers and were typically provided less, and less effective, instruction than were students who did not exhibit problem behavior” (p. 74). Although student support, school safety, and academic achievement are often discussed independently, they are interactive and often interdependent.

Two risk factors for students struggling with disruptive behavior, outlined by Jimerson et al. (2012), are: (1) teachers lacking strategies for addressing students’
developmental delays and (2) the increase of negative teacher-attention that hampers the development of positive student-teacher relationships. Protective factors for students include: (1) teachers employing effective instructional techniques; (2) reinforcement of student strengths and behaviors; (3) early interventions for learning problems; (4) positive regard for students and student-teacher relationships (Jimerson et al., 2012). These findings indicate that teachers play a persuasive role in shaping the learning environments. In turn, these educational contexts can exacerbate or curtail students' development of inappropriate and ineffective behaviors.

In order to improve the adverse student behavior, all students need to be explicitly taught a positive behavior pattern, be given opportunities to practice and display what they have learned, and receive feedback regarding the effectiveness of their efforts (Walker et al., 1996). As "classroom architects," the demands on educators extend immeasurably beyond the scope of merely covering the necessary curriculum. Working proactively and preventively, administrators, teachers, and additional staff are responsible for educating today's youth in contexts where students feel safe and have a deep understanding of the appropriate and expected behaviors.

**FOCUS ON PREVENTION**

Educators often rely on established forms of discipline to improve student behavior. According to Sugai and Horner (2009), "Most schools develop an overreliance on reactive schoolwide discipline codes that rely on reprimands and punishers to inhibit rule-violating behaviors and actually hinder the establishment of a positive school social culture" (p. 311). In essence, rule-breaking behavior is frequently answered with some means of punishment. "Such perceptions often result in extremely punitive school discipline policy as well as delimiting the range of options pursued by school personnel" (Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders, 1990, p. 57). "The question then becomes, what is the purpose of discipline in schools?" (Parrett & Budge, 2012, p. 108). Is it to teach or to punish?

Many students fail because of unclear expectations, poorly planned routines and a lack of consistency, and/or inadequate physical arrangements. The Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders (1990) recommends that schools create flexible, unified school discipline policies that include:

1. A major discussion of the desired school climate and its elements.
2. A set of expectations regarding the types of behaviors necessary to achieve the school climate.
3. A delineation of the instructional methods that will be used to teach those expectations, including a school's response to the acquisition of the expectations.
4. A section addressing the responses that might be taken to the violation of the expectations.

5. A delineation of the procedure to implement those responses, which treat all students in an individualized fashion.

6. A requirement that administrators keep records concerning the strategy selection for expectation violations. (p. 50)

Schools must transition from a reactive stance, where staff responds after the fact, to an anticipatory system that utilizes integrated, comprehensive approaches to prevent antisocial behavior in the context of schooling (Walker et al., 1996). This is a shift from "putting out fires" to committing to counteract problem behavior before it develops.

**PREVENTATIVE BEHAVIOR SUPPORT**

The idea behind behavior support is that predictable problem behaviors are preventable problems. When proactive systems are in place, the number of problem behaviors that occur due to inadequate or poorly designed rules, routines, and/or physical arrangements will be reduced through prevention (Scott, 2001). This concept represents a departure from a more traditional reactive model in which systems simply wait for, identify, and then respond to failures.

The prevention model is not always an easy one to bring to fruition. Muscott, Mann, and LeBrun (2008) expand on this in stating, "Supporting systemic change in behavior support practices from an overreliance on punishment to comprehensive, positive, and preventive approaches is a long-term journey requiring considerable support" (p. 192). This journey, moving away from reactive practices towards preventative strategies, requires stakeholders to gain the necessary knowledge framed within a formal and systematic implementation process.

**Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports**

Positive Behavior Support originated in the 1980s (Dunlap et al., 2009) due to the identified need for improved selection, implementation, and documentation of continued on page 24
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effective behavioral interventions for students with behavior disorders. Positive Behavior Support (PBS) emerged as an approach to produce consistent, socially acceptable behavior changes. Within the past two decades, PBS grew into the title of Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Today PBS and PBIS are used synonymously.

PBIS is a general term that refers to the application of positive behavioral interventions and systems to achieve socially important behavior change (Sugia et al., 2000). As a result, PBIS is defined, "as a framework for enhancing the adoption and implementation of a continuum of evidence-based interventions to achieve academically and behaviorally important outcomes for all students" (Sugia et al., 2000). Within this definition, the mutually beneficial relationship between academic student success and social behavior student success is highlighted.

One of the defining and appealing features of Positive Behavior Support is that it fits individual contexts. As a result, the model's expansion has led to the implementation of Schoolwide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS), which is utilized at the systemic level of schools. The application of SWPBIS results in socially important behavior change. Scott (2007) describes SWPBIS as,

Neither a curriculum nor a program of prescribed strategies. Rather, SWPBIS can be conceptualized as a framework, under which stakeholders in the system identify problems, select agreeable strategies to improve important outcomes, facilitate consistent implementation, and use data to evaluate their success. Schoolwide systems of PBIS are focused on changing the environment in a manner that predicts positive outcomes for the stakeholders. (p. 106)

SWPBIS advocates that schools develop, teach, and encourage positive behaviors and values as a school community.

The framework is flexible, and therefore compatible with the culture and climate of each implementing school (Bradshaw & Pas, 2011). As seen in scaling-up research, when implementing a new process, the local contextual factors matter (Klingner, Boardman, & McMaster, 2013). "Every educational environment is unique, and matching intervention to the features of the context is key to ensuring a program is successfully implemented and sustained" (Harn, Parisi, & Stoolmiller, 2013, p. 184). PBIS implemented at the schoolwide level offers the necessary flexibility to fit each unique context.

The Three Tiers of SWPBIS

Schools that have effective and complete systems of behavior support and interventions in place to address three levels of behavioral need: (1) Universal support (Primary - Tier 1): All students must have proactive classroom management procedures in place; (2) Targeted group interventions (Secondary - Tier 2): Students who are at risk of developing patterns of problem behavior must have a system for reducing behavior before it becomes worse over time; and (3) Individualized student interventions (Tertiary - Tier 3): Student with serious problem behavior must receive intensive, individualized behavior support (Crone, Hawken, & Horner, 2010). This well-crafted approach to prevention improves the efficiency and effectiveness with which school, classroom, and individual behavior support systems operate.

Working proactively, instead of "waiting for students to fail" as with traditional discipline programs, all students are taught the expected behaviors as part of the core curriculum. Behaviors are frequently assessed, and students meeting the expectations are acknowledged and rewarded. When students do not display appropriate behavior, they are provided with scientifically validated interventions with increased time and support until they achieve success.

According to the OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports (2010), "The mission of schools is to maximize opportunities for students to achieve three primary and inter-related competence areas, academic, social skills, and life skills, that enable the participation, contributions, and success in schools and larger communities" (p. 9). Schoolwide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports creates systemic structure for addressing the continuum of problem behavior through proactive approaches, enabling schools to achieve their mission.

For more information about implementing Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports in your school, contact Dr. Bubak at katiebubak@boisestate.edu.
REFERENCES


OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports.


