

WAY TO GO School Success for Children with Mental Health Needs

FACT SHEET #1

Why States and Communities Should Implement School-Wide Positive Behavior Support Integrated with Mental Health Care

Positive Effect on Children's Lives

WAY TO GO—praise for a child and a roadmap for policymakers. A combination of school-wide positive behavior support (PBS) and the provision of mental health services, based on mental health system of care values and with strong evidence of effectiveness, can have a dramatic effect on children's lives.

Education systems and mental health systems are struggling to implement separate reforms that address similar goals. Linking those reforms in a combined initiative strengthens both and provides a mechanism for helping all children.

Education-System Goals

Schools today face two significant needs: 1) to improve academic achievement, including the need to meet the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act, and 2) to foster a school climate that promotes learning by reducing discipline problems and addressing students' social and emotional development.

These issues are linked. Research shows that academic, social and behavioral problems are so connected that interventions targeting one often affect the others. Consequently, effective schools support and foster both high academic and high behavioral standards.

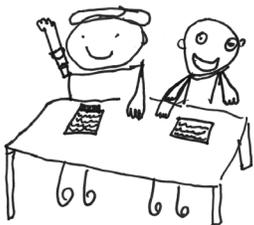
School success depends on many factors, including social and emotional development and mental health. Four elements identified as essential for a successful school are a caring school community, teaching appropriate behavior and social problem-solving skills, implementing positive behavior support and providing academic instruction.

Success also hinges on whether the environment is both conducive to learning and supportive of families.

School-Safety Issues

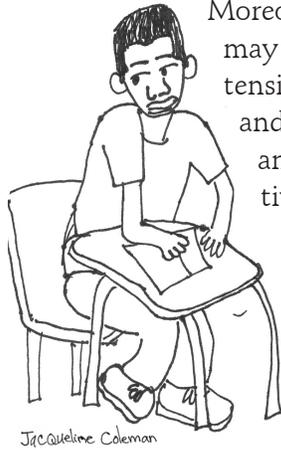
Academic achievement is also linked with school safety. Both teachers and the general public cite disciplinary issues (including a perceived increase in drugs, violence, gangs and weapons) as the number-one problem in schools, and teachers say they feel unprepared to manage problem behaviors.

In efforts to improve school safety, many school officials react by trying to remove persistent troublemakers from school. But research shows that rigid and inflexible approaches to discipline do not work and, further, that they disproportionately harm students of color and students with disabilities. In contrast, positive and relational approaches can improve the school environment without resort to exclusionary practices.



"I know the answer!" by Aslan, grade 3*

* The drawings in these Fact Sheets were produced for Way to Go by students in two programs operated by Washington Very Special Arts: the School for Arts in Learning (SAIL), a public charter school serving children K-12, and the ARTICulate employment training program.



Moreover, punitive discipline approaches are often counterproductive. While they may effectively deter some students, other children respond to punishment by intensifying the very behaviors targeted by the get-tough policies. Inconsistent rules and consequences and a coercive and punitive environment can thus *contribute* to antisocial behavior and punishment can even trigger vandalism or other disruptive behavior.

Often the students who are suspended or expelled are those with serious mental disorders, who require but do not receive mental health services and supports. The recent surge in zero-tolerance for behavioral problems in schools leads many of these students to lose access to quality education.

A punitive discipline policy emphasizes failure, demoralizing both parents and their children. Families of students with behavioral problems in such a system frequently become defensive. Parents say they feel an implicit assumption that they are bad parents and avoid engagement with the school.

More Successful Approach

To address discipline problems, help children learn and meet today’s demands for high academic standards, schools should both improve the learning environment for all students and provide the supports needed by those with more significant problems. These initiatives should include families.

Positive Behavioral Support (PBS)

One effective approach is now being adopted by education systems around the country. Positive behavior support (PBS) improves student behavior by reinforcing desired behaviors and eliminating inadvertent reinforcements for problem behavior. This requires understanding the reason for the behavior and addressing the underlying cause. As a rule, once the problem behavior no longer achieves the same result, schools find that students abandon it.

PBS acknowledges that student functioning in school, home and community requires an array of behavioral skills and competencies that can be effectively taught. Yet even if more clinical office time were available, these skills do not lend themselves to being taught in a clinical setting. They are more effectively taught in the school, home and community where there are opportunities for ongoing reinforcement and practice—two ingredients that are critical for success.

School-wide PBS has emerged as a successful strategy to prevent school violence, the use of alcohol and drugs, possession of firearms and general disruptive behavior. The literature summarizing studies of school-wide PBS suggests that, on average, PBS schools see improvements in social climate and academic performance and experience 20- to 60-percent reductions in disciplinary incidents. Furthermore, the improved behavior enables teachers to use more classroom time for education.

PBS acknowledges that even youngsters with significant problems can develop self-management skills, learning how to monitor their behavior, recognize its purpose and understand how a chain of events can lead to escalation of problem behavior. PBS schools help students gain the insight and skills to manage their own behavior and develop socially and academically.

Three-Tiered Approach

Using an approach adapted from the public health field, PBS uses a three-tiered system of prevention and support that addresses the spectrum of behavioral needs and serves all children—from those with behavior issues that are typical of their developmental stage, as well as those at risk for or already exhibiting challenging behaviors.

For the general student body—roughly 80 percent of students—school-wide PBS (Tier One), if implemented effectively, may be sufficient. Tier One focuses on changing environmental stimuli that contribute to disruptive behavior and on changing adult behavior in school so that all staff are supportive and consistently teach, reinforce, and model expected behaviors. For example, if orderly behavior in the hallways is an objective, strategies might include:

- ☆ removing the environmental trigger, such as overcrowding in the hallway at certain times;
- ☆ ensuring the presence of adults to remind students of expected behavior;
- ☆ teaching what is expected, why it is important, what the correct behavior looks like; and
- ☆ recognition and positive reinforcement and incentives.

Some Students Need More

Five to 15 percent of students who do not respond to universal methods do respond to more specialized attention that could take the form of a group intervention. These children fall into PBS Tier Two. Hallway behavior that may be exhibited by children in Tier Two, for example, is pushing other people when inadvertently bumped. A Tier Two intervention could be group sessions where students problem-solve and come up with strategies to prevent the problem behavior.

Finally, some children with the most challenging behavior need individualized services (Tier Three). Often these are children with serious mental disorders and extreme functional impairment. They represent 3 to 7 percent of all school-age children. These students should be involved in a comprehensive home, school and community plan using individualized services and techniques coordinated across agencies.

Many schools find it more difficult to help students in Tiers Two and Three. In particular, many PBS schools struggle to find the services and supports for children in Tier Three, particularly when they need comprehensive mental health services.

Role of Families in PBS

Families want quality services for their children and they know what works. PBS schools therefore emphasize a team approach that is inclusive of family. This can improve family-school relationships and lessen the likelihood that adversarial relationships will develop with families whose children struggle in school due to significant mental health and behavioral issues. Rather than naming problems or assigning blame, PBS schools are trained to involve families in constructive problem-solving.

Not all PBS schools find it easy to engage parents. Although it is best practice to include family members on state, district and school-level PBS planning and implementation teams, and to treat families as equal partners in the development of individual behavior plans when the child has intensive needs, this does not always occur.

Mental Health Reforms

At the same time that schools are focused on behavioral issues, mental health systems are struggling to adopt a system of care approach. A mental health system of care is a philosophy about the way services should be delivered to children and their families.

Systems of care are based on values and principles that promote success, safety and permanency in home, school and community. Systems of care meet the changing needs of children and adolescents by furnishing comprehensive mental health services through a coordinated network.

Family engagement—the partnering of families with professionals to effectively help children develop to their potential—and family-driven service plans are hallmarks of best practices in mental health systems of care.

Education Not Always Engaged

While systems of care are a collaboration across child-serving agencies, schools have been far less likely to participate than other agencies, such as child welfare and juvenile justice. As a result, services are often less effective than they could be and the problems a youngster has in school are not adequately addressed.

A second reform in mental health systems is an emphasis on replacing ineffective approaches with evidence-based services and recognized best practices. Systems of care that make such a change achieve better outcomes, including improvements in academic performance, reductions in functional and behavioral deficits, and reduced contact with the juvenile justice system.

PBS and Systems of Care Strongly Endorsed

School-wide PBS—preferably implemented through a statewide initiative so that individual districts and schools can be fully supported in their implementation—is now promoted by the U.S. Department of Education and strongly endorsed by national organizations representing educators, mental health providers and family organizations. Systems of care are similarly supported by the federal Center for Mental Health Services and by numerous national mental health and family organizations.

Benefits of Integration

Integrating education and mental health reforms directly addresses the weaker aspects of each. It enables PBS schools to work better with children in Tiers Two and Three and to engage families. It also significantly strengthens a mental health system of care by engaging the school and enabling all parties to come together around a single plan of care for each child and to address problems that may be exhibited only in the school setting.

A mental health system of care can assist teachers and other personnel through consultation on mental health issues and help schools fully engage families. When parents feel welcomed and engaged, effective alliances are built between families, schools and community agencies.

Full Report Available

Such joint initiatives will be adopted only if their benefits are appreciated by all key actors: schools and education systems, mental health authorities and providers, families and their children. With the goal of making this information available to all of the relevant stakeholders, the Bazelon Center recently conducted a study of initiatives in six states and produced a report, also titled *Way to Go*, setting out a roadmap for school-wide PBS integrated with mental health reforms. The report includes documentation of findings mentioned here, examples of integrated initiatives and recommendations for state, local and federal policymakers on how best to implement them.

The Center also prepared this set of fact sheets to summarize what we learned in our six-state study and alert families, other advocates and policymakers to the issue.

Way to Go

Addressing social and behavioral problems through PBS and systems of care can improve academic performance, school climate and job satisfaction for all who work in a school, while at the same time better meeting the needs of children with serious mental disorders and their families.

