

# Schoolwide Behavior Support

## • Creating Urban Schools that Accommodate Diverse Learners

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- **Increasing numbers of students are coming to school without the self-management, social competence, or literacy awareness skills to readily respond to the instruction and behavioral practices that schools typically employ.**
- **Urban educators face tremendous challenges in trying to ensure a safe learning environment for all students. However, the primary strategy used for creating a safe and civil school has been the use of reactive and punitive strategies, primarily detention, suspension, expulsion, and exclusion, which reduce the educational opportunities of the very students often most in need of educational services.**
- **Blaming students, their families, or the community for the poor outcomes of individual students is ineffective and does not lead to improved outcomes for students. Schools need to develop a climate that places students' well-being as a top priority and includes effective discipline practices to produce change.**
- **Schools are beginning to successfully employ strategies for fostering a positive school climate, increasing capacity to initiate and maintain research-validated practices, and implementing universal prevention programs designed to teach social competency, self-management, and problem-solving.**

Today's educators face a growing challenge to meet both the instructional and behavioral needs of all students (Kame'enui & Carnine, 1998; Martella, Nelson, & Marchand-Martella, 2003; Sugai, Kame'enui, Horner, & Simmons, 2002). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 has called for educational practices that will prepare all children to be responsible and positive contributors to society.

Unfortunately, many students come to school without the self-management, social competence, or literacy awareness skills to readily respond to the instruction and behavioral practices that schools typically employ (Sprague, Sugai, & Walker, 1998; Sugai, Kame'enui, Horner, & Simmons, 2002). With a more diverse student population (e.g., students with English as second language, low socioeconomic status, or significant learning and behavioral challenges) than two decades ago, educators are presented with enormous curricular and instructional challenges (Kame'enui & Carnine, 1998). Educators must also face the increase in numbers of students who display severe problem behavior (Rutherford & Nelson, 1995; Sugai & Horner, 1999; Skiba & Peterson, 1999). One of the most troubling responses

has been the use of zero tolerance policies, which often serve as a mechanism for removing the students most in need of the educational services we provide. Trends in school discipline indicate a disturbing movement towards more frequent use of suspension with urban African American males and students identified as needing special education services (Casella, 2001; Losen & Edley, 2001).

The purpose of this article is to present the challenges urban special education administrators face in serving students who present frequent behavior problems in a time of zero tolerance. We will share new strategies that show promise of creating supportive environments for educating a student population with increasingly diverse needs. We will also provide practical recommendations and a look at the future of urban schools and special services.

## The Challenge Urban Educators Face

The increase in the numbers of students who engage in severe problem behavior in schools parallels statistics of rising rates of violence among youth. According to a recent Surgeon General's

Report (2001), although adolescent and youth arrest rates for robbery and homicide were lower in 1999 than in 1983, the rates for aggravated assaults were nearly 70% higher than in 1983. Furthermore, the report summarizes data from self-report studies that indicate that more youth say they are engaging in violent behavior than in 1983. A 1997 report by the Center for Disease Control's Center for Injury Prevention and Control indicated that 8.3% of high school students surveyed had carried a weapon to school (e.g., gun, knife, or club) during the 30 days prior to the survey. Of the students surveyed, 7.4% had been threatened or injured by a weapon during the past year, and 4% reported that they had missed at least one school day because they felt unsafe at school or traveling to school. The New York City Police Department reported "a 6.6 percent increase in major crimes in the schools from July 1, 2001, to March 2001, over the same period the year before. Reports of weapons offenses increased by 11 percent, and reports of misdemeanor assaults increased by 34 percent" (Steinhauer, 2002). Not only do students fear for their safety, but teachers report that they are hesitant to confront students who are engaging in severe problem behavior for fear of violent repercussions (Biglan, 1995). In summary, problem behavior is on the rise, and its presence in urban schools is threatening effective instruction and the overall educational climate (Casella, 2001).

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No one would deny the tremendous challenge urban educators face in trying to ensure a safe learning environment for all students. However, the primary strategy used for creating a safe and civil school has been the use of reactive and punitive strategies, primarily detention, suspension, expulsion, and exclusion. What all these strategies have in common is that they wait for a problem to occur and then respond with punishment. Moreover, the use of discipline strategies that are reactive, punitive, and

exclusionary has "... come down hardest on poor and non-white students" (Casella, 2001, p. 16).

## Overreliance by Schools on Punishment as a Behavior Management Practice

Overreliance on punishment as the primary behavior management practice employed by schools is in direct contradiction to the goals set in the No Child Left Behind Act. The need to educate all students, especially those who display chronic problem behavior, has put a tremendous burden on school personnel, especially in urban settings (Casella, 2001). Unfortunately, few educators are adequately prepared to address the needs of students who display chronic behavior problems (Biglan, 1995; Horner, Diemer, & Brazeau, 1992; Skiba, 2001; Sprague, Sugai, & Walker, 1998). The answer for many schools has been to focus on the removal of challenging students (Ayers, Dohm, & Ayers, 2001; Casella, 2001; Skiba, 2001). Some specific examples recently cited in USA Today (Toppo, 2003 January 13) include:

- In Philadelphia, the first part of the 2002–2003 school year brought the suspensions of 33 kindergartners.
- Minneapolis schools have suspended more than 500 kindergartners over the past two school years for fighting, indecent exposure, and "persistent lack of cooperation," among other offenses. Statewide, Minnesota schools have suspended nearly 4,000 kindergartners, and first and second graders, mostly for fighting, disorderly conduct, and the like.
- In Massachusetts, the percentage of suspended students in prekindergarten through third grade more than doubled between 1995 and 2000.
- In 2001–2002, Greenville, South Carolina, schools suspended 132 first graders, 75 kindergartners, and two preschoolers.

In New York City, the newly created Office of School Safety and Planning will develop what Mayor Bloomberg has described as a "graduated scale of punishment" for students who violate rules. In addition, a new state law was adopted in New York in April, 2001, giving teachers the power to remove disruptive students from their classrooms and send them to "in-school suspension centers" for up to four days (Steinhauer, 2002).

This widespread use of punitive reactive strategies indicates that educators continue to operate from a crisis intervention perspective when dealing with problem behaviors. Not only are the "get tough" approaches employed by many educators ineffective in dealing with severe problem behavior, but there is also some evidence indicating that when schools rely exclusively on punitive responses to severe problem behavior they may actually be *contributing* to the increased rates of problem behavior both in and out of school (Ayers, Dohrn, & Ayers, 2001; Nieto, 1999; Mayer, 1995).

## Special Education: Truly Special or Merely Exclusionary Placement?

Another common strategy for addressing problem behavior has been the placement of students who display challenging behaviors into restrictive special education environments. General education teachers make referrals to special education in an effort to remove students who display challenging behaviors from their classes. In fact, one of the main reasons cited for placing students in more restrictive settings (i.e., self-contained classrooms) is the presence of severe problem behavior (Reichle, 1990). The improper use of special education, especially its disproportionate use with minority students, is a "national concern formally recognized by Congress" (Losen & Edley, 2001, p. 231).

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 Another common strategy for addressing problem behavior has been the placement of students who display challenging behaviors into restrictive special education environments.

Some features of schools that are ineffective in supporting students who display challenging behaviors and that have high rates of referrals for special education services include: a) unclear behavioral expectations; b) inconsistent implementation of consequences for rules infractions or harsh punishments on a routine basis; c) lack of staff agreement on expectations; and d) a failure to accommodate individual student differences (Gottfredson, Gottfredson, & Skroban, 1996; Mayer, 1995).

In fact, schools that have these characteristics are more likely to produce greater numbers of students who engage in severe problem behavior and meet criteria for special education services under the disability category of emotional and behavioral disorder. (Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995). The outlook for students receiving a label indicating an emotional or behavioral disorder is particularly grim. In addition to having the highest dropout rates, students with emotional and behavioral disorder labels are at the greatest risk for being placed in alternative (more restrictive) settings (Eber & Nelson, 1997; Gottfredson, Gottfredson, & Hybl, 1993). It has been determined that among students suspended from school, those with a special education label often represent more than one-third (Losen & Edley, 2001). It seems more than a bit ironic that the students most likely to be suspended or expelled are the very students that can least afford to miss school (Gordon, Della Piana, & Keleher, 2001).

## Promising New Strategies for Creating Supportive and Effective Educational Environments

Furlong and Morrison (2000) state that "severe problem behavior and violence in the schools cannot be seen as something that somebody or something (e.g., a metal detector) will take care of (p. 78)." Schools need to develop a climate that places students' well-being as a top priority and includes effective discipline practices to produce change. An excellent summary of how school contexts have changed and how we as educators must change our thinking and practices in order to support students was provided by Bratten (1997). He stated that schools first need to recognize that they are part of the problem and play a role in the development of social behavior. Blaming students, their families, or the community for the poor outcomes of individual students is ineffective and does not lead to improved outcomes for students. Second, he noted that schools are now being held accountable not just for the number of students that graduate, but for what is happening to the students who are not fitting in (i.e., engaging in severe problem behavior, dropping out, being defiant to adults). The "get tough" approaches that schools often use to handle violence and other severe forms of problem behavior do not take into account the diverse needs of the student population today. If we are going

to create safe and effective school environments, we need to stop looking for "quick fixes" and look at supporting students in schools as a long-term commitment (Zins & Ponti, 1990; Sugai & Horner, 1999).

In 1996, Gottfredson et al. identified several specific strategies that schools have successfully employed to reduce antisocial behavior. These strategies included creating a positive school climate, increasing a school's capacity to initiate and maintain research-validated practices, and implementing programs designed to teach social competency, self-management, and problem-solving.

### Creating a Positive School Climate

Schools that are effective in supporting a student population with diverse needs have: a) positively stated expectations that promote student learning; b) expectations that are clearly communicated and frequently taught to all students; c) schoolwide reinforcement and encouragement of prosocial behavior; and d) mild consequences for rule infractions that do not exclude the student from the academic environment (Sprague, Sugai, & Walker, 1998; Sugai & Horner, 1994; Sugai & Horner, 1999; Sugai, Horner, & Gresham, 2002; Walker, Irvin, & Sprague, 1997).

### Increasing the Capacity of Schools to Initiate and Maintain Research-Validated Practices

The adoption and sustained use of research-validated practices is a critical part of our efforts to improve schools. We have the empirically validated strategies necessary to support students with severe problem behavior in schools. In a review of over 600 studies, social skills instruction, academic modifications/restructuring, and behavioral interventions were seen as the most effective responses to prevent and remediate severe problem behavior (Kuper, 1999; Lawrence et al., 1998; Lipsey, 1992; Tolan & Guerra, 1994). Although we have the strategies, schools often state that they are struggling with money and resources, which impedes their ability to effectively support all students behaviorally and academically. The answer is to provide schools with the empirically validated practices that a) require schools to make the smallest change to produce the largest effect and b) involve implementing a continuum of support that matches the intensity of the

intervention with the severity of the problem behavior presented (Walker et al., 1996).

The adoption and sustained use of research-validated practices is a critical part of our efforts to improve schools.

A framework for improving and sustaining an effective school climate to meet the behavioral and educational needs of all students has been provided by Sugai, Kame'enui, Horner, & Simmons (2002, p. 5):

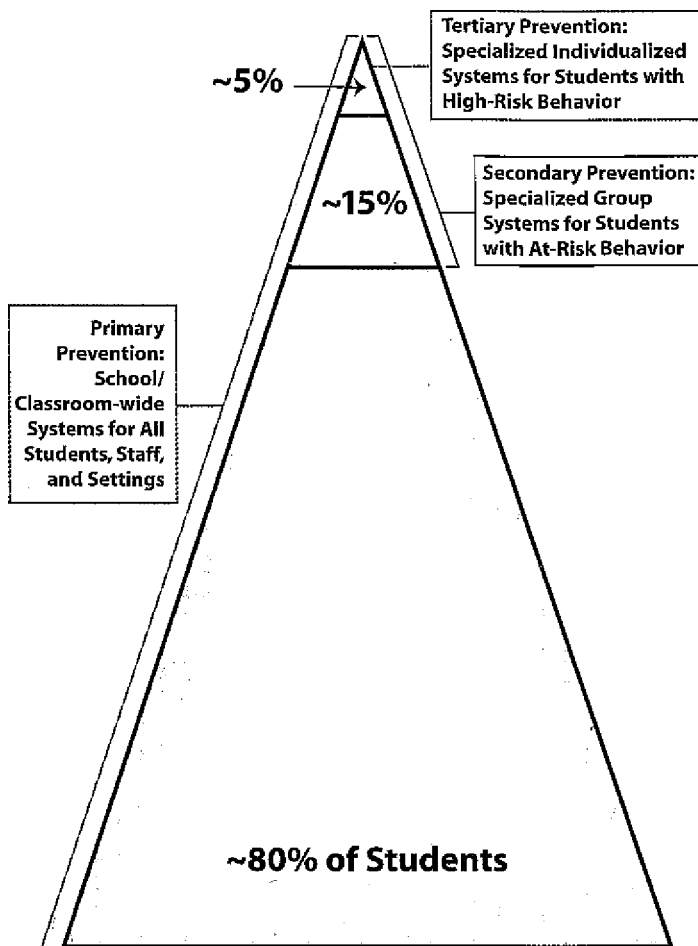
*Six major features characterize an effective behavioral and instructional "systems" approach to thinking about schools as complex, host environments of change: (a) the adoption and sustained use of research-validated practices, (b) data-based decision-making, (c) team-based problem-solving and decision-making processes, (d) active administrator involvement and leadership, (e) an instructional design analysis of teaching social and academic skills, and (f) a continuum of instructional and behavioral support.*

The link between problem behavior and academic achievement is clear. Students who are attending school and engaged in the academic content are less likely to engage in severe problem behavior and more likely to have high academic achievement outcomes (Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995).

### Implementation of Programs Designed to Teach Social Competency, Self-Management, and Problem-Solving

To be effective in supporting all students, as well as efficient with time, money, and resources, schools need to implement a continuum of behavior support, from less intensive to more intensive, based on the severity, intensity, and chronicness of the problem behavior presented (Walker et al., 1996). The continuum of behavior support is detailed in Figure 1. The triangle represents all students in the school and is divided into three levels of intervention. The bottom portion of the triangle represents the 80% of students who will benefit from universal interventions alone (Colvin, Kame'enui, & Sugai, 1993; Sugai & Horner, 1999; Taylor-Greene et al., 1997). Universal interventions are implemented with all students in all settings. The most popular universal intervention involves

**Figure 1:** Continuum of Schoolwide Instructional and Positive Behavior Support



adopting a schoolwide approach to discipline that is designed to create a positive school environment.

The middle portion of the triangle represents the estimated 15% of students that are at risk for engaging in severe problem behavior. These students need intermediate, targeted, group interventions. Intermediate level interventions are highly efficient, "packaged" interventions that can be implemented with a group of students needing similar levels of support (Crone, Horner, & Hawken, 2003; Hawken & Horner, in press; March & Horner, 2002). An example of an intermediate level intervention is the Behavior Education Program (BEP) developed at Fern Ridge Middle School in Elmira, Oregon. The BEP allows the school to efficiently identify and serve students at risk for school failure. The identification of students includes surveying all fifth grade teachers in the

three elementary schools served; reviewing archival records, such as office discipline records and school attendance; meeting with the students' parents or guardians; and direct observations (Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995). Students served through the BEP receive daily feedback from each of their teachers on their behavior, with an emphasis placed on what is expected in order to be successful at school. Teachers and parents are trained to provide specific and positive feedback and acknowledgement when students demonstrate prosocial behaviors and skills required to be successful at school (Crone, Horner, & Hawken, 2003; Hawken & Horner, in press).

The top portion of Figure 1 represents the approximately 5% of students who are engaging in the most severe forms of problem behavior and thus require intensive, individualized interventions. For these students, a functional behavioral assessment is conducted, and the information is used to develop an individualized behavior support plan (Lane, Umbreit, & Beebe-Frankenberger, 1999).

## Conclusion

Twenty-first century urban educators face a growing challenge to support the instructional and behavioral needs of all students. Statistics indicating increased rates of violence among youth correspond with an increase in the numbers of students engaging in severe problem behavior in schools. Research has clearly identified school characteristics that lead to increases in problem behaviors. Teachers and paraprofessionals who are unprepared to educate students with severe problem behavior continue to struggle to support them.

Ineffective behavior management practices that focus on removing students from the educational environment will only serve to *increase* the number of children left behind, thus increasing the number of adults in the future who lack the skills necessary to be positive and productive citizens. The common practice of referring children with challenging behaviors to special education programs appears to have the long-term effect of removing those students most in need of educational services from the general education environment where peers are more likely to be modeling prosocial behavior. There are critical steps that schools can take to change the current ineffective practices of exclusion and punishment.

It is essential for schools to effectively support all students. Empirically supported practices that support students with severe problem behavior are available (Lipsey & Wilson, 1993; Tolan & Guerra, 1994; Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995). Schools must start with a preventive approach that is universally applied to all students. This proactive strategy must focus on clarifying the positive behaviors needed to be successful at school and provide multiple opportunities for educators to teach those behaviors and support them by frequently acknowledging students when they perform the behavior. The implementation of a continuum of positive behavior support based on the severity of the problem behavior students present should be part of the school's behavior management plan. For this to be effective, it must be supported by administrators with the necessary time, money, and resources.

It is clear that implementing proactive universal strategies for improving school discipline in urban schools will fall far short of addressing the many challenges that exist, such as poverty, transience, and high incidence of abuse, to name but a few (Casella, 2001). The goal of a schoolwide behavior support plan is to create an educational environment that focuses on desired behaviors and includes mechanisms for teaching and acknowledging socially competent behavior. Thus, when students come to school ill-prepared to meet the behavioral and academic expectations placed on them, educators will be provided an environment and opportunities to teach the desired social behaviors instead of merely punishing and excluding the students most in need of educational services.

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