

# School Discipline that Works

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### Abstract

This is the third in a series of papers examining the issue of school discipline and alternatives to traditional disciplinary policies. The first paper examined the ineffectiveness of traditional suspension, particularly out-of-school suspension, concluding that suspension is generally ineffective because it removes students from educational contexts, usually with no alternative support, and does nothing to teach prosocial alternatives to problem behaviors. The second paper examined some variations on traditional out-of-school suspension and alternatives to suspension in general. Alternatives are most effective if they teach all students positive behaviors, reward positive behaviors when they occur, and ensure that when students do misbehave that they still receive appropriate instructional time and are also trained in other behaviors they could have used instead of the one that brought them in violation of the school's code of conduct. This paper looks at broader interventions used as alternatives to suspension. The Center for Public Safety Initiatives is involved in several efforts in Rochester to improve school disciplinary policies, and these papers should help inform these efforts.

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Discipline issues include but are not limited to students being disruptive, cutting class, cursing, bullying, sexual harassment, vandalism, fighting, and defiance. Many schools punish students for discipline issues by suspending the student, giving the student detention, implementing Saturday school, and even placing the student in alternative schools, but research has shown that these options do not usually solve the bigger problem; they do not usually address the underlying behavior. Further, they often use time in school itself as a punishment, possibly decreasing the students' willingness to engage with school. Those methods are short-term and can be damaging to the student's education; long-term methods are needed so that it reduces the incidence and prevalence of behavioral problems in the first place and increase academic success for students who misbehave. Researchers have concluded that school suspension, especially out-of-school suspension, is damaging to students' education and does not fix problem behaviors in the long run (Kaeser, 1979; Sautner, 2001).

United States public school data from the academic year 2005-2006 indicated that 75% of suspensions lasted five days or more, and 20% of students with disciplinary issues were transferred to specialized schools. Suspending students and removing them from an educational setting or disrupting their educational setting has led to dropouts and school disengagement. This has prompted much research to understand what approach and methods help reduce behavioral problems and improve academic performances in schools.

Research has found that identifying students who are showing signs of early aggressive behavior and intervening early on can help prevent the student from having behavioral problems and academic underachievement, since early aggressive behavior it is a strong predictor of later aggression (Tegasi & Rothman, 2001). It is important to understand that the sooner intervention programs are implemented and students are assessed to understand which students might need more help, the better chance they have for future success. Research has even concluded that as

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early as entry to kindergarten, students can be assessed for antisocial behavior, and prevention interventions can be implemented (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). School-wide intervention programs and many other prevention programs are shown to be more effective in reeducating children about behavioral problems and increasing their academic success. Many of those programs function with the philosophy that preventing the problems before they become a bigger issue is the key to effectively reducing behavioral problems.

One of the most well-known interventions that many schools use is the school-wide intervention; this name indicates that it is universal and applied to all the students in the school. Many researchers have determined the effectiveness of this method, especially when it is correctly implemented. The Three-Tiered Model of Prevention and Intervention is a school-wide universal method to reduce behavioral problems. In this model, all students are given a base level of support, including specific education around proper in-school behavior and how to handle conflicts. There are also ways to handle low-level problems, such as peer mediators. Generally in this model, positive behaviors are rewarded school-wide. Students that are in need of more guidance toward success are assessed and given extra needed services (tier 2), which may include special classes or meetings with administrators. The third tier's services include individually-tailored interventions for students with the most serious needs (usually less than 5% of the student population). The Three-Tiered Model is based on three principles: 1) to provide, for all the students, universal intervention, 2) to screen students and determine which students are in need of more services, and 3) consistently providing support for the students based on the results of the screening and assessment.

However, research has found that school-wide intervention programs are not helping all the students as expected. It has been shown that some students are unable to benefit from the universal programs, even though other studies suggest otherwise. It is believed that those

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students who are not benefiting from the universal program fall into one of the two pathways. There is the social behavior deficit pathway and an academic skill deficit pathway. The social behavior deficit pathway refers to students who enter school and already exhibit poor social skills and behavior problems. The academic skill deficit pathway refers to students who enter school and do not exhibit behavioral concerns but have academic deficits; however, in the long term, those students often develop behavioral problems due to academic failure. Therefore, this academic skill deficit pathway indicates that academic and behavioral challenges faced by students are linked.

Students who fall in those two pathways may not benefit from the school-wide universal methods because they may have needs that must be met with other or more intensive methods (McIntosh, Homer, Chard, Boland, & Good, 2006). However, if schools are able to recognize that students are in need of a more personalized method to improve academic achievement and behavior problems, then many other programs that have been shown to effectively work can help improve their outcomes as well. In other words, effective early assessments are crucial, and students showing signs of need must be addressed in more comprehensive ways.

Snell, Voorhees, Walker, Berlin, Jamison, and Stanton-Chapman (2014) examined the universal intervention program Universal Problem-Solving Approach for Difficult Classroom Routine. The research found that the program was beneficial to the students, and they do reduce behavioral problems and improve academic performance. However, McIntosh, Homer, Chard, Boland, and Good (2006) found that this universal program does not work for some students because, many times, the students fall into one of the pathways discussed above.

Snell, et al.'s (2014) study, nonetheless, showed the benefits of the Universal Problem-Solving Approach for Difficult Classroom Routines. For the study, a total of six high school classrooms (seven groups of children) were assigned to the Head Start program. The classrooms

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received workshops and coaching sessions on universal Positive Behavior Support. The classrooms had head teachers and assistant teachers, as well as two types of coaches: project coaches and program coaches. The classrooms that were chosen were determined to have multiple risk factors, such as students who are from one-parent households and students who have witnessed police activities, family violence, and sexual abuse in their homes. The intervention was implemented after one month of school being in session. During that one month, classrooms were videotaped. Videos were examined to determine which routines were stressful due to high amounts of behavioral problems. Then, classroom routines were adjusted to address these common behavior problems. Results indicated that the students in all six classes showed a decrease in inappropriate behavior after the intervention; it also indicated that students' inappropriate behavior decreased during routine classroom activities (Snell et al, 2014).

The study conducted by McIntosh, et al. (2006) also examined a school-wide universal intervention program and the pathways discussed above to determine how behavior patterns emerge in elementary school and how the behavioral problems and academic deficits contribute to future problems. The goal was to identify school risk factors, especially the factors that lead to students being able to benefit from a school-wide behavioral intervention. It also examined how schools identify students that are in need of more support. Students from kindergarten through fifth grade were examined whose schools practiced school-wide intervention, including reading support programs and behavioral support programs. For all students, the level of problem behavior was measured by assessing Office Discipline Referrals (ODRS), and reading skills were measured by using the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Literary Skills. The ODRS is an index that documents behavior problems; the school staff issues ODRS to students with serious violation issues such as fighting, vandalism, harassment, and noncompliance. The results indicated that there is an interaction between reading skill, academic skill, and behavioral

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problems; in other words, each of these factors affects the others. It was also shown that lower levels of reading skills corresponded to more students receiving ODRS and therefore suggests that students are at risk for both future academic and behavioral problems. This also indicates that students with these risk factors (disciplinary referrals and literacy deficits) are non-responsive to school-wide interventions (McIntosh, et al., 2006).

These two studies show that school-wide interventions may show promising effects in reducing behavioral problems and promoting academic achievement. However, there are still many students that are not benefiting from the universal programs. Those students are in need of extra support and more beneficial and specific intervention programs. As stated, students who are unable to succeed academically will likely also develop behavioral problems, and students who already have behavioral problems will be more likely to get labeled as a misbehaved student and, therefore, will have a difficult time succeeding academically. Many researchers believe that interventions need to start at a younger age. Therefore, it is important to identify children with academic deficits and behavioral problems (especially aggressive behavior) earlier so that it does not affect their well-being and academic achievements in the future (Cairns & Cairns, 1994).

Wilson, Lipsey, and Derzon (2003) examined school-based programs that were implemented for 20 weeks or less. The school-based programs that were implemented included social competence training *without* the cognitive behavioral component, social competence training *with* the cognitive-behavioral components, behavioral and classroom management techniques, therapy and counseling services, separate schooling for misbehaved students, academic and educational services, and multimodal programs. Multimodal programs integrate social skills training with behavioral interventions, social problem solving, and perspective-taking and self-control interventions. The study found that the programs studied were only effective in reducing already-existing aggression levels rather than preventing future aggression.

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Behavioral and counseling approaches had the largest effect. The smallest effect change was shown in multimodal programs. The results also indicated that to achieve significant reductions in aggression levels, the base rates of aggression needed to be high. For the best results and most effectiveness of the program, the intervention needs to be strict, controlled, and provide intense training for staff. In other words, programs have to be implemented well as they were designed. This could be why multimodal programs were shown to be ineffective; by implementing too many different methods, perhaps no one method was well-implemented.

As mentioned above and in prior papers, many students are labeled as misbehaved, and labeling students has a negative long-term effect that can potentially damage their reputation with the school and cause future problems with authority. Therefore, Tegasi & Rothman (2001) implemented a program that focused on elementary school students and a plan of action to reduce aggression and behavior problems. The program was implemented in such a way that it does not single out an individual; instead, it focused on two fourth and fifth grade classrooms in different schools for fifteen months. The program is known as STORIES (Structure, Themes, Open communication, Reflection, Individuality, problem Solving). This program is an early prevention program that prevents antisocial and violent behavior by progressively identifying schemes of social learning. Teachers and staff role-play by displaying hostile aggression, especially bullying and overall misbehavior, identified by the students. The evaluation results supported the program by showing that after the program, the students displayed lower aggression levels.

To summarize so far, misbehaved students that are disruptive, show aggression, are noncompliant, and challenge the school have traditionally been punished by the student getting suspended and receiving detention (Demaray, Malecki, & DeLong, 2006; Morrison, Redding, Fisher, & Peterson, 2006). Schools have realized that the method does not work, and school-wide

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interventions, although proven largely successful, also fail to help all the students as intended. The question remains: what interventions and support can consistently help reduce behavioral problems and lead to academic success?

Goh and Bambara (2012) discuss the benefits of proactive and preventive interventions when dealing with behavioral problems. One of the preventive interventions that has been discussed is the positive behavior support (PBS), and according to past research, this intervention is highly effective. PBS does not only focus on improving behavioral problems but aims to make a positive difference in an individual's life. The purpose of the 2012 study was to examine key individualized positive behavior supports and their effectiveness based on functional behavioral assessments in school-based interventions. As expected, the results indicated that functional behavioral assessment was effective, as well as positive behavior support. Functional behavior assessments use several techniques to identify the purposes that problem behavior serve for students and helps select interventions to address the behavior.

Todd, Campbell, Meyer, and Horner (2008) examined positive behavior support prevention programs and focused mainly on targeted interventions. Research has demonstrated how targeted intervention is effectively working to decrease behavioral problems. Targeted interventions include social skill training, check in/check out systems, first step to success, peer mentors, and homework club. These interventions are most effective for students who are at risk for behavioral problems. Todd et al. (2008) focused mainly on check in/check out (CICO) approaches. CICO approaches are used with students who are at-risk for behavioral problems, and it is a strategy that increases ongoing structure and feedback by increasing contact with adults in the school. Compared to before the intervention, the participants' unacceptable levels of behavioral problems decreased noticeably. The participating school offices received significantly fewer discipline referrals.

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As seen in this discussion, there are many alternatives to school suspension that are proven to benefit the school and students who are at-risk or who are already showing behavioral issues. Many times, school-wide interventions can be very beneficial, especially if the students are still screened and assessed for need of further help and support. However, research has highlighted the importance of prevention programs and how effective they are at reducing behavioral problems, especially if begun in kindergarten. It is shown that it is easier to prevent a problem than to try to decrease problems that already developed, but there are also interventions proven to be effective for students already showing behavior problems.

The research, overall, shows that effective interventions address the student population as a whole. Effective interventions include school-wide trainings in appropriate conduct, tiered systems of intervention (so that intensity of intervention matches the severity of the transgression), assessments to identify and intervene with at-risk students, and methods to deal with problem behaviors that promote continued engagement in instructional settings and individualized programming to address problem behaviors. While such comprehensive systems are difficult and perhaps resource-intensive to implement with fidelity to their design, significant benefits may be found in terms of reduced problem behavior and increased academic achievement.

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