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SPOTLIGHT

Improving and Expanding Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Supports 10 Best Practices

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Improving & Expanding **Social, Emotional & Behavioral Supports**

10 Best Practices

Nathan Levenson

DMGroup Spotlight represents the thinking and approach of District Management Group.



While there is much debate about why an increasing number of children come to school with significant social, emotional, and behavioral (S, E & B) needs, nearly all districts are reporting the number of children with these challenges is on the rise. Not only is the total number of students needing support growing, but the severity of these needs is increasing and the needs are manifesting themselves at ever younger ages. In surveys conducted by District Management Group (DMGroup) over the last few years with approximately 400 principals and assistant principals across the country, fully 86% of them indicated that they had experienced an increase in the number of students with emotional or behavioral disabilities over the last five years, yet only 30% reported that their respective districts were providing sufficient support and services to meet the needs of these students. Hard data back up these perceptions: 75% to 80% of children and youth in need of mental health services do not receive them.¹

In order for children to meet developmental milestones, learn, grow, and lead productive lives, it is critical that their social, emotional, and behavioral issues be addressed. Research indicates that children and youth with mental health problems have lower educational achievement and greater involvement with the criminal justice system.² Improving and expanding S, E & B supports not only helps the students who have these challenges, but can benefit nearly every student and adult in a school. Reducing behavioral outbursts creates a safer classroom for all and provides a schoolwide climate more conducive to learning. In addition, a great many of the 50% of teachers who leave the teaching profession during their first four years on the job cite the challenge of managing problematic behavior as a key contributor to switching careers.³

And it is not only novice teachers who are leaving the field due to the stress and sense of helplessness; many veteran teachers and principals are retiring earlier than they had planned. In an interview with DMGroup, one principal from a large urban district shared, “I have been in the district for over 30 years, and I don’t want to leave, but my husband is encouraging me to retire. He says he doesn’t want to continue to see me come home worn out and emotionally spent. It’s hard to believe that just one or two students can overwhelm me, my teachers, and the school. We don’t have the resources to help these children, and I’m not sure I can keep at this without more help from the district. I have teachers leaving for this reason, and I may follow them.”

Schools and districts have been striving to address this growing challenge. From 1970 to 2010, instructional aides increased from composing under 2% of all staff in schools to nearly 12%, fueled in large part by the need to help students with behavioral challenges.⁴ Many districts have also increased spending on school psychologists, behaviorists, social workers, and counselors. Schools have trained staff in positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS), purchased social and emotional curricula, implemented restorative justice, and designed new discipline codes, among many other actions. Even state departments of education are trying to address the issue. Four states—Illinois, Kansas, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia—have adopted standalone standards for social emotional learning; many other states have embedded social emotional learning into academic standards; and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires nonacademic indicators, many of which are related to social, emotional, and climate health of schools and districts.

Despite these heroic efforts, many teachers and principals still feel overwhelmed and unsuccessful in helping their students in need.

A more comprehensive solution

All schools—urban, suburban, and rural; large and small; and regardless of socioeconomic—have students with social, emotional, and behavioral challenges. But in some of these schools and districts, students receive the counseling they need, classroom routines promote positive behavior, and most strikingly, students with problematic behavior are able to stay in class and seldom disrupt their peers. What is the difference between these schools and typical schools? The distinctions can be hard to notice because the difference isn't in the amount they spend, the programs they bought, or the dedication of their staff. The people, tools, and talents themselves aren't all that different, but the way in which these people work and deliver intervention is different. The more effective districts have created a coherent, collaborative plan grounded in a systems-thinking approach and incorporating best practices.

Stemming from our extensive work in the area of special education, DMGroup has been researching how to improve and expand social, emotional, and behavioral support. We have reviewed published literature including academic studies, the What Works Clearing House, and the writings of experts like Ross Greene, Jessica Minahan, and Nancy Rappaport. In the course of our work on special education in over a hundred districts across the country,

we have solicited input through interviews and focus groups from roughly 10,000 teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, and parents. Also in the course of our work, we reviewed the schedules of more than 25,000 special education and other intervention staff members. We have heard the frustrations involved in trying to meet the S, E & B needs of students, but perhaps most importantly, we have heard from and witnessed firsthand schools and principals that are successfully meeting these challenges. We have sought to analyze and identify the differentiating features of these schools, and based on this research, we have identified best practices in addressing S, E & B issues.

The goal is not to just push paperwork to nights and weekends, but to streamline processes as appropriate to allow very talented staff to provide greatly needed services.

Here, we focus on what we believe to be the 10 key best practices. These best practices are interconnected, but broadly speaking, fall into three major categories:

CATEGORY A: More effectively draw upon the talent, expertise, and time of current staff

As the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students have increased, districts have responded by adding staff such as behavior specialists, school psychologists, social workers, and paraprofessionals. Despite these increases, most principals feel that even more staff are needed. Tight budgets often make these requests go unanswered, however. Best practices 1 through 4 help schools and districts expand S, E & B supports without adding staff, but instead seek to make the most of existing staff's time and talents.

CATEGORY B: Focus on prevention, not after-the-fact reaction

Best practices 5 through 8 can have an even more profound impact on meeting the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students. These ideas are so powerful because they shift the focus from dealing with behavioral outbursts to preventing the outbursts from happening in the first place. Too often, behavior management plans focus on what to do during a problematic event (calming

by a paraprofessional, removal from the room, and so on) or what to do afterward (such as consideration of more restrictive placement, meeting with parents, or discipline). The What Works Clearing House and other research show how schools can prevent student outbursts in the first place.

CATEGORY C: Seek and support outside partners

The good news is that best practices exist to help meet the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students, but the bad news is that highly skilled staff are needed and many districts cannot fully fund or even access enough people with the required training and expertise. Even districts with a sizable cadre of social workers, counselors, school psychologists, and special education staff often report that more of these staff are needed to meet the ever-growing needs of students. The final two best practices allow schools and districts to augment their in-house efforts by collaborating strategically with outside partners.

Ten Best Practices for Improving and Expanding Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Services Despite Tight Budgets

CATEGORY A: More effectively draw upon the talent, expertise, and time of current staff

Before adding additional staff, schools and districts can first take steps to ensure that teachers, psychologists, social workers, behaviorists, counselors, and others are able to effectively use their talents and time to do the most good for the most children. In interviews across the country, staff have shared with us their frustrations: meetings and paperwork take time away from being with students, roles are sometimes not assigned to play to staff's strengths, and there is seldom time to meet and plan as a team, which undermines the effectiveness of their separate efforts.

These four best practices can help schools and districts do more and better for students without adding staff and without further burdening already hard-working staff.

1 Streamline meetings and paperwork to increase time staff can spend with students

Meetings, paperwork, assessments, and parent conferences are a necessary and important part of the job of school psychologists, social workers, behaviorists, and counselors. And so is working directly with children. Both are important, but

every minute that meetings and paperwork can be streamlined is an extra minute available to help a student in need.

What may be surprising is that some staff members can be 100% in compliance, complete all their other tasks, and spend twice as much time with students as their colleagues in similar jobs in the same district and even in the same school. Based on a DMGroup review of over 25,000 schedules from over a hundred districts with which we have worked over the last few years, we have found the following:

- The typical social worker spends 32% of the week with students, but some social workers manage to spend over 66% of their week with students, thus providing double the counseling services (*Exhibit 1*).
- The typical school psychologist spends about 1.5 days on each initial or three-year special education evaluation; some need as little as one day, while others take 3.5 days. Those who can accomplish the evaluations more quickly have time available for assessment and counseling instead of having their week dominated by evaluations (*Exhibit 2*).
- In a review of 800 school psychologists' schedules from 67 districts, school psychologists on average spent just 14% of their week counseling students; only 15% of school psychologists spent more than 30% of their time supporting students (*Exhibit 3*).

Based on lessons drawn from the most effective schools and districts, meetings and paperwork can be streamlined by process mapping, reviewing who attends which meetings, and setting guidelines for desired time with students. As a result of these changes, in many districts upwards of twice as much counseling can be provided to students by current staff. The goal is not to just push paperwork to nights and weekends, but to streamline processes as appropriate to allow very talented staff to provide greatly needed services. Most educators want to work with children, but culture, schedules, and protocols set by administration or history can pull them into extra meetings and add paperwork.

For example, one suburban district had very skilled and talented school psychologists, but these well-trained counselors spent less than 15% of their week providing services directly to students, despite there being many students in need of their

services. Interestingly, based on state and national benchmarking, the district had more school psychologists than many of their peer districts. Due to the district’s history and culture, the school psychologists had become swamped with attending meetings, writing reports, and providing very lengthy IEP assessments.

School and district leaders asked a simple, yet powerful question: What would have to change for the psychologists to spend at least two-thirds of their day with students and not shift the paperwork to nights and weekends? At first, the team of psychologists, principals, central office leadership, and DMGroup facilitators questioned whether any such change was possible. But a quick review of schedules from staff across the country showed that others could do this and, in fact, one psychologist in the district already was!

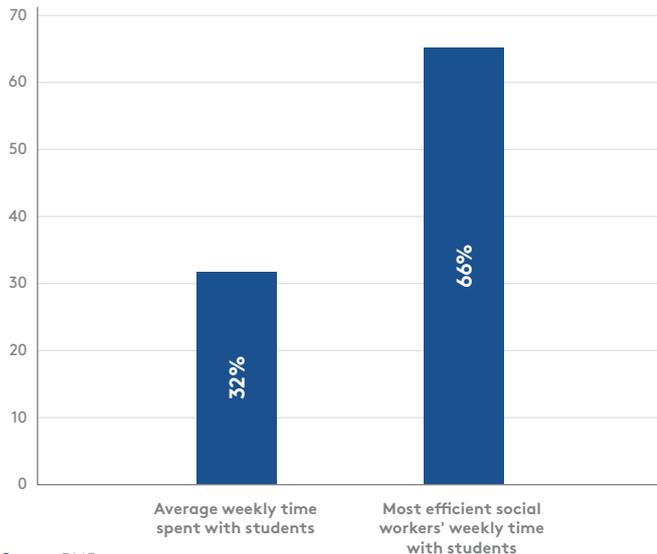
Buoyed by these examples, the team started by process mapping: they diagramed every step in the process of evaluating a student and creating an IEP. What emerged was a tendency to employ the same practice for all even if it was not needed in every case. Team pre-meetings were very helpful in complex situations, but were not seen as high value for simpler diagnoses; sharing the reports in advance was helpful in contested situations, but not always of value; and the number of IEP assessments given varied from psychologist to psychologist—some believed that certain assessments were optional, based on student need, while others

incorrectly believed the district or state mandated a certain roster of assessments be given to every student. This process mapping revealed significant opportunities to streamline the IEP process while maintaining 100% compliance and providing every student a thorough and comprehensive review.

The team next turned their attention to streamlining meetings. When asked, “Do you ever feel you are at a meeting at which your presence isn’t the best use of your time?,” half the room looked down at the table and the other half shot sideways glances at the principals or central office leaders. After creating a safe space for speaking freely, there was an outpouring of ideas. In some schools, psychologists were expected to attend all IEP meetings, all RTI meetings, and all staff meetings. The principals thought that if questions arose requiring the psychologists’ expertise, the psychologists should be present. The psychologists, however, believed their attendance at these meetings was not an efficient use of their time.

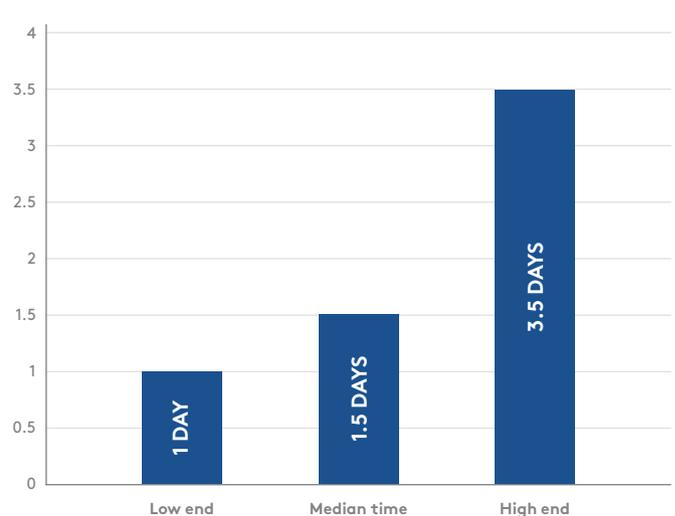
The staff shared their frustration at being expected to attend meetings that didn’t require their input or expertise, such as speech and language-only IEP meetings, faculty meetings in every school in which they worked—even if they only had a few students in the building—or RTI meetings for children with academic needs only. They also wondered why IEP meetings in some schools ran twice as long as in other schools.

Exhibit 1 SOCIAL WORKERS' TIME SPENT WITH STUDENTS



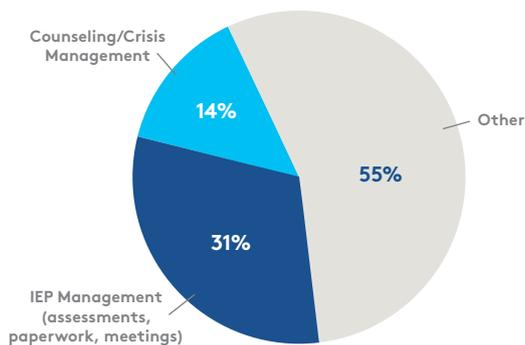
Source: DMGroup

Exhibit 2 PSYCHOLOGISTS' TIME SPENT PER INITIAL OR THREE-YEAR SPECIAL EDUCATION EVALUATION



Source: DMGroup

Exhibit 3 ANALYSIS OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS' SCHEDULES



School psychologists on average spent just 14% of their week counseling students

Source: DMGroup

Keeping in mind that every hour in a meeting meant a lost hour of counseling for a student, the team settled on new rules and procedures regarding who should attend which meetings and what should happen in the meetings.

Finally, to ensure that student services were prioritized, the district, in collaboration with staff, set the expectation that schedules would be constructed so that two-thirds of the week would be dedicated to student counseling, and meetings and assessments would be fit into the remaining time. This approach required helping staff and principals create efficient schedules for IEP evaluations and IEP meetings.

This process became the norm, and meetings, paperwork, and compliance remained important and well done, but also greatly streamlined, to the benefit of both students and staff. Best of all, this best practice didn't add to the already full plates of staff because the work was streamlined, and not just piled on.

2 Allow staff to play to their strengths; assign roles based on strengths, not titles

Schools and districts have assembled a wide array of staff to meet the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students, including behaviorists, social workers, guidance counselors, school psychologists, paraprofessionals, mental health professionals, and drug and alcohol counselors.

While all of these roles bring important strengths and skills to schools, the people in these roles

are often assigned tasks based on their *title*, not their *strengths* (skills, training, and aptitude). For example, all psychologists might be expected to evaluate eligibility for IEPs, counsel students in need, and provide behavior plans, yet some may have more expertise and comfort in assessment/case management while others may be more deeply trained in managing problematic behaviors.

In their conversations with DMGroup, many psychologists expressed frustration at the assumption that “they are good at everything,” with little effort to identify their unique strengths. One shared that she was assigned as the PBIS (Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports) coordinator for a school despite having no formal training in behavior management. It was assumed that because she was a school psychologist, she had the appropriate training. No one asked her.

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Providing the social, emotional, and behavioral supports of students is complex, challenging work. Allowing staff to play to their strengths makes hard work a bit easier and much more effective. When teams of special educators and S, E & B staff are given the chance to define their strengths, the most common areas of specialization cited are

- Academics (with further specialization by subject, such as reading, English, or math)
- Supporting students with challenging behaviors
- Counseling
- Substance abuse/addiction
- Case management
- IEP assessments
- Scheduling of paraprofessionals and other staff
- Managing outside partners



While many staff have multiple strengths, it is unrealistic to think all staff are equally skilled in all of these areas. When administrators allow staff to identify their areas of expertise and then match job responsibilities to their skills, both students and staff can benefit. This applies to paraprofessionals as well. Hiring and assigning paraprofessionals specifically for behavior or generalized support can improve morale and services as well.

3 Facilitate teamwork with common planning time

Schools have a wide array of people in a variety of roles supporting the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students; these include assistant principals, guidance counselors, classroom teachers, school psychologists, social workers, special education teachers, and behaviorists. Given the complexity of the challenge, it is no surprise that so many people need to be involved. What is surprising is how infrequently they get to meet as a group to plan, share, and collectively assess progress. Since this multifaceted team may involve staff from more than five different departments, even school-based

faculty meetings or department meetings don't bring all the key players together. Staff in some districts report that planning with cross-department colleagues happens just a few times a year. Traditional public schools often have an all-hands meeting only after a crisis. By contrast, specialized schools for children with significant behaviors typically pull the team together for an hour a day.

In many schools, though, adults only spring into action when problems occur or afterward. A focus on prevention can have a dramatic, positive impact.

Creating common planning time can seem daunting, but it's fairly straightforward if schools build staff schedules collectively. The group planning time is scheduled first, and all else is filled in around this sacrosanct time. Group planning can even include paraprofessionals supporting students with behavioral needs.

Paraprofessionals benefit greatly from regular check-ins and coaching sessions, and they in turn can provide the team with timely student updates.

In schools where common planning time works well, an hour is set aside once or twice a week for social workers, behavior specialists, counselors, assistant principals (or principals), and the special education staff who focus on behavior management to meet, review student progress, and adjust the support strategies based on recent student behaviors and successes. And just like IEP meetings, the classroom teacher(s) will be invited to the meeting for the portion devoted to discussing students from their classrooms. Paraprofessionals working with specific students are also asked to attend the relevant part of the meeting. Specialization helps make regular common planning more manageable and efficient. A common first response is “we don’t have the time, we are so busy already,” but just a small streamlining (less than 10%) of existing meetings and paperwork would free up two hours a week that would prove highly valuable.

4 Support classroom teachers with in-the-classroom support from staff skilled in behavior management

General education teachers are on the frontline of dealing directly with the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students. It is important and necessary that they play a key role in helping meet these needs, but too often, too much is being asked of them. PBIS, Tier 2 behavior supports, and social and emotional learning are often added to the very full plate of general education teachers. These are the same folks being asked to personalize learning, teach the new math standards, roll out the new writing curriculum, and so much more.

Clearly, any plan that excludes classroom teachers is bound to fail, but any plan that places too heavy a load on them is also at risk. The just-right solution is to provide ample support to these critical but stretched-thin teachers. The most welcome and impactful support includes detailed analysis of what triggers student outbursts, in-the-moment coaching, a dedicated behavior team, and regular check-ins with behavior specialists. A few hours of “sit and git” professional development is seldom enough. What classroom teachers want, deserve,

and need is in-the-classroom support from staff skilled in behavior management. Such support includes hours-long observation of students; leading conversations with students to help identify triggers; making concrete recommendations on how to avoid student triggers; observations of the student, class, and teacher after the behavior strategies have been set; and acting as a parent liaison at times as well. Classroom team teachers need a partner, not just an advisor or a trainer.

These first four best practices can quickly and significantly improve and expand the reach of existing, talented staff. They help maximize the impact of current efforts and allow more students to be helped, even when the budget doesn’t allow for adding more staff.

CATEGORY B: Focus on prevention, not after-the-fact reaction

A hallmark of schools that effectively support and manage the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students is that they are very effective at preventing problems before they occur. In many schools, though, adults only spring into action when problems occur or afterward. A focus on prevention by using best practices 5 through 8 can have a dramatic, positive impact.

Research shows that outbursts that seem random and unpredictable often have a clear pattern. A common refrain among teachers is, “You just never know when it’s going to happen. He is doing fine all day, then bang, with no warning, screaming and throwing, just havoc from nowhere. I’m walking on eggshells all day, every day. It’s wearing me down.” But research has shown that nearly all outbursts have a trigger, and that from the student’s perspective, the triggering events are very consistent. From the adult perspective, the trigger is invisible, and thus the problematic behavior seems random. Why the asymmetry? Because often the trigger is predicated on a student’s “inner monologue” that the teacher can’t hear.

5 Identify and manage behavioral triggers

Learning why some students act out and then taking steps to mitigate these reasons seems logical, but daunting. How does a teacher find a pattern in what appears to be random events? Why should the teacher even assume there is a pattern and that the pattern can be altered? For more details on how to identify student triggers and craft mitigation plans, see Ross Greene’s excellent book

Lost at School. By focusing on triggers, problematic behavior can be prevented.

The following is an illustrative example inspired by a situation at a suburban elementary school in a mid-sized district with which DMGroup worked:

The principal and staff didn't want to hear about "behavioral triggers"—they just wanted action from the central office. Specifically, they wanted a particular student removed from the school and sent to an out-of-district program. They were at their wit's end and nothing else could be done, or so they believed.

This student was a first grader who periodically screamed ugly insults to his teacher, threw things at his classmates, and ran from the room. During much of the day, he was actually quiet and hardworking, particularly at math and art. But his seemingly random outbursts had the classroom and teacher on edge; they were never certain when books, scissors, or insults would start to fly. When he would run from the room, all instruction had to stop not only in his classroom but in the classroom across the hall; the teacher from across the hall had to watch over both classrooms while the student's teacher chased after him. The student had been disciplined repeatedly, but this didn't set him on a better path. The classroom teacher also regularly met with the student's parents, who bounced between apologetic and frustrated.

Rather than send this student to a school outside the district, the superintendent decided to bring in a skilled behaviorist to observe him and consult with the student, his parents, and his teacher. Through this process, the behaviorist determined that the student hated being embarrassed and made to feel "stupid" (his words) in front of the teacher (whom he liked) and his classmates (by whom he wanted to be liked). Given his limited coping skills, he reacted inappropriately when he felt embarrassed.

While this information was potentially insightful, the classroom teacher did not at first find it helpful. In the teacher's view, this student regularly exploded at the most mundane of moments, not only when he was embarrassed. The deeper insight, however, was identifying what specifically made the student feel embarrassed, i.e. what triggered the problematic behavior. It turned out that what the teacher (and most people) consider embarrassing

was very different from this student's perception. If asked a "hard" question, the student was not embarrassed at not being able to answer correctly, but failing to correctly answer an "easy" question was very embarrassing to him. Unfortunately, it was very difficult for the teacher to guess at every turn which questions the student would perceive as hard or easy. It got more complicated. When the teacher gave him a hint to help him think through the answer, he thought the teacher was trying to embarrass him, not trying to help him.

Too many "behavior programs" seem to undervalue the importance of academic learning and student achievement.

Once the trigger was fully understood by the teacher and student, both took steps to prevent the sense of embarrassment. For example, they agreed that the student would point his pencil toward the front of the room to indicate a "hard" question and away for an "easy" question. Also, the teacher made sure to explain to the whole class that a teaching strategy she uses is to provide hints (scaffolding); she communicated that all students would regularly receive hints.

This approach worked wonders. The student's outbursts diminished dramatically and the classroom climate improved. The student remained in the district, continued to do well, and expanded his coping skills. The behavioral consultant was brought on full-time to help identify and manage triggers across the district.

6

Increase access to staff with expertise in behavior management

Some teachers and special educators may have a knack for identifying triggers, but few have formal training. Most behaviorists and some school psychologists have extensive education and aptitude in this highly specialized and valuable skill. In order to effectively focus on prevention, schools need access to experts who are trained in identifying and reducing behavioral triggers.

Given tight budgets, having sufficient behavior experts can be a challenge. Three strategies can help overcome funding challenges:

- **Replacement hiring.** As special educators, social workers, and school psychologists leave the district, seek to hire staff who have expertise in behavior management. Staff with and without these skills are paid the same.
- **Share paraprofessionals across classrooms and students.** Many districts have increased paraprofessional staffing to help address (reactively) problematic behavior, often assigning a paraprofessional to a classroom or even to a single student. But a focus on prevention can reduce problematic behavior, and then full-day and 1:1 paraprofessional support can be eased back. Some districts have been able to share paraprofessionals across multiple classrooms. Teachers text them when needed. The savings from needing fewer paraprofessionals can be directed toward hiring a few more behavior experts, and better results can be achieved with similar spending.
- **Centralized behavior team.** Having a small, highly skilled, centralized team to do initial planning for the most challenging students can enable the sharing of support across many schools.

7 Align discipline policies to support a commitment to prevention

Few topics in K-12 generate heated discussion like discipline rules. On one side, advocates point to large disparities in suspension and expulsion based on race, gender, school, and teacher. Too often,

discipline policies unintentionally exacerbate problematic behavior and very rarely succeed in deterring incidents from students who have more severe behavior needs. On the other hand, teachers and principals want to ensure safe schools and welcoming climates.

Any fair and comprehensive discipline code will include consistent expectations from classroom to classroom, ensure teacher and student safety, avoid suspensions for nonviolent infractions, minimize loss of learning time, mitigate for unconscious bias, and be applied similarly regardless of race, gender, or school.

It is important that the discipline code include some flexibility in order to incorporate the focus on prevention. For example, some behavior management plans encourage a student to leave the room and go to a predetermined calming space or encourage a student to sit a bit further away from other students. However, sometimes these practical, effective, preventative efforts run afoul of the existing discipline code. For example, an assistant principal disciplines a student walking the halls (toward his quiet space) without a pass or a teacher on lunch duty may insist a student make room for others to sit next to him, and outbursts are triggered. These students were following their behavior management plan, but in many schools, the discipline code is not adjusted to suit these situations and can escalate the difficulties. The discipline policy thus needs to be adjusted to align with the approach to managing and mitigating behavior issues.

The use of suspension as a strategy for addressing problematic behavior should also be reviewed carefully, as suspensions can make matters



Helpful Resources

***Lost at School* by Ross W. Greene, Ph.D.**

This easy-to-read book is a go-to source for understanding how to identify student triggers and make practical plans to help prevent the triggers from happening. Written in plain English, it's an accessible and practical guide for teachers and administrators alike.

***The Behavior Code* by Jessica Minahan and Nancy Rappaport**

This detailed book provides a road map for practitioners to develop and implement behavior plans that focus on prevention. It brings frontline experience to the topic, quickly building understanding with staff who work directly with students with challenging behaviors.

worse, not better. When students with problematic behaviors are suspended, they miss school and fall behind academically. When they return to class, they feel unprepared for class discussion or the unit quiz and may act out in response. There are certainly times when suspension is warranted, but the costs should be weighed against the benefits; alternatives such as in-house suspension (with tutoring, counseling, and academic expectations) should be considered.

8 Stay focused on academic achievement

Some students with problematic behaviors aren't ready to learn and concentrate until their behavioral challenges are addressed and mitigated. For these students, putting behavior management first and academics second is reasonable, even necessary, but just for a short time, until the preventive strategies can be implemented.

For some students, especially at the secondary level, learning coping skills can take a long time. Some students will spend months or years in an alternative school, a special class for students with challenging behaviors, or some other specialized program intended to help manage and mitigate behavioral challenges. Sometimes these specialized efforts that are intended to address the challenge inadvertently undermine a student's learning and in turn exacerbate troubling behaviors. There are many different triggers, but a common set revolve around a student's feeling "dumb" (their words) or being treated as if they are academically less able than others. Interestingly, many students with problematic behaviors are academically very able, even if their grades say otherwise.

Too many "behavior programs" seem to undervalue the importance of academic learning and student achievement. These classrooms often have math, science, and English taught by special education teachers, not math, science, and English teachers. They may give little or no homework, set low expectations, and teach a watered-down curriculum. Students interpret this approach as the result of their teachers' thinking they aren't able to learn at the same level as their peers, thus reinforcing one of the triggers for their problematic behaviors. Effective prevention strategies must also ensure that academic learning remains a priority as well.

Alternative and behavior-based programs need to effectively address both academics and the behavior needs of students. This means ensuring that core content classes are taught by general education teachers, that rigorous curriculum is taught, that regular end-of-unit and end-of-course assessments are used, and that ample intervention is provided to help all students master grade-level material.

These four best practices can shift a school's focus to prevention and thus reduce outbursts, help teachers, and change the lives of students.

CATEGORY C: Seek and support outside partners

Supporting students with challenging behaviors is hard work, requiring staff and specialized skills. Fortunately, schools needn't go it alone, but can strategically leverage partnerships to expand and enhance services through best practices 9 and 10.

9 Seek local partnerships

Often, local mental health agencies, nearby nonprofit counseling services, or universities can provide social and emotional services at little or no cost to students or the district. Even for-profit practitioners will sometimes partner with schools. They might waive co-pays and deductibles and only bill students' insurance for their services, thus making it free to families and schools.

One district of approximately 5,000 students, for example, received over \$1,000,000 a year (the equivalent of 15 FTEs) of counseling services for nearly no cost. Larger districts have arranged much larger partnerships. The benefits, however, go well beyond adding staff without adding to the budget. Sometimes outside partners can bring very specialized expertise, such as expertise in drug and alcohol/substance abuse, body image issues, and dealing with trauma. Outside partners can also provide counseling for families, provide continued services over the summer and during vacations, and coach district staff on best practices.

10 Actively support local partnerships

Sometimes schools or districts try to partner with local agencies and providers, but the efforts yield only a little extra service and lots of hassle. "We



tried this, and it wasn't worth all the time needed" is a common refrain. Districts that have had great success don't just seek partnerships; instead, they actively facilitate successful partnerships. For example, few outside providers can accommodate services on a six-day cycle—being at school Monday one week, Tuesday the next week, and so on. Also, plans made at central office with local partners aren't always communicated well to school-based staff, such as counseling rooms being double-booked by school staff and outside partners, which can cause great frustration and irritation.

Outside partners flourish when there is a dedicated point person who has time to manage, communicate, and smooth over the inevitable bumps in the road. Some much-appreciated facilitation can include

- Providing counseling space inside the schools
- Providing an online room calendar to avoid double-booking
- Scheduling services on a five-day cycle, even if the school master schedule isn't on that cycle
- Placing services into student schedules
- Introducing outside partners to all school-based staff
- Inviting partners to faculty meetings, department meetings, and other key meetings
- Checking in weekly by phone and monthly in person with each provider
- Having a single point of contact

A small investment in managing and facilitating outside partners can yield big returns for schools and students. As one example, a 5,000-student district invested about \$50,000 each year (1/2 FTE) to maintain and support the \$1,000,000 of outside services. Without this modest investment, it is likely that many of the partnerships would not have existed or would have faded away. Dedicated leadership was critical in preventing small problems from becoming deal breakers.

Not easy, but worth the effort

Using these 10 best practices, schools and districts can more effectively and comprehensively create a system to meet the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students. The first four best practices, which focus on leveraging the skills, expertise, and time of existing staff, can be tackled first, and the others can be phased in over time to build a cohesive and coherent systems approach.

In one large urban/suburban district that partnered with the District Management Group, principals were gathered and began to share in emotional terms their challenges with unmet counseling needs and disruptive student behaviors. As principal after principal shared tales of stress, woe, and frustration, two principals remained silent and seemed to be shooting knowing looks across the room at each other. When asked how things were going in their schools, they shared that



up until a few years ago, their story had been similar to those being voiced, but after shifting to a focus on prevention, letting staff play to their strengths, streamlining meetings and paperwork, and slightly reducing paraprofessionals to add a half-time behavior expert, “a miracle happened,” they stated. Students with the greatest challenges became manageable and the number of challenging students was greatly reduced. It wasn’t divine intervention, but just good implementation of best practices sustained over a few years by dedicated, hard-working teams.

With social, emotional, and behavioral issues posing a growing challenge for school districts, and with budgets tight for the foreseeable future, schools and districts will need a new and comprehensive approach to meet the needs of their students. While neither easy nor quick, these best practices can help to better serve students. This work, however, will need leadership from the top, systems thinking, support for teachers and principals, and perseverance. If parents, staff, school leadership, and district leaders work and plan together, much progress can be made in addressing this difficult challenge. ♦

NOTES

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DMGroup's 10 BEST PRACTICES

For Improving & Expanding Social, Emotional & Behavioral Supports

CATEGORY A:
Leverage talents of current staff

1

Streamline meetings and paperwork to increase time staff can spend with students.

Process mapping, reviewing who attends which meetings, and setting guidelines for desired time with students can often significantly increase the services provided to students by current staff.

2

Allow staff to play to their strengths; assign roles based on strengths, not titles.

Identify staff's unique skills and match job responsibilities to these areas of expertise. For example, some psychologists may have expertise in behavior management while others may have expertise in assessment and case management.

3

Facilitate teamwork with common planning time.

A wide array of people in a variety of roles are often involved in supporting the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students. Allow them to come together weekly to review student progress and adjust support strategies.

4

Support classroom teachers with in-the-classroom support from staff skilled in behavior management.

In-the-moment coaching, in-the-classroom observations, and specific recommendations from behavior specialists can help classroom teachers meet the needs of their students.

5

Focus on prevention by identifying and managing behavioral triggers.

Identify why a student acts out and develop specific strategies for averting these triggers to prevent outbursts before they happen.

6

Increase access to staff with expertise in behavior management.

To effectively focus on prevention, schools need access to experts trained in identifying and reducing behavioral triggers. Given tight budgets, seek to hire staff with expertise in behavior management when doing replacement hiring and/or seek to build a centralized behavior team that can provide support across many schools.

7

Align discipline policies to support a commitment to prevention.

It is important that the discipline code has the flexibility to support a focus on prevention, that loss of learning time is minimized, that suspensions are avoided for nonviolent infractions, and that unconscious bias is mitigated.

8

Stay focused on academic achievement.

Many "behavior programs" seem to undervalue the importance of academic learning and student achievement. Core content is often taught by special education teachers instead of subject expert teachers, and curriculum is sometimes watered down; lowered expectations can exacerbate troubling behaviors.

9

Seek local partnerships.

Often, local mental health agencies, nearby nonprofit counseling services, universities, and sometimes even for-profit practitioners can provide social and emotional services at little or no out-of-pocket costs to students or the district.

10

Actively support local partnerships.

Local partners can provide much-needed services, so it is worth making an investment in managing and facilitating these relationships to ensure their success.

CATEGORY B:
Focus on prevention

CATEGORY C:
Support partnerships



10 Mistakes to Avoid

Improving and Expanding Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Services Despite Tight Budgets

Despite tight budgets, schools and districts can create a more effective and comprehensive system to meet the rising social, emotional, and behavioral needs of their students. Best practices focused on better leveraging the talents and time of existing staff, emphasizing prevention over reaction, and leveraging the support of outside partners can yield significant benefits for students needing these services as well as improve the climate for all students and staff. These 10 lessons help guide the way.

Don't wait for new funding.

Children with social, emotional, and behavioral needs have immediate challenges to be addressed. While more funding would be helpful, districts can improve and expand services within current budgets by implementing best practices.

Don't let staff work in silos.

Districts have assembled a diverse team of professionals to support students' social, emotional, and behavioral challenges. These staff members are busy and often work across different departments and across multiple schools. It's important that they be provided common planning time to share, advise, coordinate services, and fine-tune interventions.

Don't assume job titles indicate specific skills and training.

Not all school psychologists, counselors, or special educators have similar training and strengths. Some are expert at behavior management, for example, while others excel at conducting evaluations or at teaching reading. Thoughtfully assigning staff based on their skills and strengths instead of based on their titles will benefit students and staff alike.

Don't let meetings and paperwork consume staff time.

Social workers, behaviorists, counselors, school psychologists, and special educators have valuable skills that can help students in need. However, meetings and paperwork often consume more than half their day. Process mapping, reviewing who attends which meetings, streamlining paperwork, and setting guidelines for desired time with students can result in providing more services to more students without adding to staff workload.

Don't ask too much of classroom teachers.

Classroom teachers are an important part of meeting students' social, emotional, and behavioral needs, but they have a lot on their plate and more is added every year—new curricula, new initiatives, and new mandates. Classroom teachers need help in the form of in-the-classroom support from staff skilled in behavior management, not just “sit-and-git” professional development.

Don't just react to problematic behavior; focus on prevention.

When students have outbursts, schools must react. But outbursts can be reduced by proactively identifying the triggers and methodically addressing the conditions that cause the flare-ups. Focusing on prevention takes skill and patience, but can greatly reduce problematic behavior.

Don't let discipline policies create more discipline problems.

Few topics generate as much heated debate as discipline rules. Each school and district must find the right balance of support and discipline, but any discipline code should avoid creating future discipline problems, minimize loss of learning, and be reviewed if the policies are chronically failing to improve student behavior.

Don't try to go it alone.

Meeting the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students is challenging, and schools seldom have enough staff and enough experts to meet all their needs. Fortunately, many local nonprofits and insurance-funded providers can be integrated into a school's efforts at little or no cost.

Don't forget to actively support outside partners.

Outside partners need to be tightly integrated into the life of the schools in which they work. Having a dedicated point person to communicate and provide facilitation can allow the district to leverage outside partners and garner more supports for students.

Don't lose hope!

Meeting the rising social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students isn't easy and is often stressful, but a growing body of best practices can help every school help nearly every child.



Can you improve and expand social, emotional, and behavioral supports despite tight finances?

Nearly all districts are challenged by the growing need for social, emotional, and behavioral supports, but in an era of tight budgets, some districts feel there isn't much they can do to expand and improve services. A number of practical strategies do exist that don't require new funding. Can your district take advantage of some of these opportunities?

QUESTIONS	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Not Sure
Do social workers and counselors spend more than half their day providing counseling to students?				
Is attendance at meetings carefully reviewed to include only the most essential participants?				
Are school psychologists assigned behavior-support roles for which they have specialized training?				
Do all staff members supporting a student's social, emotional, and behavioral needs have time to plan together each week during the school day?				
Do classroom teachers have ready access to skilled experts for advice in supporting students with behavioral challenges?				

QUESTIONS	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Not Sure
Do discipline policies effectively prevent repeat infractions?				
Do behavior supports focus primarily on preventing problematic behaviors?				
Does a central office leader devote significant time each week to finding and managing outside partners?				
Total number of checkmarks in each column				
Multiply	x 1	x 5	x 10	x 15
Total score by column		+		+
				TOTAL

Your Score	Are there opportunities to improve and expand social, emotional, and behavioral supports despite tight finances?
5–20	You are doing almost everything right. Keep it up!
21–40	You have many key elements in place. Adding a few missing pieces could make a very big difference.
41–60	There are some opportunities to help you better meet the needs of your students.
61-plus	As in many districts, there are significant opportunities to expand and improve social, emotional, and behavioral supports.