An Introduction to Effective Schoolwide Discipline in Virginia

A Statewide Initiative to Support Positive Academic and Behavioral Outcomes for All Students

This booklet was produced by the Virginia Department of Education, in collaboration with the Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice, American Institute of Research, Washington, D.C.

Dear Educators and Parents:

It is gratifying to know that most students in Virginia’s schools are performing very well academically. However, there are some students who are struggling to be successful learners. I believe that all children can attain academic success, and in recognition of recent federal legislation and regulations, the Virginia Department of Education is working closely with schools throughout Virginia to address the overlapping relationship between classroom conduct and academic achievement. This is being accomplished by means of the Effective Schoolwide Discipline Project. I am pleased to report that we are witnessing some significant progress in terms of a decline in disciplinary problems, a recouping of lost administrative and instructional time, and promising increases in student achievement.

This booklet entitled, An Introduction to Effective Schoolwide Discipline in Virginia: A Statewide Initiative that Provides Positive Behavioral and Academic Support to All Students, explains what educational personnel, parents, and students can do to enhance safe and effective schooling for all of our students in our public schools. I encourage you to use this resource and join me in supporting this positive approach to creating an environment conducive to improving the educational outcomes for all students in Virginia’s public schools.

Sincerely,

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Introduction

“Midway through the lesson, for no apparent reason, Bill got out of his seat, walked across the room, and began to yell at Carl. Stunned for a moment, Carl rose from his seat and responded with a string of obscenities. With that, Bill shoved Carl back into his desk, which triggered the third fight in my class in the past month. The fight, along with getting both boys out of class and to the assistant principal’s office, pretty much put an end to that lesson. It is frustrating. At this point, I’m not sure I can cover the material that students are expected to learn for success on the SOL test.”

Unfortunately, this is not an isolated incident. In a growing number of schools, student misbehavior exacts a heavy toll on the academic achievement of the students who engage in disruptive behavior and interferes with the education of their classmates. The following statistics underscore the magnitude of the problem some schools face when it comes to student discipline:

- Over a five-month period, an elementary school principal reported that one student received eight major discipline referrals and 12 minor incident referrals. This one student monopolized 40 percent of the teacher’s time and the principal’s time.
- A middle school principal indicated he often had to cover personally for a teacher who was absent because no substitute teacher would come to his school because of student behavior problems.
- In one intermediate/high school with 880 students, there were more than 5,100 office referrals in a single academic year; two-thirds of the students had at least one referral.
- One teacher turned in 273 disciplinary referrals; three boys received 87, 76, and 67 referrals, respectively. The cost associated with the disciplinary process, assuming each referral takes approximately 10 minutes to complete and submit, translates into 51,000 minutes, or 850 hours, or 140 school days.

Changing Perspectives on School Discipline

Student discipline has been one of the most pressing issues facing public schools for many years. Even under the best conditions, teachers
struggle to allocate a fixed amount of time, energy, and resources among students, including a growing number who need more individual attention. Not surprisingly, teachers are frustrated by the disproportionate amount of time that one or two students who misbehave in class can demand. Reducing even minor discipline problems would afford teachers more time for instruction.

**Student Discipline and Academic Achievement**

Administrators, teachers, families, and students voice concern about behavior problems in schools and the fact that chronic and significant misbehavior decreases the amount of school time available for instruction. The scope of discipline problems in school is reflected in various ways. In most instances, it includes the number of office referrals; disciplinary actions (in-school suspensions or out-of-school suspensions); attendance problems; incidents on buses, and/or the amount of property destruction and vandalism. In the past, schools addressed problems by introducing negative sanctions or consequences. For instance, teachers often sent a disruptive student to the principal’s office. If the problem persisted, the principal might assign the student to in-school suspension or even out-of-school suspension.

Today, principals and other school personnel recognize that traditional disciplinary practices often do not result in the desired outcome, especially for students with more challenging behavior problems. Indeed, there is mounting evidence that imposing negative consequences for unacceptable behavior can increase antisocial acts, school vandalism, tardiness and truancy, and the dropout rate, all of which school officials are working hard to eliminate. For example, the common practice of suspension provides little more than a brief respite from the immediacy of a student’s academic or behavior problems. As most principals can attest, a student rarely returns to school with a more positive attitude or increased enthusiasm toward learning. In fact, with each suspension, the probability increases that the student will fall further behind academically, which only serves to trigger more misbehavior to escape further classroom frustration or failure. It follows that there must be a better way to deal with students who behave inappropriately.
Integrating Best Practices of Management and Instruction

Schools throughout Virginia are committed to assuring that all students have access to the general education curriculum and equal opportunity to succeed. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) underscores the importance of that goal. With NCLB, the spotlight shines brightly on classroom instruction and interventions that are scientifically based. The message could not be clearer, educational professionals must rely on strategies that have been proven effective. For that reason, the classroom has become a focal point for dealing simultaneously with student learning and behavior.

We know that academic success is a powerful antidote and that student success can greatly decrease the risk of behavior problems. In addition, because learning and behavior problems go hand-in-hand, it is more effective for teachers to address both aspects of student performance. Research tells us that the most effective way to deal with student misbehavior is to respond the same as when a student fails to complete an academic task. If it were an academic problem, the teacher would examine carefully the nature of the problem and look for one or more strategies to teach that skill. Teachers now know that they can resolve most behavior problems the same way that they deal with academic problems—through direct and systematic instruction. Effective discipline means decreasing the use of punitive disciplinary practices, and increasing school personnel’s reliance on more positive intervention plans. This subtle change can make substantial changes in students’ classroom conduct and academic achievement.

Support for Effective Schoolwide Discipline

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) renewed the call for schools to offer students what is variously referred to as “effective behavior support,” “positive behavior support,” “effective schoolwide discipline,” or, according to the language of IDEA, “positive behavioral interventions and supports”. Effective schoolwide discipline is not so much a model as it is a process, no two school-based programs will look the same. In every case, the underlying assumption is reflected by the old adage “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure”. Instead of relying on punitive measures to control behavior, school personnel
look for ways to (a) alter aspects of the social as well as instructional environment, (b) explicitly teach students what is expected of them, (c) acknowledge appropriate behavior in ways that are valued by the students, and (d) explicitly provide faculty and staff with staff development on behavioral interventions and effective strategies to address behavior problems. These methods have proven to be practical, realistic, and effective ways to address student discipline.

Positive approaches to discipline represent a fundamental change in the way schools respond to students with learning and behavior problems. Positive approaches include various structures and routines that create a positive learning environment designed to promote the academic and social competence of every student. In establishing a common classroom-level and schoolwide management system (a) student achievement rates increase and (b) the number of student discipline problems decline. Then, teachers are able to give all students more attention, including those students who have learning or behavior problems that are especially challenging. To summarize, positive and effective discipline affords schools a systematic approach to working effectively with the diverse needs of an increasingly diverse population of students. It is applicable in elementary, middle, and high school settings.

The use of effective schoolwide discipline has produced some impressive results in schools in Virginia and in the nation. The implementation of a positive schoolwide discipline system has reduced numerous school-related problems, including classroom incidents, office referrals, and student suspensions, by up to 80 percent in two-thirds of the cases reported nationally. Schools also report a decrease in the number of students referred to special education, many times by as much as 50 percent.

A growing number of educators are finding that effective schoolwide discipline complements several other important initiatives of the Virginia Department of Education, including Instructional Support Teams (IST) and Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) and Response to Intervention (RtI). Singly, or in combination with other initiatives, effective schoolwide discipline is a practical way for schools to respond to group-individual needs, to define, teach, and reward acceptable student behavior at the schoolwide level, at the classroom level, in nonclassroom settings, and finally, at the individual student level.
A schoolwide system of effective discipline emphasizes prevention and consists of proactive strategies that focus on teaching and rewarding student behavior that contributes to improved academic performance and social behavior. In noninstructional settings, the primary focus is on teaching expectations to students and ensuring their safety by means of close adult supervision. At the classroom level, emphasis is on group-individualized curriculum, differentiated instruction, and consistent classroom management. Finally, at the student level, school personnel usually rely on individual interventions based on formal Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA). For more information please visit the following Web site: http://www.ttac.odu.edu/esd/fba.htm.

In recalling earlier figures on the negative effect of behavior problems in school, here is what school officials report after implementing a schoolwide system of effective discipline:

- One middle/high school reduced the number of discipline referrals by two-thirds; student academic engagement increased; faculty, staff, and students said the school was a calmer place.
- In another middle school, administrators found they saved the equivalent of 20 eight-hour days; teachers found they had more than 430 more hours for instruction; statewide achievement scores increased dramatically over a four-year period.
- Over a four-year period, the number of elementary school students who met state achievement standards in reading increased from 20 percent to 79 percent.

Effective, Positive Schoolwide Discipline – A Commitment to Change in Schools

A schoolwide system of discipline provides teachers a school culture in which they are able to integrate effective practices into daily instruction. Even though schools differ in many ways, the underlying principles and strategies for conceptualizing, developing, implementing, evaluating, and maintaining positive changes are essentially the same. Effective programs of discipline flourish in schools where administrators dedicate themselves to ensuring the best possible education for all students. Other hallmarks of effective schools include faculty collaboration within
and across disciplines and the involvement and routine sharing of information with families.

Incorporating schoolwide supports into the schools requires staff commitment and acceptance that a proactive approach to behavior management is a top priority. One way to determine whether school personnel will support this change is to survey the faculty regarding their three major concerns. If student behavior is among those concerns, then it is likely that the faculty will accept the idea of effective schoolwide discipline.

Positive schoolwide systems are built on commitment to change, setting aside ineffective disciplinary practices, establishing a clear set of reasonable expectations, and evaluating routinely the impact on student progress. However, it is important to keep in mind that the introduction of a positive schoolwide system does not mean that there will no longer be any consequences for inappropriate student behavior. Behavior expectations and consequences for students who violate the rules are spelled out clearly for both students and adults. Schoolwide efforts simply broaden the scope of student-centered approaches to include the classroom, school, and family/community.

Making Decisions about Positive Schoolwide Discipline

Mirroring implementation of many school-based initiatives, schools that are interested in exploring a schoolwide system of support form a team composed of general education teachers, special education teachers, support personnel, administrators, families, and others. Together, the team develops a plan and conducts a schoolwide assessment to determine the precise needs of their school. Schoolwide comprehensive evaluation tools that have been developed to determine the adequacy of an existing management system are available from the Training and Technical Assistance Centers (T/TACs) in Virginia.

At this point the decision is made whether to introduce a schoolwide system after careful review of the academic and nonacademic needs of their students. In many cases, the decision whether or not to initiate a schoolwide system depends on the number and percentage of students who present serious behavior problems and struggle to do well academically. If school personnel find that a number of students engage in the same problem behavior there may be good reason to make changes in the discipline system.
In implementing a positive schoolwide discipline system, education personnel come to an agreement on a common set of schoolwide student expectations, such as (a) Be Respectful, (b) Be Responsive, (c) Follow Directions, and (d) Be There - Be Ready to Learn. Teams may choose different expectations based on the priorities they have identified for the school.

After education personnel identify their expectations, all students are taught directly and systematically (a) when to engage in the behavior and (b) how to perform the behavior. Faculty members make extensive use of modeling and role-play activities to minimize any confusion or misunderstanding regarding specific expectations. When teaching the student classroom expectations, teachers establish clear objectives that are specific and measurable. Students are given multiple opportunities to practice the expectations and to receive positive reinforcement for doing so. Later, after students learn the expectations, teachers routinely introduce a scaled down version of the original instruction to ensure that students maintain the behaviors. Once the faculty and staff decide to introduce a schoolwide system, they: (a) establish a discipline team; (b) review existing data and decide in which context(s) (schoolwide, classroom-based, or individual centered) to begin; (c) select measurable student outcomes; (d) select scientifically-based practices; (e) establish ways to provide one another support to sustain implementation; and (f) monitor closely implementation and progress toward reaching the outcomes specified for the school.

**A Blueprint for Implementing Effective Schoolwide Discipline**

In implementing a schoolwide program, personnel work together to match the level and intensity of intervention to the needs of their student(s). Experience shows that about 85 to 90 percent of the students respond positively to schoolwide behavioral expectations; with only about 10 to 15 percent of the students needing additional instruction, interventions, and support. Of course, the actual number of students that fit a particular category will vary across grade levels and schools. For example, administrative and faculty concerns in a suburban elementary school may vary significantly from those of education personnel in an urban high school. However, in most instances, schools find that the number of students who will benefit from behavioral support is essentially the same as the number of students who need some kind of academic support.
In some instances, schools have found that it is useful to develop schoolwide expectations and a data collection system before moving to schoolwide, classroom, or individual interventions. The data are analyzed to determine the needs of the school. For example, if it is found that most of the student referrals come from the classroom, it makes sense to develop strategies and procedures that are applicable to the classroom. If the same students are receiving the majority of referrals, then school personnel might decide to conduct Functional Behavioral Assessment and develop positive behavioral intervention plans and supports for those students. In contrast, if a significant number of students, for instance, one-third of the student population, receive one or more referrals, then the focus would probably be on a schoolwide system. It is important to keep in mind that a schoolwide program provides the framework that is essential for promoting positive learning environments for all students.

As part of the decision-making process, faculty and staff record the cumulative number of referrals in a particular area (classroom versus non-classroom setting) and then calculate the respective percentages. If there is doubt about the accuracy of the data, the number of referrals each day might be charted for a specified amount of time. On that chart, specific behaviors, such as noncompliance or property damage and the location in which the behavior occurred (classroom, cafeteria, computer lab), would be recorded. Regardless of the specific data collection procedures, all relevant information should be analyzed as part of the decision-making process.

Once the schoolwide evaluation is complete, a mission statement is developed that reflects the objectives that staff have identified and that underscore their commitment to proactive academic and behavioral interventions. A team composed of administrators, general and special educators, parents, guidance counselors, and other interested school personnel should be formed. The team will:

- identify and define 3-5 schoolwide expectations of appropriate behavior;
- identify key locations throughout the school and further define expectations according to the specific demands of the setting(s);
- systematically instruct all students in each of these expectations;
• develop a system of positive reinforcement that includes immediate, delayed, and variable reinforcement options for students who demonstrate the expected behavior;
• develop a plan to correct student behavior problems through a graduated program of consequences and direct instruction on appropriate behavior;
• collect data on important aspects of the plan to ensure consistent implementation and to guide decision making regarding program adjustments or revisions;
• establish and maintain strong administrative and faculty support and building-level leadership for positive schoolwide discipline;
• provide information to families in a variety of ways; and
• secure district wide support for positive schoolwide discipline.

In thinking about how positive approaches to discipline affect students, it is helpful to picture a triangle. The base of the triangle represents best practices that will benefit the majority of students. Some experts refer to these strategies as primary interventions. Strategies include a classroom routine and schedule of activities that communicate to students a clear picture of the daily organization of instruction; the physical proximity of the teacher; teacher attention and use of verbal praise; high notes of correct pupil responses; brisk pace of instruction; and differentiated instruction to accommodate the diverse needs and capabilities of students. The middle section of the triangle corresponds with the needs of a smaller segment of the student population for more focused academic and behavioral instruction (or secondary interventions). Finally, the top portion of the triangle corresponds to those students whose needs can best be met through intensive individual intervention plans that stem from a formal FBA.

One way school personnel can organize intervention and support options is to think of the triangle as divided into three different behavior
zones: (a) the green zone (most students), (b) the yellow zone (some students), and (c) the red zone (few students). Because discipline referrals are a good barometer of overall student behavior, the faculty might reserve the green zone for students who have no office referrals. Some students with two to five referrals would be assigned to the yellow zone; while a few students with six or more office discipline referrals per year are assigned to the red zone; the faculty would develop and implement a range of interventions.

Ways to Promote Acceptance of Effective Schoolwide Discipline

Successful implementation of a schoolwide support system depends upon strong administrative support, along with unwavering faculty commitment. In many schools, administrators and faculty involve students and families in the decision-making process as well. To encourage student acceptance of positive, effective schoolwide discipline, faculty and students often choose a slogan that reflects a sense of schoolwide commitment to establishing a positive learning environment, such as “Panther Pride,” “The High Five Program,” “No Limits on Learning,” to mention a few. In implementing a system, the accumulated research indicates that schools are able to decrease the number of student discipline problems and create an environment in which teams can conduct a FBA and introduce more intensive interventions if they are needed. As a result, the school climate is more welcoming, classroom teachers are more responsive to students, and students and adults all report more positive relationships.

Conclusion

There is growing evidence that a positive and effective schoolwide approach to discipline is an economical way for schools to make use of available resources. In establishing such a program, faculty members work together and work smarter to narrow performance gaps among students and to raise the level of academic achievement of all students. While not all schools need a schoolwide system, all schools benefit from a clearly defined and consistently enforced system of effective schoolwide discipline. In the end, the most compelling reason to promote positive, effective schoolwide discipline is that it increases the capacity of schools to create safe and effective learning environments for all of Virginia’s children.
Additional Information

Journals and Other Periodic Sources

Educational Leadership
ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education
Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions
The Clearing House
Newspaper of the National Association of School Psychologists
Intervention in the School and Clinic
Preventing School Failure
Research Connections in Special Education

Selected Readings


**Web sites**
- Center for Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports [www.pbis.org](http://www.pbis.org)
- Center for Effective Collaboration & Practice [http://cecp.air.org](http://cecp.air.org)
- Council for Exceptional Children [www.cec.sped.org](http://www.cec.sped.org)
- Beach Center [www.beachcenter.org](http://www.beachcenter.org)
- T/TAC Online [www.ttaonline.org](http://www.ttaonline.org)
Effective Schoolwide Discipline Web site: http://www.t tac.edu/esd

Virginia Department of Education’s
Training and Technical Assistance Centers

T/TAC Office – Regions 1 & 8
Virginia Commonwealth University
Region 1: School of Education
10 East Franklin Street, Suite 200
P.O. Box 843081
Richmond, VA 23284-3081
Phone (804) 828-6947 or (800) 426-1595
Fax (804) 828-7495
TDD (800) 828-1120
Web site: http://www.vcu.edu/t tac/

Region 8: Pickett Park
440 QM Circle South
Blackstone, VA 23824
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Fax (434) 292-7486

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