A Schoolwide, Proactive Approach to Discipline

By Nancy Protheroe

In effective schools, “behavior support is connected to the broader concern of improving academic success” (Dunlap, Goodman, McEvoy, & Paris, 2010, p. 41). The approach used by these schools to maintain high standards of behavior can be described by two words—schoolwide and proactive.

Schools that take a schoolwide approach invest time and attention in developing expectations for behavior—as well as consequences for misbehavior—that apply in every classroom and in all public settings. “In this way, efforts in the classroom to establish expected behaviors such as cooperation, respect, safety, and responsibility are supported on a schoolwide basis” (Colvin, 2009, p. 2). A key aspect of this approach is educating staff members and all students so that they are all on the same page. Students may be less likely to misbehave when expectations are clear and they understand the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable behavior.

In a proactive approach, the plan for addressing discipline is broader than simply developing consequences for misbehavior. For example, school staff members work to identify ways in which school policies and practices could be changed to decrease the likelihood that problem behaviors occur. This approach also involves educating students about acceptable and unacceptable behavior beyond simply distributing copies of school rules, because “even if students don’t have major discipline problems, they can benefit from instruction in positive behavior expectations and positive acknowledgements” (Dunlap, Goodman, McEvoy, & Paris, 2010, p. 3).

A schoolwide, proactive approach to discipline is well aligned with the position of the Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA (2011). The center recommends that efforts to develop and maintain a safe and secure environment be considered essential to a school’s ability to accomplish its instructional goals.

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Just the Facts

- “Behavior support is connected to the broader concern of improving academic success. There is more time to teach when the frequency and intensity of discipline problems are reduced” (Dunlap, Goodman, McEvoy, & Paris, 2010, p. 41)
- “A proactive approach can be summarized in three words: structure for success.” (Rickert, 2005, p. 45)
- “The defining feature of a proactive schoolwide discipline plan is the focus on schoolwide behavior expectations.” (Colvin, 2007, p. 56)
- “Well-disciplined schools tend to be those in which there is a schoolwide emphasis on the importance of learning and intolerance of conditions which inhibit learning.” (Cotton, 2001, p. 3)
mission rather than considered a separate agenda. The center also suggested that such efforts as bullying prevention are more effectively addressed when part of a comprehensive effort—not one in a list of piecemeal programs.

What Does a Schoolwide, Proactive Approach to Discipline Look Like?

Cotton (2001) stressed the integral relationship between discipline and instruction and described “well-disciplined schools... characterized by a schoolwide emphasis on the importance of learning and intolerance of conditions which inhibit learning” (p. 3). In Colvin’s (2007) view, “the defining feature of a proactive schoolwide discipline plan is the focus on schoolwide behavior expectations” (p. 56), with the school emphasizing desired behaviors instead of “the traditional focus on eliminating undesirable behavior” (p. 56). In addition, “students need to perceive discipline as being fair, consistent, and clear” (Fager and Boss, 1999, “Schoolwide Efforts,” para. 3). According to Scott and Hunter (2001), “When schoolwide expectations, policy, and consequences are inconsistently applied across staff, they become ambiguous to students. And when students cannot predict the outcome of a given behavior, a significant number will act inappropriately” (p. 15).

Rickert (2005), a former high school principal, discussed several characteristics of effective schoolwide systems:

- **Proactive**—A proactive approach can be summarized in three words: structure for success.... To build proactive structures, look at what you are asking your students to do and how you are asking them to do it. Look for ways to alleviate tension. Try to solve problems before they foster misbehavior.
- **Positive**—A positive approach involves constructive, encouraging, and affirmative interaction between students and staff members.... Overall, the message we want to give students is, “We really like you guys, but you don’t run the place.”
- **Instructional**—An instructional approach is one in which teachers and staff members prepare students to behave responsibly and positively by teaching expectations and strategies. (pp. 45-46)

Colvin (2007) agreed with Rickert about the importance of the instructional component: “At the heart of a proactive schoolwide discipline plan is the notion that expected behavior needs to be taught. Simply put, ‘If you want good behavior, you have to teach it’” (p. 55). In line with this instructional focus, teachers should routinely “encourage suitable behavior by recognizing students when they behave appropriately” (Kay & Ryan, 2000, p. 6). Some of these schoolwide approaches to discipline use concepts similar to response to intervention in that some components are designed for all students in the school and other, more-intensive interventions and supports are designed to address serious misbehavior or students who chronically misbehave. One important element is to “focus on preventing the development and occurrence of problem behavior, which is more effective, cost-efficient, and productive” (Horner, Sugai, and Vincent, 2005, p. 4). Horner, Sugai, and Vincent (2005) described other characteristics of this approach:

- **Acknowledge appropriate behavior.** Students should receive regular recognition for appropriate behavior at rates that exceed rates of recognition for rule violations and problem behaviors. Negative consequences alone will not change problem behavior. Instead of ignoring problem behavior, a continuum of consequences (e.g., correction, warning, office discipline referral) for problem behavior should be maintained and used to prevent escalation and allow instruction to continue in class.
Gather and use data about student behavior to guide behavior support decisions. Data on what problem behaviors are being observed and how often, where and what time of the day they are occurring, and who is engaging in these problem behaviors enable schools to develop the most effective, efficient, and relevant school-wide behavior support plan. (p. 4)

Finally, effective systems work to develop their “capacity for highly intense interventions with the small number of students with chronic behavior problems” (Homer, Sugai, and Horner, 2000, p. 20). These interventions are frequently preceded by a functional behavior assessment (FBA), a systematic and rigorous process intended to help identify possible relationships between a problem behavior and the context or setting in which it tends to occur. The data gathered from an FBA is then used “to guide the development of effective positive interventions based on the function of the behavior” (Loman & Borgmeier, 2010, p. 3). For example, one-on-one counseling—a type of intense intervention—might proceed in one direction if the problem behavior was classified as helping a student to “escape” a situation and another if the FBA pointed to a student’s use of the misbehavior as a way to get attention. Another type of intervention might focus on removing a trigger event or at least decreasing the likelihood that a student will experience it.

An Example of a Proactive, Schoolwide Approach

Although there are several packaged approaches to managing discipline that could be categorized as schoolwide and proactive, they should be viewed as a process rather than a set of components. A school’s approach to discipline has “to become woven into the fabric of existing school systems” if it is to be effective (Dunlap, Goodman, McEvoy, & Paris, 2010, p. 41).

One such approach is positive behavioral interventions and support (PBIS). Schools implementing this approach with fidelity have experienced improvement in several academic indicators, including the time students spend in instruction as well as decreases in indicators such as the number of referrals to the office and the number of students needing more-intensive behavior supports (Horner, Sugai, & Vincent, 2005). Although the approach was initially used primarily in elementary schools, both middle and high schools are now adopting the process. The staff members at one middle school phased in PBIS by first developing and implementing schoolwide expectations for student conduct. They communicated the expectations as five Ps—being prompt, positive, polite, prepared, and productive. Office referrals declined from an average of 5.7 each day to 2.5 each day. After this clear indicator that the approach could be effective, the school staff shifted emphasis to developing more intensive interventions for students who need additional support (Zehr, 2011).

Building the Schoolwide Approach Collaboratively

How a schoolwide approach to discipline is developed can be just as important to its success as the elements it includes: research highlights the importance of involving all school members in developing rules and consequences that are consistent with the school’s philosophy of education and learning goals. Scott and Hunter (2001) stated that “when the entire school staff is involved in determining and agreeing upon schoolwide expectations, policy, and consequences, staff consistency and resulting student
success are far more likely” (p. 15).

The starting point for a school’s discipline plan should be developing a consensus for a vision of the school community. Data from a recent survey of principals and teachers demonstrated why this type of discussion among school staff members may be particularly important. The 2008 MetLife Survey of the American Teacher found that, although fewer than two-thirds of secondary teachers rated their school’s discipline policy as excellent or good, almost all principals categorized it this way (Markow & Cooper, 2008). This gap likely points to a difference between teacher and principal perceptions as to how well the discipline system is working in their schools.

Miles (1999) suggested that schools interested in revising their approach to discipline begin with a “behavior audit” to assess the current situation and to highlight both strengths and problem areas. Engaging in discussion about what currently works—and what does not—is a good second step. The following questions could be used to jump-start discussion in a staff meeting or among committee members charged with evaluating the current discipline system:

- Do we currently have a working, schoolwide plan for managing discipline?
- Do students experience consistent approaches to discipline across classrooms in our school?

Boynton and Boynton (2007) suggested that staff members should also discuss current school rules. For example, are the rules clear and explicit? Are they effective in general? Are there specific rules that seem to need evaluation and possible reworking?

This preliminary discussion is a key part of the process of moving toward a more unified approach to school discipline. For example, teachers should attempt to come to consensus on the elements of acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Young (2008) described the process in one school:

It became clear that change would not occur until all the adults had concrete rather than abstract understanding of how students were to be supervised, how our operational procedures were to be structured, what each adult would have to know and be able to do, and how we could collectively work to prevent problems rather than react to them. (pp. 2–3)

If a shift toward a more comprehensive approach to discipline will involve major changes in school practices, the first step is to ensure that staff members understand and are comfortable with the new approach. To support this, Shellady and Sealander (2003) suggested that staff members “be surveyed about their content knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs toward student behavior, as well as perceived barriers and need for support” (p. 33).

After assessing needs and problems, the staff members should develop clearly stated expectations that everyone in the school community understands. Colvin (2007) suggested that schools define no more than four or five behavioral expectations, such as “Be respectful.” The next step is identifying common settings—such as classrooms, hallways, and the cafeteria — and describing the behavioral expectation for each setting in “positive, action-based terms using simple understandable language as briefly as possible” (p. 46). For example, wait your turn; keep hands, feet, and objects to yourself; and follow directions may describe what “be respectful” would look like on the school bus.

Colvin (2007) also stressed that an effective schoolwide approach to discipline requires the development and implementation of two core concepts. “The system needs to have a continuum of procedures for addressing the full range of problem behavior, and this continuum is broken out into two tracks, office-managed behavior and staff-managed behavior” (Colvin, 2007, p. 75).
Borelli (2007) described the process for what teachers will do in response to problem behavior as the “‘meat and potatoes’ of an effective schoolwide discipline model” (p. 38). This element of schoolwide discipline should receive special attention during a school’s initial implementation of PBIS as schools work to develop a flowchart that distinguishes problem behaviors that are expected to be managed by teachers from those that are to be managed by the office. For example, teachers might be expected to handle student tardiness, refusal to work, or inappropriate comments. In contrast, students exhibiting such behavior as fighting or significant vandalism are sent directly to the office, with chronic infractions also qualifying for management through the principal’s office. In addition, teachers are expected to complete brief information sheets on minor infractions and their responses to them, with the data collected and analyzed to provide a more complete picture of student behavior (Lewis, 2009).

Although data use should be ongoing, it is important to make intentional use of data during initial discussions about changes to the current system.

Avoiding the Traps
Developing an effective approach to schoolwide discipline is a complex process. Horner, Sugai, and Horner (2000) identified “traps” around which a school staff needs to navigate as they design an effective discipline system. Part of the planning process might be reviewing these traps and asking whether any of them apply to your school’s current or proposed approaches:

- **Trap No. 1:** Getting tough is enough. (In reality, it is simply not enough to get tough without a proactive system for teaching and supporting appropriate behavior.)
- **Trap No. 2:** Focusing on the difficult few. (Although an effective disciplinary system must address the small number of students who engage in chronic and intense disruptive behavior, procedures must be in place to build schoolwide social competence.)
- **Trap No. 3:** Looking for the quick fix. (Building effective schoolwide discipline takes time. A reasonable period to design and establish an effective disciplinary system is from three to five years.)
- **Trap No. 4:** Finding one powerful trick. (Schoolwide discipline is not achieved through a single strategy. It must include components for defining and teaching behavioral expectations, rapid and low-effort support for students who continue to display disruptive behavior, and high-intensity support for students with high-intensity behavior problems.)
- **Trap No. 5:** Believing someone has the solution. (An effective system will...

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**What Data Should be Considered?**

Questions to consider for data use:

- How are we doing overall?
- Are we doing better than we have in the past or are problems increasing?
- How does our discipline picture compare to those of similar schools?
- Does the data show that there are special problems with some locations, times, specific students or groups of students?
- Are there specific classrooms that seem to have a higher than average number of classroom referrals?
- Are there patterns in the data that point to problems that should be addressed?
- Do any of the problems point to changes in school procedure that should be considered?
- How about the possibility of help for some teachers in the area of classroom management skills?
be designed to meet a school’s specific needs—identified through active self-assessment—and be continuously evaluated and changed to meet changing needs and goals.

- **Trap No. 6: Believing more is better.** (Instead of accumulating more and sometimes inconsistent programs and approaches to deal with disciplinary problems, it is more effective to eliminate practices that are not working and very carefully match new practices to specific school needs). (Horner, Sugai, & Horner, 2000, pp. 22–23)

**In Summary**

Although there are no simple or overnight solutions for how to turn around a school with serious discipline problems, or even how to make a school with only moderate levels of inappropriate student behavior better, schoolwide approaches have a proven track record.

The bottom line—staff collaboration toward developing and implementing a proactive, schoolwide approach to discipline sends a clear message to students and helps to create an environment that supports learning.

Horner, Sugai, and Horner (2000) emphasized the importance of effective leadership to developing and maintaining a schoolwide approach to discipline:

We know schoolwide discipline requires the sustained use of effective classroom and behavior management practices by teachers, staff members, and families. However, we also know that workshops on classroom management procedures, anger management training, and crisis management strategies will produce minimal effects without clear, consistent leadership. (p. 20)

Ultimately, it is the principal’s role to address and implement behavior management at the building level. Effective principals proactively address barriers to developing and maintaining an orderly school climate. They provide development opportunities for teachers who need to strengthen skills in classroom management or instructional strategies. Principals also monitor implementation of the schoolwide plan and procedures related to discipline. And perhaps most important, they model the behaviors that they expect of students and staff.

“[It would be a] mistake to consider the creation of a safe and supportive school community as an add-on effort consisting of special programs to address specific topics such as bullying, character education, or dispute resolution. Unless the school has a clear sense of its vision and goals, along with a comprehensive plan to realize them, such programs will likely do little to positively affect the daily experiences of most students and staff.” (Learning First Alliance, 2001, p. vii)
References

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About the Author

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