An urban elementary school reduced its behavior problems by giving students direct expectations and offering support.

All educators hope to create an environment that supports meaningful learning, one in which students' behavior contributes to—rather than obstructs—achievement. Schools traditionally use reprimands, social isolation, or loss of privileges to shape student behaviors. But punitive techniques do not truly teach students how to behave appropriately and usually bring little long-term change.

In contrast, the approach known as School-wide Positive Behavior Support (Lewis & Sugai, 1999; Sugai & Horner, 2002, 2007) shows great promise in helping students acquire and demonstrate responsible behavior. Hoffman Glen, an urban elementary school in Virginia serving primarily low-income students, has found that implementing Positive Behavior Support (PBS) brought about changes in student behavior that traditional approaches had not. During 2006–07, the first year Hoffman Glen implemented PBS, student discipline referrals decreased significantly. As a university faculty member whose research and teaching focus on PBS, I observed and documented how the faculty at Hoffman Glen used this approach to transform their school.

What Is Positive Behavior Support?

Positive Behavior Support (also known in Virginia as Effective Schoolwide Discipline) focuses on creating a school-level team that leads school personnel in identifying specific desirable student behaviors and then explicitly teaching—and rewarding—such behaviors throughout the school. The approach includes these basic components:

- **Prevention**: Clarifying positive behavioral expectations and explicitly teaching them schoolwide.
- **Consistent Support**: Fostering responsible student behavior by modeling, acknowledging, and rewarding appropriate behaviors.
- **Data-based decision making**: Regularly evaluating data to gauge the program's effectiveness and changing program elements as needed.

A look at how Hoffman Glen applied this approach throughout the school and to one particularly troublesome part of the day—lunch time—illustrates the process of putting a schoolwide PBS program into action.

Forming a Team and Clarifying Expectations

At the end of 2005, high numbers of Hoffman Glen students were failing academically, missing too much school, and receiving numerous discipline referrals. The assistant principal attended a session on PBS sponsored by the Virginia Department of Education and supported by the...
department's regional Training and Technical Assistance Centers housed in local universities across the state. By spring 2006, he had nominated a team of teachers, administrators, and a special educator to lead the school in learning about PBS and applying it. The PBS team, usually nominated by a school's administrator, is a key part of implementing PBS and may include the school psychologist, social worker, or other specialists. After this team received training, the school provided professional development focused on PBS for all teachers and staff. Specialists from the Training and Technical Assistance Centers provided workshops, coaching, mentoring, and team facilitation.

School personnel pored over data on the most frequently occurring misbehaviors. They identified four overall conduct expectations that, if followed, would lessen recurring behavior struggles: be respectful, be responsible, be safe, and be a problem solver. They defined specific behaviors aligned to these broad expectations that would be appropriate in various school locations. For example, walking rather than running in the hallways is part of being safe; following adult directions is part of being respectful. At the start of the school year, Hoffman Glen hung signs listing these four expectations throughout the school and posted specific behaviors prominently in appropriate locales.

**Modeling and Supporting Behaviors**
Throughout the year, faculty, administrators, and staff directly taught behavioral expectations to students. Adults in the school modeled actions like asking respectfully to borrow learning supplies and gave students feedback on their performance. They reinforced target behaviors, frequently with videos and other creative media. Administrators required any student who received a discipline referral to identify the general expectation he or she had violated, suggest what conditions might have led to the off-track behavior, and plan how he or she might respond more positively in the future.

Teachers began randomly awarding tickets (redeemable for such items as school supplies, recreational equipment, snacks, or small toys) when they recognized behavior matching the school’s expectations. They accompanied each reward with specific words of encouragement (“You waited your turn quietly—that really helped”). Teachers at each grade level planned a quarterly event, such as a dance or talent show, to reward students who received few or no discipline referrals. Students who didn't earn a place at these events attended positively charged "booster sessions" to review and practice appropriate behaviors.

**Keeping Close to the Data**
Once school personnel began explicitly teaching students to conduct themselves more appropriately—and acknowledging praiseworthy conduct—Hoffman Glen teachers saw tremendous changes. Two years into the program, school officials reported a 30 percent drop in the number of discipline referrals. Administrators and the PBS leadership team continue to regularly analyze data on student behavior and make adjustments to school practices with an eye to what the data reveal—a key principle of PBS.

For example, the team introduced an individualized support measure for any student who receives two or more office referrals in a specified period. These youth are assigned teacher mentors to give them extra support and guidance.

**Calm in the Cafeteria**
This ongoing evaluation of the effectiveness of the initiative revealed that student behavior in the cafeteria remained a problem. So the leadership team created a plan to make lunchtime a better experience for both students and staff. A PBS leadership team member volunteered to study what was happening at lunch. This "lead teacher" observed students and staff as they interacted during lunch periods and, armed with this observational data, led the team in identifying problem behaviors and more positive alternatives. The modified plan emphasized specific cafeteria behaviors, including

- Following adult directions.
Using manners (for example, saying *please* and *thank you* or keeping one’s place neat).

- Staying in the assigned eating area.
- Staying seated at the lunch table and using respectful language and a quiet voice.
- Raising a hand for assistance.

Cafeteria monitors, hired from the community, participated in training that articulated these expectations, modeled positive management techniques, and provided practice responding to student behaviors. Now that the new cafeteria plan is standard procedure, monitors receive ongoing support and feedback from the lead teacher.

Transition times are notorious opportunities for student distraction. The PBS team noted that misbehavior occurred frequently while students waited in line to begin or end lunch. The team designed routines for transitioning to and from the cafeteria, which all classes adopted. For example, students now stand next to the wall rather than down the middle aisle when lining up. Homerooms are dismissed for lunch on a staggered schedule to prevent long lunch lines, and teachers meet their students immediately after lunch to walk back to class.

Students sit at tables by homerooms, and cafeteria monitors place a green, yellow, or red plastic cup on each table, which reflects student conduct. Green cups mean student behavior meets expectations; yellow cups serve as a warning that behavior is beginning to get too loud or rowdy, and are soon changed to either green or red cups. Red cup mean behavior has crossed the line. Monitors record an *R* or *G* on daily sheets to summarize each table's behavior during that day's lunch period.

A chart showing each table's tally of green marks is displayed prominently on the lunchroom wall so that students can readily see which classes are being recognized for responsible behavior. To focus on positive behavior, only green marks are posted. At the end of each week, monitors put a star on a pizza-shaped sign for each class that received a green mark all five weekdays. A slip with the teacher's name of each of these star classes is placed in a container for a drawing. On Monday morning, the principal or assistant principal publicly announces which classes earned a star the previous week and randomly draws three of these classes to be awarded special recreational equipment. At the end of the month, classes that earned stars every week that month attend a pizza party.

Monitors use incident reports to track serious misbehaviors by individual students. To prevent an entire class from losing its green designation because of a few students’ chronic misbehavior, school staff intervene to help any students who perpetually get reprimanded by developing individual behavior plans designed to support them in the cafeteria. If a homeroom class gets three red marks within one week, the teacher must eat lunch with these students to identify what’s tripping students up, problem solve with them, and reteach and practice appropriate behaviors.

Since Hoffman Glen adopted PBS and this lunchtime plan, discipline problems in the cafeteria have decreased to an average of fewer than two incidents each month, primarily verbal rather than physical infractions. Teachers and administrators report spending considerably less time dealing with inappropriate behaviors in both the cafeteria and the classrooms. The overall climate of the school has improved dramatically.

**What Makes It Work?**

Faculty members and staff at Hoffman Glen attribute the success of this schoolwide behavior initiative to two factors:

- Shared leadership and responsibility. Members of the PBS team convinced their colleagues to actively participate in planning and implementing the program over time. This shared leadership, workload, and accountability helps prevent the burnout that brings down so many innovations undertaken by a few overworked individuals.
• Public, proactive administrative support. Throughout the first two years of Hoffman Glen's adoption of the PBS approach, administrators repeatedly demonstrated that teachers and staff members could count on them to meet needs that arose in switching to the new discipline model. Administrators set aside time at faculty meetings to discuss the model, for example, and problem solve with individual faculty. They consciously model positive behavioral support for their staff members, which encourages teachers to do the same for students. Administrators and PBS team members also recognize staff members who implement the program effectively with "shout-outs"—public commendations for their efforts. An attitude of openness and continuous improvement pervades the school.

Making School the Place to Be
Classrooms aren't the only locations to consider when creating positive school environments. Conflicts or angry feelings that flare up in the cafeteria, hallways, or playground frequently spill over into the school day, affecting the overall school climate and the quality of the educational program.

When schools focus on punishing "bad" behaviors, they may control these behaviors, yet make little long-term progress toward student growth. A punitive approach also exacts a price in terms of discouraged students (and teachers), reduced instructional time, and an uncomfortable school climate. As demonstrated at Hoffman Glen, a system of positive behavioral supports holds far more promise for making schools the kind of places that we and our students want to be.

References

Endnote
1 All names in this article are pseudonyms.

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