

# Preventing Problem Behavior: Implementing a School-Wide System of Behavior Support

This edition of the *Utah Special Educator* focuses on what works for schools. Almost a decade of research has provided evidence for the best method of preventing problem behavior in schools—implementing a school-wide system of behavior support.

Implementing a school-wide system is a proactive approach to preventing problem behavior with an emphasis on teaching, monitoring, and rewarding students rather than relying on punitive strategies (e.g., suspension) to change student behavior. Key components of school-wide behavior support include:

- School staff agree upon 3-5 positively stated expectations (e.g., “Be There, Be Ready” “Hands and Feet to Self”).
- Expectations are taught throughout the school (i.e., classrooms, cafeteria, hallways, and bathrooms) both at the beginning and throughout the school year.
- A continuum of rewards/incentives is established to acknowledge students for following expectations.
- A range of consequences is established for students who are not following expectations.
- Data (i.e. office discipline referrals, attendance rates, tardies, suspensions, etc.) are gathered on an ongoing basis to evaluate school-wide efforts.
- A team, which includes a school administrator as an active participant, is in charge of leading school-wide behavior support and evaluating its effectiveness.

Schools in Utah and throughout the country have experienced reductions in office discipline referrals, increases in attendance, and increases in academic engaged time following implementation of school-wide behavior support plans. These gains do not occur overnight and schools must commit to continually refining and evaluating whether the school-wide system is working.

## School-Wide Behavior Support Implementation and Evaluation

There is no one method or curriculum to follow when implementing school-wide behavior support. The goal is to establish a system which includes the key components mentioned above and fits the



culture of your school. For schools that have made efforts to implement a school-wide system of behavior support, the Systems-Wide Evaluation Tool or SET (developed at the University of Oregon) can be used to reliably measure implementation of the key components. The SET uses the following indicators to measure the extent to which a school-wide plan is in place:

- Staff report that school-wide expectations have been taught and reviewed.
- *Students* know the school-wide expectations.
- *Staff* know the school-wide expectations.

- Students report they have recently *received* a reward for following expectations.
- Staff report they have recently *delivered* rewards to students for following expectations.
- A school team (which includes an administrator) meets regularly to address behavior support, uses data for decision-making, and regularly presents data to all staff.
- The administrator and staff agree on student problem behavior that should be handled in the classroom versus sent to the office.
- A crisis intervention procedure is in place to deal with extreme emergencies (e.g., student brings a gun to school) and all staff agree on how to handle crisis situations.

## School-Wide Versus Individualized Behavior Support

Why should schools focus on implementing school-wide behavior support systems? Why not just focus on individual students who need behavior support?



Often, schools spend a great deal of time and resources on interventions that are implemented *after* a student has engaged in problem behavior. Examples of these interventions include “Think Time” (i.e., interclass time-out), behavioral contracting, and self-monitoring. Although these interventions are necessary for some students, the number of students who will need this type of behavior support is decreased if schools focus up front on preventing problem behavior.

The majority of students (80-85%) will respond to a school-wide approach to discipline, some (5-10%) will need more targeted interventions (i.e. check-in, check-out interventions) and only a small percentage of students (1-5%) will need intensive, individualized interventions (i.e. those requiring Functional Behavioral Assessments and Behavior Support Plans). However, in schools that do not have a proactive, school-wide system in place, the number of students needing targeted and individualized interventions increases. Further, in schools without a school-wide approach to discipline, students often engage in problem behavior because a) expectations are unclear or have not been taught, b) consequences for problem behavior are inconsistently implemented by staff, and c) appropriate behavior is not acknowledged as frequently as problem behavior.

Many schools and districts in Utah have made implementing a school-wide system of behavior support a top priority. For example, Peggy Milligan, Director of Special Education for Murray City School District strives to have all schools in her district implementing a school-wide system. When posed with the question “Why focus on school-wide?” Peggy stated, “All kids are working hard and need to be acknowledged.” She stated that school-wide behavior support allows schools to focus on students who are following the expectations, rather than always putting energy toward students who are acting out. The same question was posed to Linda Rawlings-Lewis, Principal of Academy Park Elementary School in Granite School District. Linda stated that school-wide behavior support helps staff be consistent in managing problem behavior and focuses them on increasing positive feedback to students. Similar to those of us who carry an American Express Card, Linda states, “School-wide behavior support - don’t leave home without it.” This is just a small sample of the reasons why schools and districts in Utah focus on school-wide systems.

## Resources for Implementing School-Wide Behavior Support

If your school is interested in receiving training on how to implement a school-wide behavior support system, there are several options in Utah. The Utah Behavior Initiatives (UBI) project focuses on helping schools implement systems of behavior support school-wide. For more information on the UBI project, contact Hollie Pettersson at the UPDC ([holliep@updc.org](mailto:holliep@updc.org)). Also, a new course on school-wide discipline will be offered this spring at the University of Utah (for more information contact Dr. Rob O’Neill at [roneill@ed.utah.edu](mailto:roneill@ed.utah.edu)). Finally, information, research, and technical reports on school-wide are available on the [PBIS.org](http://PBIS.org) website and in numerous issues of *the Utah Special Educator* ([www.updc.org](http://www.updc.org)). ■



**Leanne S. Hawken, Assistant Professor, University of Utah**