

## A POSITIVE APPROACH TO SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

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***Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports- New Hampshire (PBIS-NH) is improving the learning environment for many New Hampshire students.***



Walk into virtually any preschool or elementary school today and you're likely to see posters and whole bulletin boards devoted to messages about 'responsibility,' 'respect,' and 'caring,' among other ideals. But with problem behaviors in schools at an acknowledged all-time high, you have to wonder, "Is any of it working?"

One program, first introduced into New Hampshire schools four years ago by Rivier College Professor Dr. Howard Muscott and colleague Eric Mann of Southeastern Regional Education Service Center, is claiming a high success rate in reducing discipline problems in schools throughout the state.

The Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports - New Hampshire program—PBIS-NH for short—has led to fewer office referrals, a dramatic decrease in school suspensions, and ultimately an increase in instructional time for many New Hampshire schoolchildren, say those involved with the initiative. Their claims are based not only on anecdotal evidence, but also on statistical tracking, which is an integral part of PBIS-NH.

“We started with the knowledge that punishment is not the answer to changing problem behavior in schools,” says Muscott, explaining, “PBIS is a systematic, positive, and preventive approach that helps schools to become safe, caring, respectful environments for learning. Our primary goal is to create a place where all children, including those with emotional and behavioral disorders, can experience success.” Muscott, along with Mann, co-founded the New Hampshire Center for Effective Behavioral Interventions and Supports (NH-CEBIS) that oversees PBIS-NH.



“Before PBIS, we really had no data on how often certain undesirable behaviors were occurring and no way of dealing with them...Now we’re able to look at our problem areas and our successes and do more of what is working,” says Michelle Etchells, a behavior specialist at Thorntons Ferry Elementary School.

Currently, there are 125 New Hampshire school sites participating at all levels, from preschool to high school, with a majority being at the preschool and elementary levels.

“I was very skeptical about this program at first,” says one veteran teacher in the Merrimack School District, “I thought, here we go again—another initiative. But I can honestly say that teaching is much easier with PBIS in place—I am now sold on this approach.”

Michelle Etchells ’91G, a behavior specialist at Thorntons Ferry Elementary School in Merrimack, agrees. Etchells, who introduced PBIS at her school four years ago, saw office referrals reduced significantly from year one to year two of the program. “I really feel the PBIS program is working. Even longtime teachers have confirmed the value of it.”

Muscott says PBIS is a process, not a curriculum. “It does not have a ‘one size fits all’ answer to creating a positive school environment and is not a top down initiative, but rather allows each school to set its own expectations.”

Once teachers and administrators have reached a consensus and established three to five schoolwide expectations, teams are created to influence behavior at three key levels: universal, targeted, and intensive. The universal team works with the 80 to 90 percent of all students who do not have serious behavior problems; a targeted team focuses its efforts on the estimated five to 15 percent of students who are at-risk for problem behavior; and the intensive team works with approximately one to seven percent of students who have chronic/intense behavior problems.

“With at-risk students, we recommend a specialized group intervention and when it comes to those with chronic and serious behavior problems, we advocate for individual interventions,” explains Muscott.

According to Etchells, schoolwide goals at Thornton’s Ferry are “Respect,” “Responsibility,” and “Safety.” A related behavior matrix defines expectations for students in all areas of the school, including classrooms, the cafeteria, hallways, bathrooms, and the playground. Responsible behavior on the playground, for example, includes returning all play equipment to its proper place.

Etchells says a valuable part of the program is that each expectation needs to be observable and stated in positive language. “At Thorntons Ferry, it forced teachers to come together to define acceptable student behaviors and to hold students accountable.”

Brian Bowden, a guidance counselor at Kingswood Regional High School in Wolfeboro, N.H., says that prior to adopting PBIS in 2004, his school “did not have clear and concise behavioral expectations that all faculty and administrators agreed upon.” The result was a feeling of frustration among students and staff. “If students don’t have clear and consistent boundaries,” he says, “they will constantly test authority and their environment.” PBIS has the potential to change all of that, according to Bowden.

With the program only in its second year of implementation at Kingswood, Bowden acknowledges there are many challenges ahead. “High school teachers interact with far more students on a daily basis than elementary teachers, so it’s going to take some time.” Still, Bowden says, “Using the PBIS system, we were able to reduce “tardies” by approximately 70 percent from one month to the next.”

“The biggest change at Maple Avenue since implementing the program in 2003 has been one in school atmosphere...now we find that the children act more respectfully to teachers and their peers,” says Kurt Gergler, principal of the elementary school located in Claremont.

“One reason for the impressive success of the project,” says NH CEBIS Co-Director Eric Mann, “is the advance commitment the Center requires for participation in the initiative. Schools must have an administrator committed to PBIS and then 80 percent of faculty are required to give their approval before training can begin.”

Those involved with PBIS-NH say another big difference between this and other behavior modification programs is that PBIS provides measurable data. When a school adopts the program, they agree to use data for decision making, according to Muscott. Most institutions choose to track office discipline referrals using the Schoolwide Information System (SWIS) database, developed by the Positive Behavior Support Center at the University of Oregon.

“Before PBIS, we really had no data on how often certain undesirable behaviors were occurring and no systematic way of dealing with them,” says Etchells. Now Thorntons Ferry teachers document student behaviors using referral slips and describe the action taken. With those referrals tracked daily, “We’re able to look at our problem areas and our successes and do more of what is working.”

One of the successes at Thorntons Ferry has been curbing physical aggression on the playground. Etchells says when she and other members of the target team talked individually with the offending students, they realized the children were bored and didn’t know how to play outdoor games. “So we taught them how to play four square and other games.” The result was a measurable decrease in pushing and shoving on the playground and “more time spent learning in the classroom instead of sitting in the principal’s office.”

Kurt Gergler, principal at Maple Avenue Elementary School in Claremont, N.H., which has 350 students from pre-school through fifth grade, says the biggest change at his school since implementing the program in 2003 has been one in school atmosphere. “Things were okay before, but now we find that the children act more respectfully to teachers and their peers,” he says, quickly acknowledging that there are still students with behavior issues. “But we now have systems in place to address those behaviors,” he adds.

The unprecedented success of PBIS-NH is all about systems, say those responsible for introducing the program to New Hampshire schools. “PBIS-NH provides comprehensive training and technical assistance to participating schools,” says Muscott. “We’re proud of the fact that we work collaboratively with educators to build schoolwide systems and then support teachers and administrators on an ongoing basis. Working together, we believe we’ve accomplished a lot for many of New Hampshire’s schoolchildren. ■

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