

STUDENT BEHAVIOR: WHAT IS HAPPENING HERE?

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Meltdowns, arguments, and disrespectful talk. Students out of their seats and fights breaking out! Does this sound like YOUR school in Fall 2021? It appears ALL schools are experiencing atypical and problematic student behaviors now that schools have returned to in-person learning.

Explanations for problem behavior are, of course, apparent. Students' routines have been disrupted, a problem that continues with outbreaks and quarantines. During remote learning, students experienced not only a loss of consistency and purpose, but also reduced personal contact and social interaction. Students reliant on extended family or social agencies for support were cut off. And, most of all, students missed seeing, bonding, and receiving attention from important people in their lives--- their teachers! Children and youth often lack the words to express confusion and distress. Behavior becomes their means of communication. And, yes, students have been communicating a lot this Fall!

What can school leaders do? First and foremost, school leaders should strive for stability and consistency. Now is a good time to review your Board policies and parent-student handbook. As the new year begins, refresh on key policies and provisions in your daily announcements and weekly staff memos. Or consider making provisions of the code of conduct into positive statements or affirmations to feature on bulletin boards or in hallways. In a recent visit to one of our schools, I saw a catchy poster featuring a "choice wheel" of "things you can say if you are angry."

School leaders are being pulled in many directions, but it's very important this year to adhere to tenets of positive school climate and effective management. Here is a quick summary:

1. **Keep it positive** – All school staff should work to teach, encourage, and reinforce positive behavior. This means *really knowing and using* Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS). As you walk through the school, note whether most interactions are positive. If a "carrot and stick" approach is pervasive, consider a PBIS refresher for your staff. Plan a "caught you being good" campaign. Sprinkle happy events regularly throughout the schedule. Opportunities for arts and music experiences, collaborative schoolwide projects, and special events help motivate positive behavior. Students also engage more positively when they work together for a compelling purpose like contributing to a food bank or saving pennies for a good cause.
2. **Problem-solve concerns** – Look for patterns of problem behavior. If dismissal time is disruptive, discuss the situation as a staff. Come up with shared, positive solutions. Perhaps it is time to implement a solution I saw in one school--- teaching up to a last bell! This way, students did not have 10 or more minutes of "down time" to cause problems.
3. **Address individual problems proactively** - Use Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) team meetings to problem-solve individual behavior problems. Where possible, include parents in these discussions. A student who is chronically absent or misbehaving is communicating a need. The tools of Functional Behavior Analysis (FBA) and Behavior Intervention Planning (BIP) will help uncover underlying needs. School staff should

develop an intervention plan for individual behavior support. Track progress in response to the intervention and meet regularly to review the student's status.

4. **Become a Trauma-Informed School** - Remember students experiencing trauma or dysregulation do NOT respond positively to consequences and confrontation. If students are upset or dysregulated, plan an alternate activity – walking or skipping in the hall, for example. Consider having a sensory room where students can choose a quiet activity--- sitting on a swing or listening to music. Ensure that a staff member supervises the student and is available to talk when the student is ready to do so. Provide a school counselor or social worker. Or establish a strong partnership with a local mental health agency. Students experiencing prolonged trauma need deep levels of support.
5. **Train and Support a Crisis Team** – Each school should have a crisis team of 4 or more staff trained in verbal and non-verbal de-escalation. Crisis Team members should confer regularly about incidents that have happened so far and scenarios that could happen in the future. Teams should also actively practice crisis response protocols. They should be attuned to what's happening in the school through frequent observation and conversations with students. Serious disruptive behavior is often caused by undercurrents in school climate, for example, subtle bullying or harassment.
6. **Respect Student Rights** – When a crisis occurs, school personnel must be careful to follow Board policies and established school procedures. It is always better to take a few minutes to review information than to make a quick response. Remember students and parents have rights in public schools, including due process and confidentiality rights. The rights of students should be at the forefront of administrative response when high stakes consequences like suspension and expulsion are being considered. Discipline of students with disabilities requires special steps and team consideration of the impact of the disability on behavior. A lack of understanding, poor judgment, and disinhibition are effects of some disability conditions. A team, including parent(s), must conduct a manifestation determination to carefully weigh the situation if a long-term suspension or expulsion from school is being considered.

BCHF would like to support school leaders as they face the behavior challenges of 2021-22. To this end, we will offer two opportunities to attend a 3-hour virtual seminar on “School Discipline and Behavior Management,” on January 14 and February 18 respectively. The session will inform and refresh knowledge of behavior interventions, crisis team training, legal and due process requirements, and considerations for students with disabilities. We will also respond to your questions and concerns. *We request that all schools an administrator to one of these important sessions!* Registration is through our [Professional Learning Opportunities Catalog](#).