Moment to Moment and Year to Year:
Preventing Contemporary Problem Behavior in Schools

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Effective education faces many challenges: chronic absenteeism, dropout, diversity inequities, antisocial conduct and violence, emotional and behavioral disorders, suspensions and expulsions. We suggest that the solution emphasize the adoption of a two-prong prevention approach that considers informed decision making, selection of evidence-based practices, and implementation of culturally relevant tiered systems of support.

The Long-Vision on Prevention

The first prong is a long-vision on prevention that requires a systematic and deliberate implementation of daily proactive practices. Prevention is more than "catching kids early." It is about "vaccinating" all children against the adoption or learning of socially and educationally damaging behaviors. This vaccination requires a daily dose of social skills instruction, practice, and reinforcement on everyday expectations and routines that are imbedded into every instructional and social interaction.

At a universal level, we focus on a few school- and classroom-wide traits or values (e.g., respect self, others, and property; or responsibility, respect, and safety) that are defined by specific behavioral examples and linked to typical classroom (e.g., lecture, independent study, transition) and school (e.g., hallways, assemblies, cafeteria, field trips, entering/exiting the school) contexts. Although environmental cues (e.g., posters, signage) are useful, the real impact occurs during each moment-to-moment and day-to-day teaching and social interaction.

From a long-vision perspective, prevention also means having an explicit continuum of evidence-based practices that enables predictable and efficient supports for students who need more than the universal dose of social skills instruction. The investment is on the following priorities:

1. Development of decision-based data systems that enable efficient universal screening, continuous progress monitoring, and regular checks of implementation fidelity.
2. Use of the smallest combination of most effective intervention strategies that can enhance the most important educational outcomes.
3. Coordination or leadership team that is unwaveringly focused on high fidelity delivery of these practices and systems.
4. Long-vision on prevention includes giving equal priority to the tiered implementation of effective instructional curriculum and targeted differentiated instruction for all learners, especially those with learning-risk (e.g., access to instruction, disability, mental health issues).

If the long vision is given implementation priority, the long-term prevention outcomes can be significant:

1. reductions in norm-violating behavior,
2. increases in student self-management behaviors,
3. decreases in teasing and harassment,
4. increases in reported positive classroom and school climates,
5. decreases in the use of reactive management practices, and
6. increases in attendance and academic engagement.

The Short-Vision on Prevention

The short-vision prong emphasizes implementation of immediate and daily prevention practices, that is, what we do every day, all day, and across all school settings to reduce the likelihood of minor and major behavior incidents and increase the probability of prosocial behavior.

Every staff member during every lesson must:

1. Set challenging and achievable academic and behavior goals for every student.
2. Model positive examples of the same social skills and behaviors expected from students.
3. Prompt/cue and recognize desired social behavior at higher rates than are used for negative or norm-violating behavior.
4. Maximize every minute for successful academic and behavioral engagements.
5. Continuously and actively supervise all students across all settings at all times.

On an hourly and daily basis, minor behavior incidents (e.g., noises, wandering, off task) should be treated constructively, quickly, and quietly. Incidents of minor disruptive behavior represent teachable moments or opportunities to remind students of the desired behavior and to prompt and reinforce future opportunities to be successful. The process of handling minor problem behaviors should never sacrifice instruction time for any student, and if minor behaviors become chronic, the focus shifts toward a plan that rearranges conditions so that the opportunity to engage in problem behavior is reduced or eliminated.

Every major behavior event (e.g., fighting, intentional inappropriate behavior, harassment, disruptive non-compliance) should be treated as a "bad" habit that has worked for the student in the past and is highly likely under specific situations. Because a bad habit by definition is chronic, habituated, and efficient, solutions must be much more informed and targeted. That is, the intervention must be based on a specific understanding of the triggering and maintaining conditions and development of a specialized intervention that formally cues and rewards desired behavior and carefully eliminates competing cues and rewards for problem behavior. This plan must provide at least hourly implementation schedules, especially in the most likely problem behavior settings, by individuals who are better at doing the intervention than the student is at doing the problem behavior. Daily progress monitoring is required to enable immediate tweaking of the intervention to improve effectiveness and efficiency.

Prevention is More than Practices

Effective implementation of this two-prong approach requires more than careful selection and organization of evidence-based practices. Efficient systems must be in place to support staff implementation. These systems include strong school and district leadership that is effectively distributed at the classroom, grade level, department, and school levels. In our most challenged schools, effective principals must be instructional leaders and given at least 3–5 years to establish a durable effective and positive school culture. In addition, principals should share and distribute meaningful leadership authority to important teams (e.g., climate committees, behavior support teams, grade level and department teams) for durable implementation capacity. Daily decision-making must be guided by easily accessible and interpretable data and efficient teaming.

The full set of behavior support practices must be organized in an implementable and integrated manner, that is, a multi-tiered continuum of support. Establishment and implementation of this continuum are guided by some simple but important principles:

1. Carefully define the behavioral needs of classrooms and school-wide settings.
2. Based on these needs, eliminate practices that are no longer needed or effective and select the best evidence-based practices that have documented good outcomes related to these needs.
3. Establish data systems based on decision rules for progress monitoring and differentiation of supports.
4. Align and integrate all practices so that three general support tiers are in place:
   - Tier 1—all students, all staff, all settings;
   - Tier 2—targeted and group implemented; and
   - Tier 3—intensive and individualized interventions.

Concluding Comments

Contemporary school and classroom challenges must be defined, verified, and discussed. However, emphasis must be shifted quickly from rumination to prevention. A prevention-based multi-tiered system of practices requires moment-to-moment, hour-to-hour, day-to-day, month-to-month, and year-to-year engagement. Practice selection and adoption are necessary but insufficient. Equal, if not more, attention must be directed toward systemic or organizational supports (leadership, decision making, support continuum) that enable implementation to be effective, efficient, durable, and relevant. If implementation fidelity is high and sustained, preventing the development and occurrences of our contemporary challenges is thinkable and doable, and effective classroom and school organizations with common vision, language, and experiences are possible.