Unified School Approach to Behavior

Almost everyone has an opinion about behavior systems. Even with the wide variations, successful systems share core features. To effect real change, a behavior system must emphasize consistency both throughout the building and across classrooms and incorporate social and emotional skills. To make this happen, the entire school staff, including cafeteria workers and bus drivers, must adopt strategies that will be uniformly implemented. As a result, these approaches require professional development and long-term commitment by the school leadership for this innovation to take hold, but the results show that the effort pays off.

The federal Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) funded a study on the efficacy of Unified Discipline. The study focuses on four core goals:

- Unified attitudes: Teachers and school personnel believe that instruction can improve behavior; behavioral instruction is part of teaching; personalizing misbehavior makes matters worse; and emotional poise underlies discipline methods that work.
- Unified expectations: Consistent and fair expectations for behavioral instruction are a key to successful discipline plans.
- Unified consequences: Using a warm yet firm voice, teachers state the behavior, the violated rule, and the unified consequence and offer encouragement.
- Unified team roles: Clear responsibilities are described for all school personnel.

Preliminary data on Unified Discipline show promising trends such as reductions in office referrals[1]. An added benefit of school-wide behavior systems is that when plans are implemented that teach and support prosocial behaviors and provide consistent school-wide responses to challenging behaviors, the structure created appears to increase the school's ability to expand placement options for students who struggle with emotional regulation.[3]

One Small Step Toward Unified Schools

Whether your school has a behavior management system or not, consider adopting or updating your school-wide codes of conduct. This is a perfect opportunity to include the students and families in the process of developing the social emotional learning (SEL) pillars you want to highlight. Asking for student participation in the process empowers kids and helps them develop agency.

The following Code of Conduct is from Fuller Elementary School in North Conway, NH [2].

- Safety: Are my actions safe for myself and for others?
- Respect: Do my actions show respect for myself and for others?
- Honesty: Do my words and actions represent truth?
- Responsibility: Do my actions meet the expectation to take care of myself and be a dependable member of the community?
- Courtesy: Do my actions help make this a nice place, where people feel welcome and accepted, and where they can do their work without disruptions?

These codes become an integral part of the school culture. Your code of conduct can be woven into your curriculum and provide the means to celebrate small successes throughout the year.
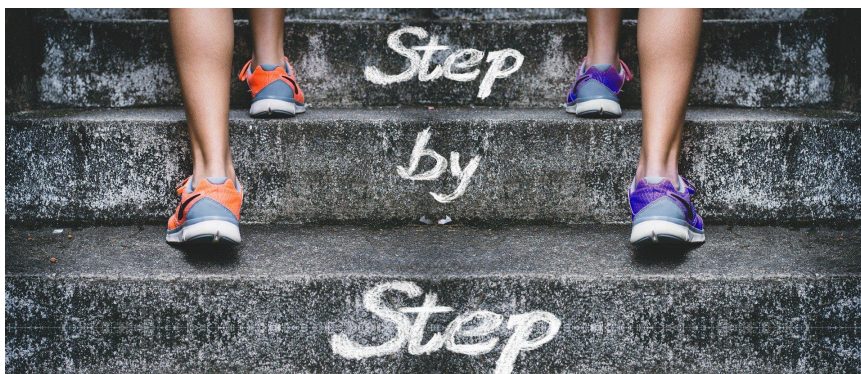
Sources and references

[1]Algozzine, Bob, et al. Preventing Problem Behaviors. Corwin Press, 2002.

[2]Cheney, D., Barringer, C., Upham, D., & Manning, B.(1995). Project DESTINY: A model for developing educational support teams through interagency networks for youth with emotional or behavioral disorders. Special Services in the Schools, 10(2), 57-76.

[3]Fitzsimmons, Mary K. ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education Reston VA. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED417515.pdf

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