29 years & counting

School Practitioner Listserv

A Weekly Community of Practice Network for Sharing and Interchange

Mental Health in Schools
UCLA
Center
Program and Policy Analysis*

In keeping with the *2015 National Initiative for Transforming Student & Learning Supports*, this community of practice network has expanded in number of participants and topics discussed. The thematic emphasis is on (1) daily concerns confronting those working in and with schools, (2) the transformation of student and learning supports, and (3) promoting whole child development and positive school climate.

January 19, 2015

Request from a Colleague
>*Help: Teaching & addressing disruptive students*

Response from Center &
Initial Responses from the Field
>*About teaching & addressing disruptive students*

Featured Center Resources
>*What we offer. What else would you like? What can you share?*

Brief update on the 2015 Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports

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Please forward this to a few colleagues you think might be interested. The more who join, the more we are likely to receive to share.

For those who have been forwarded this and want to be part of the weekly exchange, send an email to **Ltaylor@ucla.edu**
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Request from a Colleague

R"When trying to meet with a variety of students, I am faced with numerous interruptions from one student's continual poor choices in behavior. How can I manage my groups, see individuals AND be the 'GO TO' person for this student in crisis?"

Center Response:

CA constant challenge for teachers and student support staff is working with a group that includes some students ready/willing/and able and others not so ready or able and sometimes not very willing. The situation calls for rethinking how to ensure that intervention efforts are a good match for students, how to improve the ways misbehavior is handled in and out of the classroom, and how to ensure out of classroom referrals are made only when necessary.

Personalizing the Learning Environment

The essence of good classroom teaching and special assistance for students is the ability to create an environment that first can mobilize a learner to engage and then maintain that mobilization in ways that effectively facilitate learning. With this as context, help in reframing the above common and frustrating daily challenge can be found in resources offered through the Center's online clearinghouse Quick Find on

>*Environments that Support Learning –*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/environments.htm

See for example,

>*Matching Students and Instruction: The Dilemma of Grouping Students –*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/grouping.pdf

Note that current professional development stresses that ultimately the need is to *personalize* intervention and incorporate the use of *response to intervention* strategies in providing instruction and special assistance. As aids for this, see the Center's two continuing education modules on

>*Personalizing Learning and Addressing Barriers to Learning*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/personalizeI.pdf

Handling Misbehavior

Schools, of course, are meant not only to teach academics, but to turn out good citizens. While many terms are used, this societal aim requires that a fundamental focus of school improvement be on facilitating positive social and emotional development/learning.

Behavior problems clearly get in the way of all this. Misbehavior disrupts. In some forms, such as bullying and intimidating others, it is hurtful. And, observing such behavior may disinhibit others. Because of this, discipline and classroom management are daily topics at every school.

For resources related to addressing disruptive behavior in the classroom and school-wide, go to the Center's online clearinghouse Quick Find on

> *Behavior Problems and Conduct Disorders –*
> http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p3022_01.htm

See for example,

> *Rethinking How Schools Address Student Misbehavior & Disengagement –*
> http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newsletter/spring08.pdf

With specific respect to group dynamics, rather than keeping disruptive students in a group, we suggest working for a while with one or two such students separately. Of course, if a student doesn't want to be in the group, individual work remains the best option until the student indicates an interest in joining the group. Note that when a student really wants to be in the group, s/he may process removal from the group mainly as punishment for the disruptive behavior. Thus, it is important to clarify that the intent of individual work is to help the student get ready to function successfully in the group. For students who want to rejoin group, the work involves acquiring appropriate attitudes and skills (e.g., a commitment and the skills to listen, interact, share).

In general, school efforts to minimize misbehavior are reactive (e.g., employing a variety of external disciplinary and social control practices, including some that model behaviors which foster, rather than counter, development of negative values). As often happens with reactive procedures, the benefits can be offset by various negative outcomes. These include increased negative attitudes toward school and school personnel which often lead to behavior problems, anti-social acts, and various mental health problems. Some disciplinary procedures also are associated with dropping out of school.

With growing awareness that widely used discipline practices are insufficient and often counterproductive, advocates for a more positive approach have called for a greater focus on prevention by adding programs for character education, social skills and emotional "intelligence" training, and positive behavior support initiatives. A more transformative perspective emphasizes developing a comprehensive approach encompassing:

- efforts to prevent misbehavior (e.g., improving programs to enhance student engagement and minimize conditions that foment misbehavior; enhancing home responsibility for childrens' behavior and learning; promoting a school climate that embraces a holistic and family-centered orientation; working with students to establish a set of logical consequences that are reasonable, fair, and nondenigrating)
- actions taken during misbehavior (e.g., reestablishing a calm and safe atmosphere and applying established logical consequences in keeping with the framework for personalization and special assistance)
- steps taken afterwards (e.g., making program changes if necessary; preventing further problems with those who misbehaved by following-up with special assistance).

Remember: The aim is not only to reduce misbehavior, but to use events as teachable moments to enhance personal responsibility (social and moral), integrity, self-regulation/self-discipline, a work ethic, appreciation of diversity, and positive feelings about self and others.

Reserving Referrals for Chronic and Severe Problems

Referrals would be dramatically reduced if there was an initial emphasis on preventing problems and expanding special assistance in the classroom as soon as problems appear. Reducing unnecessary referrals is essential to stemming the flood of referrals for special assistance and special education that for some time has exceeded school and district resources. See

>*Minimizing Referrals Out of the Classroom --*
     http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/referralspn.pdf

(This is one of a series of practice notes from the Center focused on daily classroom dilemmas teachers experience and some initial ways to deal with such concerns.)

Increasing special assistance in classrooms requires expanding the roles and functions of student support staff to include not only providing targeted direct assistance and support to students and their families, but collaborating with teachers *in the classroom*. In terms of immediate changes, student support staff need to (a) work with their administrators and support staff colleagues to balance expanded functions and (b) build a working alliance with teachers and others at the school to focus on developing better strategies (e.g., school-wide and classroom interventions that can reduce unnecessary out of class referrals).

When Referrals are Necessary

Obviously, there still will be some instances when a student's misbehavior is so chronic and severe that it calls for providing special assistance for individual students and their families. When this happens, staff can find a variety of online resources for addressing concerns raised by referred students. These resources have been compiled into a *Practitioner and Professional Development Virtual Toolbox for Mental Health in Schools* that can be freely accessed at http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/toolbox.htm.

In general, we always stress that concerns about responding to behavior problems are related to student engagement and re-engagement in classroom learning, promoting whole child development and enhancing school climate. And, ultimately, addressing such concerns more effectively requires transforming student and learning supports. For more on this, see

>*Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Developing a Unified,*
     Comprehensive, and Equitable System –
       http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/book/book.pdf.

Initial Responses from the Field

We shared this concern with a number of colleagues and here is a sample of what has been received so far:

   (1) "I sense two questions here. One is about behavior management in groups, which can have a million different causes and an equal number of possible solutions. If that is the main concern, I suggest having a knowledgeable somebody (maybe your school psychologist) observe the sessions and look for patterns. It is very difficult for the group leader to "keep the lid on", achieve therapy or instructional goals, and trouble-shoot the process on the fly. An outside third party can also uncover additional information that

the group leader probably does not have time to gather. Sometimes, this additional data can change your mind about whether the student's choice of behavior was really a "poor" one. I remember a middle school student who was prone to cursing the teacher, which usually resulted in immediate removal from the classroom and a suspension. Staff thought that was a really poor choice. Digging deeper, we discovered the student knew he had an explosive temper. His family was violent in many ways. When his non-school life was crummy enough, he was preoccupied with those events and had very little frustration tolerance. And we all know success in school requires a lot of frustration tolerance.

So when this student couldn't take school any more, he thought he had two choices to escape his pressure-cooker: a) punch out the teacher, or b) cuss out the teacher. He didn't want to throw a punch because he knew that would put him in trouble with the law. Of the two, I think most educators would call plan 'b' a "good" choice – until the time that we could convince him there were also other as-yet-unseen options at hand.

The other question might be about the possible negative effects of having to "discipline" a student with whom you need to maintain a therapeutic or advocacy relationship. People debate whether a counselor can wear two hats. Part of the problem, as I see it, is that there can be a mis-match in the theory supporting the counseling session and the theory upon which the discipline system is based. Sometimes, these two systems are designed and maintained by people with very different goals. Uncomfortable situations can develop. In my own work, there were times when I was able to enforce my hiring agency's discipline code-which was more punitive than I preferred-and still maintain a good relationship with the student. I think the fact that I did enforce the rules demonstrated to the student that I can be trusted to do the right thing. But before this happened we had a fair amount of time to get to know each other. The relationship came first. I think we both understood we were caught in the system and just had to ride it out together. There was some authentic and honest conversation at the time. Even during the disciplinary events, there was mutual respect. I have also gotten emotionally caught up in the power play and simply scolded a student. Those times never worked out well. This is also questions highlight the incredible number of critical decisions per minute the group leader needs to make. This is a skill that improves with continued study and guided practice over time. I'm glad to see you reaching out for assistance rather than handle all the details by yourself."

(2) "I am not sure what the system supports are in place for this person. Here are my two cents ... and only that.
- Always start with taking care of yourself. A healthy support staff/teacher is happy teacher and students feel your attitude, well-being, stress, etc.
- Good preparation is always key for teaching, it minimizes behavior problems.
- Build strong relationships with your students. What do they like, what engages them? Greet them each day with a warm smile and by their first name.
- Annoying behaviors are often developmental... fidgeting, distractibility, blurting out, poor social skills. Build in lessons on social skills of caring, personal hygiene, and developmentally appropriate student learner expectations and social skill development.
- Pair him or her with a peer who can assist.
- Ask your Principal or veteran teachers, teaching coaches how to group students who may need additional learning supports (sometimes a behavior is due to an

inability to meet the grade level standards and a student may need a little more attention in a targeted intervention group).

- Ask for help; Meet with the parents; If nothing works, consider a referral for disability. "

(3) "I would start with a focus on building/strengthening the relationship with the child during "peace time" to come to some sort of understanding on behavior and expectations during "group time."A few conversations outside of group time might help with this. I would presume the behaviors are symptoms of something deeper. Finding that out would help immensely. Also, if the behaviors are not happening in other settings, it could very well be a classroom management issue more so than it just being the student. ... Finally, a call to a parent or guardian never hurts as a further line of support and accountability."

Listserv Participants:

What can you add? Support staff, teachers, and administrators know there must be better ways to handle such problems, but seldom have the time and resources to pursue them. Can you offer any different ideas than "business as usual"? Please share so we can share with the field. Send to ltaylor@ucla.edu

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Center Featured Resource:
What we offer. What else would you like? What can you share?

If you have visited our website, hopefully you have taken time to look at the "First Visit" page and the "Site Map." In browsing through our multifaceted resources, note that we offer a strand to support daily practice, another that focuses on policy analyses, and another focused on systemic change and transformation.

We encourage everyone to explore those resources that are most relevant to their concerns and interests. We also value input about what we need to add and improve. And we really appreciate it when folks share resources with us so that we can share them with the field.

Each week we use this space to highlight a specific resource or set of resources. This week we want to draw attention to our efforts to regularly update information on

>*Upcoming initiatives, conferences & workshops –*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/upconf.htm
>*Calls for grant proposals, presentations, and papers –*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/upcall.htm
>*Training and job opportunities–*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/job.htm
>*Upcoming & archived webcasts & other professional development opportunities*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/webcast.htm

Our homepage (http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu) also provides easy access to each of these. As we are informed of items to include, we add them; so please send let us know what

should be included. Send to ltaylor@ucla.edu.

Also, can you share some ideas to help us enhance our Facebook site (https://www.facebook.com/uclacsmh)? To date we have just used Facebook to share the information we send out on our listservs; we'd love to make it a more potent vehicle for networking, interchange, and sharing.

Brief update on the 2015 Initiative for Transforming Students and Learning Supports

> *Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable.... Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals.*
>
> Martin Luther King, Jr.

We have added a couple of items to the website section for the initiative – online at http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html. See "Talking Points" and "Letter to Congressional Education Committees."

In response to our request for leaders willing to be interviewed by the media about matters related to the initiative, we were pleased to receive a host of responses from superintendents, principals, and other leaders. Anyone interested in be added to this group can let us know by responding to this email.

We are especially pleased that folks are taking time to download the new book entitled *Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/book/book.pdf. We have several other resource aids for guiding system transformation; this one revises and adds to earlier documents. We are interested in feedback.

Please share relevant resources ideas, requests, comments, and experiences! Send to ltaylor@ucla.edu

Note: Responses come only to the Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA for possible inclusion in the next week's message.

We also post a broad range of issues and responses to the *Net Exchange* on our website at http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newnetexchange.htm **and to *Facebook* (access from the Center's home page** http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/

For Recent Previous Postings, see http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/practitioner.htm

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