

What is a Behavioral Initiative?

Flaunting the rules, vandalizing property, bullying others, acting out in disrespectful, defiant, and violent ways -- schools across the country are being called on to do more about such student misbehavior. From the general public's perspective, the incidence of "discipline" problems is far too great; from the perspective of teachers and other school staff and many students, the problems represent additional barriers to teaching and learning. Concern about all this is heightened by the movement to keep special education students in regular classrooms, including those who need special interventions to address behavioral needs.

How should schools respond to problem behavior? In too many cases, the tendency is to overrely on strategies such as denying privileges, detention, and suspension. Too often, such measures are ineffective and even counterproductive. The necessity for schools to improve how they respond to behavioral needs is delineated in the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) which calls for IEPs (Individual Education Programs) to address such needs among children with disabilities early and comprehensively.* This requirement is a catalyst for schools to enhance the way they address behavioral concerns of all students.

And so the move to behavioral initiatives. In response to increasing need and the deficiencies of current practices, those responsible for public education are now developing behavioral initiatives. Such initiatives emphasize proactive programs to address student misbehavior. They provide families, schools, and communities with reforms and tools to reduce behavioral barriers to learning. In the process, they have the potential to foster school wide approaches to addressing barriers to learning and enhance positive relationships among school, family, and community.

What does a behavioral initiative look like? Because there is no consensus about the characteristics of such interventions, marked variations can be expected as initiatives develop. Some will focus on underlying causes of misbehavior; a few will emphasize holistic approaches; many will focus directly on behavioral interventions and functional assessments; some will emphasize direct and indirect ways to promote student social and emotional development; some will focus on enhancing school and community attitudes, skills, and systems. All will recognize the need for schools and communities to work together. The state of Montana, for example, sees its initiative as assisting "educators and other community members in developing the attitudes, skills, and systems necessary to ensure that each student leaves public education and enters the community with social competence appropriate to the individual regardless of ability or disability." The aim is to develop students who are "personally and socially ready to participate as productive citizens." This is to be accomplished through "a comprehensive staff development venture created to improve the capacities of schools and communities to meet the diverse and increasingly complex social, emotional and behavioral needs of students."

Developmental Trend in Intervention Thinking: Behavioral Initiatives and Beyond

