

Peabody College

VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE 37203



**The Alliance Project**

**Headquarters**

Peabody College, Box 160  
Hill Student Center, Rm. 101  
(615) 343-5610  
1-800-831-6134  
Fax (615) 343-5611  
alliance@vanderbilt.edu

**Washington, DC Metropolitan Office**

10860 Hampton Road  
Fairfax Station, VA 22039  
(703) 239-1557  
Fax (703) 503-8627  
Email: judysd@gte.net

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## **Outcomes for Students with Problem Behaviors in School: Issues, Predictors, and Practices**

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS MODULE is to review issues, practices, progress, and challenges regarding problem behaviors. Although the module addresses behavior issues across all disability groups, as well as children without disabilities, the research foundation regarding behavior issues stems largely from the work with students with emotional and behavioral disorders. The module begins with a review of what we know about this population and the academic and life outcomes for students with some of the most challenging problem behaviors -- those whose behavior interferes with their ability to learn or to maintain satisfactory relationships or is disruptive to the learning environment. These difficulties may be termed academic and social failure.

Students who exhibit behavior disorders in school continue to be one of the most problematic issues for both teachers and administrators (Furlong, Morrison, & Dear, 1994). As a consequence of their behaviors, these students spend less time engaged in instruction and often disrupt the learning environment for both themselves and their peers. This prognosis creates the need to develop effective and efficient prevention and intervention practices. Unfortunately, while inclusion is a goal for these students, research indicates that simply placing them in regular education environments with appropriate peer models is not sufficient to facilitate academic or behavioral success (Gable, McLaughlin, Sindelar, & Kilgore, 1993). For many of these students, placement in the regular education environment without appropriate supports may lead to more academic and social failure than does placement in more restrictive settings (Friedman, Cancelli, & Yoshida, 1988; Rich & Ross, 1989).

This module looks at trends and outcomes among students with problem behaviors, focusing on the school's role. A review of the research will lead to a discussion of the predictors of students who exhibit problem behaviors in school. Although these students often come to school predisposed to failure, a comprehensive analysis of these predictors is key to developing effective school-based prevention strategies. Finally, the module presents a brief summary of effective prevention practices.

## **Students with Problem Behavior: Outcomes**

This section presents a review of student outcomes in regard to problem behaviors. Throughout the 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), discussions on behavior and discipline were constant and somewhat contentious. Through these debates, it became obvious that there was a lack of data that are needed to make informed decisions. Several data collection efforts are currently in place to provide information on behavioral issues, including national studies on the implementation of the behavior-related provisions of IDEA and State-reported data on suspensions and expulsions.

### **School Outcomes**

In 1998-99, OSEP began collecting data from States on children with disabilities who were removed from their educational placement for disciplinary reasons. These data were required as part of a comprehensive effort to address discipline issues in the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA. States reported the number of children with disabilities who were (1) unilaterally removed to interim alternative educational settings following drug or weapon offenses; (2) removed based on hearing officer determinations regarding likely injury to themselves or others; or (3) suspended/expelled for more than 10 days in a school year. States also reported on the acts precipitating these removals. Data were reported by race/ethnicity and by disability category. In 1999-2000, OSEP funded a study of issues associated with the validity of the State-reported discipline data and found many threats to the validity of the data. As a result, OSEP has initiated revisions to the data collection.

In order to provide a more complete understanding of the importance of addressing problem behaviors early and comprehensively, the following sections of the module review the literature to provide a synthesis of current views on typical outcomes for students with problem behaviors (Note 1).

### **Academic and Social Failure**

While academic failures are directly related to curricular expectations, social failures involve a lack of success in meeting expectations for interacting in a school environment. Academic and social failures are reciprocally and inextricably related (Kauffman, 2001; Maguin & Loeber, 1996). The most obvious connection is seen in students with difficult behaviors who suffer from associated academic deficits. However, the connection is equally sound in the opposite direction in that academic deficits are among the most powerful predictors of social failure and problem behaviors (Maguin & Loeber, 1996; Morrison & D'Incau, 1997; Rylance, 1997; Wu, Pink, Crain, & Moles, 1982). In some sense, there appears to be evidence of characteristics of what might be termed "social learning disabilities" in many of these students. These students tend to have few friends and significantly impaired abilities to relate to peers (Kauffman, 2001). Regardless of the reasons, Marcus (1996) reports that delinquent adolescents' friendships are characterized by greater conflict, poor attachment quality, lesser ability to repair relationships, cognitive distortions, and poorer social-cognitive problem solving.

### **Life-Long Challenges**

The longer academic or social failure persists for these students, the less likely it is that they will be successful in their educational experiences or in their lives following separation from school (Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995). About 50 percent of students identified under IDEA as having emotional and behavioral disorders drop out of school (Watner, Newman, D'Amico, Jay, Butler-Nalin, & Marder, 1991). Once they leave school, these students lack the social skills necessary to be successfully employed; they consequently suffer from low employment levels (Bullis, Nishioka-Evans, Fredricks, & Davis, 1993; Carson, Sitlington, & Frank, 1995) and poor work histories (Bullis & Gaylord-Ross, 1991). Over the course of their lives, students with emotional and behavioral disorders typically hold multiple short-term jobs, rather than long-term employment (Wagner, D'Amico, Marder, Newman, & Blackorby, 1992) and, consequently, earn less than students from any other disability category (Frank & Sitlington, 1997).

The poor prognosis for students with academic and social failures, regardless of whether they have been served under IDEA, extends beyond employment. Within three years of leaving school, 70 percent of these students will be arrested (Jay & Padilla, 1987), continuing a pattern of failure that becomes extremely difficult to correct. If there is one characteristic that separates juvenile offenders from any

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Note 1. The module does not include State-reported discipline data, which are available in Appendix A of the *Twenty-Third Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of IDEA*.

other child who exhibits problematic behavior, it is perhaps the extraordinarily poor prognosis for successful rehabilitation, particularly for those who have been incarcerated (Scott, Nelson, Liaupsin, Jolivette, Christle, & Riney, in press). Continuing life problems include involvement with social services and the corrections system (Duncan, Forness, & Hartsough, 1995) and drug abuse (Wagner, Blackorby, Cameto, & Newman, 1993). These outcomes represent only a partial list of identified negative outcomes that are associated with students whose behavior problems result in academic and social failure.

### **Students with Problem Behavior: Predictable Failure**

When we can predict the academic and social failures of students with behavior problems, we then have much of the information necessary to prevent more serious academic and social problems from developing over time. However, unraveling the complex array of home, community, and school factors associated with any student quickly becomes too unwieldy a task to undertake on a large scale. But research has identified significant predictors of which students with behavior problems will experience academic failure. The purpose of prediction is not to place or remove blame; it is helpful only if it assists in alleviating the problem. Prediction has two clear benefits. First, we must understand the reasons for failure if we are to effectively develop prevention and intervention strategies that are likely to provide these students with their best chances for success. Second, we must determine how to best use our existing resources and where additional resources will be needed to create successful programs. Regardless of the nature or source of identified predictors, this review maintains a focus on the school's role in creating and facilitating environments that predict success for students predisposed to or currently exhibiting academic and social failure.

### **Poverty and Predictable Early Academic Deficits**

The single greatest predictor of academic and social failure in America's schools is poverty (Illinois State Board of Education, 2001; Rylance, 1997). Multiple regression analyses of statewide data on Illinois and Kentucky demonstrate that approximately 70 percent of the variance in standardized achievement scores can be accounted for by nothing more than income level (Illinois State Board of Education, 2001; Nelson, Scott, Liaupsin, Christle, & Riney, 2001). Further analysis in Illinois reveals that the cumulative effects of multiple other variables do not significantly add to the predictability of student success or failure (see Table 1).

There is strong evidence regarding the issues associated with poverty that tend to predict student failure. Students from a background of poverty typically come to school with significantly less exposure to print materials (Adams, 1988) and with less vocabulary and less practice at following complex sets of directions (Hart & Risley, 1995). These students then experience academic and social failures from the first day of school and at a higher rate than their peers (Coleman & Vaughn, 2000).

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Table 1. Percentage of Successful Predictions for ITBS Scores  
Below the Mean in Illinois

<u>Predictors</u>	<u>Successful Prediction</u>
Poverty rate	71 percent
Poverty rate + mobility rate	73 percent
Poverty rate + mobility rate, attendance rate, teacher race, and highest teacher degree-master's	77 percent
Poverty rate + mobility rate, attendance rate, limited English proficiency, average teacher salary, average teacher experience, truancy rate, race, teacher race, funding per pupil, school enrollment, average class size, highest teacher degree-bachelor's, and highest teacher degree-master's	78 percent

Source: Adapted from table presented on the Illinois State Board of Education web site.

In the original report, this is Table I-6.

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These failures begin a pattern within which students experience more negative interaction and punishment, while at the same time receiving less academic time with teachers. This becomes a vicious circle as students escalate problem behaviors in order to avoid aversive classroom experiences; the result is more punishment and eventual exclusion. This is an especially tragic pattern in light of the fact that there is ample evidence to suggest that increased academic engaged time and effective instructional practices can promote both academic and social success with these students (Nelson, Johnson, & Marchand-Martella, 1996; Scott, Nelson, & Liaupsin, in press; Tarver & Jung, 1995).

Research indicates that there are no easy answers for low-income students with a history of early academic and social failure. Simply providing effective instruction in key deficit areas is a necessity, although it is apparently insufficient to facilitate continuing success (Hart & Risley, 1995). Students with problem behaviors require effective instruction, supportive/encouraging environments, and continuous feedback on an ongoing basis. That is, preventive support cannot be delivered via a "hit and run" model. Instead, support for students with these challenges must be incorporated into the system and follow students through their school careers. The longer a student goes without support, at any level, the less likely that the student will achieve success. Thus, research indicates that there is little room for error in promoting success with all children -- but especially those who are at risk of academic and social failure.

### **Practices Affecting Student Outcomes**

The following practices have been successful in both preventing student failures and in providing effective supports for intervening with students who are already experiencing failure. These practices can be characterized in three stages: (1) primary prevention -- creating school environments that minimize conditions that predict failure and provide effective instruction and

prompting for success across all students; (2) secondary prevention -- identifying students exhibiting initial failures despite primary prevention efforts and providing them with more individualized strategies to prevent failures from progressing; and (3) tertiary prevention -- identifying students with the most chronic and pervasive academic and social failures and providing intensive and collaborative school/community-based strategies to prevent these failures from resulting in school dropout and the negative life outcomes typically associated with it (i.e., incarceration, social welfare involvement, drug abuse, etc).

### **Positive Behavioral Support**

Systems of positive behavioral support provide schools with a framework within which to predict student failures and to create strategies and expectations across all personnel in an effort to prevent failures. Such practices have been successful in decreasing a variety of student failures, thereby facilitating increased student success rates (Lewis & Sugai, 1999; Scott, 2001; Sugai, Sprague, Horner, & Walker, 2000). To be successful, positive behavioral supports must be implemented as a system wherein all personnel take equal responsibility for planning, implementation, and evaluation of student progress (Scott & Nelson, 1999a; Jolivette, Barton-Arwood, & Scott, 2000).

Positive behavioral support is a schoolwide approach to adopting and sustaining the use of effective practices to prevention designed to enhance the capacity of schools to educate all students, especially students with problem behaviors resulting in academic and social failure (Sugai et al., 2000). For students with problem behavior, positive behavioral supports help to prevent many of the predictable behavior problems that typically begin a pattern of escalating academic and social failures. This approach has been advocated in the *2000 Report of the Surgeon General's Conference on Children's Mental Health* as a cost effective method of prevention. This report recommends that positive behavior support emphasize "primary prevention methods that recognize the unique differences of all children and youth, but should include selective individual student supports for those who have more intense and long-term needs" (p. 7).

For students with problem behavior, positive behavioral supports help to prevent many of the predictable behavior problems that typically begin a pattern of escalating problems. However, regardless of the fidelity and implementation of schoolwide support systems, many students with problem behaviors will continue to exhibit behavior problems and experience academic and social failure. These students will require more intensive and individualized interventions (Sugai & Horner, 1999). Sugai and Horner (1999) suggest that, within a system of support, the level and intensity of support are dictated by the level and complexity of the behavior problem. Efficiency is then realized by preventing problems across all students so that more intensive needs may be identified earlier and more resources may be applied in developing individualized interventions.

Because students with problem behaviors often experience a high degree of academic and social failure in their lives, effective schools provide multiple opportunities for success and facilitate success by communicating high expectations, providing effective instruction, and developing environments that encourage, prompt, and acknowledge success. Students with a background of failure are easily discouraged and must be set up to succeed on a frequent and predictable basis (Scott et al., in press).

## **Effective Instruction and Collaborative Practices**

Meta-analyses of over 800 studies have examined effective practice for students with problem behaviors (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1996; Lipsky, 1991). The largest effects were found for social skills instruction, behaviorally based interventions (i.e., encouragement and consistent responses to positive and negative behaviors), and academic instruction. What these three practices have in common is that they are based on the delivery of effective instruction. For both academic and social problems, meta-analyses have identified practices in which instruction includes clear expectations and how to meet them, encouragement and facilitation of success, and consistent acknowledgment/ feedback for both positive and negative behavior.

As previously discussed, students with problem behaviors require effective instruction that engages them in learning and encourages frequent success. Evidence clearly indicates that academic success is associated with a decrease in problem behavior and involvement with the judicial system (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1996; Lipsky, 1991; Maguin & Loeber, 1996). However, while effective instruction has historically been conceived of as mainly an academic issue, students with problem behaviors require effective instruction across the curriculum and into students' extracurricular lives. In the social realm, research indicates a need for programs that include social skills, peer mediation and conflict resolution, and transition planning (Jolivette, Stichter, Nelson, Scott, & Liaupsin, 2000; Peck, Sasso, & Jolivette, 1997).

Effective interventions will likely require schools to look beyond their traditional role with these students. For example, Neel, Meadows, Levine, and Edgar (1988) described vocational training as the means for identifying, teaching, and reinforcing appropriate and specific job skills within a variety of work environments. This definition implies collaboration between the school and community in developing coordinated experiences and expectations. The array of problems faced by many students requires interventions that are beyond the scope of the school. Although intervention plans may be initiated by the school, the plans themselves and effective implementation of them will require a collaborative effort between the school, family, and community.

### **Wraparound Planning**

One positive trend for students with behavior problems has been the move toward integrated and collaborative assessment and intervention. Wraparound planning typically has been conceptualized as a family- and student-centered, multidisciplinary planning process specifically designed for students whose history of problem behaviors warrants the most intensive interventions. However, wraparound planning has also been applied for students with more mild behavioral problems and as early intervention for students identified as at-risk for emotional and behavioral disabilities (Eber, Smith, Sugai, & Scott, 2001; Eber, 1999). Wraparound planning involves all stakeholders, including parents, school personnel, the student, and a variety of associated professionals from the community (e.g., vocational counselors, physical therapists, mental and medical professionals). Services commonly used by individuals with emotional and behavioral disabilities include counseling; financial counseling; job training, mentoring, and coaching; and health services (Karp, 1996).

## School Responses

A survey conducted during the 1996-97 school year found that more than 75 percent of all schools reported having zero tolerance policies for various student offenses (U.S. Department of Education and Justice, 1999). In addition, there has been an increase in the presence of law enforcement officers and metal detectors in public schools (U.S. Departments of Education and Justice, 1999). However, evidence suggests that such measures have been ineffective, or even counter-productive, in preventing school violence (Hyman & Perone, 1998; Mayer & Leone, 1999). Schools continue to exclude students with problem behaviors as a first-level response, often without implementing active instructional strategies for future problem prevention.

## Functional Behavioral Assessment

The 1997 Amendments of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandate the development of behavior intervention plans based on functional behavioral assessment for those students with disabilities who exhibit behaviors that constitute a pattern of misbehavior or require a change in placement (P.L. 105-17, Section 615[k][1][B][i]). Functional behavior assessment has been defined as "a process for gathering information that can be used to maximize the effectiveness and efficiency of behavioral support" (O'Neill et al., 1997, p. 3). Simply, functional behavior assessment is a systematic method of assessing the purpose or "function" of a student's behavior in relation to its context (i.e., surrounding environment) so that appropriate interventions can be designed to meet the unique needs of individual students. The great benefit of functional assessment is the ability to assist in developing proactive (i.e., preventive), positive, and individualized behavior intervention plans for students with challenging behaviors. The basic steps for conducting a functional behavior assessment and implementing a behavioral intervention plan are presented in Table 2. The mandating of functional behavior assessment has resulted in the need to train large numbers of personnel in the process of creating behavior intervention plans based on the functions of student problem behavior. However, the structure and cost of traditional professional development models make such large-scale training efforts difficult (Scott & Nelson, 1999b; Sailor et al., 2000).

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Table 2. Steps for Conducting a Functional Behavioral Assessment and Implementing a Behavioral Intervention Plan

<u>Steps</u>	<u>Procedures</u>
<i>Step 1. Define the problem behavior</i>	Create a concrete definition of the problem behavior and the conditions under which it typically occurs.
<i>Step 2. Gather information regarding environment and behavior</i>	Use interviews, questionnaires, record reviews, and direct observations to determine what environmental events tend to precede and follow behavior.
<i>Step 3. Hypothesize the function of behavior</i>	Use collected information to hypothesize the functions or purpose the behavior serves for the student.

*Step 4. Develop a behavioral intervention plan*

Determine and teach an appropriate behavior that serves the same function for the student. Arrange the environment to prompt the desired behavior and develop plans for providing consequences for both desired and undesired behavior.

*Step 5. Monitor behavior to verify the hypothesis and validate the intervention*

When monitoring indicates that the intervention is successful, the functional behavioral assessment is completed. When intervention is unsuccessful, return to Step 2 and continue gathering data toward a more valid hypothesis.

In the original report, this was Table I-7.

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Traditionally, students with problem behaviors have been placed in exclusionary environments (i.e., resource room, self-contained room, non-school placement). As more students identified with behavioral disabilities are being included in the general environment, questions have arisen regarding the appropriateness of traditional methods of functional behavioral assessment. Recent literature, however, provides support for the efficacy of functional behavioral assessment for most problem students in public school classrooms (Ellingson, Miltenberger, Stricker, Galensky, & Garlinghouse, 2000; Heckaman, Conroy, Fox, & Chait, 2000).

Examples of systems and procedures for conducting functional behavioral assessment and implementing behavioral intervention plans in public schools have increasingly demonstrated positive outcomes for students with problem behavior (e.g., Scott, DeSimone, Fowler, & Webb, 2000; Sugai, Lewis-Palmer, & Hagan, 1998). These student successes have been facilitated by functional behavioral assessment processes that involve collaborative decision-making and planning across a range of professionals and stakeholders (Eber, Smith, Sugai, & Scott, 2000; Jolivet, Barton-Arwood, & Scott, 2000). To bring systems together in creating effective and efficient plans, the functional behavioral assessment must be a part of typical systemic procedures for assessing problem behaviors at any level (Sugai, Horner, & Sprague, 1999). In a 1998 research synthesis funded by OSEP, behavioral intervention plans that were based on a prior functional behavioral assessment were more likely to result in positive behavioral change.

This level of cooperation among a diverse group of professionals represents a fundamental change in the ownership of problem students -- a shift from the expert model to the collaborative model. Such systemic changes are difficult for schools to undertake, regardless of the topic or students involved. When focusing on such a group of students whose behaviors are seen as among the most problematic issues facing school personnel, the challenge of changing systems

becomes ever larger (Scott, Nelson, & Zabala, in press). Still, current evidence suggests that such processes and collaborative systems are related to positive student outcomes.

## Summary

Students with problem behaviors present challenges to schools; in turn, schools tend to react in ways that often set the context for further problem behaviors and eventual school exclusion. Such students typically experience poor social and academic outcomes in school, leading to poor employment outcomes, involvement with the social services system, and incarceration. Research on school achievement points to poverty as the leading predictor of both academic and social failure. Students from a background of poverty are less prepared to enter school on both academic and social grounds and typically experience failure very early in life.

Practices that increase positive outcomes for students with behavior problems are those such as social skills instruction, behaviorally based interventions, and academic instruction that provide systems-level support calculated to prevent predictable failures. Individualized interventions based on functional behavioral assessment and involving a range of stakeholders from both the school and community have been found to increase positive outcomes for these students. Although not implemented on a large scale, interventions and collaborative ownership of problem behaviors that are evidenced in the positive behavioral support model and the functional behavioral assessment and wrap-around procedures that have been implemented systematically give reason for optimism. In general, this trend would seem to be a turning point in the effort to prevent student failure.

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