Florida's MTSS — A Multi-Tiered System of Supports

This Fact Sheet is a collaborative effort between the Problem Solving & Response to Intervention Project and Florida's Positive Behavior Support projects with the Florida Department of Education and the University of South Florida.

Fact Sheet

Effects of Suspension on Student Outcomes

Understanding the relationship between school-initiated practices (e.g., instruction, intervention, discipline) in academic and behavior areas and student outcomes is critical if schools wish to achieve the goal of continuous improvement through positive student growth. The stakes are high, both for educators and students. Personnel evaluations in Florida are influenced up to 50% by student growth data. Successful student progression is dependent on attaining pre-determined student performance levels. Until recently, educators have used academic data to predict and understand academic growth and have used behavioral data to predict and understand behavior growth. In fact, many schools have separate academic and behavior teams. The recent advent of interactive databases that determine the impact of behavior on academic growth and academic factors on behavior growth (such as Early Warning Systems that identify students at risk for negative academic and/or behavior outcomes) and other technology-enabled data analyses provide educators with powerful tools. The use of these data within a problem-solving process results in the development, implementation, and evaluation of more effective instruction and intervention strategies.

The research-based relationship between academic and behavior variables and the importance of that relationship in predicting positive and negative student outcomes informed the passage of S.B. 850 by the Florida Legislature in 2014. S.B. 850 requires that all middle schools implement Early Warning Systems to understand the relationship of behavior to academic performance and to implement interventions to mitigate the effects of one on the other (Section 8 – s.1003.53, F.S., Dropout prevention and academic intervention.) This legislation requires that schools collect data on attendance, suspensions, course failure, and academic outcomes in order to predict off-track status for on-time high school graduation.

Suspension practices are clear predictors of student dropout rates, graduation rates, and poor post-secondary outcomes.[2, 6] Of great concern is the disproportional use of suspensions with black and economically disadvantaged students, as well as with students with disabilities.[2, 4, 6, 7] These studies also highlight the interconnectedness of discipline suspension with other intermediate academic outcomes, such as attendance and successful course completion. The table below shows data for all ninth grade students in Florida, including students with disabilities, between the years of 2000 and 2008.[3] The data were obtained from the Florida K-20 Education Data Warehouse and show the impact of suspensions on students' secondary and post-secondary outcomes. Of the total population followed in this study, approximately one in four students experienced at least one suspension. The table below is organized by number of suspensions.

Characteristic	# Students	% Dropout	% Graduated	% Enrolled in Post-Secondary	Avg Post-Secondary Terms Completed
0 Suspensions	133,044	16	75	58	4
1 Suspension	25,812	32	52	39	1.9
2 Suspension	11,693	42	38	31	1.2
3 Suspension	5,833	49	30	26	.9
4 Suspension	5,506	53	23	23	.7
Attendance > 95%	101,296	11	81	62	4.3
90-94	34,601	25	63	47	2.7
85-89	16,210	39	44	35	1.6
80-84	7,307	47	31	26	1,1
F grades: 0	93,626	8	85	67	4.9
1	18,500	23	66	44	2.3
2	14,909	29	56	40	2.0
3	7,482	38	45	31	1.2
4+	27,865	51	26	25	.9

The chances of succeeding academically for each student are impacted by just one suspension — a 16% increase in dropout rate, 23% reduction in graduation rate, 19% reduction in actual attendance in post secondary settings, and reduction of perseverance in post-secondary settings by more than 50%. With each additional suspension, the associated results are even more striking.

It's important to understand that the risk of negative student success is equally a threat to habitual offenders and otherwise well-behaved students with only one isolated suspension. When these data are

disaggregated across various populations, disproportionality of suspensions match those of nationally-focused studies — 39% of blacks compared to 22% of whites, 31% of students with disabilities compared to 25% of non-disabled, and 34% of students with free/reduced lunch status compared to 16% with non-eligible status. The average suspension period for the ninth grade cohort population was seven days, and the average frequency of suspension was two days. Of this cohort, 15% of the students received as many as 8-13 days of suspensions per incident. When types of offenses were observed, suspensions among black, economically disadvantaged, and disability populations were most often for minor, non-violent offenses which did not require out-of-school suspension by any state mandates. In the majority of cases, students suspended multiple times were found to have missed 30% – 60% of their total annual school days.

What Can We Do?

Few educators would argue against the importance of active student engagement for securing positive educational outcomes. Suspensions, absences, and failing grades represent students' dis-engagement from education. The problem is compounded with lost or mismatched instruction. It is important to adopt a comprehensive approach involving prevention, intervention, and follow-up strategies to avoid, limit, or mitigate the effects of suspension on students' success. While there are justifiable reasons for recommending suspension for students, school districts and schools have the responsibility to re-engage students toward success.

Prevention. There are many strategies for preventing suspensions. In general, the theme of these strategies is early identification of student-focused barriers to learning and academic engagement. Studies conducted in other states found that behavioral warning signs of disengagement were the first to emerge, before attendance or course issues.[5] We know that some students' misbehavior is triggered by assignment of tasks for which they cannot complete due to a lack of skills or knowledge. Some misbehavior can be triggered by aversive social relationships with peers or adults. And some misbehavior can be triggered by a negative school climate. **In Florida, data indicate schools implementing Positive Behavior Support (PBS) with fidelity demonstrate 42% fewer suspensions than comparison schools not implementing PBS.** Researchers have advocated for implementing school-wide PBS and related prevention strategies such as EWS, improved classroom management practices, and mental health training.[3] A reduction in suspensions as a result of implementing these prevention strategies has a positive impact on graduation rates and post-secondary participation. When a positive school-wide climate exists in which students are given common expectations for pro-social behavior; are consistently provided effective, repeated, and meaningful instructional opportunities to demonstrate expected behavior; and are recognized for accomplishing their behavioral and academic goals, then students are afforded a preventative option to suspension.

Intervention. As with prevention strategies, there are numerous intervention options that can serve as alternatives to suspension. Within a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) framework, schools use data (e.g., EWS data, teacher nominations, office discipline referrals, surveys, student self-nominations, academic performance) to screen for students who are struggling to stay academically engaged. When students are identified, a structured problem-solving process allows a representative team of educators to pool their collective skills and knowledge to develop a plan for removing or reducing the barriers affecting the students' engagement and performance to goals. Evidence-based interventions are designed, and matched to each student or group of students' needs. Data are used to monitor effectiveness of the intervention including the data that first raised concerns. **The implementation of PBS and Response to Intervention (RtI) involves the adoption of a multi-tiered approach to service delivery and the use of a structured problem-solving process to guide data use and decision making.** Given the reciprocal relationship between behavior and academics, it is incumbent on educators and problem-solving teams to consider the many sources and types of data that would explain a behavior concern. In many cases, such behavior problems are associated with academic concerns or lead to academic concerns as a result of interruptions in instruction, thus resulting in downward spiral of dis-engagement. The Florida PBS and Problem Solving & Response to Intervention (PS/RtI) projects work with districts to implement tiered systems of supports in all schools so that a multitude of evidence-based interventions may be adopted and implemented based on local student need.

Follow-up/Mitigation. When prevention and intervention strategies are unsuccessful in providing suspension alternatives, the district and school have a responsibility to plan for what follows after a suspension period. Many follow-up or mitigation strategies share a common design and use as intervention strategies. An example of an evidence-based strategy that specifically focuses on increasing student engagement to mitigate the negative impact of suspension is Check and Connect.[1, 8, 9] When implemented within a larger context of school-wide PBS, the practices of Check and Connect can have far-reaching impacts on student success. Another strategy for educators to consider in the context of mitigating the effects of suspension is a set of practices called restorative justice or restorative practices. Restorative justice strategies are a set of principles and practices aimed at promoting respect, taking responsibility, and strengthening relationships. The main idea of this approach is to teach students how to behave as opposed to merely punishing them for misbehaving so that the potential for similar offenses in the future may be avoided.

One of the most critical side effects of suspension is decreased positive student-student and student-teacher relationships. Check and Connect involves a trusting relationship between a student and a caring, trained mentor. This mentor both advocates for and challenges the student with support from family and community partners. In a school where PBS is implemented with fidelity, a mentor can engage other educators to support the student within specific classroom settings while also creating opportunities for the student to find recognition and rewards for pro-social

behaviors. When barriers arise from the student's perspective to meet behavioral expectations, the mentor works with the student in finding a successful solution to the problem. Within a problem-solving context, the mentor identifies and provides supports to the student for learning new skills and knowledge, empowering the student to take more responsibility for his or her education. The mentor serves as liaison with home, school, and community to build constructive relationships that support the student's goals. When Check and Connect is implemented as designed, it decreases truancy, tardies, behavioral referrals, and dropout rates, while also increasing attendance, persistence in school, earned credits, and graduation rates.

References/Resources

1. Anderson, A. R., Christenson, S. L., Sinclair, M. F., & Lehr, C. A. (2004). Check and Connect: The importance of relationships for promoting engagement in school. Journal of School Psychology, 42, 95-113.

2. Balfanz, R., Herzog, L., MacIver, D. (2007). Preventing student disengagement and keeping students on the graduation track in high-poverty middle-grades schools: Early identification and effective interventions. Educational Psychologist, 42, 223-235.

3. Balfanz, R., Stenson, T. (2013). Using data to build early warning systems [Webinar]. United States Department of Education School Turn-around Learning Community. Retrieved from http://vimeo.com/37739265

4. Center for Social Organization of Schools (2007). Falling off the path to graduation: Middle grade indicators in Indianapolis. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University.

5. Everyone Graduates Center (2010). Multiple pathways segmentation study: Austin Independent School District. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University.

6. Everyone Graduates Center (2011). Early indicator analysis of high school and post-secondary outcomes: Florida. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University.

7. MacIver, M., Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2009) Advancing the "Colorado graduates" agenda: Understanding the dropout problem and mobilizing to meet the graduation challenge. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University.

8. Sinclair, M. F., Christenson, S. L., Evelo, D. L., & Hurley, C. M. (1998). Dropout prevention for youth with disabilities: Efficacy of a sustained school engagement procedure. Exceptional Children, 65, 7-21.

9. Sinclair, M. F., Christenson, S. L., & Thurlow, M. L. (2005). Promoting school completion of urban secondary youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities. Exceptional Children, 71, 465-482.

Other resources for this Fact Sheet can be found online at http://floridarti.usf.edu/resources/topic/ews/index.html.