

July 27, 2024

Are Schools Really Prepared to Address Educators' Biggest Behavioral Student Concerns Right Now? "We've Got Serious Problems and We Need Serious People" (Part II)

Dr. Howie Knoff

<https://www.projectachieve.info/are-schools-really-prepared-to-address-educators-biggest-behavioral-student-concerns-right-now-weve-got-serious-problems-and-we-need-serious-people-part-ii/>

[To listen to a synopsis and analysis of this Blog on the *"Improving Education Today: The Deep Dive"* podcast on Spotify. . . hosted by popular AI Educators, Angela Jones and Davey Johnson: [CLICK HERE for Angela and Davey's Enlightening Discussion](#)]

Dear Colleagues,

Introduction

*Students do not "mature" out of inappropriate behavior. . .
They need to be taught and learn appropriate behavior.*

Howie Knoff

Last month, I delivered three presentations at The Model Schools Conference in Orlando. . . sharing my perspectives with over 5,000 attendees.

Two weeks ago, my Blog (Part I of this Summer Series) discussed one of my Conference presentations, outlining the "Seven Sure Solutions for School Success"—an evidence-based blueprint that I implicitly or explicitly use when helping districts and schools solve some of their thorniest academic or behavioral student challenges.

[[CLICK HERE to LINK to this BLOG](#)]

The Blog used the "Glass Half-Empty or Half-Full" metaphor to emphasize that—despite incremental accomplishments— we still have so much to do in our schools today.

From an academic perspective, the Blog noted that too many schools publicly define their annual success as an increase in the number of students scoring Proficient or Above on their state standards tests in reading, math, and science. Significantly, many high schools add the percent of students graduating in four (or five) years to this perspective of "success."

And yet, using these definitions, the Blog "tipped the glass" and documented that—for example—on the 2023 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP):

- Over 1.6 million 8th Grade students from the five highest NAEP-scoring states in the country were Below Proficient in Reading as they entered their first year in high school; and
- Over 2.1 million 12th Grade students from the five highest NAEP-scoring states in the country were Below Proficient in Math when they graduated from high school year.

Significantly, these number were only from the five best-scoring states on the NAEP.

These numbers did not include the five most populous states in the country: California, Texas, Florida, New York, and Pennsylvania. And, the 3.7 million deficient students—at just the two academic and grade levels above—exceeded the total individual populations from 23 different states (not combined. . . individually).

So. . . even as some schools see the glass as half-full. . . the largest part of the glass remains half-empty.

As Michael Douglas—playing “President Andrew Shephard” at a Press Conference in movie The American President (1995)—said in a memorable soliloquy:

“We’ve got serious problems, and we need serious people.”

What about Student Behavior and School Climate?

From a school climate and student behavior perspective, Education Week published an article last week (July 18, 2024) reporting the results of the most-recent School Pulse Panel survey organized by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). This Panel has been used over the past few years to track the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the school and schooling process.

Completed between May 14 and May 28, 2024, this survey involved 1,714 public school K-12 leaders from every state in the country and Washington, D.C.

Education Week reported the following summary statements from those who completed this NCES survey:

- 83% reported that the pandemic and its lingering effects continue to negatively influence the socioemotional development of students;
- 75% reported that students’ lack of focus or inattention had either a “moderate” or “severe” negative impact on learning during the 2023-24 school year;
- 21% reported that students were academically unprepared for school (e.g., not doing homework, not bringing necessary supplies);
- 19% reported students being disruptive in the classroom (e.g., calling out, talking to others during instruction, getting out of a seat when not allowed, leaving the classroom);
- 19% reported students not doing individual work
- 18% reported students being physically unprepared for school (e.g., lack of sleep, not eating before school); and
- 16% reported students using cellphones, computers, and other electronic devices when not permitted.

In addition:

- 57% of the schools surveyed reported confiscating some type of substance from students during the 2023-2024 school year;
- 45% reported having confiscated a weapon from students during the year;
- 36% reported that student acts of disrespect toward teachers or staff members, other than verbal abuse, occurred at least once a week;
- 30% reported instances of cyberbullying that happened at and outside of school at least once a week;

- 20% reported that threats of physical attacks or fights between students occurred at least once a week;
- 18% reported bullying occurring at least once a week; and
- 17% reported students' verbal abuse of teachers or staff members occurring at least once per week.

NOTE: If 20% does not sound like a “disruptive” number, consider (a) what a classroom would be like if 1 out of every 5 students, for example, came to school without doing their homework or did not bring needed classroom supplies; or (b) what a school’s climate would be like with at least a weekly threat of a physical attack or student fight.

The last reported data from the NCES survey revealed that:

- 76% of the public school leaders said they need “more support for student and/or staff mental health;”
- 71% need “more training on supporting students’ socioemotional development;”
- 61% need “more training on classroom management strategies;” and
- 52% said “more teachers and/or staff need to be hired.”

All of this at a time when school finances are pinched and experienced teachers are hard to find.

“We’ve got serious problems, and we need serious people.”

Serious Solutions Require Serious Science

Given the breadth of the problems above, districts and schools need to look at themselves—especially as the new school year is about to begin—to determine:

- Which (if any) of these problems exist in their settings and to what degree;
- Whether the problems identified are independent or inter-related;
- What problems can be or should be solved during the first days or weeks of the new school year;
- How to do this in an evidence-based and self-sustaining way; and
- Who needs to be involved.

Many times, districts and schools need an objective, independent perspective here, or they do not have the resources available to fully vet these issues and solutions. This is where an experienced outside expert can be beneficial. . . someone who can be direct and candid, and who will work in a short-term, solution-focused way.

To begin this process, let me share and briefly comment on three quotes from my Model Schools Conference presentation, while recommending that you (re)read my Blog from last month:

“Does Your School’s SEL Program Teach Social Skill Behaviors, or Just Talk About What Students “Should Do”? If We Taught Reading the Way We Teach SEL, None of Our Students Would Learn How to Read”

[[CLICK HERE to LINK to this BLOG](#)]

Quote 1

“Students do not “mature” out of inappropriate behavior. . . They need to be taught and learn appropriate behavior.”

While some student behavior is developmental in nature, the first days and weeks of the school year should progressively teach students the different classroom and building routines. . . having them physically practice them during supervised “walk-throughs,” while providing supportive or corrective feedback when needed. This should especially be done with all preschool through (and including) new 9th grade high school students.

All students (preschool through high school) also should learn and discuss the specific behavioral expectations in their classroom—and across the common areas of the school. In addition, they should also learn (or review) and discuss the different intensities of inappropriate behavior. . . that is, what specific behaviors are annoying, disruptive, antisocial, or dangerous or code of conduct offenses.

Here, the behaviors need to be described in observable—not generic—terms. For example, “disrespect,” “disruptive,” or “defiant” behaviors need to be more behaviorally specified so that everyone is clear what these global terms actually refer to.

The discussions, moreover, should be more peer-to-peer than adult-to-peer. Peers need to share how inappropriate behavior affects them academically and socially, and they need to make prosocial commitments to each other regarding the importance of appropriate interpersonal behavior. They also need to address and practice how to “call out” and resolve inappropriate peer behavior—even when it is unintentional.

This is especially important for interactions that relate to gender, socio-economic status, race or culture, sexual orientation, or skill and proficiency. These discussions also should explicitly address individual, peer-related, in-person, or virtual (social media) teasing and bullying, intimidation and taunting, physical or sexual harassment, and micro- and macro-aggressions.

Separately. . . when students continually demonstrate significant behavioral challenges, consistent with the quote above, it is important to recognize that “Talk alone does not change behavior.”

That is, while “the talk” may clarify both the inappropriate behavior that should be eliminated and the appropriate prosocial behavior that is needed instead, the only way for students (or anyone) to learn, master, and be able to independently demonstrate the latter, appropriate behavior is:

- To behaviorally teach and physically demonstrate the desired behavior;
- Roleplay and practice it behaviorally with the student;
- Continue to practice it behaviorally with the student using relevant, applied situations in the settings where they most often occur; and
- Encourage independent behavioral student-practice so target behaviors become automatic and routine.

Critically, students do not mature or age-out of significant inappropriate behavior. And, as above, they do not demonstrate appropriate behavior automatically even when they “know what they are supposed to do.”

Moreover, sitting and talking in a “restorative circle”—while it may help clarify and personalize a socially inappropriate interaction—will not, in most cases, prosocially change the behavior the next time.

By way of analogy, if you want proficient reading behavior, students need to learn, practice, and become automatic readers.

If you want students to demonstrate appropriate interpersonal, social problem-solving, conflict prevention and resolution, and emotional awareness, control, communication, and coping skills, they need to learn, practice, and become automatic in these behaviors.

Quote 2

“Why is anyone surprised that the science and practice of teaching students social, emotional, and behavioral skills. . . is any less sophisticated than teaching students literacy skills?”

During my 40+ years in education as a school psychologist, I have seen more than enough haggling and acrimony relative to the “Reading Wars.” And yet, without over-simplification, the steps for teaching reading (not the teaching itself) have never been terribly complex for me as a scientist-practitioner.

The goal of “the War” is to ensure that our high school graduates are literate. . . that they can truly understand the explicit and implicit meanings after they read (or listen to) different types of text.

And to progressively—from preschool through high school—help students attain this goal, we need to interdependently teach them layers of phonemic awareness, decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension skills.

Clearly, this involves sophisticated neurolinguistic, psychoeducational processes—some that we still do not fully understand. And while there may be a universal literacy instruction blueprint, it needs to be adapted or modified for some learners.

But now turning to today’s focus. . . per the quote above, why would anyone think that teaching students social, emotional, and behavioral interactions is any less complex than teaching them reading?

And (drum roll, please). . . the resounding answer is. . . it’s not!

And that’s why it is especially frustrating when Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is so inadequately described and operationalized in the popular press, as well as by some “researchers,” journal or book authors, and many vendors.

As I have written in the past:

- Too much of what educators say is “Social-Emotional Learning” is not; and
- When educators are concerned that their “Social-Emotional Learning” activities or programs “are not working,” they need to first look at the curriculum and instruction... before concluding that this is a (continuing) “student problem.”

Quote 3

“Every time you do an intervention with a student and it doesn’t work. . . You make that student more resistant to the next intervention.”

Too often, educators—individually, in grade-level or instructional teams, or at a whole-school or district level—see what they think are “student problems,” brainstorm what to do about them, and then, choose a “solution” and proceed into implementation.

When this is done without a root cause analysis—to truly and objectively determine why the problem exists—we call this “Intervention Roulette.”

This is because this approach has a high probability of failing because (a) the target of the intervention is often a symptom, and not the “real” problem; and (b) the intervention is not well-matched to the root cause—as the root cause analysis step was either skipped or not completed with fidelity.

The ultimate point here is that, “Interventions for social, emotional, and behavioral challenges are strategic, and not random.”

- Brainstorming results in a random intervention that has a high probability of failure.
- Root cause analyses—within the context of a data-based problem-solving process—results in high probability of success interventions.

And yet, some educators still say, after brainstorming an intervention, “Let’s just try it. How much damage could it do?”

The answer: A lot of damage.

Not only will the intervention likely fail, but the implementation experience and failure may also:

- Make the student’s problem worse, compound it, or make it more convoluted;
- Put doubt in the student’s mind that s/he can successfully overcome the problem, and that the intervention team is competent and has his/her best interests at heart;
- Make the intervention team think that the student has a more serious problem than originally thought; and/or
- Put doubt in the minds of the staff, who are working on the problem and its solution, that the student is committed to change, that the problem can be solved with the available resources or expertise, or that the problem can be solved at all.

All of these potential outcomes—when a low probability of success intervention fails—result in an overt or subliminal level of resistance when the next intervention is tried.

That is, when an intervention does not work, everyone may be “further behind” than when they started.

The solution?

Educators need to understand the potential implications of a failed intervention. They need to: (a) stop the implementation of any intervention generated through brainstorming or unconfirmed speculation regarding why the problem exists; and, instead, (b) make sure that they do their “due diligence” through the data-based problem-solving process and its root cause analysis step—linking the results of an objective and high quality analysis to the selection of well-designed and high probability interventions.

Summary

This Blog (Part II) revealed the many social, emotional, and behavioral challenges identified in a May, 2024 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) survey of 1,714 public school K-12 leaders from every state in the country and Washington, D.C.

These challenges included students' (a) lack of focus and lack of preparation for their classes; (b) classroom disruptions and the use of prohibited cellphones, computers, and other electronic devices; (c) verbal abuse and other acts of disrespect toward teachers; (d) (cyber)bullying and physical attacks or fights with peers; and (e) substance abuse and bringing weapons into school.

This Blog reflected on the “solutions” suggested by the leaders surveyed by the NCES and, instead, recommended that individual districts and schools (a) objectively and independently analyze their own students, staff, data, and circumstances; and (b) decide which of the reported problems exist in their settings, why they exist, and which ones can be addressed as the new school year begins.

To facilitate this process, three quotes from a recent presentation at the annual Model Schools Conference were presented along with their implications and importance to generating high probability of success interventions. . . so that the problems above can be effectively and expeditiously solved.

The quotes emphasized the importance of:

- Teaching students social, emotional, and behavioral skills;
- Recognizing that this social-emotional learning instruction is as sophisticated as teaching students how to read; and
- Completing root cause analyses, for students with significant or persistent behavioral challenges, to determine the underlying reasons for their challenges, then linking the root cause results with high probability of success interventions.

As we turn the “summer corner,” and begin thinking about the impending new school year, we hope that this Blog Series (and this current Part II) is helpful and relevant to you and your colleagues.

While school finances across the country are tight, we all know that districts and schools benefit—both financially and, especially, relative to student, staff, and school outcomes—when they understand why they are successful and, conversely, why they are less successful.

Sometimes, this requires on-site expertise from an outside partner.

Together, I know that we can attain the short- and long-term, sustained successes that you and your students need.

Best,

Howie