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# Improving Disciplinary Practices in an Urban School: Solving the Problem of Practice

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## Abstract

In this article, the authors share a case study of a special educator who worked closely with a leadership team in an urban elementary school to establish universal behavior expectations for all students. The special educator was a behavior coach in the urban elementary school located in a southwestern school of the United States of America. Following an action research framework, the special educator also the lead author worked closely with the leadership team to solve the issue of high office disciplinary referrals (ODRs) for aggressive behaviors. The aggressive behaviors included actions that harm others, such as assault, bullying, hitting, etc. The methodology included the team establishing universal expectations within the school-wide positive behavior supports framework taking into consideration parental feedback and university colleagues' input. To evaluate the effectiveness of universal expectations, the team tracked the number of ODRs for two years. Findings indicate that the adoption of schoolwide behavior expectations resulted in the overall reduction of ODRs by 47% and ODRs for aggressive behaviors reduced by 50% from Year 1 to 2. These findings have implications for educators serving students in urban schools settings.

**Keywords:** parent involvement, universal expectations, office disciplinary referrals, university involvement

## 1. Understanding the Problem of Practice

### 1.1 Introduce the Problem

School success is optimized when supportive environments are established to facilitate student learning and positive behavior. In a positive social climate in schools, students become more engaged in school activities and less engaged in disruptive behaviors (Cardillo, Freiber, & Pickeral, 2013). To help reduce student behavior infractions in urban schools, positive universal expectations for student conduct have been widely used as part of a larger School-wide Positive Behavior Supports (SWPBS) program (Bradshaw, Reinke, Brown, Bevans, & Leaf, 2008). The three tiers of SWPBS have been recognized as a move away from reactive management to establish positive, proactive approaches to discipline and expectations for conduct in the school. SWPBS provides a systemic framework that takes into account the unique make up of a school's student population through the design of universal strategies combined with targeted and responsive individualized strategies for achieving important social and learning outcomes for all students (Lane, Kalberg, & Menzies, 2009).

Within SWPBS frameworks, schools use data to inform decisions and implement interventions for the three tiers. Universal expectations fall under the umbrella of Tier 1 behavior supports, and consist of a set of clear behavior expectations in settings across the school (i.e., cafeteria, classroom, playground, on the school bus, etc.). Typically, schools adopt universal behavior expectations for all students first. These universal expectations are communicated to all of the students through the administration, teachers, and posted reminders throughout the school. The expectations are defined through examples and non-examples, the students practice the expectations, and feedback is given to the students. For example, one expectation could be that students "be safe" in school. The teachers would define what safe looks like in the cafeteria, the bathroom, and in the hallway and would request students to perform according to the expectations. After students demonstrate being safe at school, teachers would reinforce and/or celebrate the student for demonstrating safe behavior. Tiers 2 and 3 target small groups and individual students and provide them with specialized interventions and supports based on their needs. Through this framework students who are faced with

behavioral challenges are likely to get effective interventions in a timely manner and all students experience the overall improvements in school climate leading to positive academic and social outcomes (McIntosh, Chard, Boland, & Horner, 2006; Nelson, Benner, Neill, & Stage, 2006)

### *1.2 Importance of the Problem*

Towards the end of the previous school year, the school leadership team met to plan and schedule improvements and professional development for the upcoming school year. The school's principal discussed student behavior by sharing student discipline data that showed high numbers of ODRs for aggressive behaviors such as assault, inappropriate language, hitting, bullying and non-aggressive behaviors that included theft, lying, property damage, etc. The behaviors referenced in the ODRs affected the school climate and exhausted important time and resources of the administration. The principal shared with the team that classroom teachers were using different sets of classroom rules and behavior management practices. For example, a second grade teacher's classroom rules were to follow directions, keep your hands, feet, and objects to yourself and work and play in a safe manner. However, another second grade teacher's rules were to be safe, be respectful, and to be responsible. The principal stressed the need for consistency in expectations and rules to streamline behavior management practices across grade levels and teachers.

The lead author, who was a special educator and behavior coach, took the responsibility of presenting an action plan to the leadership team. As a behavior coach, he was responsible for providing support and mentoring to teachers in behavior management. He shared the critical elements of SWPBS and research that supported the framework with the school leadership team. After seeing the presentation, the team considered the creation of universal (campus-wide) behavior expectations for all students, an important component of SWPBS (Sugai & Horner, 2006). The team identified six practices that were viewed important in the design and implementation of universal expectations: (a) using an action plan to solve the problem of practice; (b) involving the leadership team in creating and implementing universal expectations; (c) including parents in the creation of behavior expectations by recognizing different cultural practices, values, and ideas; (d) providing professional development; (e) teaching and reinforcing desired behaviors; and (f) accessing continuous advisement and guidance from university colleagues on the implementation and evaluation of SWPBS.

## **2. Method**

### *2.1 Participants*

The participating inner-city school was located in a southwestern state of the United States and served students from minority populations; 93% of students were from Spanish speaking families. Total enrollment was 784 students and 765 students for Years 1 and 2 respectively, and everyone was taught universal expectations. 77 (9%) of the 784 students during Year 1 and 69 (9%) of the 765 students during Year 2 of the implementation were identified as students with disabilities.

### *2.2 Procedure*

The procedure of implementation consisted of the following six best practices in the design and delivery of universal expectations.

#### *2.2.1 Developing an Action Plan*

After the principal of the school shared behavior data and office and discipline referrals, the lead author took the initiative, sought training in the essential components of SWPBS, and created an action plan aimed at adopting universal behavior expectations for the school. The action plan included a timeline towards implementing the behavior expectations. The plan also called for the leadership team to use the *Implementation Blueprint and Self-Assessment for Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports* created by the Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports and the United States Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (Office of Special Education Programs Center on Positive Behavior Support, 2004). The action plan was presented to the school leadership two weeks before the start of school. The team reviewed the plan and voted in favor of the initiative.

#### *2.2.2 Working Closely with Leadership*

The lead author, who was a special educator, and behavior coach became an active participant in the leadership team. Due to constraints of time and funding, the leadership team decided to serve as the school's behavior analysis team. After the leadership team agreed to work together as the school's behavior analysis team, they began to develop a timeline to create the school's universal expectations (see Table 1).

Table 1. Timeline for Implementing Behavior Expectations

<b>Timeline</b>	<b>Tasks Accomplished</b>
Early Summer	Created an action plan
Early Summer	Created a behavior team
Late Summer	Developed school expectations
Fall	Conducted poster contest/rallies
Fall and Spring	Facilitated professional development seminars
	Conducted fidelity checks on implementation
	Provided support to staff and faculty in parent involvement
	Communicated with university colleagues on a regular basis

### 2.2.3 Including Parents

The team felt that it was important to include families in the creation of the school-wide expectations. The team recognized that each family might have different expectations for their children. Therefore, the team created a ballot (in Spanish and English) that included seven different expectations such as being safe, respectful, responsible, accountable, timely, honest, and positive with a blank space so parents could include an expectation that was not in the list but was important to them. Parents were instructed to indicate their expectations for their children or fill in an expectation that may not be presented.

Two weeks after the ballots were sent home, they were returned and counted, and the expectations with the highest number of votes were selected. The results of the ballot led to the identification of the expectations that would be used as the school's behavior expectations for all students. Students, parents, families, and the leadership team collaboratively selected the expectations and created a mnemonic that aligned with the school mascot, COBRAS: Caring, Organized, Be Honest, Respectful, Accountable, and Safe. Each of these expectations was further defined in the context of routines and settings.

To celebrate the school's collaboration with families and students during the creation of the universal expectations, the leadership team held a contest in which students across grade levels could design a poster with their families for a chance to win a new bicycle along with additional prizes. The poster contest created an opportunity for families to work together to define the expectations that would be used across the campus. Many of the posters were created in Spanish, which also promoted ownership and shared decision-making among parents and students. The posters submitted served as official school-wide expectation posters. They were placed in classrooms around the campus, in the cafeteria, on school buses, and in the front office. The entire leadership team, including the grade-level chairs and school administrator were invested in the changes to the school environment. The poster contest was developed as a means for promoting the school-wide expectations and took place in the first month of school. In that time, students and their families had turned in over 100 posters and four grade level rallies were scheduled. The leadership team created a grading rubric for the posters and shared it with parents, students, and teachers on campus, and was used to identify the winner of the contest.

During these rallies, the principal announced the poster contest winners and new school-wide expectations were presented to students and their families. Community members, such as local Lucha Libre wrestlers, whose wrestling history is closely intertwined with the history of Mexico, business owners, and political leaders also attended the rallies and spoke about the need for students to meet the behavior expectations. The grade level rallies were considered a huge morale booster for the entire school.

The second two rallies were held after school so that parents, governing board members, and special guests could attend. The office staff and teachers made phone calls informing families that a rally was being held to introduce and review the new school-wide behavior expectations. Food and drink were served at no cost. Over 100 parents attended the after school rallies, and many of the parents were excited to hear of the new school-wide expectations. The leadership team made copies of the new expectations in Spanish and English and created magnetic leaflets of the expectations created by the leadership team. These rallies allowed the parents to take the plan home and discuss and review the expectations with their children.

### 2.2.4 Providing Professional Development

The leadership team determined to provide teachers with professional development seminars on the basic tenets of SWPBS, including how to use universal expectations, teach and reinforce appropriate student behavior in the classroom and around the campus, and when to write referrals. The seminars were scheduled to take place on once weekly after school. School personnel had to be explicitly taught how to teach students the expected behaviors. This included teaching teachers how to reinforce student behavior across various setting in and around the school campus. Teachers and paraprofessionals were trained to reinforce positive student behavior in classrooms, and identify when students were demonstrating desired behavior on school buses, in the cafeteria, while at recess, during fire drills, and in all

settings across the school's campus. The school's principal agreed to pay teachers one hour beyond their contract pay to attend the seminars.

### 2.2.5 Teaching and Reinforcing Expectations

Taking the time to teach students each expectation and what each expectation looks like in different settings of the school was essential for the success of the SWPBS program with the students. During the school year, teachers and staff used the Teaching Matrix to teach and reinforce these expectations in various school settings and routines (see Table 2).

Table 2. Teaching Matrix

School Expectations C.O.B.R.A.S.	Classroom	Breezeway/ Common Areas	Cafeteria	Bathrooms	Playgrounds
Caring	Wait your turn, help others, share and do your part in your team	If someone needs help, offer assistance	Eat only your food, use an inside voice, use proper manners help others if needed	Report any graffiti or vandalism to your teacher	Help others if they need it, be a problem solver, learn new games and activities
Organized	Do your best on all assignments and assessments, take notes, ask questions	Keep the line straight, keep track of your belongings	Keep the line straight, wait your turn, use in-door voices	Be a good example to other students, leave the room better than you found it	Stop playing when the first bell rings, take belongings with you, take care of and return any equipment you have borrowed
Be Honest	Ask for help if you need it do your own work, tell the truth	Be considerate of yours and others' personal space	Keep your hands and feet to yourself and be considerate to others	Return to class promptly and if needed report problems with the facilities to your teacher	Report broken equipment, report bullying, tell the truth
Respectful	Be on time, attend class regularly, respect peers personal space, follow routines and procedures	Keep location neat, keep to the right, use appropriate lang., monitor noise level, allow others to pass	Put trash in trashcans, push in your chair, be courteous to all staff and students	Keep area clean, put trash in cans, be mindful of others' personal space, flush toilet	Line up at first signal, invite others who want to join in, enter and exit playground peacefully share materials use polite language
Accountable	Do your share of the work, do the best you can, be proud of what you achieve	Monitor to leave enough time to get to class	Get your meal, eat your meal, and clean up after yourself.	Use a bathroom or hallway pass, sign out on the sign out sheet	Walk in a straight line when going to the playground and line up right away when recess if over
Safe	Follow the teacher's directions	Walk on the concrete sidewalk, help others if needed	Walk, maintain your place in line, maintain personal boundaries	Walk to the bathroom, and wash your hands after using the bathrooms	Play safe, use equipment for intended purpose, wood chips are for the ground, participate in school approved games only, stay in approved areas, Keep body to self

Students were taught what the expectation looked like within a routine and were provided examples and non-examples of rule-following within the routine. Teachers provided students with time to practice the new expectations across the school campus. Once a student demonstrated a new expectation, the student was immediately reinforced with specific verbal praise such as, "you have done an amazing job at being respectful!" Classroom teachers often modeled behavior expectations, and students were then encouraged to demonstrate these expectations in different settings throughout the school. If a student demonstrated respect to another person, the student's behavior was reinforced through positive phrase, or different types of tangible reinforcers, such as stickers or raffle tickets. Happy Grams were given to a student that demonstrated appropriate behaviors consistent with SWPBS expectations. Happy Grams were little notes that teachers used to write the student's name and specific behavior demonstrated by the student. Happy Grams had a white cover sheet and a yellow carbon copy. The students turned in their yellow carbon copy into the office drop box, which automatically included the student in the weekly raffle for prizes and recognition. The white copy went home with the student so that he or she could show it to his or her parents and celebrate the achievement at home.

### 2.2.6 Seeking Continuous Advisement from Colleagues from University

Two university colleagues served as external coaches who were specialists with behavioral expertise who supported and

guided the implementation process. These coaches were knowledgeable about effective instruction, behavior and classroom management strategies that motivate students, use of data analysis systems, and Applied Behavior Analysis methodology (Lewis, Barrett, Sugai, & Horner, 2010).

The school behavior analysis team worked closely with university coaches as they went through the list of ODRs and categorized them as aggressive and nonaggressive. Aggressive ODRs were viewed as verbal or nonverbal act that caused physical or psychological harm to a student, teacher, or staff member. Examples include assault, BB gun and/or knife possession, hitting, intimidation, physical and verbal sexual harassment, and provocation. Behaviors such as classroom disruption, defiance, disorderly conduct, inappropriate language, lying, noncompliance, policy violations, theft, and vandalism were identified as being nonaggressive.

In addition, the external coaches assisted the team in (a) identifying and examining the critical factors that underlie disciplinary issues, practices, and the school’s traditions, (b) developing and implementing an action plan for reforming disciplinary practices to create a positive culture change (Kozleski & Huber, 2010, and (c) ensuring that SWPBS was implemented with consistency and integrity. The external coaches assisted the behavior coach, the lead author, in creating a checklist consisting of a self-reflection component for participating teachers (see Table 3).

Table 3. Teacher Reflections

**DIRECTIONS**  
 Complete as much of the checklist as you can before the first day of each month. Once the checklist is complete, answer the reflection questions at the bottom and turn the checklist into the behavior coach. Thank you.

**TEACHER REFLECTION OF KEY COMPONENTS OF UNIVERSAL BEHAVIOR EXPECTATIONS**

Teacher Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade Level: \_\_\_\_\_

**CLASSROOM ORGANIZATION**

<input type="checkbox"/> Arrange desks, tables, and chairs for easy accessibility	<input type="checkbox"/> Designate specific places for other classroom supplies
<input type="checkbox"/> Post classroom expectations in two to three different areas of the classroom	<input type="checkbox"/> Designate specific places for student backpacks, jackets
<input type="checkbox"/> Materials such as pencil sharpener, trash can, drinking fountain, student cubbies are easily accessible	<input type="checkbox"/> Decorate the classroom with student work
<input type="checkbox"/> Computer workstations are placed in an appropriate location and won't distract students	<input type="checkbox"/> Keep extra copies of important documents available such as parent/teacher conferences, information on school rallies, fieldtrips, and office referrals
<input type="checkbox"/> Color code folders for homework, make-up work, incoming and out-going letters to parents	<input type="checkbox"/> Hang a copy of the campus map in the classroom and use during fire drills.
	<input type="checkbox"/> Maintain a behavior chart that documents positive student behaviors

**CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION**

<input type="checkbox"/> Teach classroom routines and procedures.	<input type="checkbox"/> Teach students how to transition between classes or subjects
<input type="checkbox"/> Teach students the two to three school wide behavior expectations during the first two weeks of school and after every break (i.e., fall, winter, and spring break) and continue to teach the expectations on an as needed schedule	<input type="checkbox"/> Maintain a rewards program for students who demonstrate behavior expectations (i.e., token economy)
<input type="checkbox"/> Positively reinforce students when they demonstrate behavior expectations	<input type="checkbox"/> Promote critical thinking
<input type="checkbox"/> Use the Premack Principle to create a daily class schedule then post the schedule using words and pictures	<input type="checkbox"/> Use collaborative work groups
	<input type="checkbox"/> Progress monitor academic and behavior achievement and use data to identify student needs and baseline levels.
	<input type="checkbox"/> Design evidence-based academic and/or behavior interventions as needed

**PREDICTABILITY**

<input type="checkbox"/> Continue to practice and teach your students the classroom routines and procedures until they know them by heart	<input type="checkbox"/> Consistently use behavior reduction strategies (e.g., error coaction, differential reinforcement, response cost, and time out) to address in appropriate behavior
<input type="checkbox"/> Teach students how to act in the event of a fire drill, lock down, natural disaster	<input type="checkbox"/> Follow the daily classroom schedule
<input type="checkbox"/> Consistently respond to positive student behavior as well as undesired student behavior	<input type="checkbox"/> Pay close attention to time
<input type="checkbox"/> Reinforce positive behavior right away	<input type="checkbox"/> Establish and maintain group, independent, and/or interdependent contingencies
	<input type="checkbox"/> Control the access to reinforcers

**REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

Do I maximize structure, consistency, and predictability in my classroom?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Have I posted the expectations in the classroom?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Do I review and/or teach the expectations to my students on a regular basis?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Do I make an effort to engage students in my instruction?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Do I use a continuum of reinforcers (e.g., tangibles, token economy, behavior specific praise) to promote appropriate desirable behaviors?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Do I use a continuum of behavior reduction strategies (e.g., error coaction, differential reinforcement, response cost, and time-out) to address in appropriate behavior?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No

The behavior coach collected the checklist from the participating teachers and paraprofessionals every month. Teachers and staff were encouraged to periodically reflect upon their classroom organization and instructional skills. They were encouraged to be consistent in implementing the universal expectations. The checklist assisted in identifying areas of

additional supports for the teachers and paraprofessionals. The behavior coach also offered one on one assistance to the participants in behavior management practices, if they so desired.

The process of implementation continued for two years. At the end of each of the two school years, the leadership team met to review the results of adopting universal expectations. The ODRs were compared from Year 1 to Year 2.

**3. Results**

An initial analysis of data collected at the end of the second year showed a significant decline in the number of ODRs (see Table 4).

Table 4. Years 1 and 2 ODRs by Grades

Year 1 Student Behaviors	K	1	2	3	4	5	Total	Year 2 Student Behaviors	K	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Aggressive behaviors	0	3	32	24	21	8	88	Aggressive behaviors	1	5	14	5	13	6	44
Non-aggressive behaviors	1	1	21	9	10	1	54	Non-aggressive behaviors	2	1	6	12	4	6	31
Total ODRs	1	4	53	33	31	2	142	Total ODRs	3	6	20	17	17	12	75

ODRs for aggressive behaviors reduced by 50% from 88 in Year 1 to 44 in Year 2. ODRs for aggressive behaviors were for assault, BB gun and/or knife possession, hitting, intimidation, physical and verbal sexual harassment, and provocation. ODRs for nonaggressive behaviors reduced by 57% from 54 in Year 1 to 31 in Year 2. The nonaggressive behaviors included classroom disruption, defiance, disorderly conduct, inappropriate language, lying, noncompliance, policy violations, theft, and vandalism. The overall rate of ODRs per student decreased from 18% in Year 1 to 9% in Year 2. By the end of Year 1, 10% students enrolled were involved in receiving ODRs indicating 90% students responded to Tier 1 expectations. By the end of the second year of implementation, only 6% students enrolled in the school were involved in receiving ODRs suggesting 94% students responded to Tier 1 expectations. The team determined that the adoption of school behavior expectations effectively reduced ODRs by 47%, from 142 to 75 in two years. Another finding was that students with disabilities were receiving ODRs at a much higher rate than students without disabilities (see Table 5).

Table 5. Number of ODRs Years 1 and 2 for Students with and without Disabilities

Year 1 Student behaviors	Number of ODRs from Students with Disabilities	Number of ODRs from Students without disabilities	Total	Year 2 Student behaviors	Number of ODRs from Students with Disabilities	Number of ODRs from Students without disabilities	Total
ODRs for aggressive behaviors	31	57	88	ODRs for aggressive behaviors	29	15	44
ODRs for non-aggressive behaviors	29	25	54	ODRs for non-aggressive behaviors	19	12	31
Total ODRs	60	82	142	Total ODRs	48	27	75
Total Number of Students in School	77	707	784	Total Number of Students in School	69	696	765

There was a decrease in the overall rate of ODRs from 78% to 70% for students with disabilities from Year 1 (60 ODRs for 77 students with disabilities) to Year 2 (48 ODRs for 69 students with disabilities). 60 of the 142 ODRs in Year 1 and 48 of the 75 ODRs in Year 2 were from students with disabilities indicating the need for more targeted and personalized supports. Based on this finding, the school began to plan for more targeted interventions for students with disabilities in need of more intensive Tier 2 interventions, such as social skills training and check-in/check-out. The effect of the SWPBS resulted in a decrease in the number of suspensions from 76 (10%) during the first year to 24 (3%) during the second year.

#### 4. Discussion

This action research took place in an urban elementary school that had high levels of disruptive and aggressive student behavior. The lead author was a graduate student working with professors and colleagues who had extensive knowledge and experience in the areas of urban schools, responsive practice, behavior, and multi-tiered systems of supports who guided him through the process of implementation of SWPBS. Through this exposure to SWPBS, he was motivated by concern for his students that were engaged in aggression towards other students and disrespectful behavior towards administration. Finally, the inclusion of parents, guardians, and students in the selection and adoption of behavior expectations deconstructed barriers that may have created opportunity gaps for some students. Family support was viewed as an integral part of SWPBS. Regular meetings, rallies, and informal opportunities of communication with parents and family members assisted in developing positive relationship with families. Several changes in disciplinary practices were implemented in the first two years of the study. Teachers went from creating their own sets of classroom rules during the first year to adopting and teaching school-wide behavior expectations. Teacher posted positively stated behavior expectations in classrooms and throughout the school. They taught the students the expectations and reviewed them periodically. Teachers and staff were also trained to use positive reinforcement, and practiced reinforcing student behavior when an expectation was demonstrated. Finally, teachers and staff contacted parents on a more consistent basis to share positive information about their son or daughter's adherence to expectations. Furthermore, by including parents and students in establishing expectations, the relationship between the school and the community was strengthened, and the voices and opinions of students and their families were valued. The lead author's motivation and dedication and his personal investment in the implementation process assisted in accomplishing disciplinary changes in the school. As a behavior coach, he was also providing support to teachers and staff members needing additional assistance. With the assistance of members in the leadership team and university colleagues, by using observation protocols and assessments, he ensured that faculty and staff were implementing the school expectations with integrity. The intent of this case study was to describe the program that was implemented in an urban school and to demonstrate how a special educator could work with the leadership team and implement the program. Additional research is needed to investigate student outcomes associated with change in climate using more sophisticated statistical techniques.

#### 5. Conclusion

The implementation of universal expectations resulted in reducing the number of ODRs in an urban school that was serving students primarily from minority populations. This case study highlighted the need for developing more targeted and personalized interventions for students with disabilities (Banks et al., 2005). The leadership team was responsive to the need and implemented social skills training and check-in/check-out programs for students who were at-risk for behavioral challenges. The school continues to use the SWPBS framework incorporating parents in the process to allow for success as a school, and individual progress for each student. Although the findings of this case study are unique to the school, they are beneficial for educators who would like to implement universal expectations in their schools.

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