

Start with

A principal discovers that the first step to changing student behaviors is changing the behaviors of the adults in the school.

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When I first arrived five years ago as the new principal at Ruth Owens Krusé Educational Center, I brought all the enthusiasm, expertise, and confidence I had acquired at the A-rated schools in which I had previously worked. Well versed in data-driven decision making, I was ready to transform this underperforming school.

Ruth Owens Krusé Educational Center, in Florida's Miami-Dade County, is a K-adult day school for students diagnosed with emotional and behavioral disabilities. All students are in the Students with Disabilities accountability group, and 82 percent are economically disadvantaged. The year I arrived, the school had barely reached 50 percent proficiency in reading or math on standardized or alternate assessments.

Walking through the halls and classrooms those first days, I observed things I had only heard about. Students were attacking teachers. Some were being physically restrained. Parents waited to get prescriptions from the psychiatrist. Even in my days as a high school teacher, I had never experienced such a high-energy, crisis-driven, adrenaline-rushing environment. Some days it felt more like a hospital emergency room than a school. If the Response to Intervention (RTI) pyramid included a Tier 4, this would be it.

A Recipe for Disaster

My initial idea was to implement everything I had tried at former sites and wait for change to occur. So I bombarded staff members with e-mails, articles, piles of data, and guidelines. But this approach only frustrated everyone and reinforced the perception that I was out of touch. Most teachers just wanted me to leave them alone. They needed all their resilience to survive one crisis, one IEP (individualized education program) meeting, one day at a time.

A turning point came three years ago. I was participating



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in a yearlong program—the Superintendent's Urban Principal Initiative—which provided intensive training for administrators in struggling schools. One of the key components was for participants to identify a major problem at their schools and create an intervention plan to remedy it. It was difficult for the participants from my school to identify a single deficit; we had so many. Three of us—an assistant principal, a school clinician, and I—decided to focus on suspension rates. These data opened our eyes.

Small as it was, our school had one of the highest suspension rates in the district. As we pored over paperwork and identified patterns, we noticed the excessive use of all sorts of exclusionary practices. Close to 50 percent of our students were spending almost half of the school year away from instruction because of time-outs and suspensions. How could any student learn this way?

The exclusionary practices data prompted us to question

the Adults

other practices as well. We began looking at grading policies, discipline plans, scheduling procedures, and point systems. Some teachers used positive behavior support strategies to manage their classrooms; others preferred traditional disciplinary or punitive methods. Some used point systems consistently; others hated them and came up with their own reward systems. Some

was our defense mechanism, our way of explaining our inability to reach our students.

We also learned that many of our policies and procedures were unrealistic, illogical, poorly implemented, or completely ignored. We would never be able to establish a successful behavior plan under such chaotic conditions. Students just didn't know what to expect. Some

with a focus on behavior (Sugai, 2010); the goal of the program is to help eliminate the need for suspensions and expulsions.

We're now ready to take the next step. We've become better at analyzing both traditional and nontraditional data trends. We're questioning past practices and making modifications where needed. Instead of just presenting data and becoming frustrated with our trends, we now focus on discussing root causes and finding solutions. In our team meetings, we feel more comfortable sharing our beliefs, values, attitudes, and best practices. We've become less defensive. Although we continue to experience high levels of stress and crisis, we're more confident, better prepared, more supported, and more optimistic.

Our willingness to change has made all the difference. It's also made us more credible, effective, and trustworthy in the eyes of those who matter most—our students. ■

We started having challenging conversations with staff members about the behaviors, expectations, and values of the adults in the building.

teachers strictly enforced schoolwide policies; others created their own.

In short, our behaviors were inconsistent, impulsive, and often unfair. Our actions often served as triggers that led to outbursts and crises. The more we analyzed what we were doing, the more we realized that we adults were the biggest obstacle to our students' success.

Less Impulsive, More Deliberate

So we started having challenging conversations with staff members about the behaviors, expectations, and values of the adults in the building. We discovered, first of all, that we often acted with a sense of "determined impotence" (Reeves, 2006). We blamed our lack of progress on our students, their families, and their circumstances. Administrators complained about the teachers, who complained about security, who complained about the clinicians. This

teachers let them use their cell phones in classes; others did not. Some staff members let students roam the hallways alone; others insisted on escorting them. As a school, we needed to draft an action plan with input from all stakeholders—and consistently stick to the plan.

Although we continue to experience the same behavior-related challenges as before, we've adopted a "reflection-in-action" approach (Fullan, 2008). We're less reactionary and more proactive in our implementation of positive behavior support techniques.

Most important, we're now open to change. For example, after three years of avoiding a formal commitment, our staff members finally decided to join the Positive Behavior Support Project at the University of South Florida (see <http://flpbs.fmhi.usf.edu>). This statewide initiative assists schools with implementing interventions that address problem behaviors. The system parallels RTI

References

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