August 2018

Behavioral Interventions and Positive Systems of Support in a Culture of Care

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by

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A graduate project report submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Education Specialist
Department of Leadership, Counseling, Adult, Career and Higher Educatiojn
College of Education
University of South Florida

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Date of Approval:
May 10, 2018

Keywords: behavioral interventions, positive systems of support, culture of care

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ABSTRACT

This capstone project was part of a group project completed by five school and district administrators in Hillsborough County, Florida. The project began because of our passion for teachers who are able to establish a culture of care in their classrooms that support students academically but transform their learning through experiences that enable them to be more highly engaged and productive students, regardless of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, perceived academic abilities, and backgrounds.

My focus in this group project looked at school climate, culture and student behavior in high needs schools. I asked, what steps can be taken by a school leader to improve school climate and culture in turnaround schools? What happens with student behavior as school climate and culture improve?

Selected literature was reviewed that concentrated on current issues with school discipline, multi-tiered approaches for support, and the role of school-based leadership in student success (mediated by the size of student enrollment). I applied what I learned to developing a collaborative working environment for teachers, implementing school uniforms, developing discipline procedures for managing student behavior, and looking for ways to encourage positive student behaviors.

Key findings in my area of focus included development of a common understanding of discipline infractions and procedures, decrease in discipline referrals, increase in teacher satisfaction with discipline processes, and improved school grade.

SECTION 1. INTRODUCTION

This final project report was completed as part of a group project examining the concept of a 'culture of care'. Turnaround schools are plagued by cycles of poor academic achievement and high referral and discipline rates. Barriers to success can include high levels of poverty, teacher apathy, low teacher retention, poor student achievement, and weak leadership. These barriers can be overcome and must be overcome if we are to truly turn schools around.

Our group believes that students at turnaround schools need the best teachers - teachers who care about them, believe in them, and will not give up on them. They need teachers who will understand where they are coming from and differentiate their learning experiences to meet their needs. They need teachers who understand that the culture and climate in their classrooms is just as important as the academic lessons being taught. We believe these "superstar" teachers exist—teachers who have high levels of student achievement and whose classrooms are warm, inviting communities for learning.

We believe these teachers are able to establish a culture of care in their classrooms that support students academically but transform their learning through experiences that enable them to be more highly engaged and productive students, regardless of students' ethnicity, socioeconomic status, perceived academic abilities, and backgrounds.

Personal focus. I am the principal of a Middle School. This is my first principalship and experience working in the middle grade years. I have worked in Hillsborough County for 13 years. I began my teaching career at King High School, teaching English and Reading to freshmen and sophomore students. I have been an assistant principal of student affairs at Middleton High School and an assistant principal for curriculum at King High School. For years, I watched students struggle and fall through the cracks. As a 9th grade teacher for years, I watched the distinct challenge middle schoolers experienced transitioning to high school. Now as principal, with an enrollment of almost 2,000 students, I felt that a greater focus and support system in middle school would substantially turn student behavior around for the better.

My focus in this group project looked at school climate, culture and student behavior in high needs schools. I asked, what steps can be taken by a school leader to improve school climate and culture in turnaround schools? What happens with student behavior as school climate and culture improve?

School District Context

Hillsborough County Public Schools (HCPS) currently serves over 210,000 students, with over 15,000 certified teachers and 25,000 full-time staff. HCPS is the eighth-largest school district in the country with over 250 schools. The enrollment by race/ethnicity is approximately 40% white, 29% Hispanic, 21% Black, and 3% Asian. Fifty-seven percent of all students are on free and reduced-priced lunch. Roughly 12% of all students are English Language Learners (ELL), and the district graduation rate for 2015 was 76% with over 14,000 students graduating.

Social service in the community. Hillsborough County, Florida has comprehensive social services. The Social Services Department "provides comprehensive case management programs as well as stabilization services to low-income residents of Hillsborough County. The Social Services Department's mission is to improve the quality of life of Hillsborough County's most vulnerable citizens by promoting self-sufficiency through interactive service delivery and strategic partnerships" (see http://www.hillsboroughcounty.org/index.aspx?nid=281).

To better guide parents of HCPS students to community support services, Hillsborough County Schools have an entire Student Services Department which includes: Attendance, Exceptional Student Education (Special Education), Guidance Services, Health Services, Multi-Tiered System of Supports, Non-Traditional Programs K-12, Professional Development, Psychological Services, and Social Work Services.

School choice. HCPS School Choice provides parents and legal guardians with options such as Magnet schools, Career & Technical Education programs, School Choice (parents may choose from a list of schools with space available), Out of County options, and options for military families. School Choice has become increasingly popular in HCPS with several options available:

- *Charter schools* − independent public schools operated by a non-profit organization. According to a report printed February 29, 2016 by the HCPS Charter Office, 16,620 students are currently enrolled in Charter schools.
- *Home education* − defined by Florida Statute 1003.01 as "sequentially progressive instruction of a student directed by his or her parent in order to satisfy the attendance requirements of SS.1002.41, 1003.01 (4), and 1003.21 (1)."
- *John M. McKay Scholarship* − additional Choice options to students with an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) or a 504 Plan.
- *Partnership schools* − schools that have developed an innovative partnership between the public and private sector. Proof of employment in the partnership area is a requirement.
- *Hillsborough Virtual School (HVS)* − a school choice option for students entering grades K-12. HVS students are served by Highly Qualified Hillsborough County teachers for each class online.

Turnaround Schools

Our group's sense of the need for a *culture of care* in our schools and classrooms came from our observations of a historical and prevailing misconception in our society that many of our most poverty stricken and underperforming students cannot learn. This mentality of inability pervades our educational world and includes a subversive belief which asserts that it is okay to allow students of color and low socio-economic status to fail. It was our group's profound sense of purpose that drove our discussion to delve deeper into the context of how care, compassion, and commitment to our students might truly thwart the ills that society has constructed and allow *all* students, in *all* schools to succeed.

We derived this concept of a *culture of care* from a variety of combined resources. Utilizing the newly formulated "HCPS Octagon" that represents the eight essential tenets of a culturally positive organization, as well as embracing the Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) that our district leaders outlined as priorities, our team formulated the notion that care pervaded and necessitated all these initiatives. Furthermore, our perspective was informed by an extensive exposure to a variety of educational reform literature that discussed the "ethic of care" and "building relationships," along with "culturally relevant pedagogy" (Gorski, 2013; Guajardo & Guajardo with Casaperalta, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1995). In addition, "appreciative organizing in education" (Barrett & Fry, 2008; Burrello, Beitz, & Mann, 2015; Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008) helped us to conceptualize the need for defining, understating, and realizing that a *culture of care* in our schools and with our teachers, administrators, and most importantly students, is necessary.

The notion of "culturally appropriate" (Au & Jordan, 1981, p. 139) pedagogy began over 35 years ago and suggested that teachers in a Hawaiian school incorporate aspects of students' cultural backgrounds into their reading instruction (Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1995). However, today's context magnifies the importance of providing culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1995) instruction and curriculum for our students of other backgrounds, creating a sense of purpose for our black and brown children and allowing them to be reflected in the body of work that is read and studied in schools. By truly allowing our traditionally underrepresented ethnic groups the opportunity to study literature and engage in resources that mirror their population in schools, we can emphasize just how untrue the idea is that Black people don't value education (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Moreover, as HCPS administrators and researchers, we are committed to overcoming the institutional limitations that disproportionately affect our low income students. Despite the literature that suggests schools cannot overcome the societal barriers that students bring with them every day (Berliner & Glass, 2014), we were convinced that there are teachers who are capable of excellent teaching for all struggling students (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

With our already defined understanding of the importance of "organizational culture" through both the literature and HCPS Octagon model, focusing on the shared "beliefs, values, artifacts, and underlying assumptions of groups of people" (Schein, 1999), the logical extension was to examine connections between a strong climate and culture in the classrooms and the positive impact on students' performance.

Middle School Context

The school is located in an incorporated, middle-class community located right outside the larger City of Tampa, Florida. There are 908 students enrolled, and 89% of students qualified for free or reduced lunch. Of the 908 students enrolled, 59% were African American, 19% were Hispanic, 17% were white, and the remaining 6% were multiracial.

The 2011-2012 school year, by all accounts, was a tough year. Once an ‘A’ school, the school was slated to earn its first ‘D’ rating amidst increasing discontent among leaders in the community, many of whom wanted to have the school rezoned or shutdown and reopened as a charter school. That year, disciplinary referrals soared. Multiple teachers wrote over 100 discipline referrals, resulting in a school total of 3,453 referrals during the 2011-2012 school year.

Parent involvement in the school’s PTSA or School Advisory Council were scarce except for the parents of students who were part of the schools’ two STEM Choice attractor programs. Scores on state standardized tests were low in all subject areas and despite having a focus on science, the school had the lowest percentage of students passing the science state exam of all schools in the district.

Results from the district’s School Climate Inventory and Perception Survey revealed that only 19% of the faculty felt an atmosphere of trust and collegiality. Vacancies exceeded 30 positions, tensions existed with the law enforcement agency that provided the school resource services, and the school had earned less than satisfactory financial audits for three consecutive years. Teachers were discouraged and felt defeated, and as a result, many contributed to the lack of order in the school by missing more than 15 days of school. Additionally, unqualified substitutes initially filled positions but eventually stopped accepting assignments at the school causing school leaders to disperse students to other classes to ensure students were under the supervision of an adult.

District leadership weighed in on the series of concerns occurring at the school and assigned a District Assessment Team to meet with school stakeholders over an extended period of time to review all elements of the school. The results of this review led to the reassignment of the principal and all assistant principals. With a new principal, two first year assistant principals and one veteran assistant principal, the task was to turn around all aspects of the school, with an intentional focus on developing procedures, communicating effectively with all stakeholders, and improving student conduct.

SECTION 2. PERSPECTIVES FROM SELECTED LITERATURE

A review of selected literature was guided by the questions, what steps can be taken by a school leader to improve school climate and culture in turnaround schools? What happens with student behavior as school climate and culture improve? To develop a culture of care, students must be treated individually and equitably, and schools must ensure systems of support are in place to support struggling students. Three major themes emerged from this review of selected literature: current issues with school discipline, multi-tiered approaches for support, and the role of school-based leadership in student success (mediated by the size of student enrollment).

Methods used to conduct the review. To prepare this literature review, the University of South Florida Libraries general keyword, title, and abstract searches were used to search a variety of databases including: Academic Search Premier, EBSCO, ERIC, Google Scholar, JSTOR, SAGE, and Web of Science. Searches included the following keywords: school discipline, Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, school climate, school culture, and principal role in school discipline. Sources within selected texts were cross-referenced, resulting in additional searches by author or source. Sources were limited to the last 10 years, and the primary focus was on studies conducted in the United States.

School Discipline

Improving student discipline cannot occur in isolation of school stakeholders. Graham (2014) studied the effects and use of suspensions in schools and noted that most suspensions are a matter of the routine enforcement of minor school rules. His study found that while serious misbehavior must be addressed, harsh discipline policies increase the number of young people who are disengaged from school, which has damaging academic consequences and long-term economic societal costs (Graham, 2014).

We know that school discipline entails more than punishment. Teachers and administrators must work together to assist the students to better understand their misbehavior. In 2010, more than 3 million students were suspended from school, double the level of suspensions in the 1970s (Flannery, 2015). Suspending students and sending them to the office is a quick and easy fix for teachers who are dealing with disruptive students; however, the intention of discipline is to change behavior while providing students with an opportunity for success.

The effort to change behavior is not quick, nor is it easy. Expectations and support systems must be in place for students that communicate to them that they are not only coming to school but also going to learn. Often times, students do not mind staying home, so frequent suspensions only encourages the action students seek (Omojola, 2013). One of the goals of public schooling is to prepare students to participate in our democracy and become productive, contributing members of society. Disciplinary tactics that respond to typical adolescent behavior by removing them from school do not prepare them for adulthood; instead, they increase their risk of educational failure and dropout (Losen & Skiba, 2004).

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports

After years of zero tolerance policies in schools, harsh discipline policies for minor infractions, high dropout rates, and low graduation rates among high schools, Positive Behavior Systems (PBS) became the key ingredient in reform efforts. PBS is not a specific program but a general idea that describes a set of strategies or procedures designed to improve behavioral success by employing non-punitive, proactive, systematic techniques (Sugai & Horner, 2002). PBS strategies work and have shown great success in schools across the country as measured by reductions in referrals, suspensions and expulsions. At the same time, increases have been seen in student and staff attendance and connectedness (Sprick, 2006).

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is one form of PBS. Colombi and Osher (2015) describe the PBIS framework used in most schools as a three-tiered Response to Intervention (RTI) approach. In Tier 1 all teachers implement school-wide strategies with all students, in all classes, aiming for 85% of students to be successful. Tier 2's approach is a more targeted intervention for small groups of students exhibiting early signs that more support is needed. In this stage, unique evidenced-based programs aligned with the behavioral challenges are implemented with the small group of students. For example, restorative justice allows a school staff to work with students who commit infractions to realize their actions and take full responsibility by examining how their behavior affected others, repairing the harm, and developing a plan to avoid similar incidences in the future (Denti & Guerin, 2012). Theoretically, 95% of students are expected to be successful in school with Tier 1 and 2 interventions when implemented with fidelity. Tier 3 interventions exists for the remaining 5% of school populations who require intensive support from specialized counselors, psychologists, social workers or other clinical mental health counselors (Colombi & Osher, 2015).

The primary focus of all PBIS models is that more time, effort, staff development and financial resources are placed on proactive, positive, and instructional approaches than on reactive and exclusionary approaches (Sugai & Horner, 2002). PBIS concepts have to be exercised over time and enforced with consistency by establishing settings, structures and systems to facilitate positive behavior change. Administrators and teachers should work together to develop an agreed-upon system to respond to behavioral violations (Debnam, Bradshaw, Pas, & Johnson, 2015). As a school, clarity must be established surrounding what constitutes classroom verses office managed discipline problems. Support structures must be developed to guide teachers with providing interventions for students in class, and school administrators must also have support structures in place to support students who receive an office disciplinary referral. School staff have to consistently reinforce positive behavior while teaching students how to act appropriately.

A PBIS team must be developed to provide building level leadership regarding the implementation. The team must attend and provide training and develop materials to support implementation while meeting regularly to discuss strengths and areas of development (Debnam et al., 2015; Vincent, Tobin, Hawken, & Frank, 2012). Though not a component shared by all models, Vincent et al. (2012) noted the importance of identifying a PBIS Coach from among one of the current members of the school's student services team to provide technical assistance and on-site support. Common language must also be created among all staff related to the expectations for positive student behavior (Debnam et al., 2015; Denti & Guerin, 2012; Vincent et al., 2012). Time must be invested, at the start of the school year, to teach students what school personnel want them to know related to expectations for school-wide behavior; a reward system must also be developed to recognize students who exhibit the expected behaviors, and all school personnel must utilize the system and communicate it to all students (Colombi & Osher, 2015; Denti & Guerin, 2012; Vincent et al., 2012).

PBIS in secondary schools. While much research exists about the success of PBIS in elementary schools, those same interventions and support systems may not be as successful in secondary schools due to the complexities of size and systemic differences in operating secondary schools. Colombi and Osher (2015) and Debnam et al. (2015) explain that in secondary schools most students have less personalized time with teachers, often changing classes every hour. For this reason, not only does a school-wide PBIS program need to articulate positive behavioral expectations for students, but it must also promote student-staff interactions that allow positive relationships to be built. In addition, PBIS in secondary schools require greater involvement and support from the school administrator in order for the positive systems to function effectively.

A key to success of PBIS implementation, particularly in turnaround secondary-level schools. is the use of a formal data system to collect, analyze and use data to inform decisions (Debnam et al., 2015). Teachers and school leaders need to see trends among students, noting behaviors that occur most frequently, locations that are most troubling, or even incentives that students like the most. School leaders must also see trends among the staff so as to understand who is making full use of the PBS program. Using those individuals to engage their colleagues in discussions and learning opportunities may further increase the number of staff members who use the system with fidelity.

One of the reasons secondary schools fail to successfully implement PBIS is the population of the schools and the number of resources available to meet the needs of all students; as such, schools must ensure that the reward systems they create provide opportunity for all students to be eligible to earn a reward. In addition, the rewards should have minimal cost, if at all, so it is sustainable despite any unanticipated funding challenges.

Discipline(d) Leadership

It is technically easy for school leaders to refer students for suspension and expel them, especially disruptive students. On the other hand, it takes time, coordination and intentional shifts in how all school personnel function in their daily efforts to support students to approach student behavior problems from a positive lens. In fact, in a study by Schwartz (2013) during an adult labor dispute, one arbitrator called suspensions and zero tolerance “the last refuge of a weak administrator” (p. 23). At the end of the day, suspensions do not change students’ behaviors.

Often times, students return to school repeating the same behaviors because they have not learned how to make better choices when they are faced with troubling circumstances (Denti & Guerin, 2012).

Colombi and Osher (2015) take the position that educators should look at their consciences and remember why they entered the business of education. On the front cover of their report, *Advancing School Discipline Reform*, for the National Association of State Boards of Education, they feature a quote from an adolescent female identified as Rosie: “Kicking kids out of school without looking at what is really going on with us just makes things worse. It’s like saying, ‘We don’t care about you. You are just a problem we want to get rid of.’ ”

School leaders need to examine, in advance, the factors that make implementation and sustainability of positive behavior systems difficult in secondary schools so plans can be made systemically to prevent those barriers. Pinkelman, McIntosh, Rasplica, Berg, & Strickland-Cohen (2015) and Debnam et al. (2015) detailed barriers which include lack of staff buy-in, lack of actively involved and effective administrators, and lack of resources as well as logistical barriers including time, school climate and data systems.

Hill and Brown (2013) highlight the support systems that helped at-risk students in secondary schools when the school implemented positive behavior supports. As schools look to improve learning for the most at-risk students, systemic changes must be made including shifting teacher mindsets. Educators are experts in the field of education, but may not believe they are capable of making a positive difference in students’ learning despite their circumstances.

Discussion

Ideally, it would be great if all students came to school prepared, well-behaved and craving learning, but the reality is many students come to school with different life circumstances that interfere with their ability to exhibit the best behavior and academic excellence that we, as educators, desire on a daily basis. However, many students with high discipline and suspension rates come to school each day with extensive challenges, stemming from their lives of poverty, single parent families, and crises they have experienced in their lifetime. In order to develop a strong culture of care in schools, leaders must foster a safe and orderly environment where teachers can teach and students can learn.

Multiple researchers place blame on zero tolerance policies (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, & Leaf, 2010; Colombi & Osher, 2015; Denti & Guerin, 2012) for increasing the negative statistics related to the disproportionate numbers of students removed from schools due to minor disciplinary infractions. At the height of school violence, many school districts instituted zero tolerance policies, which led to an increase in exclusionary school practices. Unfortunately, those policies, intended on curbing school violence, paved the way for schools to punish students for minor infractions such as using profanity, disrespect and non-compliance (Denti & Guerin, 2012). Zero tolerance policies also disproportionately targeted African American and Hispanic males (although high-profile school violence and shooting cases generally were committed by White perpetrators) (Denti & Guerin, 2012). Although leaders may have had great intentions, the unfortunate results of punitive practices over the past few decades included a disproportionate number of African American and Hispanic students, beginning in middle school (Skiba, Horner, Chung, Rausch, May, & Tobin, 2011), being suspended at alarming rates (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, & Leaf, 2010), scoring lower in reading and math achievement (Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007), and dropping-out at higher rates (Stillwell, 2010).

Looking at positive efforts to improve school culture, researchers have explored the values of Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS) in connection to Response to Intervention

(Colombi & Osher, 2015; Fallon, O'Keeffe, & Sugai, 2012; Vincent et al., 2012). These studies focus on how struggling schools successfully reformed their discipline practices in an effort to provide preventive, predictable and positive school and classroom environments. Along the same line of replacing punitive disciplinary practices with more nurturing interventions, Denti and Guerin (2012) and Colombi and Osher (2015) discussed providing students with the opportunity to take responsibility for their actions, which includes changing behavior and making reparations with victims through restorative justice.

Student success is ultimately the reason why educators got into the profession. Years of data as represented in the selected literature reviewd indicate that a large number of students are being removed from school due to suspensions. In particular, students of color are over-represented. It is clear that mind-set shifts are necessary for school-wide implementation of PBIS. It is also clear that any PBIS program selected by a school must be implemented with as much fidelity as possible; otherwise, it may result in failure. This is important in turnaround schools that often find themselves trying to implement far too many new programs, often mandated by external sources, in hopes of immediately improving the school's circumstances. Staff members in turnaround schools are overwhelmed.

Schools considering PBIS should explore all the options that are available. PBIS can be implemented in many ways, and while many schools simply focus on Tier 1 interventions, the three-tiered approach allows schools to focus greater, more intense supports, on students with the greatest needs. The tiered approach also allows schools not to exert too much energy trying to do the same thing for everyone. The data-based approach utilized in the three-tiered model allows schools to work strategically and intentionally.

SECTION 3. PROJECT REPORT

Appreciative Inquiry and Organizing (AOE) is a theoretical approach (Barrett & Fry, 2008; Burrello, Beitz, & Mann, 2015; Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008) that allows individuals to reject the deficit model and harness "students' cultural strengths" into the learning environment and organizational design (Azano, 2014, p. 62).

Instead of teaching the "decontextualized stuff" (Theobald, 1997), education might instead attend to context and offer "place conscious instruction" (Azano, 2014, p. 62), given the "power of place" (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2015) to provide students with an opportunity to take ownership in their own learning. In addition to context is the concept of culture in teaching and learning, from *culturally relevant pedagogy* (Ladson-Billings, 2009) to *culturally responsive teaching* (Gay, 2010) or *funds of knowledge* (Moll & Gonzalez, 2004). All set the stage to identify assets and resources within our marginalized students, families, and communities, providing them hope, instead of assuming our struggling students are a burden and liability (Guajardo et al., 2008; Trueba, 1999; Wyatt, 2014) as in the traditional problem-solving, deficit model.

Appreciative Inquiry, then, is based on the assumption that finding what works right in an organization helps it focus on what is important, effective, and successful. Focusing on this positive core helps an organization think about ways to sharpen its vision, leverage its energy, and take action for change. It is strengths-based rather than deficit thinking.

Project Purpose

Our purpose in this project was not to replicate the successes of other districts or schools, but rather to uncover aspects and behaviors of a culture of care that support systems that overcome performance and equity gaps. We did not expect to have a cure-all that would immediately address gaps in achievement. Rather, by combining the approach of focusing on teacher-driven, practitioner-based successes, along with theoretical researched-based knowledge, we felt we might gain insight into the "complex nature of education[al] limits" that Berliner and Glass (2015) refer to in "Trust But Verify" -- limits which often leave individuals dumbfounded by complexities that at times seem inherently counter-intuitive.

Individual Focus. My area of focus in the group project was on school climate/culture and student behavior. In my experience students enrolled in the district's turnaround schools have a greater rate of disciplinary incidents and higher suspension rates than their counterparts in higher performing schools. Many of the students come to school each day with extensive challenges, stemming from their lives of poverty, single parent families, and crises experienced in their lifetimes.

To develop a culture of care, students must be treated individually and equitably, including in the area of student discipline. Positive Behavior Systems and Response to Interventions help teachers to ensure standards of conduct are clear to students while making sure all students feel respected. In the past three years, the school, an urban Title I school with a free lunch rate of 89%, had implemented several practices to reduce both disciplinary incidences and suspension rates of all students, as well as recognize and support the efforts of teachers.

This project report looks at how school climate and student behavior in a high needs school can improve with focused processes and systematic procedures, established by both teachers and school leaders working together to improve school culture.

Changing School Climate and Culture

The prospect of improving school climate and culture for students began by improving it for teachers. Teaching conditions are critical to student success; unhappy teachers can make life miserable for students. No one knows how to improve teaching conditions better than teachers so getting them around the table was critical to the process of improving school culture. As a result, teachers were assigned to various task force committees to examine different categories within the school. Each committee was asked to identify problems and provide solutions within that one area. It was important for teachers not only to think of where they wanted the school to go but also to offer suggestions on the steps necessary to achieve the desired goal. The results of these meetings led to sub-committees, particularly in the area of student conduct, which visited the ideas of implementing school uniforms, developing discipline procedures for managing student behavior, and looking for ways to encourage positive student behaviors.

Dressing for success. In Hillsborough County Schools, implementing mandatory uniforms required 75% of the parents to approve of the concept. Since parental involvement was not the strongest asset of the school, outside-the-box thinking was required to get the high approval rating expected by the district. Former principals had attempted to get parental support but were either met with resistances from involved parents or lack of response from uninvolved parents. Eventually, I opted to meet with sixth and seventh grade students, in small groups of 50, proposing the idea of implementing uniforms but also asking them what it would take to get them to support the idea. After all, the students needed to deliver the parent surveys home and return them to school.

Students spoke of the desire to make school fun, need for school staff to offer incentives, and the ability to be heard. So, I made an agreement to implement student suggestions by offering ice cream to each student who returned their uniform petition survey and raffling gift cards each day to all students. Flyers and emails were sent home to parents explaining the benefits of school uniforms. A pep rally was also scheduled towards the end of the year, the first pep rally the school had in eight years, to show students that their opinions would be considered. Three weeks later, 80% of families had approved of the uniform plan. Fifth graders at all feeder elementary schools were also informed so they could be ready for the 2012-2013 school year.

We had to come to an agreement as to why uniforms were important to have in school. At the same time, we needed to create systems for managing the process for students who did not comply with the uniform policy while keeping our eyes on the goal of reducing the amount of time students are out of the classroom due to disciplinary issues. Sometimes, teachers have to be reminded that rules are not in place to ensure conformity, rather, to deter a behavior. Once they remembered the goal was to reduce conflict, harassment and inappropriate attire, it would allow teachers to be resolved with the fact that not all students will comply.

We also had to remember that we have a high-needs school where almost 90% of students received free or reduced lunch. This does not necessarily mean most students cannot afford uniforms; however, it does mean that sometimes their parents may be too busy working multiple jobs to make ends meet so the uniform a child wears one week may not have been washed in time for the next week so the child wore the only clean clothes that he or she had available. As a result, we built a uniform closet from donated clothing we recruited from members of the community. Any morning a child entered without the school uniform, we allowed the student to enter the uniform closet to change. The supply room of uniforms tremendously expanded over the three year period of implementation due to students' response by administration to recycle their uniform at the end of each school year for the grand prize of allowing them to wear any clothing of choice the last week of school. We also realized we needed to encourage students to comply with the uniform policy so we wanted to connect the uniform policy to the Positive Behavior System that the other faculty group was planning.

Channeling behaviors of students and faculty. Developing discipline procedures required various stakeholder groups' involvement given the fact that everyone was going to feel the impact of our renewed effort to improve school culture. Issues surrounding student behavior in classrooms and around the school needed to be owned by everyone, and improvement was only going to occur if all stakeholders worked together to reach solutions. A review of discipline data permitted the team to look for trends and pinpoint the offenses students were charged with most often: tardiness, disobedience and inappropriate behavior.

To address improving student tardiness, we set out to ensure several interventions were in place to redirect students. We also approached tardiness from an appreciative point of view, calling on a few teachers to pilot the idea of allowing students to utilize their electronic devices during passing periods, as long as students were inside their classroom. The thought was that most students had classes within a seven foot distance to their next class, but they spent time in the hallway because there was no reason to arrive in class early. The final intervention, which ended up resulting in the greatest improvement, was to engage parents in helping their student transition to class on time: we eliminated the practice of assigning in-school suspension and out of school suspension and implemented parent shadowing for habitually tardy students. What a difference it made to have parents involved in redirecting student behavior; not only were they excited to come in to help get their students to class on time, they also connected with a few of their child's teachers, offering assistance in improving in-class performance.

Disobedience and inappropriate behaviors fell into such broad categories that we focused on the general idea of helping teachers gain confidence in controlling their classrooms, using proximity control to deter inappropriate behaviors during transitional periods, and developing systems to support struggling students and teachers. Protecting students and teachers from misbehavior and disruption was one of our main goals, but we took a position, similar to the National Education Association, that strict suspension policies and zero tolerance policies were not succeeding in improving school culture and student achievement (Ruland, 2011). Teachers and resource personnel were trained on school-wide procedures utilizing CHAMPS, a system of clearly communicating expectations using one common language throughout the school.

Time was also spent breaking down common teenage offenses that students committed in an effort to delineate which behaviors teachers should work through in stages and those behaviors that warranted immediate administrative intervention (see Table 1). As a school, clarity must be established surrounding what constitutes classroom versus office managed discipline problems. It was also important that teachers and administrators developed a mutually agreed-upon system to respond to behavioral violations (Debnam et al., 2015).

Teachers were also provided with support, ideas and tools to use in helping to redirect common teenage inappropriate behaviors. Teams of teachers were tasked with working together to improve student behavior. Since working together required time, the faculty voted to approve a plan to adjust the daily bell schedule, whereby 100 additional minutes of non-student contact time was added weekly to the lunch period without reducing instructional time. In this new model, lunch periods were extended to 50 minutes, and teachers on the same grade level team were given common lunch periods and charged with meeting with members of their team, bi-weekly, to

Table 1

Teacher and Administrator Responsibilities for Discipline Referrals

Teacher Intervention – referral not always needed	**Administrator Intervention – referral needed**
Failure to be in one's assigned place	Bullying/Harassment
Inappropriate language	Fighting
Not following directions/completing work	Property Destruction
*Cheating	Direct Refusal of Authority
Theft	Weapons
Calling Out	Aggressive Physical Contact
Dress Code	Pattern of Aggressive /profane language
*Inappropriate use of the internet	Credible Threats
*Misusing property, damaging, throwing items.	Elopement from Classroom
Unsafe or Rough Play	Skipping
Teasing or Disrespect	Chronic or Major destruction
*Invading Personal Space	Theft
*Lying, giving false information	(*) – Depending on the degree and severity of the infraction, an administrative referral may be required.
Minor Disruption	
Pushing past someone	

categorize students with the most needs and respond with team interventions. If teacher teams were unable to improve a child's behavior, more intensive support was arranged. A greater focus was placed on mandatory use of student services. In the past few teachers sought assistance from student services staff prior to writing referrals. The push was to set school-wide expectations that there must be progressive interventions before a student can be referred for common teenage behaviors. These interventions, at a minimum, required parental contact and multiple resource personnel interventions. These requests to student support services were setup electronically using an Assistance Request email form, also known as a minor referral form, to establish an informal platform to track patterns among students and teacher use of interventions, as well as monitor how student services personnel responded to teacher requests for assistance.

Encouraging positive behaviors. While procedures were being established to manage disruptive student behaviors, procedures were also being established to reward positive behaviors. The vision was to implement Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), a proven system that improves school culture, to emphasize appropriate student behavior while working to tailor school disciplinary practices (Sugai & Horner, 2002).

Motivation is critical to student success; however, what was clear in our predominately low income school was students were not generally intrinsically motivated. The cultivation of ideas from the earlier meeting held with students to implement uniforms was to ensure that all 900 students had an equal opportunity to earn frequent incentives once they achieved goals established by the school. Although the system of Cub Bucks existed to incentivize students, most felt excluded as recipients to this process. As a result, we built upon the current Cub Bucks program, paying every student $10 in Cub Bucks, every week for improving their attendance or maintaining perfect attendance one week and improving their grade average in all seven classes the opposite week. Homeroom teachers were responsible for verifying who earned Cub Bucks, congratulating them and paying them in the electronic system. Additionally, teachers were encouraged to pay students Cub Bucks for other positive behaviors that supported the school's mission. The one caveat to earning or spending Cub Bucks, however, was tied directly into the uniform plan so students could only spend or earn Cub Bucks if they were appropriately and completely wearing their uniform.

We increased the opportunities students had to spend their Cub Bucks by utilizing the newly increased 50 minute lunch period as the hub for daily spending. No longer were students going to be restricted to spending their lunch period sitting in assigned tables. Instead, to promote an environment of fun during lunch, students were permitted to pay $2 in Cub Bucks, for example, to go outside and play basketball or football. A game room was built with old, donated gaming systems, where students were able to spend $5 in Cub Bucks to play video games. The high level of student interest to use the game room increased after two years in a small room, leading teachers to willingly agree to give up their faculty dining room in order to enlarge the game room. The first year of implementation, the school had the second highest rate of attendance average improvement of all 240 elementary, middle and high schools in the district, followed by a newly converted magnet school.

Everyone Had to Change

School administrators also needed to make changes in their way of work practices. At times, students who behave extremely poorly could cause adult tempers to flare; therefore, processes must be put in place to ensure objectivity. In a school administrators are judges and juries so deciding how to administer discipline when the behavior directly involves the administrator requires a leveled-head in order to prevail.

As a result, a discipline matrix was created to provide administrators with a consistent guide, in ranges, on what should occur each time a student violates a code of conduct. While discretion must be utilized, context must be considered and complete knowledge of the student as a whole must be reviewed. The matrix was intended to guide administrators so there was a sense of fairness and consistency applied to all student conduct violations. No longer were students going to be suspended for ten days the first few times they fought; after all, fighting is a teenage behavior, and students had to be taught other ways to respond to anger. In addition, any suspension exceeding four days out of school required approval from the principal. The presumption that students had little chance of rebounding after extensive days out of school generated discretionary caution and collaboration to assess the process. With a goal of reducing the number of overage students at the school, students had to have a chance to rebound after making mistakes so extended days of suspensions were reserved only for students who were being recommended for expulsions stemming from major violations of school rules.

As a school family, we had to continuously discuss how to improve school culture. Often times, people believe that the only way a school could improve is to change the school demographics. In other instances, there is a belief that limiting the number of days students are suspended would create increased disruption on campus. However, the school staff were committed to monitoring all systems in the school and providing solutions on how to improve troubling circumstances. Teachers met with one another on a monthly basis reviewing all areas of school culture, including a component dealing with managing student conduct. Following those meetings, a representative from each component of school culture met with administrators to act on the recommended solutions. The fact is, the middle school years are the most troublesome times for young people, and a lot must be done to cultivate a positive school environment.

PBIS Impact

Student discipline data are collected by the school district and reported to the Florida Department of Education, Office of Accountability (see http://www.fldoe.org/accountability). Table 2 provides an overview of the total number of discipline referrals from 2009-2010 through 2014-2015 and distribution by type of infraction. The highlighted area indicates the three years during which the school Middle School was implementing PBIS interventions. Data show that during that time the total referred incidents decreased by approximately 64%.

Data on teachers' perceptions of their working conditions is collected each year through the Teaching, Empowering, Leading and Learning (TELL) Survey. The survey addresses eight areas: Time, Facilities and Resources; Community Support and Involvement; Managing Student Conduct; Teacher Leadership; School Leadership; Professional Development; Instructional Practices and Support; and New Teacher Support. Survey data are publicly accessible from the district's Office of Assessment and Accountability.

Table 2

Discipline Referrals by Type and Total 2009-2010 through 2014-2015

	Total Incidents	**Prior Year Difference**	**Personal Conduct**	**Minor Violation**	**Attendance Issues**	**Fighting**
2009-2010	1,548	+236	1,071	130	212	33
2010-2011	2,364	+816	1,639	153	362	90
2011-2012	3,453	+1,089	2,123	183	579	88
2012-2013	2,645	- 808	1,953	136	262	30
2013-2014	2,220	- 425	1,270	152	488	74
2014-2015	1,248	- 972	737	56	253	61

Three years into reform efforts at the school, the 2014-2015 TELL climate surveys showed that while teachrs still felt that students don't willingly follow rules, they perceived positive conditions in every other area relating to managing student behavior (Table 3).

Table 3

2014-2015 Teaching, Empowering, Leading, and Learning Survey (TELL) Data

TELL Survey Questions – Managing Student Conduct	**Overall % Score**
Students at this school understand expectations for their conduct.	79.0%
Students at this school follow rules of conduct.	**32.3%**
Policies and procedures about student conduct are clearly understood by the faculty.	83.6%
School administrators consistently enforce rules for student conduct.	78.0%
School administrators support teachers' efforts to maintain discipline in the classroom.	78.7%
In this school we take steps to solve problems.	83.6%
School administrators are visible to students and faculty throughout the school day.	83.6%
MEAN	**74.1%**

Results on state assessments also showed improvement. Passing rates on the Algebra End of Course Exam increased from 47% to 75% in this three-year period. Passing scores on the Civics End of Course Exam increased by 12%. After multiple years of stagnant Science scores, students' pass rates increased by 8%. School grades also improved. The school had beed graded D for three years, 2011-2012 through 2013-2014. In 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 the school was graded C.

Summary

In Hillsborough County Public Schools, a 2004 study by the Juvenile Justice System revealed that while Black students made up only 21.5% of enrolled students during the 2004-2005 school year, they made up 59.3% of suspended students (Poltilove, 2006). A similar study conducted by leaders in Hillsborough County Public Schools, as a result of an inquiry by the Office of Civil Rights in 2015, showed similar disturbing results. In that study, it was revealed that Black students still made up only 21% of students enrolled in 2015-2016 but an alarming 64% of arrests and 62% of suspensions (Kourkounis, 2015). Despite over a decade of research and study in Hillsborough County, Black students in the eighth largest school district in the nation continue to suffer at an increasing rate. The result of such disparity has led to low graduation rates among Black students and high dropout rates. While the graduation rate district-wide was 74% in 2012-2013, the graduation rate for Black students as measured by federal standards was just 59% (Poltilove, 2006).

This project report describes the proactive steps one middle school in Hillsborough County took to achieve reduction in student discipline and suspension rates. Once pictured in the *Tampa Bay Times* as the face of schools leading the district with the most withdrawals to charter schools (Sokol, 2013), the same newspaper reported the school with reduced withdrawals to charter schools two years later, in fact, omitting the school's name among the several schools listed (Sokol, 2015).

School climate and culture can change. School administrators are key to making sustained changes in school climate and culture so students feel cared for and teachers feel supported. With strong, effective leadership, years of negative repercussions can be reversed when students who make poor choices have opportunity to right their wrong, minimizing the amount of time they are out of school due to disciplinary incidents. By positively supporting students and reducing punitive consequences, they begin to make better choices, and teachers begin to feel more positive about their work conditions.

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