

Foundations for Learning: Safe and Civil Schools Project

Executive Summary

The 1999 Washington State Legislature directed the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) to address disruptive behavior by students.¹ Using a \$2 million appropriation, OSPI implemented the Foundations for Learning: Safe and Civil Schools Project to promote a positive instructional approach to school discipline by building collaborative school teams through a training process. Schools had to apply for project participation through OSPI's Safe and Drug Free Schools Program. The project, funded for two years, included 123 schools: 19 high schools, 26 middle schools, and 78 elementary schools.

The Washington State Institute for Public Policy (Institute) was asked by OSPI to evaluate the Foundations Project. The Institute undertook the evaluation recognizing that:

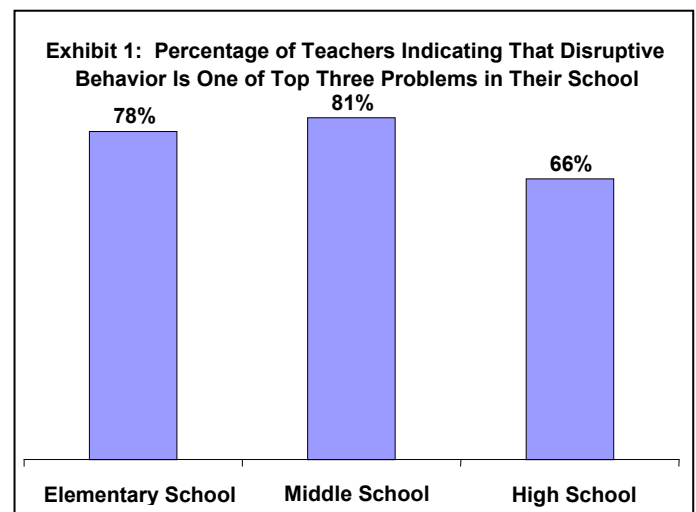
- School disruption is an important issue to Washington State policymakers and schools;
- Schools can be an efficient location for cost-effective prevention efforts; and
- The project provided an opportunity to test the feasibility of evaluating a school program using a comparison group—a more scientifically sound evaluation design.

The Institute's research effort involves evaluating the outcomes of the Foundations Project and examining the national research literature on "what works" in school settings to reduce disruptive behavior. This brief report summarizes our findings. A detailed technical report is available on the Institute's website (www.wsipp.wa.gov).

EVALUATION DESIGN

To test whether the Foundations Project is achieving its objectives, the Institute compared outcomes for the project schools to a matched group of non-project schools. To obtain data for the evaluation, surveys were conducted during May 2001 in both the project and comparison schools. Surveys were returned by 183 schools: 105 project schools (85 percent of all project schools) and 78 comparison schools (63 percent of comparison schools). This impressive response reflects the importance of the issue of disruptive behavior in these schools, as illustrated by the survey results shown in Exhibit 1.

The survey results cannot be generalized to represent all schools in Washington since the OSPI grant selection process resulted in a set of schools that over-represent larger schools from lower income neighborhoods with lower standardized test scores.

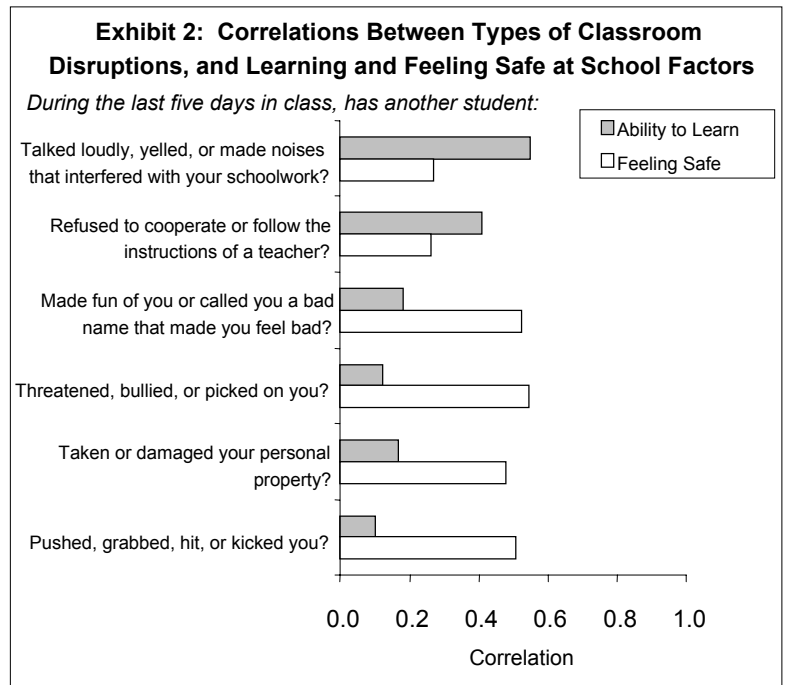


¹ Chapter 166, Laws of 1999 (E2SHB 2085—Disruptive Students)

WHAT DO THE SURVEY RESULTS INDICATE?

The Institute’s survey assesses disruptive behaviors in schools and how these behaviors affect: a) the learning environment, and b) student safety. The results, shown in Exhibit 2, indicate that some disruptions affect student’s ability to learn, while other types of disruptions affect student safety. For example, students associate a lack of general classroom control—such as talking loudly, yelling, and refusing to cooperate—with their ability to learn. On the other hand, more aggressive disruptions both inside and outside the classroom—name-calling, bullying, and physical aggression—are more closely associated with students not feeling safe at school.

In addition, a comparison of student and teacher responses for the same classes indicates that teachers are not always aware of disruptive behaviors in their classrooms.



The survey also indicates that high incidences of reported disruptive behavior are not disproportionately associated with schools that are large, in poor neighborhoods, or have low test scores. The survey findings summarized here are fairly consistent across the elementary, middle, and high schools. Detailed survey results are available on the Institute’s website.

These survey results suggest that a single strategy is unlikely to affect both the learning environment and a student’s feelings about safety. A comprehensive approach that includes school-wide training in discipline practices, developing school-wide norms for positive student behavior, and focusing on youth with specific behavior problems is needed.

HOW IS THE FOUNDATIONS PROJECT DOING?

The Institute used the survey to test for differences between the project and comparison schools. The Foundations for Learning Project is a three-year staff and curriculum development effort to design a positive school-wide approach for the correction of misbehavior and reinforcement of appropriate behaviors in a supportive and predictable manner.²

The Institute was not able to survey students in the comparison schools, so the impact of the project on student-reported behavior could not be assessed. The analysis of the teacher, staff, and administrator surveys, however, reveals several significant differences between the project and comparison schools. For example, as displayed in Exhibit 3, relative to teachers in the comparison schools, teachers in the project elementary schools reported several improvements.

² Training for the Foundations Project was conducted by Randy Sprick, Ph.D. and Mickey Garrison, Ph.D. (www.behaviorsite.com).

Exhibit 3: Teacher-Reported Behavior in Project Schools, Compared With Comparison Schools

- 8 percent less verbal intimidation: teasing, ridiculing, or name-calling in the classroom
- 6 percent less aggressive verbal intimidation: threatening or bullying in the classroom
- 5 percent less taking or damaging personal property
- 7 percent less pushing, grabbing, hitting, or kicking someone in classroom
- 4 percent less difficulty explaining assignments and giving directions
- 4 percent less difficulty achieving instructional objectives
- 6 percent less of a decrease in desire to continue teaching

The teacher surveys provide evidence that the Foundations Project, after one year of implementation, is making small positive changes in teacher perception of student disruptive behavior and the impact of these behaviors on teachers. The program seems to increase teacher morale, since teachers in the project schools report less of a decrease in a desire to continue teaching. The first-year results from the administrator and staff surveys, not shown in Exhibit 3, indicate less evidence of positive change.

HAVE SOME PROGRAMS BEEN PROVEN TO REDUCE STUDENT MISCONDUCT?

As part of this study, the Institute also examined the existing research literature to determine if there are programs proven to reduce disruptive behaviors at school. We found there are many commercially available programs that have been designed to reduce student misconduct. Unfortunately, only a few of these programs have been scientifically evaluated, and without this evidence, it is difficult to know what does and does not work.

Fortunately, hopeful signs are emerging from the research community. Denise Gottfredson, at the University of Maryland, has produced a comprehensive review of the existing literature,³ and researchers at the University of Colorado have developed a “Blueprint” process to make research-proven programs available for “real world” use.⁴

Gottfredson classifies the existing programs into two types: programs that work with teachers and staff to change the school-wide environment, and those that work directly to change student behavior. She discovered that, on average, programs that change the school-wide environment by improving school and discipline management and establishing norms or expectations for proper behavior, like the Foundations Project, are effective in reducing problem behaviors and improving staff morale. On the other hand, programs that change classroom management or reorganization of students are promising, but need more supporting evidence.

For programs that work directly with students to change behaviors, Gottfredson found that the use of cognitive-behavioral methods⁵ to develop student social skills is effective. On the other hand, she found that lecture-style methods for skill development, counseling, social work, therapeutic interventions, recreation, community service, enrichment, and leisure activities are not particularly effective. Mentoring, tutoring, and work-study are promising programs that need more study.

The University of Colorado has taken this one significant step further. The Center’s efforts go beyond identifying programs that work, to recognizing as equally important the process of having the program implemented correctly so that it becomes part of a school’s culture. The Center has identified the best-researched programs as “Blueprint” programs because they have been replicated and shown to work more than once. Programs with fewer successful replications are called “promising.” A list of the relevant Blueprint and promising programs identified by the University of Colorado is provided on the back page.

³ Denise C. Gottfredson, *Schools and Delinquency*, Cambridge University Press, 2001. Her website is www.gottfredson.com; and www.gottfredson.com/summary.pdf summarizes her most recent study.

⁴ University of Colorado Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, www.colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints.

⁵ Cognitive-behavioral methods use role modeling, rehearsal, and coaching with repeated performance, feedback, and reinforcement to learn skills and change behaviors.

CONCLUSIONS

The preliminary evaluation of the Foundations Project is encouraging since the teacher surveys show some positive improvements after the first year of the planned three-year implementation effort. News from the research community is also encouraging. Researchers are having success in finding programs shown to change school environments and student behaviors. Schools can be more confident in implementing a research-based school-wide initiative to develop effective discipline practices and school norms, and then adding programs within that environment to target specific behaviors, such as bullying, or programs that focus on specific at-risk student groups.

University of Colorado “Blueprint” Programs for Schools

www.colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints

Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies for elementary schools (PATHS): A comprehensive multi-year program for promoting emotional and social competencies and reducing behavior problems while enhancing the educational process in the classroom. Although primarily focused on the school and classroom settings, information and activities are also included for use with parents.

Bullying Prevention Program for elementary, middle, and junior high schools: A universal intervention for the reduction and prevention of bully/victim problems. School staff has the primary responsibility for the introduction and implementation of the program. All students participate in most aspects of the program with additional individual interventions targeted at students who are identified as bullies or victims of bullying.

University of Colorado “Promising” Programs for Schools

FAST Track for grades K through 6: This intervention specifically targets children identified in kindergarten for disruptive behavior and poor peer relations. It is most intense during first grade and the transition to middle school and includes parent training, home visitations, social skills training, academic tutoring, and classroom intervention utilizes the paths curriculum.

Seattle Social Development Project for grades 1 through 6: A universal, multidimensional intervention combining parent and teacher training. Teachers receive instruction in proactive classroom management, interactive teaching, and cooperative learning. First-grade teachers teach communication, decision-making, negotiation, and conflict resolution skills; and sixth-grade teachers present refusal skills training. Parents receive optional training throughout their children’s schooling.

I Can Problem Solve for kindergarten and possibly elementary school: This a school-based intervention designed for kindergarten, but it has also been successfully implemented in grades 5 and 6, that trains children in interpersonal problem solving, and recognizing thoughts, feelings, and motives that generate problem situations.

Linking the Interests of Families and Teachers for elementary schools: A school-based intervention for schools in at-risk neighborhoods involving classroom, playground, and parent components.

Project PATHE for secondary schools: A comprehensive program involving staff, students, parents, and community members working together to design and implement improvement programs.

School Transitional Environmental Program for large, urban junior or senior high schools which serve predominantly non-white, lower-income students: A program to reduce school disorganization by restructuring the role of the homeroom teacher and the facility.

Preventive Intervention for junior high school: A two-year intervention starting in the 7th grade for high-risk adolescents to provide a school environment that allows students to realize that their actions can bring about desired consequences by eliciting participation from teachers, parents, and individuals.

Baltimore Mastery Learning and Good Behavior Game for elementary school: Interventions focusing on strengthening reading achievement and decreasing early aggressive and shy behaviors respectively. The Mastery Learning intervention utilizes a group-based approach in which students advance when a majority of the class has mastered the learning objectives. The Good Behavior Game is primarily a behavior modification program that involves students and teachers.

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