



Improving Middle School Behavior

District Leadership Forum

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Table of Contents

1) Executive Summary	4
Key Observations	4
2) Evaluating Zero-Tolerance Discipline	5
Outcomes	5
Reform	9
3) Responding to Misbehavior	11
Teacher De-Escalation Training	11
Functional Behavior Assessment	12
Threat Assessment	14
Alternatives to Discipline	16
4) Promoting Positive Behavior	19
Classroom-Based SEL Instruction	19
Mentorship Programs	21
Absenteeism Interventions	23
5) Research Methodology	26
Project Challenge	26
Project Sources	26
Appendix A	30

1) Executive Summary

Key Observations

Zero-tolerance discipline does not improve school safety and perpetuates inequitable treatment of minority students. Zero-tolerance discipline policies refer to policies that require predetermined, severe consequences, (e.g., suspension) for student misbehaviors, regardless of the context of the misbehavior. In 2008, the American Psychological Association (APA) found school violence levels have not changed despite the widespread implementation of zero-tolerance policies¹. In addition, research shows that minority students face more severe and frequent discipline consequences than their peers, with serious implications for the school-to-prison pipeline and achievement gaps.

Administrators face resistance to school discipline reforms when teachers feel ill-equipped to maintain order in their classrooms following the reforms. Seventy-seven percent of middle school and high school teachers in one survey indicate that their students suffer because of “a few persistent troublemakers.” Though teachers understand the serious consequences of discipline practices such as suspension on the suspended student, they often assert that alternatives (e.g., school-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, or PBIS) do not adequately preserve order in their classrooms.² Therefore, this report profiles several actionable practices that administrators and teachers can use to effectively manage middle school student behavior alongside school-wide PBIS.

When responding to student misbehavior, prioritize non-exclusionary responses when students do not pose substantive threats. Administrators can train teachers on strategies to de-escalate student outbursts to help them manage their classrooms without referring students for discipline. For students with special needs, who are more likely than their peers to experience suspension, teachers and school staff can use functional behavioral assessment-based interventions to redirect behavior. Though administrators should avoid exclusionary discipline when possible, administrators must commit to school safety and should reserve the right to suspend students in cases where students pose a substantive threat. Administrators can identify these cases through evidence-based threat assessment protocols. Administrators should also consider implementing alternative to suspension programs to provide an opportunity for suspended students to receive behavioral therapy and academic support.

To promote positive behavior, use classroom-based social and emotional learning (SEL) curricula and mentorship programs. Research highlights a connection between direct SEL instruction and improved behavior—in one study, students exposed to SEL curricula committed half the number of discipline code violations as students in a control group. Though SEL experts suggest administrators should select an evidence-based SEL curricula for teachers to implement in their classrooms, teachers can also integrate SEL instruction into regular classroom instruction. To further provide SEL instruction, administrators should consider creating mentorship programs that connect students with school staff and community volunteers.

1) American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, “Are Zero Tolerance Policies Effective in the Schools?” *American Psychologist*, vol. 63, no. 9 (2008): 852-862. <https://www.apa.org/pubs/info/reports/zero-tolerance.pdf>.

2) David Griffith and Adam Tyner, “Discipline Reform through the Eyes of Teachers,” *Thomas B. Fordham Institute* (2019). <https://fordhaminstitute.org/sites/default/files/publication/pdfs/20190730-discipline-reform-through-eyes-teachers.pdf>.

2) Evaluating Zero-Tolerance Discipline

Outcomes

Zero Tolerance Discipline Does Not Improve School Safety

Zero-tolerance discipline policies refer to policies that require predetermined, severe consequences, (e.g., suspension) for student misbehaviors, regardless of the context of the misbehavior. While states and districts originally implemented zero tolerance policies in the 1980s to combat drug use, gang activity, and school violence, administrators now often apply these policies to a range of misbehaviors, including classroom disruption and cell phone use.³

In 2008, the American Psychological Association (APA) reviewed literature concerning the past two decades of zero-tolerance discipline policies in schools. The APA found that zero-tolerance policies do not lead to safer schools. Specifically, the APA found evidence to contradict the key tenets of the philosophy behind zero-tolerance discipline.⁴

Rationale for Zero-Tolerance and Contradicting Evidence⁵

Rationale

School violence is **pervasive** and increasing.

Zero-tolerance policies allow administrators to apply school discipline with **consistency**: All misbehaviors should receive the same disciplinary response.

Removing students who misbehave **maintains a positive learning environment** for other students.

Zero-tolerance discipline policies **deter** future student misbehavior.

Evidence

Violent behaviors comprise a **small percentage of student misbehaviors**, and school violence levels have remained approximately stable since 1985.

The culture and characteristics of a school, its personnel, and its students can **cause rates of suspension and expulsion to vary greatly** within and between schools despite zero tolerance policies. For example, due in part to subconscious biases, teachers may refer minority students for discipline more often than white students.

Schools with higher rates of expulsion and suspension also have negative school climates. Though this research cannot demonstrate causality, it does suggest that suspension and expulsion **do not improve school climates**.

Research suggests that students who face suspensions are more likely to **face additional suspensions for misbehavior in the future**.

3) American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, "Are Zero Tolerance Policies Effective in the Schools?" *American Psychologist*, vol. 63, no. 9 (2008): 852-862. <https://www.apa.org/pubs/info/reports/zero-tolerance.pdf>.

4) Ibid.

5) Ibid; Travis Riddle and Stacey Sinclair, "Racial Disparities in School-Based Disciplinary Actions are Associated with County-Level Rates of Racial Bias," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, vol. 116, no. 17 (2019): 8255-8260. <https://www.pnas.org/content/116/17/8255>.

Zero-Tolerance Policies are Developmentally Inappropriate for Middle School Students⁶

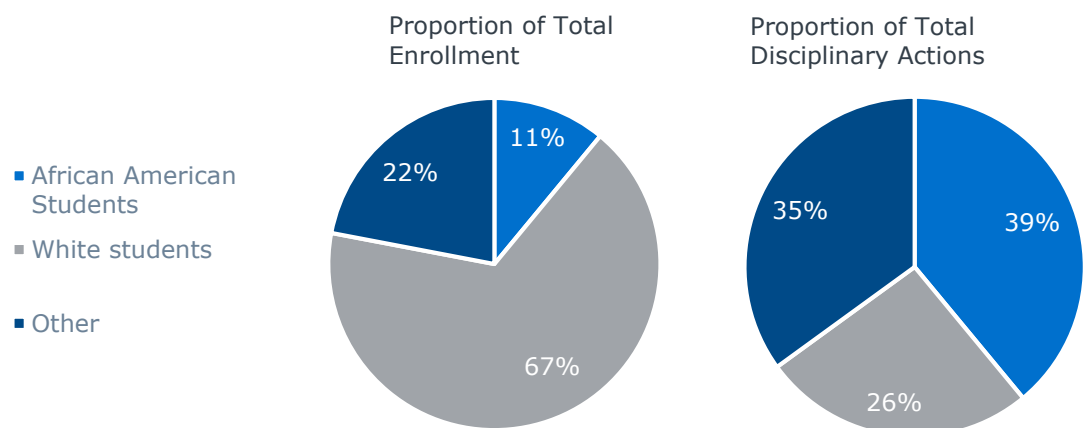
Evidence from the fields of psychology and neuroscience shows that adolescents are developmentally susceptible to impulsive or poor decisions. In other words, they are more likely to make mistakes. Despite this finding, zero tolerance policies assume that students should be held fully and severely accountable to their impulsive or poor decisions—these policies do not allow for mistakes. According to the APA, this discrepancy suggests that zero-tolerance policies are not a developmentally appropriate response to misbehavior in middle school.

Zero-Tolerance Policies Perpetuate Systematic Inequality

Research from sources such as the APA, the Center for Promise, and the Civil Rights Project at the University of California- Los Angeles all document the connection between zero-tolerance discipline policies and overuse of suspension in schools, especially in response to misbehavior from students of color.⁷ Zero-tolerance policies normalize and encourage responding to student misbehaviors with discipline measures such as suspension. Because discipline actions disproportionately affect students from minority groups,⁸ the increase in suspensions within a zero-tolerance environment leads to the disproportionate exclusion of minority students from classrooms.

For example, a 2018 Center for Promise study reviews data on demographics and discipline actions from the Minnesota Department of Education to demonstrate that, though African American students comprise only 11 percent of total enrollment in Minnesota's public schools, 39 percent of total reported disciplinary actions target African American Students. Research shows that racial stereotypes and biases account, at least in part, for the discrepancy.⁹

Disproportionality in Disciplinary Actions in Minnesota¹⁰



6) American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, "Are Zero Tolerance Policies Effective in the Schools?" *American Psychologist*, vol. 63, no. 9 (2008): 852-862. <https://www.apa.org/pubs/info/reports/zero-tolerance.pdf>

7) Ibid.; Elizabeth Pufall Jones et al., "Disciplined and Disconnected," *Center for Promise* (2018), <https://gradnation.americaspromise.org/report/disciplined-and-disconnected>; Daniel J. Losen and Amir Whitaker, "11 Million Days Lost," *Center for Civil Rights Remedies of UCLA's Civil Rights Project and American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California*, (2018). https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/field_document/final_11-million-days_ucla_aclu.pdf.

8) Ibid.

9) Travis Riddle and Stacey Sinclair, "Racial Disparities in School-Based Disciplinary Actions are Associated with County-Level Rates of Racial Bias," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, vol. 116, no. 17 (2019):8255-8260. <https://www.pnas.org/content/116/17/8255>.

10) Elizabeth Pufall Jones et al., "Disciplined and Disconnected," *Center for Promise* (2018). <https://gradnation.americaspromise.org/report/disciplined-and-disconnected>.

These inequities contribute to significant differences in the way that African-American students and white students experience the education system. In particular, zero-tolerance discipline policies contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline.

Relationship Between Zero-Tolerance Policies and the School-to-Prison Pipeline¹¹

Zero-tolerance policies encourage exclusionary discipline for minor misbehavior



In the 1990s, Criminal justice policymakers and education policymakers adopt “broken windows theory,” which states that **low-level misdemeanors contribute to an environment conducive to high-level crime**. In alignment with this philosophy, administrators applied harsh, zero-tolerance disciplinary actions to a wide range of low-, mid- and high-level misbehaviors. However, research has shown that zero-tolerance discipline for minor offenses does not reduce disruptions.



Inequitable trends in discipline referral data



African American students are **disproportionately suspended and expelled**, regardless of socio-economic status, and despite the lack of evidence to suggest that African American students exhibit high rates of violence.

African American students are **disciplined more severely** for comparable discipline infractions committed by their white peers.

African American students are **disciplined for less objective reasons** than their white peers (e.g., perceptions of disrespect rather than concrete evidence).



Implications for the School-to-Prison Pipeline



African American students are more likely to face severe discipline responses, including referrals to the juvenile justice system. These justice-system referrals are a prime example of the school-to-prison pipeline, through which disproportionately low-income, African-American, male students **enter the prison system directly from the education system, or shortly thereafter**.



Consider Minimizing Disciplinary Responses for Drug Infractions

Today, some schools connect students with treatment services instead of suspending students in violation of school drug policies. For example, see **pages 19-21** of EAB’s report [Responding to the Vaping Crisis](#) to learn about alternatives to suspension for students who violate e-cigarette policies.

¹¹ American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, “Are Zero Tolerance Policies Effective in the Schools?” *American Psychologist*, vol. 63, no. 9 (2008): 852-862. <https://www.apa.org/pubs/info/reports/zero-tolerance.pdf>; “Zero Tolerance Policies and the School to Prison Pipeline,” Shared Justice, accessed November 13, 2019, <http://www.sharedjustice.org/domestic-justice/2017/12/21/zero-tolerance-policies-and-the-school-to-prison-pipeline>.

To Respond to Misbehavior, Address the Root Cause, Avoid Punitive Approaches, and Preserve Student Learning to Improve Student Outcomes

The 2018 report from the Center for Promise mentioned above uses qualitative evidence (i.e., interviews with 38 public school students in three Minnesota communities) to document the impact of these practices on disciplined students. Interviewed students faced discipline for a variety of misbehaviors, ranging from phone use to truancy and skipping class. Based on these interviews, Center for Promise researchers conclude that students disengage from school following their experience with their school's discipline protocol.¹² Student disengagement, in turn, can negatively impact future student behavior and student success (e.g., graduation rates).¹³

The researchers identify three key pitfalls of school discipline responses that contribute to student disengagement— responses that leave the behavior's root cause unaddressed, that treat students punitively, and that remove students from their classrooms. To avoid these pitfalls, administrators should adopt disciplinary policies that align with the following recommendations:

Research-Backed Characteristics of Successful Disciplinary Policies¹⁴



Address the root cause of the misbehavior

Teachers and counselors can use functional behavior assessments (see **page 12**) to diagnose causes of misbehavior and determine response plans.



Value and engage students during the discipline process

Teachers and counselors can use principles from social-emotional learning and restorative practices (see **pages 19-20**) to encourage students to understand and manage their own behavior.



Preserve student learning

Administrators can implement alternatives to exclusionary discipline (e.g., Saturday detentions) in lieu of traditional suspensions (see **pages 16-18**).

The Center for Promise report suggests that responses to misbehavior that reflect these characteristics will more effectively prevent future misbehavior and will improve student outcomes. On the other hand, practices that fail to align with these recommendations can cause negative academic outcomes, decreased student engagement, and future misbehavior. In particular, disciplinary practices that mandate lost instructional time (e.g., suspensions) cause serious consequences. A 2018 report from the Center for Civil Rights Remedies and the ACLU notes that, after controlling for dozens of other variables, missed instructional time relates to poorer academic outcomes. For example, one study cited in the report argues that suspension decreases the likelihood a student will graduate from high school by seven percent.¹⁵ Because zero-tolerance policies and exclusionary discipline disproportionately impact



7%

decrease in the likelihood that a student will graduate from high school if suspended.¹⁷

12) Elizabeth Pufall Jones et al., "Disciplined and Disconnected," *Center for Promise* (2018).

<https://gradnation.americaspromise.org/report/disciplined-and-disconnected>.

13) Persida Himmele and William Himmele, *Total Participation Techniques: Making Every Student an Active Learner* (ASCD, 2017), Chapter 1: The High Cost of Disengagement. <http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/117033/chapters/The-High-Cost-of-Disengagement.aspx>.

14) Elizabeth Pufall Jones et al., "Disciplined and Disconnected," *Center for Promise* (2018).

<https://gradnation.americaspromise.org/report/disciplined-and-disconnected>.

15) Daniel J. Losen and Amir Whitaker, "11 Million Days Lost," *Center for Civil Rights Remedies of UCLA's Civil Rights Project and American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California*, (2018). https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/field_document/final_11-million-days_ucla_aclu.pdf.

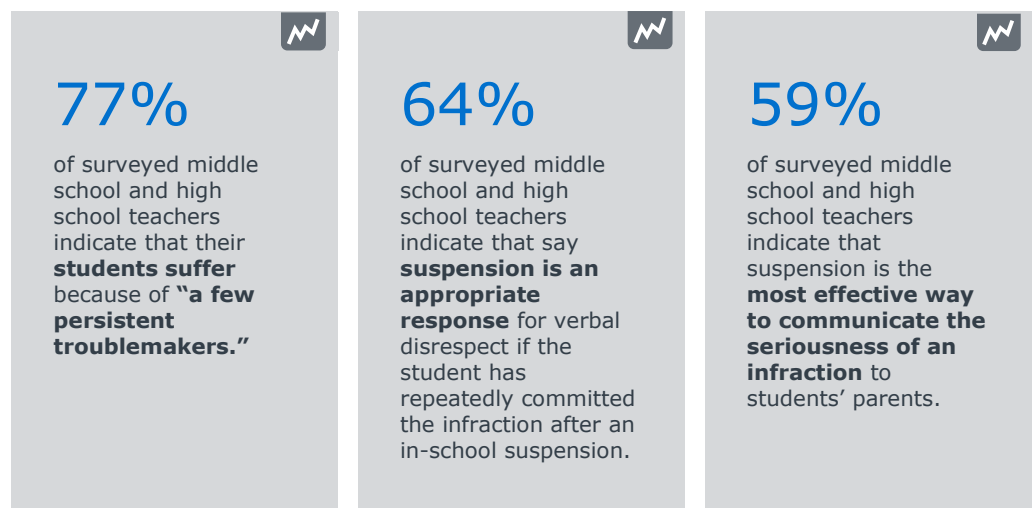
minority students, their associated negative impacts on achievement may contribute to persistent gaps in test scores, graduation rates, and postsecondary achievement between white and minority students in the United States.¹⁶

Reform

To Alleviate Teacher Resistance to New Discipline Policies and Improve Outcomes for All Students, Reform Discipline Approaches and Commit to School Safety

Despite the adverse effects of traditional school discipline, the APA does suggest that exclusionary discipline consequences (e.g., suspension) are appropriate when student behavior poses a true threat to safety. In addition, a 2019 study from the Fordham Institute finds that an uncompromising focus on decreasing suspension rates can cause distrust, frustration, and resistance among teachers.¹⁸ The study reports that, though teachers understand the serious consequences of suspension on the suspended student, they find that alternatives do not adequately preserve order in their classrooms.

Selected Teacher Survey Responses¹⁹



Teachers in the study report chronic and serious issues with classroom management. Many teachers feel that when administrators’ focus entirely on alternative discipline practices (e.g., PBIS), they respond to misbehavior with too much leniency.

Research supports the use of school-wide alternatives to zero-tolerance policies, and PBIS in particular, to effectively manage student behavior, improve school climate, and reduce suspensions.²⁰ For example, Redland Middle School in Montgomery County, MD, used PBIS to cut to discipline referral rates by 98 percent.²¹ However, research also shows that successful PBIS implementation relies on securing buy-in from teachers.²² The Fordham Institute’s teacher surveys imply that administrators should simultaneously commit to schoolwide PBIS and actionable practices that

16) National Center for Education Statistics, *Department of Education*.

17) Daniel J. Losen and Amir Whitaker, “11 Million Days Lost,” *Center for Civil Rights Remedies of UCLA’s Civil Rights Project and American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California*, (2018). https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/field_document/final_11-million-days_ucla_aclu.pdf.

18) David Griffith and Adam Tyner, “Discipline Reform through the Eyes of Teachers,” *Thomas B. Fordham Institute* (2019). <https://fordhaminstitute.org/sites/default/files/publication/pdfs/20190730-discipline-reform-through-eyes-teachers.pdf>.

19) Ibid.

20) “A Systemic Approach to Managing Behavioral Disruptions in the Early Grades,” *EAB* (2018): 30-31.

21) Sabrina Holcomb, “How One Middle School Cut Discipline Referrals By 98 Percent in Just One Year,” *NEA Today*, February 17, 2016, <http://neatoday.org/2016/02/17/middle-school-discipline-referrals/>.

22) “Critical Elements to a Successful PBIS Initiative,” *PBIS Rewards*, accessed November 13, 2019, <https://www.pbisrewards.com/blog/12-elements-successful-pbis-initiative/>.

directly respond to student misbehavior. These responses can include teacher trainings on de-escalation, threat assessments to determine whether to use exclusionary discipline, and numerous other strategies.

Incorporate Actionable Practices Alongside School-wide Discipline Initiatives to Manage Middle School Behavior

This report profiles several actionable practices that administrators and teachers can use to effectively manage middle school student behavior.

Characteristics of Effective Responses to Student Misbehavior



Align with Evidence

- Minimize lost instructional time
- Address the root cause of the behavior



Elevate Teachers as Partners

- Provide teachers with tools and practices to manage behavior in their classrooms
- Demonstrate a commitment to school safety

This report provides seven practices that align with these characteristics. Practices One, Two, Three, and Four can help administrators optimize both their and teacher responses to misbehavior to improve equity while maintaining school safety. Practices Five, Six, and Seven can help administrators and teachers pre-empt discipline by promoting positive behavior.

Profiled Strategies to Address Student Behavior

Respond to Misbehavior



- **Practice One:** Teacher De-escalation Training
- **Practice Two:** Functional Behavioral Assessments
- **Practice Three:** Student Threat Assessment Guidelines
- **Practice Four:** Alternatives to Exclusionary Discipline

Promote Positive Behavior



- **Practice Five:** Classroom-Based Social-Emotional Learning Curricula
- **Practice Six:** Mentorship Programs
- **Practice Seven:** Absenteeism Interventions

3) Responding to Misbehavior

Teacher De-Escalation Training

Train Teachers to De-Escalate and Redirect Misbehavior

Administrators can support teachers' ability to respond to student outbursts, disruptions, and misbehaviors when they occur. When students begin to engage in misbehavior, research offers several tactics that teachers can use to prevent the behavior from escalating.

Tactics to Prevent the Escalation of Misbehavior²³



Identify the trigger(s) for the students' misbehavior and remove these factors from the environment, if possible.



Speak to the student in private and in a calm voice with open body language and without blocking exits.



After sufficient time has passed, debrief with the student to **discuss how the student can succeed in future situations** with effort and support.

To ensure that teachers are well-equipped to manage misbehavior through de-escalation, administrators should consider investing in training for school staff on the above tactics and other strategies to manage behaviors and reduce violence in the classroom. For example, the Crisis Prevention Institute (CPI) offers educators and school staff training through the program [Nonviolent Crisis Intervention](#). This program provides educators with a framework to respond to student misbehavior and promote positive behavior.²⁴

Case Study: Nonviolent Crisis Intervention at School District U-46²⁵



Goals:

Administrators at district U-46 in Illinois aimed to reduce fights and suspensions while improving school culture and staff behavioral management skills at the middle- and high-school level.



Implementation:

The superintendent participated in the CPI training on Nonviolent Crisis Intervention. Next, teachers, principals, and other district staff participated in the program. Approximately half of the district staff have received training.



Results:

Out of school suspensions reduced by 75%. Challenging and disruptive behaviors reduced by 50-75%.

23) "Understanding and Managing Escalating Behavior," *Region IX Education Cooperative*, accessed November 13, 2019, https://tb2cdn.schoolwebmasters.com/acct/67464/site_67465/Documents/UnderstandingEscalatingBehavior.pdf.

24) "Nonviolent Crisis Intervention," *Crisis Prevention Institute*, accessed November 13, 2019, <https://www.crisisprevention.com/What-We-Do/Nonviolent-Crisis-Intervention>.

25) Erin Harris, "How School District U-46 Reduced Assaults by 90% [Case Study]," *Crisis Prevention Institute* (blog), accessed November 13, 2019, <https://www.crisisprevention.com/Blog/Reduced-Assaults>.

In addition to de-escalation tactics, administrators should consider training teachers to use restorative practices to respond to misbehavior. The Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) suggests that restorative practices can effectively improve school climate and address the root cause of misbehavior, preventing recidivism. Though a recent study suggests that full implementation of time-intensive, group restorative practices (e.g., restorative circles) may not be effective in middle schools,²⁶ teachers can still approach individual incidences of misbehavior through a restorative lens in an attempt to deescalate situations and discourage misbehavior. An article from the Hechinger Report suggests that though restorative justice *programs* may not be particularly effective, restorative *responses* to incidences of misbehavior likely contributed to declines in suspensions at schools both with and without restorative justice programs.²⁷

To that end, AMLE offers a concrete protocol designed for teachers to use to respond to in-classroom misbehavior without referring students to further discipline. AMLE recommends that teachers engage students through two sets of targeted, restorative questions. Teachers use the first set of questions to understand the root cause of the misbehavior, and the second set of questions to help other students move forward.²⁸

Restorative Questions to Respond to Misbehavior in the Classroom²⁹

To respond to challenging behavior

- What happened?
- What were you thinking at the time?
- What have you thought about since?
- Who has been affected by what you have done? In what way?
- What do you think you need to do to make things right?

To help those harmed by other's actions

- What did you think when you realized what had happened?
- What impact has this incident had on you and others?
- What has been the hardest thing for you?
- What do you think needs to happen to make things right?

Functional Behavior Assessment

Conduct a Six-Step Process to Implement an FBA-Based Intervention

2019 research from Child Trends shows that students with disabilities are twice as likely to be suspended or expelled than their peers without disabilities.³⁰ To respond to this trend, educators and administrators should adopt research-backed approaches to respond to misbehavior from students with disabilities.

For example, functional behavior assessment-based interventions align with the requirements for responding to student behavior mandated under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.³¹ Educators and school staff (e.g., school behavioralists) use functional behavior assessments (FBAs, or FBA-based interventions) to diagnose

26) Matt Barnum, "Major New Study Finds Restorative Justice Led to Safer Schools, but Hurt Black Students' Test Scores," *Chalkbeat*, January 4, 2019, <https://chalkbeat.org/posts/us/2019/01/04/the-first-gold-standard-study-of-restorative-justice-is-out-heres-what-it-tells-us/>.

27) Jill Barshay, "The Promise of 'Restorative Justice' Starts to Falter Under Rigorous Research," *Hechinger Report*, May 6, 2019, <https://hechingerreport.org/the-promise-of-restorative-justice-starts-to-falter-under-rigorous-research/>.

28) Brandie Oliver, "Restorative Practices," *Association for Middle Level Education* (October 2016), <https://www.amle.org/BrowsebyTopic/WhatsNew/WNDet/TabId/270/ArtMid/888/ArticleID/712/Restorative-Practices.aspx>.

29) Ibid.

30) Kristen Harper, Renee Ryberg, and Deborah Temkin, "Black Students and Students with disabilities Remain More Likely to Receive Out-of-School Suspensions, Despite Overall Declines," *Child Trends* (April 29, 2019), <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/black-students-disabilities-out-of-school-suspensions>.

31) Tom McIntyre, "Functional Behavioral Assessment," *Behavior Advisor*, accessed November 13, 2019, <https://www.behavioradvisor.com/FBA.html>.

the root cause of a students' misbehavior, formulate a plan to adjust the environment accordingly, and monitor and reward better behavior.³²

The IDEA Partnership, which focuses on serving students with disabilities, provides a [document](#) to guide the implementation of an FBA-based intervention.

Steps of a Functional Behavior Assessment

Refer to the Idea Partnership [document](#) for more information and examples.

Step One: Define the Problem Behavior

Teachers and/or other school staff use specific, observable, and measurable terms to define the problem behavior (**page 2**).

Step Three: Analyze the Data

Summarize the incidents and identify patterns (**page 5**).

Step Five: Develop a Plan

Create and implement a Behavior Intervention Plan to redirect the misbehavior and teach appropriate behavior (**pages 5-6**).

Step Two: Collect Data

Use student records, interviews, and observations to document the antecedents, behaviors, and consequences of relevant incidents (**pages 2-4**).

Step Four: Hypothesize

Suggest a reason for the misbehavior. Often, students misbehave to receive something they lack or to avoid something they dislike (**page 5**).

Step Six: Monitor Results

Observe student progress and modify the plan as needed. Successful plans employ an iterative process (**page 6**).

Behavioral Teams Can Lead FBA-Based Interventions and Interventions for All students

Consider forming a behavioral health intervention team to coordinate FBA-based interventions. See **page 46** of EAB's study [A Systemic Approach to Managing Behavioral Disruptions in Early Grades](#) to learn about the members of these teams. These teams can also design behavioral intervention plans for consistently disruptive students without IEPs.

Evidence Suggests FBA-Based Interventions Improve Middle School Behavior

In 2014, the Southern Disability Law Center identified FBAs as an effective way to manage student behavior and simultaneously reduce suspension rates for students with disabilities.³³ Though the Southern Disability Law Center does not cite the precise impact of FBA-based interventions on suspension rates, numerous studies support FBA-based interventions as an effective way to improve behavior at the middle school level. The Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse

32) Amanda Morin, "Functional Assessment: What It Is and How It Works," *Understood*, accessed November 13, 2019, <https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/evaluations/evaluation-basics/functional-assessment-what-it-is-and-how-it-works>.

33) "Keeping Students with Disabilities in School: Legal Strategies and Effective Educational Practices for Preventing the Suspension of Students with Disabilities," *The Southern Disability Law Center* (2014), <https://www.wrightslaw.com/info/disc.SDLC.res.manual.galagan.pdf>.

reviewed eight evaluations of FBA-based interventions and found evidence that these interventions have a potentially positive effect on student behavior in kindergarten through twelfth grade (i.e., 74 percent of the studies indicated a positive impact on student behavior, and no studies indicated a negative impact). Based on an additional 15 studies, the WWC found evidence that FBA-based interventions also have a potentially positive affect on school engagement in kindergarten through twelfth grade.

Threat Assessment

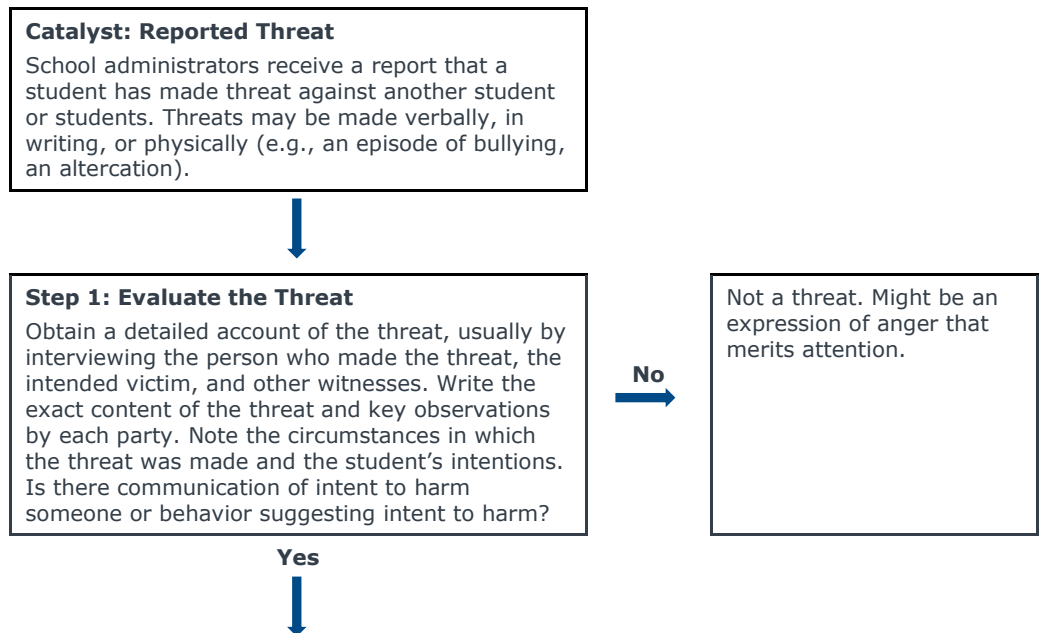
Visit the VSTAG [website](#) for more information on the implementation manual, educator trainings, and free threat assessment forms.

Use the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines to Identify Appropriate Instances for Exclusionary Discipline

Teachers can use de-escalation training and functional behavioral assessment-based interventions to manage student misbehavior in many circumstances. However, in some cases, students may present challenging behavior (i.e., students may make verbal or physical threats) that necessitates an administrator's response. In these cases, administrators should consider implementing strategies to ensure that they preserve school safety without unnecessarily suspending students.

The Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines (VSTAG) from the **University of Virginia's Youth Violence Project** provides training and an evidence-backed protocol for administrators to use in the event that a student makes a verbal or physical threat against another student or students. The training and protocol help administrators decide the severity of the threat and design an appropriate response. Researchers designed the protocol to mitigate the use of exclusionary discipline for non-substantive threats. VSTAG, used nationwide, provides a five-step decision tree and accompanying documents for school administrators to use to decide the severity of a threat and design an appropriate response.³⁴

VSTAG Decision Tree³⁵



34) Jenni Owen, Jane Wettach, and Katie Claire Hoffman, "Instead of Suspension: Alternative Strategies for Effective School Discipline," *Duke Center for Child and Family Policy and Duke Law School Children's Law Clinic* (2015), https://web.law.duke.edu/childlaw/schooldiscipline/downloads/instead_of_suspension.pdf.

35) "Threat Assessment Manual," School Threat Assessment, accessed November 13, 2019, <https://www.schoolta.com/manual>.

Step 2: Identify Whether Threat is Transient

Is the threat an expression of humor, rhetoric, anger, or frustration that can be easily resolved so that there is no intent to harm? Does the person retract the threat or offer an explanation and/or apology that indicates no future intent to harm anyone?

Yes
→

Case resolved as transient; add services as needed (e.g., behavioral counseling)

No
↓

Step 3: Respond to a Substantive Threat

If not transient, the threat is substantive. Substantive threats can be serious or very serious. For all substantive threats:

- Take precautions to protect potential victims
- Warn intended victim and parents
- Look for ways to resolve conflict
- Discipline student, when appropriate

Serious means a threat to hit, fight, or beat up whereas **very serious** means a threat to kill, rape, or cause very serious injury with a weapon.

Serious
→

Case resolved as serious substantive threat; add services as needed (e.g., behavioral counseling, exclusionary discipline if appropriate)

Very serious
↓

Step 4: Conduct a Safety Evaluation for a Very Serious Substantive Threat

In addition to the steps above,

- Screen student for mental health services and counseling; refer as needed
- Initiative law enforcement investigation for evidence of planning and preparation and/or criminal activity
- Develop safety plan that reduces risk and addresses student needs, check for alignment with Individualized Educational Plan if applicable. If not, assess student for potential disability



Step 5: Implement and Monitor the Safety Plan

- Document the plan
- Maintain contact with the student
- Monitor whether plan is working and revise as needed

Use Exclusionary Discipline for Credible Threats to Communicate a Commitment to School Safety

Administrators should respond with strict and even exclusionary discipline when the VSTAG protocol indicates that a student does represent a credible threat to school safety. This ensures that other students and school staff remain safe, and it indicates to teachers that administrators understand the severity of credible threats and remain committed to teachers' well-being.

Evidence Suggests the Student Threat Assessment Guidelines Maintain Safety and Reduce Exclusionary Discipline

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services included VSTAG in the National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices in 2013, after three controlled studies attested to the effectiveness of VSTAG. In subsequent years, many additional studies have provided evidence for the effectiveness of the guidelines. A summary of this research finds that the VSTAG guidelines preserve school safety—the protocol ensures that students who pose a threat do not return to classrooms. In all other cases, VSTAG encourages administrators to respond to infractions with counseling or other behavioral interventions rather than with exclusionary discipline. The research summary also asserts that VSTAG encourages proactive responses to bullying and other student conflicts before they manifest as violence. Lastly, though VSTAG reduces the use of exclusionary discipline, the research summary shows that VSTAG increases teachers' sense of safety at school. Thus, the guidelines can improve school culture and perhaps mitigate teacher resistance.³⁶

Selected Evidence of VSTAG Effectiveness³⁷



Ninety-nine percent of threats processed through the threat assessment were not carried out.



Students in schools that use the guidelines reported less bullying and greater willingness to seek help from adults at school as compared to students at comparable schools (e.g., similar size, demographic composition) without the framework.



Suspension rates decreased and racial disparities in discipline reduced. For example, one study of 23 high schools documented a 52% reduction in long-term suspensions after school staff received VSTAG training.³⁸

Alternatives to Discipline

Use Alternatives to Exclusionary Discipline to Respond to Persistent and Severe Misbehaviors

Sometimes, a student does not represent a credible, severe threat to school safety, but is nonetheless persistently and exceptionally disruptive to their peers. In those instances, administrators should turn to alternative disciplinary practices that both demonstrate their commitment to classroom order/teacher well-being and minimize lost instructional time/detrimental impacts to students. Testimony from researchers supports this claim—education experts Robert Horner, George Sugai, and Howard Horner argue administrators should use “separate and distinct” discipline responses for students who continue to display disruptive behavior despite school-wide behavioral programs (e.g. PBIS).³⁹ Specifically, Horner, Sugai, and Horner recommend that discipline responses for persistently disruptive students incorporate controlled conditions and close oversight.

36) Dewey Cornell, Peter Sheras, Anne Gregory, and Xitao Fan, “A Retrospective Study of School Safety Conditions in High Schools Using the Virginia Threat Assessment Guidelines Versus Alternative Approaches,” *School Psychology Quarterly*, vol. 24, no. 2 (2009):119–129. <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.468.9653&rep=rep1&type=pdf>; “Evidence,” School Threat Assessment, accessed November 13, 2019, <https://www.schoolta.com/research>; “Threat Assessment Research,” University of Virginia Curry School of Education and Human Development, accessed November 13, 2019. <https://curry.virginia.edu/threat-assessment-research>.

37) Ibid.

38) Dewey Cornell, Peter Sheras, Anne Gregory, and Xitao Fan, “Reductions in Long-Term Suspensions Following Adoption of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines,” *Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary School Principals*, (2011): 175–194.

39) Robert Horner, George Sugai, and Howard Horner, “A Schoolwide Approach to Student Discipline” *The School Superintendents Association* (1999), <https://aasa.org/SchoolAdministratorArticle.aspx?id=14466>.

When Necessary, Incorporate Structure and Support into Exclusionary Discipline Practices to Improve Student Outcomes

Though out-of-school suspensions inevitably reduce instructional time for the suspended students, administrators can consider incorporating time for schoolwork into an alternative to suspension program to help students stay on-track academically.

In some severe cases, administrators and educators may decide to remove students from class via a suspension. For these students, administrators should consider implementing programs that students can attend instead of traditional suspension. Whereas students serve traditional out-of-school suspensions without school supervision, alternatives to suspension can provide structured conditions and behavioral support. Some districts attempt to provide this structure through in-school suspensions, during which students stay in a designated area, often within the school's central office, for one or more days. However, no research conclusively verifies the effectiveness of in-school suspensions. In fact, researchers suggest that this lack of evidence exists because in-school suspensions often do not incorporate behavioral support, counseling, or other techniques to help the student understand and improve their behavior.⁴⁰ Therefore, instead of in-school suspensions, administrators should consider implementing more robust programs that incorporate behavioral supports. For example, San Mateo Union High School District operates an Alternative to Suspension (ATS) program to improve outcomes for suspended students. Though administrators designed this program for high school students, its components should transfer to the middle school level.

80%

of students who complete ATS are not suspended again. In addition, surveys administered to participants at the end of the school year indicate that a majority make better decisions after attending the program.⁴¹

Alternative to Suspension Program at San Mateo Union High School District⁴²

Program Overview

- Upon referral by the school principal, students who receive a one- to three-day suspension may attend the Alternative to Suspension program
- The Alternative to Suspension program occurs away from the student's school site in another district building
- The program uses group therapy to help address the root cause of the discipline incident

Program Schedule

Morning- Focus on Disciplinary Incident ("Why Am I Here?")

- Group introductions, preparation for day and check-in activities
- Narrative "re-write" of disciplinary incident. Students answer the following questions:
 - What was in your control?
 - What factors around you support you? What factors bring you down?
 - What would you do if you could do it again?

Afternoon- Reflection on Educational Progress

- Assessment of current educational progress and attitude/engagement toward school (e.g., program staff may ask students to review their grades and information about graduation requirements).
- Lunch
- Goal setting. Based on assessment of their progress and a share-out of identified challenges to the group, students write three educational goals for a school reentry plan.

40) Neil Blomberg, "Effective Discipline for Misbehavior: In School vs. Out of School Suspension," *Concept*, vol. 27 (2004).

<https://www.healthiersf.org/RestorativePractices/Resources/documents/suspension%20ineffective.pdf>.

41) "Alternative to Suspension," San Mateo Union High School District, accessed November 14, 2019, <https://www.smuhsd.org/Page/2400>.

42) Ibid.

As one of their goals, students must identify an adult on their campus that they can go to for help with academic, behavioral and emotional issues.

Program Exit Requirements

At end of program day, students can:

- Identify at least one aspect of the suspension incident under their control
- Describe at least one alternative action they could take to avoid suspension
- Identify at least one adult from whom they can seek help on campus
- Upon reentry to school, student will tell one adult at school about the goals they set for themselves.

Saturday Detentions Preserve Instructional Time

Administrators can implement Saturday detentions, or “Saturday school” as an alternative to out-of-school and in-school suspensions that allow students to remain in the classroom. Research notes that Saturday detentions typically last for three to four hours. Saturday detentions do not remove persistently disruptive students from the classroom, and they provide a controlled environment with close oversight in alignment with the suggestions of Horner, Sugai, and Horner.⁴³ During Saturday detentions, administrators may require students to work on school projects, meet with counselors, and/or complete community service (e.g., picking up trash around the school), which aligns with the research-backed suggestion to provide resources and other constructive activities when disciplining students.⁴⁴

⁴³Emily Moss and Reece Peterson, “Saturday School” *University of Nebraska-Lincoln* (October 2013).
<https://k12engagement.unl.edu/Briefs/RestorativePractices/SaturdaySchool/Saturday%20School%20%2010-31-2013.pdf>.
⁴⁴Neil Blomberg, “Effective Discipline for Misbehavior: In School vs. Out of School Suspension,” *Concept*, vol. 27 (2004).
<https://www.healthiersf.org/RestorativePractices/Resources/documents/suspension%20ineffective.pdf>.

4) Promoting Positive Behavior

Classroom- Based SEL Instruction

Encourage Teachers to Deliver Evidence-Backed SEL Curriculum to Improve Students' Inter- and Intra-Personal Competencies

Through Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), students learn how to recognize their emotions, set goals, develop empathy, and make positive decisions. SEL helps students regulate their behavior.⁴⁵ The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) recommends that administrators ask teachers—rather than support staff—to deliver SEL lessons to their students. CASEL researchers note that when teachers deliver SEL instruction, it can help them to form strong relationships with their students. To ease the strain on teachers, CASEL recommends that administrators dedicate time for explicit SEL instruction in the master schedule through advisory periods or dedicated courses.⁴⁶

To help teachers deliver SEL instruction during these designated times, CASEL recommends that administrators select an evidence-based SEL curriculum. At the middle school level, CASEL identifies seven evidence-based SEL programs.

Evidence-Based Interventions Validated at the Middle School Level by CASEL⁴⁷

Curricula			
EL Education	Facing History and Ourselves	Lions Quest – Skills for Adolescence	Responding in Peaceful and Positive Ways
Second Step: Student Success Through Prevention for Middle School	Student Success Skills	Wyman's Teen Outreach Program	

CASEL also recommends that teachers integrate SEL into everyday classroom instruction. CASEL provides four guiding questions for teachers to use to integrated SEL instruction.

45) "What is SEL?" CASEL, accessed November 14, 2019, <https://casel.org/what-is-sel/>.

46) "Explicit SEL Instruction," CASEL, accessed November 14, 2019, <https://schoolguide.casel.org/focus-area-3/classroom/explicit-sel-instruction/>.

47) "Effective SEL Programs for Middle School," CASEL, accessed November 14, 2019, <http://secondaryguide.casel.org/#MS-Programs>.

Four Guiding Questions to Integrate SEL and Instruction⁴⁸

For CASEL's teacher self-assessment tool, which can help teachers optimize the way they teach SEL in the classroom, see [here](#).

- Are SEL standards/ goals **clearly embedded** in academic learning?
- Do students regularly **share their perspectives** on how social and emotional competencies connect to what they're learning?
- Do teachers actively engage students in co-constructing knowledge and making meaning of content through **classroom discussions and collaborative structures**?
- Do teachers use intentional strategies to **foster student ownership over their learning**, including connecting their perspectives and experiences to instruction?

Evidence Supports the Use of SEL to Improve Student Behavior

A 2017 metaanalysis and evidence review from the Wallace Foundation identifies 60 SEL intervention programs that meet the Every Student Succeeds Acts' evidence-based standards. Researchers found that these SEL interventions not only build intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies, but also improve academic attainment and achievement, disciplinary outcomes, civic attitudes and behaviors, and school climate and safety. For example, one study found that students exposed to an SEL curricula in seventh grade committed half the number of discipline code violations as did students in a control group during the first semester of eighth grade.⁴⁹ Moreover, the evidence for many of these interventions demonstrates their effectiveness for low-income or minority students.⁵⁰

50%

fewer discipline **code violations** committed by students exposed to evidence-based SEL curricula.⁵¹

Consider Implementing Mindfulness Programs to Complement SEL Initiatives

Mindfulness can help students recognize their own emotions—a central goal of SEL.⁵² Experts suggest that teachers implement mindfulness alongside SEL curricula to compound the benefits of each.⁵³ Therefore, teachers may also consider incorporating mindfulness-based practices into classroom routines.

While only preliminary research exists on the impact of mindfulness-based practices, initial evidence suggests that mindfulness-based practices in the classroom can improve behavior. For example, in one study of seventh and eighth grade students, implementing mindfulness-based practices caused the average number of office

71%

decrease in average office referral rates due to mindfulness-based practices.⁵⁴

48) "Integration of SEL and Academic Instruction," CASEL, accessed November 14, 2019, <https://schoolguide.casel.org/focus-area-3/classroom/integration-of-sel-and-instruction/>.

49) Albert Farrell, Aleta Meyer, Terri Sullivan, and Eva Kung, "Evaluation of the Responding in Peaceful and Positive Ways (RIPP) Seventh Grade Violence Prevention Curriculum," *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1 (2003):101-120. <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1023%2FA%3A1021314327308.pdf>.

50) Sean Grant et al, "Social and Emotional Learning Interventions," *The Wallace Foundation and Rand Corporation* (2017), <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Social-and-Emotional-Learning-Interventions-Under-ESSA.pdf>.

51) Albert Farrell, Aleta Meyer, Terri Sullivan, and Eva Kung, "Evaluation of the Responding in Peaceful and Positive Ways (RIPP) Seventh Grade Violence Prevention Curriculum," *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1 (2003):101-120. <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1023%2FA%3A1021314327308.pdf>.

52) Allena Avila, "Mindfulness and Social Emotional Learning: What's the Difference?" *Edulastic* (blog), September 6, 2019, <https://edulastic.com/blog/mindfulness-and-sel/>.

53) Linda Lantieri and Vicki Zakrzewski, "How SEL and Mindfulness Can Work Together," *Greater Good Magazine*, April 7, 2015, https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_social_emotional_learning_and_mindfulness_can_work_together.

54) Akira Gutierrez et al, "Mindfulness in the Classroom: Learning from a School-based Mindfulness Intervention through the Boston Charter Research Collaborative," *Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University* (January 2019). <https://www.transformingeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/2019-BCRC-Mindfulness-Brief.pdf>.

referral rates for the students to drop from 6.33 per a three-month period to 1.78 in a three-month period.⁵⁵

Two Strategies to Implement Mindfulness-Based Practices in the Classroom



Technologies

Students in the study mentioned above experienced mindfulness-based practices through an app and headband created by the company [Muse](#).



Facilitator-led Sessions

At Creative Challenge Community School in Denver, students participate in two, 15-minute mindfulness sessions each month. A school staff member with experience in yoga and mindfulness leads these sessions.⁵⁶

Mentorship Programs

Connect Students with Dedicated Adults Through Mentorship Programs

School-based mentorship programs facilitate partnerships between students and volunteers or school personnel, either one-on-one or in group settings. These programs promote student engagement and ensure that students have a trusted, adult resource at school. Some schools partner with community organizations to provide mentorship programs.⁵⁷ A 2011 meta-analysis of 73 youth mentorship programs, both school- and community-based, suggests three ways that administrators can ensure the success of mentorship programs.⁵⁸

Key Components of Successful Mentorship Programs⁵⁹



Mentors' occupational and/or education credentials align with the goals of the program.



Mentors and their mentees have similar interests.



Programs provide supports for mentors to help them teach and advocate for their mentees.

For a mentorship activity suggestion from EAB's research brief [Mentorship Programs for Middle and High School Students](#), see **Appendix A**.

Align Mentorship Programs with Research-Backed Indicators of Success to Improve Student Behavior

Several studies of mentorship programs demonstrate that they can have a positive impact on student behavior. For example, a 2008 report notes that school-based

55) Akira Gutierrez et al, "Mindfulness in the Classroom: Learning from a School-based Mindfulness Intervention through the Boston Charter Research Collaborative," *Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University* (January 2019). <https://www.transformingeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/2019-BCRC-Mindfulness-Brief.pdf>.

56) Monte Whaley, "Denver Public Schools' Mindfulness' Class Teachers Gratitude, Appreciation of Surroundings," *Denver Post*, November 28, 2019, <https://www.denverpost.com/2016/11/28/denver-public-schools-mindfulness-class-teaches-gratitude-appreciation-surroundings/>.

57) David DuBois et al, "How Effective Are Mentoring Programs for Youth? A Systematic Assessment of the Evidence," *Association for the Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, vol. 12, no 2 (2011):57-91. <https://www.rhodeslab.org/files/DuBoisetalMeta.pdf>.

58) Ibid.

59) Ibid.

mentorship programs can reduce student discipline referrals and incidences of student violence.⁶⁰ In addition, a 2013 study of 121 middle school students enrolled in a school-based mentorship program found that the students in the program had far fewer discipline referrals than students in a control group (i.e., a group of students with similar characteristics enrolled at a comparable school without a mentorship program).⁶¹ However, not all research agrees that school-based mentoring programs are an effective behavioral intervention. For example, a 2012 meta-analysis of six studies on school-based mentorship programs found that these programs do not reliably improve behavior.⁶²

To explain the discrepancy between different research-backed conclusions about school-based mentorship programs, consider the findings of the 2011 meta-analysis of 73 evaluations of youth mentorship program (mentioned above). This meta-analysis found that overall, mentorship programs positively impact adolescent behavior, academics and attendance but studies were more likely to demonstrate positive results when the programs reflected the key components listed above.⁶³ Administrators must ensure that they carefully and intentionally design mentorship programs to maximize benefits.

Implement Mentorship Programs for Middle School Students to Provide Social and Emotional Benefits

To optimize mentorship programs, administrators can also target them toward developing students' social and emotional skills. A 2017 article published by AMLE suggests that administrators turn to mentorship programs to improve students' social and emotional outcomes.⁶⁴ Research supports this approach—one study of mentorship programs for seventh through tenth grade students found that mentorship programs improve students' connections to their parents and their conception of their future selves.⁶⁵ Based on a review of research literature, the AMLE article makes several recommendations for implementing mentorship programs.⁶⁶

Characteristics of Mentorship Programs that Support Social and Emotional Learning⁶⁷



Mentors



Appropriately trained



Responsive to student needs



Goal-oriented



Mentor-mentee relationship



Mentors care about their mentee as a person



The relationship adapts as the mentee develops



Mentors and mentees trust each other

60) Linda Jucovy, Michael Garringer, and Patti MacRae, "The ABCs of School-Based Mentoring," *National Mentoring Center* (2008). <https://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/abc-of-mentoring.pdf>.

61) Janet Gordon, Jayne Downey, and Art Bangert, "Effects of a School-Based Mentoring Program on School Behavior and Measures of Adolescent Connectedness," *School Community Journal*, vol. 23, no 2 (2013). <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1028864.pdf>.

62) "School-Based Mentoring," *National Mentoring Resource Center*, November 14, 2019, <https://nationalmentoringresourcecenter.org/index.php/30-topic-areas/182-school-based-mentoring.html>.

63) David DuBois et al, "How Effective Are Mentoring Programs for Youth? A Systematic Assessment of the Evidence," *Association for the Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, vol. 12, no 2 (2011):57-91. <http://www.rhodeslab.org/files/DuBoisetalMeta.pdf>

64) Suzanne Lindt and Cody Blair, "Making a Difference with At-Risk Students: The Benefits of a Mentoring Program in Middle School," *AMLE*, accessed November 14, 2019, <https://www.ample.org/BrowsebyTopic/WhatsNew/WNDet/TabId/270/ArtMID/888/ArticleID/763/The-Benefits-of-a-Mentoring-Program-in-Middle-School.aspx>.

65) Janet Gordon, Jayne Downey, and Art Bangert, "Effects of a School-Based Mentoring Program on School Behavior and Measures of Adolescent Connectedness," *School Community Journal*, vol. 23, no 2 (2013). <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1028864.pdf>.

66) Suzanne Lindt and Cody Blair, "Making a Difference with At-Risk Students: The Benefits of a Mentoring Program in Middle School," *AMLE*, accessed November 14, 2019, <https://www.ample.org/BrowsebyTopic/WhatsNew/WNDet/TabId/270/ArtMID/888/ArticleID/763/The-Benefits-of-a-Mentoring-Program-in-Middle-School.aspx>.

67) Ibid.



Program
structure



One-on-one
meetings



Consistent
meetings on a
scheduled basis
at first, followed
by a more
flexible schedule



Monitor progress
regularly

For more information on implementing middle school mentorship programs to develop social-emotional competencies, see EAB's report [Mentorship Programs for Middle and High School Students](#).

Absenteeism Interventions

Address Chronic Absenteeism to Improve Student Behavior

Research typically considers students as “chronically absent” when they miss 15-18 days of school per school year, excused or unexcused.⁶⁸ The Brookings Institute reports that students who are chronically absent may develop social-emotional deficiencies and may disengage from school.⁶⁹ In addition, a 2018 literature review from the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development concludes that chronic absenteeism often leads to student misbehavior.⁷⁰

Factors Contributing to Misbehavior from Chronically Absent Students⁷¹

Chronically absent students...



Fall behind in classes,
leading to frustration and
anxiety.



**Build fewer positive
relationships,** because
they have less time with
adults and peers.



**Develop fewer social-
emotional competencies,**
because they learn to avoid
difficult situations rather
than overcome them.

Therefore, administrators should consider implementing absenteeism interventions to a school-wide strategy to address student misbehavior.

Implement Multiple Tiers of Absenteeism Interventions

According to research from Attendance Works, administrators should implement a three-tiered Response to Intervention model to improve attendance. A 2018 Brookings Institution report profiles selected evidence-based interventions to reduce chronic absenteeism, with a particular focus on Tier One and Tier Two strategies.⁷²

68) “Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation’s Schools,” *U.S. Department of Education*, January 2019, <https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html>; Brian Jacob and Kelly Lovett, “Chronic Absenteeism: An Old Problem in Search of New Answers,” *Brookings Institution*, January 27, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/chronic-absenteeism-an-old-problem-in-search-of-new-answers/>.

69) Brian Jacob and Kelly Lovett, “Chronic Absenteeism: An Old Problem in Search of New Answers,” *Brookings Institution*, January 27, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/chronic-absenteeism-an-old-problem-in-search-of-new-answers/>.

70) Jessica Sprick and Randy Sprick, *School Leader’s Guide to Tackling Attendance Challenges* (Ancora Publishing, 2018), Chapter 1. <http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/118037/chapters/Understanding-the-Stakes@-Why-We-Should-Address-Chronic-Absence.aspx>.

71) Ibid.

72) Lauren Bauer, Patrick Liu, Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach, and Jay Shambaugh, “Reducing Chronic Absenteeism under the Every Student Succeeds Act,” *Brookings Institution* (April 2018). https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/reducing_chronic_absenteeism_under_the_every_student_succeeds_act2.pdf.



Tier One: Communicate with Parents

Communication between school staff and parents increases student attendance. Research-backed methods include:

- Texts to parents to notify them if students miss school, communicate the value of attendance, and offer parents opportunities to engage with teachers can improve student attendance.
- Letters mailed to parents to remind them about their child's absence and communicate the value of time in school can improve attendance. For more information on mailing letters to parents, see **page 11** of EAB's report [Preventing Chronic Absenteeism](#).



Tier Two: Dedicate Staff to Intervene

School-based programs that dedicate staff members to work intensively with chronically absent students can identify and address the root cause of the student's attendance issue. Examples include [Success Mentors](#) and [Check and Connect](#). On average, chronically absent students in the Success Mentors program improve their attendance rates by 13 days per year.

School staff and community partners interested in serving as **success mentors** can access the following supportive [resources](#) (e.g., mentor guide, mentoring



Tier Three: Engage Partners

For students who miss 20 percent or more of the school year, administrators should work with social workers, community-based organizations, and the legal system to improve student attendance.

When Selecting Absenteeism Interventions, Consider Evidence Base and Ease of Implementation

Numerous companies, state entities, and educational organizations recommend absenteeism intervention practices or provide absenteeism intervention products. Most of these interventions qualify as Tier Two or Tier Three interventions. A 2012 metaanalysis of the evidence behind these interventions shows that, overall, there is limited, rigorous evidence that supports the effectiveness of absenteeism interventions (i.e., only 28 of 391 available studies met selection criteria).⁷⁴

However, the 28 studies that do rigorously evaluate absenteeism interventions report a moderate, positive effect on attendance. The metaanalysis finds that school-, community-, and court-based interventions all have a similar level of effectiveness. In addition, the metaanalysis finds that the modality of the program does not matter (i.e., there is no difference in the effectiveness of programs comprised primarily of group,

⁷³Lauren Bauer, Patrick Liu, Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach, and Jay Shambaugh, "Reducing Chronic Absenteeism under the Every Student Succeeds Act," *Brookings Institution* (April 2018). https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/reducing_chronic_absenteeism_under_the_every_student_succeeds_act2.pdf.

⁷⁴Brandy Maynard, Katherine Tyson McCrea, Terri Pigott, and Michael Kelly, "Indicated Truancy Interventions: Effects on School Attendance among Chronic Truant Students," *The Campbell Collaboration* (April 2012). <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED535217.pdf>.

family, mentoring, or alternative education components). The authors suggest that—based on these findings, administrators should implement a two-step decision process for selecting absenteeism interventions.⁷⁵

Considerations for Selecting Absenteeism Interventions⁷⁶

First, ensure that research independently verifies the effectiveness of the intervention.



Next, consider whether the program can build on existing district infrastructure. Since intervention effectiveness does not vary by modality or whether the program is school- or community-based, administrators should prioritize ease of implementation (e.g., leverage existing staff members).

⁷⁵) Brandy Maynard, Katherine Tyson McCre, Terri Pigott, and Michael Kelly, "Indicated Truancy Interventions: Effects on School Attendance among Chronic Truant Students," *The Campbell Collaboration* (April 2012). <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED535217.pdf>.
⁷⁶) Ibid.

5) Research Methodology

Project Challenge

Leadership at a member institution approached the Forum with the following questions:

- What are the benefits and drawbacks of zero-tolerance disciplinary approaches?
- What actionable, non-punitive strategies can teachers use to positively impact middle school behavior in the classroom?
- What actions can administrators take to support teachers as they manage middle school behavior?
- What student programs can administrators implement to positively impact middle school behavior?
- When should administrators and teachers respond to student behavior with discipline?
- What equitable, effective disciplinary strategies should administrators use to manage middle school behavior?
- What is the relationship between chronic absenteeism and student behavior at the middle school level?

Project Sources

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Appendix A

Page 8 of EAB's research brief **Mentorship Programs for Middle and High School Students** profiles a social and emotional-learning focused activity for a mentor-mentee pair to complete:

Hey, Thanks!

As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them.

—John Fitzgerald Kennedy

Objective: To recognize and thank people who have made a difference in our lives, which reinforces positive behaviors.

Materials needed: Paper and pencil

Procedure: Ask these questions. Allow enough time for mentee to respond.

- If you had one hour to live, who would you call?
- Why would you call that person?

As the mentee to share. This is a very personal session; therefore, give the opportunity to share but allow mentee a "pass."

Ask mentee to write the answer to the following:

- List 10 things for which you are grateful.
- Describe one of the most beautiful things that you have ever seen.

Ask the mentee to share.

Closure activity: Have a mentee read the following quote:

At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us. —Albert Schweitzer

Ask: Who sparked the flame in your life? Why?