

# Issues Summary

## OVERVIEW OF EMOTIONAL/ BEHAVIORAL DISABILITIES

Over two million young people in the United States have an emotional/behavioral disability (EBD), yet EBD is often difficult to diagnose. The ASEC (Area Special Education Cooperative) defines EBD as an established pattern of one or more of the following emotional or behavioral responses:

- withdrawal or anxiety, depression, problems with mood, or feelings of low self-worth;
- disordered thought processes with unusual behavior patterns and atypical communication styles; and/or
- aggression, hyperactivity, or impulsivity.

For an EBD diagnosis to occur, the established pattern of emotional or behavioral responses must negatively impact educational or developmental performance, including intrapersonal, academic, vocational, or social skills; be significantly different from appropriate age, cultural, or ethnic norms; and be more than temporary, expected responses to stressful events. The emotional or behavioral responses must be consistently exhibited in at least three different settings, two of which must be educational settings, and one other setting such as in the home, child care, or community. As a result, EBD is not easily addressed or quickly resolved, often requiring long-term school, family, and community supports.

Statistics released by the Southern Poverty Law Center and *The Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders* reflect the grim outcomes for students with emotional or behavioral disabilities:

- Students with EBD have the worst graduation rate of all students with disabilities. Nationally, only 40 percent of students with EBD graduate from high school, compared to the national average of 76 percent.

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Kelsey Carroll at Somersworth High School. Kelsey is featured in the film *Who Cares About Kelsey?* by producer/director Dan Habib. The film tells the story of Kelsey's transformation from a defiant "problem student" to a motivated, self-confident young woman.

- Students with EBD are three times as likely as other students to be arrested before leaving school.
- Students with EBD are twice as likely as other students with disabilities to live in a correctional facility, halfway house, drug treatment center, or on the street after leaving school.
- Female students with EBD are twice as likely as students with other disabilities to become teenage mothers.
- 75 percent of young adults with EBD have been involved with the criminal justice system at some point in their lives.

## TRADITIONAL RESPONSES TO PROBLEM BEHAVIOR IN SCHOOL

Students with EBD typically do not respond well to traditional discipline policies and educational programs. As such, schools can easily and wrongly dismiss them as "problem kids," further reinforcing the characteristics of EBD (anxiety, depression, low self-worth, aggression), which leads to cycles of discipline referrals.

With the rise of school violence in the 1990s, schools responded by securing the safety of their students and faculty by the initiation of zero-

tolerance policies. Across the country, many of those policies still exist today. The goal of zero-tolerance is to deter problem behavior by providing swift consequences for misconduct, sending a strong, “one strike and you’re out” message to students. Seriously dangerous behaviors, that jeopardize the safety of students and staff, require consistent and firm consequences. However, zero-tolerance prescribes non-negotiable punishment (typically, suspension or expulsion) for misconduct, regardless of the extent or context of the infraction. This “one-size-fits-all” framework impedes administrators from using their professional judgment, common sense, and teaching skills to correct minor infractions and help students behave positively. By focusing solely on punishment, zero-tolerance neglects to examine the root causes of problem behavior and consequently can do little to prevent the behavior from reoccurring. Rather than increasing school safety, zero-tolerance often leads to increased suspensions and expulsions for both serious and mild infractions and disproportionately impacts students with disabilities.

According to a 2012 report by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, students covered under IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) are more than twice as likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions than students without disabilities.

A long-term study in Texas released in 2011 — *Breaking Schools’ Rules: A Statewide Study on How School Discipline Relates to Students’ Success and Juvenile Justice Involvement* — tracked one million students in Texas between their seventh- and 12th-grade school years. The study confirmed the prevalence of suspension as a default response to behavior issues in school:

- 60 percent of public school students studied were suspended or expelled at least once between their seventh- and 12th-grade school years.
- Only three percent of disciplinary actions were for conduct for which state law mandates suspensions and expulsions (e.g. bringing a weapon to school). 97 percent of suspensions/expulsions were for minor infractions that did not jeopardize the safety of the school population (e.g. talking back to the teacher, talking in class, noncompliance with dress code).
- Approximately 59 percent of students disciplined 11 times or more did not graduate from high school.

The study also showed that disciplinary measures are not color-blind. African-Americans were 30 percent more likely to face disciplinary action, often for a similar incident, that would not lead to suspension for a White or Latino student.



Students eat lunch together at Armstrong Elementary School, which has implemented PBIS.

Further, according to recent studies conducted by the Schott Foundation, students who are suspended or expelled often drop out of school altogether, which can lead to juvenile delinquency, arrests and prison. Taking students out of their learning communities for non-violent misconduct is not only counterintuitive but has furthered the development of the school-to-prison pipeline. According to reports from groups such as the American Bar Association and the American Psychological Association, zero-tolerance policies are associated with declines in academic achievement and increases in student misconduct, repeat suspensions, school dropouts, and poor attitudes toward adults. Research also links zero-tolerance to increases in referrals to the juvenile-justice system for infractions that used to be handled in schools.

There are economic consequences when youth exhibiting treatable behavior problems are transferred to the juvenile-justice system. The anti-crime organization “Fight Crime: Invest in Kids” cites that the cost of keeping a young person in juvenile detention for one year is between \$35,000 to \$50,000, compared with \$12,000 to \$15,000 per year to provide effective prevention and intervention programs to an adolescent. Furthermore, the country saves an estimated \$1.7 million for every young person kept from engaging in a life of crime.

### WHAT WORKS?

The good news is there are numerous alternatives to zero-tolerance policies that work. Rather than cling to ineffectual strategies, many schools around the country are embracing proven (also known as “evidence-based”) models that help all students, including those with EBD, achieve success in school. These models are effective because they are rooted in prevention, build upon the inherent strengths of each student, and seek to address the underlying causes of problem behavior. For far too many students with EBD, school is seen as the

place where they are misunderstood, punished, and isolated. However, school is an ideal setting for students, particularly those with EBD, to develop meaningful relationships with competent, trustworthy adults who see their potential. These relationships are key to sustaining climates of success, safety, tolerance, and excellence, in which students learn to thrive.

⇒ Schools must emphasize both student wellness and academic achievement equally if all students are going to learn to their fullest potential.

Many successful evidence-based models that address issues facing schools and students — particularly those with disabilities — fall under the educational framework called Response to Intervention (RtI), which is sometimes referred to as Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). In short, RtI:

- provides all students with the best opportunities to succeed in school;
- identifies students with learning or behavioral problems; and
- ensures that students receive appropriate instruction and related supports.

RtI models have consistently been shown to be effective. In November 2011, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), held a congressional briefing at which it shared its findings on how schools can create safe, supportive conditions for learning. Experts underscored that (1) student wellness (social, emotional, behavioral, and psychological) is essential for academic

achievement, and (2) schools must emphasize both student wellness and academic achievement equally if all students are going to learn to their fullest potential. The key components of safe and supportive conditions for learning presented by NASP are rooted in the best practices of RtI and include:

- School-wide frameworks, such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), that prevent negative behaviors such as bullying, violence, gang involvement, substance abuse, and truancy.
- Comprehensive and coordinated learning supports (e.g., effective discipline and positive behavior supports) that directly contribute to student social-emotional wellness, mental health, and positive behavior.
- Positive school climates that promote student connectedness and family engagement.
- Effective use of data to identify and address the most critical issues related to school safety and engagement.
- School-based specialized instructional support personnel who are integrally involved in development, delivery, and evaluation of these services.

From PBIS to bullying prevention, inclusive education to transition planning, the educational resources presented in the “What Works” section of this project support the findings presented to Congress by NASP. These educational materials summarize some of the best practices for helping all students achieve and sustain success in school and beyond.

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