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## ISSUE BRIEF:

# Supporting Student Achievement through Sound Behavior Management Practices in Schools and Juvenile Justice Facilities: A Spotlight on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

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## **About the National Evaluation and Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Children and Youth Who Are Neglected, Delinquent, or At-Risk**

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## Introduction

Many students across the Nation struggle with emotional and behavioral problems that may lead them to act out in ways that school administrators and teachers might not understand or be prepared to respond to effectively. In today's era of high-stakes testing, zero-tolerance discipline measures, and shrinking school and district budgets, there is an incentive to remove problem students from the classroom rather than devote the time and resources necessary to address the underlying causes of the behavior. These punitive disciplinary practices negatively affect the academic performance and achievement of students with behavioral problems by temporarily removing them from needed classroom instruction time.

When school disciplinary practices result in youth being out of school more than they are in school, such practices are also more likely to result in unnecessary justice system involvement. Compared to traditional schools, the juvenile justice education system is at least as ill-equipped to deal with a population of students with a high prevalence of educational, learning, and mental health disorders (Quinn, Rutherford, Leone, Osher, & Poirier, 2005). In fact, if the secure care environment places more emphasis on punishment than achieving positive youth outcomes, it can exacerbate problematic behaviors, resulting in an unsafe environment for staff and youth, and it can compound student academic deficiencies.

Implementing an evidence-based behavior management approach is one way that educational programs—whether in traditional community schools or residential secure care settings—are addressing problem student behaviors in proactive, supportive ways that encourage student success. Within juvenile justice and other residential settings specifically, administrators can use supplemental funding, like Federal Title I, Part D, funding to adopt behavioral support practices that assist students with behavior problems and help them to achieve academically at levels comparable to their peers in community schools.

This brief provides an overview of the link between student behavior and traditional discipline responses by schools, and how both affect academic achievement. In light of these connections, the brief asserts that supportive behavior management practices are critical to helping youth achieve

academic success while in school and preventing the unnecessary justice system involvement that results from punitive and exclusionary school discipline practices. The brief also makes the case that supportive behavior management can also make a difference for youth already in the justice system; it highlights the success of Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), which many juvenile justice settings have adapted and adopted based on its success in traditional community schools.

## The Connection between Student Behavior Problems and Academic Performance and Achievement

Not unexpectedly, research studies have provided strong evidence of a link between disruptive and other problem student behaviors and academic problems and underachievement (Barriga et al., 2002). The effect of behavior issues on academic achievement stems from both the external response of adults to the behavior as well as the impact on a student's ability to meaningfully engage in learning that translates into positive outcomes.

*Related academic barriers.* Students with severe behavior problems may experience co-occurring learning and mental health disabilities, which can separately affect their ability to succeed in the classroom (Barriga et al., 2002). For example, students with externalizing behaviors (e.g., conduct disorder) are more likely to be behind in school, and for some subjects, such as math, deficits can worsen over time (Nelson, Benner, Lane, & Smith, 2004). When they co-occur, behavioral and learning challenges can create obstacles to academic success that are difficult for a student to overcome without supplemental behavioral support services.

*Social and emotional connections.* Behavioral issues that lead to classroom disruptions negatively affect learning conditions for all students in a number of ways. Research demonstrates that student learning is greatly affected by social and emotional factors in classrooms, schools, and communities (Becker & Luthar, 2002). For example, the quality of students' relationships with teachers, peers, and family, as well as relationships between teachers and families, can affect learning. Challenging student behaviors can strain relationships when teachers and families do not have adequate training or preparation to respond appropriately. Additional social and emo-

tional factors are related to the safety and overall climate of the school/learning environment and a student's motivation, self-esteem, and the ability to manage emotions and interactions with others (Osher, Sidana, & Kelly, 2008). Studies have shown that students who experience a sense of belonging and interpersonal support tend to demonstrate greater academic success (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Osterman, 2000; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003), whereas peer rejection has been shown to lead to poorer academic achievement, future school dropout, and contact with the juvenile justice system (Ollendick, Weist, Borden, & Greene, 1992). For youth to succeed in school, teachers and other school staff must be aware of these social and emotional factors and create a learning environment that facilitates a student's ability to effectively engage in learning while empowering teachers and families to provide needed supports.

*Instructional time.* Research has demonstrated that time spent in instruction impacts academic achievement (Baker, Fabrega, Galindo, & Mishook, 2004; Putnam, Handler, & O'Leary-Zonarich, 2003; Putnam, Handler, Rey, & O'Leary-Zonarich, 2002; Scott & Barrett, 2004). Student behavior problems affect instructional time, learning, and achievement for both the student demonstrating the disruptive behavior and for other students within the classroom, because teachers often break from their lesson plans to address the disruptive behavior. Further, problem student behaviors typically result in disciplinary responses (e.g., office referrals, suspension, and expulsion). Thus, a student's time spent engaged in the problem behavior within the classroom is compounded by the time spent involved in the disciplinary process or out of school, significantly reducing his or her time receiving instructional content and cumulatively resulting in academic delays across the school year.

Thus, addressing student behavioral issues is critical to ensuring that all students are present for and

NDTAC's Brief, [\*Improving Conditions for Learning for Youth Who Are Neglected or Delinquent\*](#), examines how social and emotional factors affect learning and explores how schools can improve student outcomes by building positive social and emotional conditions for learning.

**“There is no evidence that responding to...behavior problems through referral of youth to the criminal courts is associated with positive outcomes for youth or communities. Moreover, schools with higher rates of student suspension and expulsion tend to have lower academic test scores, poorer school climate, and lower ratings on school governance.”**

*Christle, Nelson, & Jolivette, 2004; Skiba & Sprague, 2008*

connected to the learning process and are supported in achieving good academic outcomes.

## **The Impact of School Disciplinary Action on Academic Achievement**

Given that schools often respond to problem student behaviors in punitive ways that remove students from classrooms and learning, it is not surprising that research has demonstrated a connection between increased exposure to school disciplinary action and academic failure. For example, Tobin and Sugai (1999) correlated noticeable academic failure with grade school students who had been suspended three or more times in a school year. Similar research from Tobin and Sugai (1999) found that, among boys in sixth grade, specific types of office discipline referral behaviors (e.g., fighting, harassing and threats of violence, and nonviolent misbehavior) were associated with lower grade point averages. Additionally, Larsen, Steele, and Sailor (2006) found that the number of office disciplinary referrals and suspensions a student received predicted lower scores on standardized reading and math tests in an urban middle school setting.

These findings likely reflect the result of receiving decreased instructional time, but they also underscore the negative impact that these disciplinary responses can have on a student’s motivation to succeed in light of repeated exclusion from learning opportunities and lack of support from teachers and other school personnel. If schools invest the time and resources in understanding and addressing the root causes of student behavior issues, they can not only devote less time to disciplinary actions but also improve the academic performance and achievement of all students. Unfortunately, many schools continue to rely on traditional ways of addressing problem student behaviors, and the consequences for students—especially those with behavioral issues—can be far more dire than academic problems.

## **School Disciplinary Action and Youth Involvement with the Juvenile Justice System**

The 2011 report *Breaking Schools’ Rules: A State-wide Study on How School Discipline Relates to Students’ Success and Juvenile Justice Involvement* (Fabelo et al., 2011) drew Nationwide attention to the issue of student behavior problems, schools’ subsequent disciplinary approaches, and the perpetuation of the previously documented school-to-prison pipeline (e.g., *The Advancement Project*, 2010; Gregor & Hewitt, 2011; Losen & Skiba, 2010). In tracking nearly 1 million Texas students, the report found that when a student was suspended or expelled, he or she was nearly three times more likely to be involved in the juvenile justice system the subsequent year (Fabelo et al., 2011). The study also found that more than one in seven students were in contact with the juvenile justice system at least once between seventh and twelfth grades (Fabelo et al., 2011).

The push to move disruptive youth out of the classroom and into the juvenile justice system reflects the zero-tolerance school disciplinary policies that became more widespread after the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School, along with the pressures of accountability and academic testing that accompanied the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act only two years later (Nelson, Jolivette, Leone, & Mathur, 2010). Subsequent research has shown that schools have been equipped to disproportionately discipline and remove students with emotional and behavioral problems, which has resulted in increased rates of academic failure, suspension, expulsion, arrest, and incarceration for this population (Kauffman & Landrum, 2009; Kerr & Nelson, 2010). The reality is that many of the Nation’s juvenile justice systems are under- or unprepared to address student behavior problems in ways that encourage and support academic success; thus, these settings are even more in need of sound behavior management systems.

## **The Challenge of Supporting Students with Behavior Problems in School Settings**

The results of the Texas study highlight the difficulty of understanding and addressing student behavior problems within community schools. Most teachers and administrators lack proper training in and the time and resources to address the underlying causes of problem behaviors. Many community schools rely on traditional discipline approaches that react to problem behavior punitively and often by removing students from the classroom or school altogether.

The challenge of supporting students with behavior problems is greater when examining correctional and other institutional school settings. Research has shown that there is a disproportionately higher prevalence of students with learning disabilities, mental health disorders, and behavior issues in the juvenile justice system than in traditional education settings (Leone & Weinberg, 2010; Quinn et al., 2005). In fact, according to the National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice (NCMHJJ), the prevalence of disruptive behavior disorders among youth in the juvenile justice system is between 30 and 50 percent (Shufelt & Cocozza, 2006). Such elevated levels of problem behavior make it all the more difficult for classroom teachers—and other facility staff—to manage students’ behavior in ways that support all youths’ academic success. Further, a high proportion of students enter the system with severe academic deficits; for example, in School Year (SY) 2009–10, 59 percent of long-term students entered Title I, Part D-funded correctional programs<sup>1</sup> testing below grade level in reading, and 58 percent tested below grade level in math (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

Both behaviorally and academically, the concentration of higher-need students in residential secure care educational settings obviously creates tremendous challenges for teachers, other facility staff, and administrators when trying to provide a quality educational program for the youth in their care for a variety of reasons, including

- *Iatrogenic effects*: Iatrogenic effects are those effects caused by the setting itself or the people with whom the youth are interacting. Research findings indicate that youth behavioral issues occurring alongside those of the majority of their

1. Long-term students are those who were enrolled for 90 or more days; correctional programs include juvenile detention, juvenile corrections, and adult corrections.

**“Youth...involved with the juvenile delinquency system too often do not receive the education services to which they are entitled. As a consequence, they are less likely to achieve education milestones, earn diplomas, and experience the health and well-being associated with higher income and stable employment as adults.”**

*Leone & Weinberg, 2010*

classroom peers more greatly disrupt instruction and learning among all youth in the classroom (Dodge, Dishion, & Lansford, 2006).

- *Greater classroom disruption:* With more students struggling with behavior problems, teachers in secure/residential care settings face more complex challenges with classroom management and may find it difficult to maintain high levels of instructional time and student engagement compared to their peers teaching in traditional classrooms (Houchins, Puckett-Patterson, Crosby, Shippen, & Jolivette, 2009; Houchins, Shippen, & Jolivette, 2006).
- *Resources and training:* Many secure juvenile facilities lack the resources and training to recognize and respond to the diverse needs of youth with educational disabilities, mental health disorders, and related problems, and they are ill-equipped for effectively teaching, modeling, and reinforcing appropriate behaviors (Grisso, 2007; Nelson et al., 2010).

In fact, studies have shown that most youth in juvenile justice settings do not receive adequate educational and related services to address their disabilities and mental health issues (Hisa & Beyer, 2000; Leone et al., 2003). As a result of this—or perhaps because of the belief that punishment is the preferred approach in a correctional setting—many juvenile justice facilities rely on reactive punitive interventions for addressing problem youth behavior (Jolivette & Nelson, 2010). And students in juvenile justice settings may also be removed from the learning environment for both classroom and facility disruptions, similar to the punitive discipline levied in traditional school settings. This practice seems to occur more frequently in correctional settings where youth have disabilities that staff are not trained to understand (Leone, 1994).

The [NDTAC Issue Brief: The Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports \(PBIS\) Model](#) (Brock & Quinn, 2006) provides more information on the basics of PBIS and explores its relevance for youth who are neglected, delinquent, or at risk.

In response to these challenges, a growing number of juvenile secure care facilities around the country have begun to consider and adopt alternative behavior management approaches. One approach in particular, PBIS, has demonstrated promising results as an effective behavioral management alternative to negative disciplinary practices (Jolivette & Nelson, 2010).

## Considerations for Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) in Juvenile Justice Settings

### The basics of PBIS

PBIS is an evidence-based systems approach that originated in the special education arena and, when implemented in a overall school setting, it has the goal of creating learning environments that improve outcomes so that all students—including those with behavior problems, disabilities, and academic deficits—have the same opportunity to achieve (Carr et al., 2002; Sugai et al., 2000). Many public resources are available to help a school implement PBIS in traditional school settings;<sup>2</sup> however, it is important to understand the essential tenets of PBIS before considering whether to integrate this approach within a juvenile justice setting.

PBIS targets behavior change by understanding and ultimately modifying the context (e.g., the school or environment) in which behaviors occur to promote and support desired behaviors through positive reinforcement rather than negative discipline. In such a context, PBIS focuses on achieving the goals of reducing new occurrences of challenging student behaviors; preventing current problem behaviors from getting worse; and continually promoting positive, prosocial student behavior (Carr et al., 2002).

The PBIS approach is based on a tiered intervention model that provides a range of supports to students depending on their needs (see Exhibit 1) and focuses on six main components:

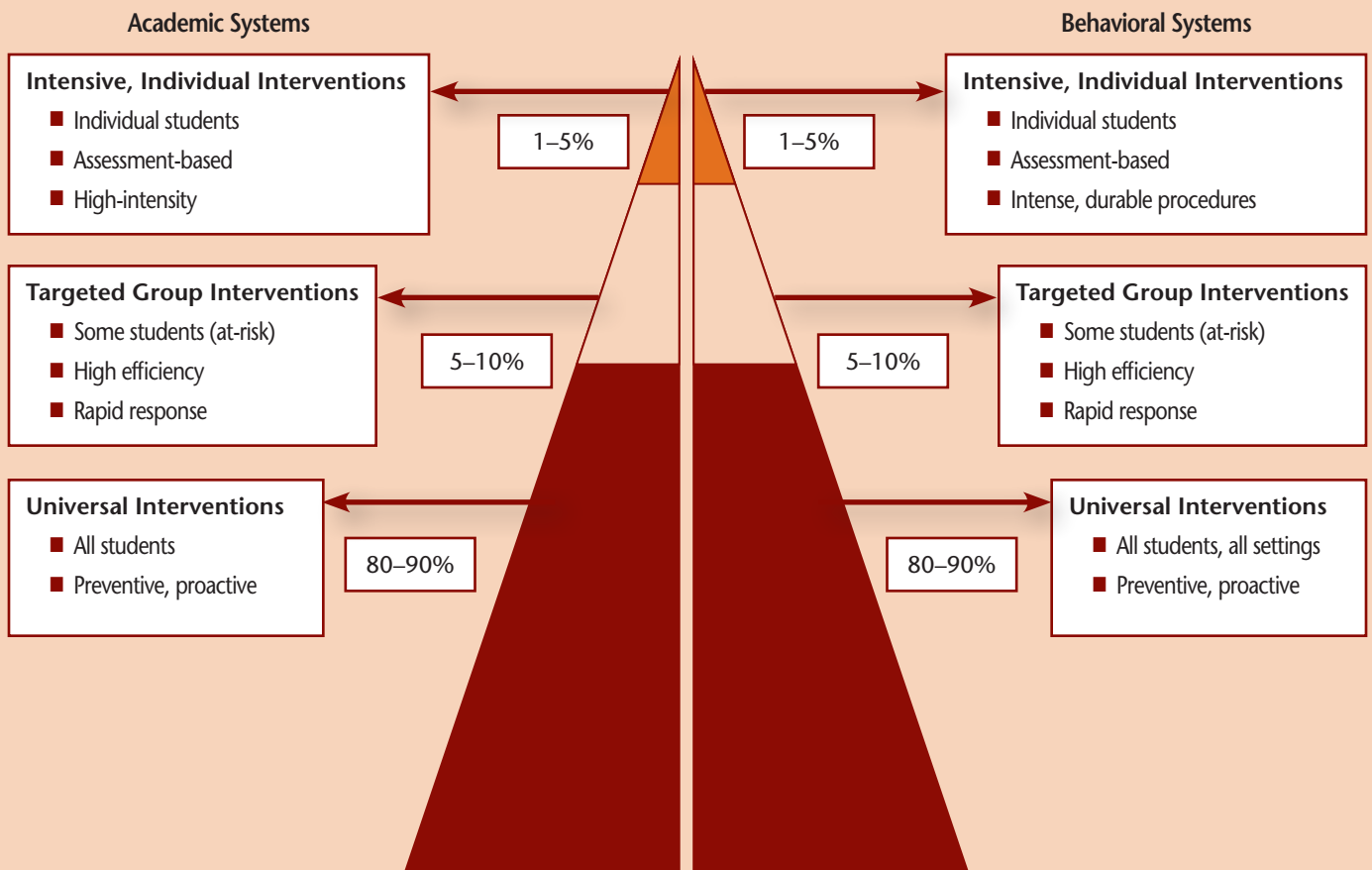
1. Setting consensus-driven behavior expectations
2. Teaching critical interpersonal skills
3. Providing systematic positive reinforcement for meeting and exceeding performance criteria
4. Monitoring intervention efficacy continuously through data collection and analysis
5. Involving all stakeholders in the formulation of discipline practices (students, teachers, administrators, and parents)
6. Reducing and eliminating reactive, punitive, and exclusionary discipline strategies in favor of a proactive, preventative, and skill-building orientation (Horner & Sugai, 2000; Nelson, 1996; Taylor-Greene et al., 1997; Walker et al., 1996).

### Moving PBIS into a Juvenile Justice Context

Juvenile justice facilities certainly face challenges in implementing PBIS that traditional school settings might not (Nelson, Sprague, Jolivette, Smith, & Tobin, 2009). For example, juvenile justice facilities typically offer a range of services for youth, including education, vocational training, recreation, and specialized treatment services (e.g., substance abuse, mental health). These activities are typically coordinated by different personnel throughout a facility, all with varied roles, backgrounds, training, and approaches to problem behavior. An additional challenge to the implementation of PBIS can arise in facilities where inflexible security procedures dominate sound practices for programming and services, and staff see their roles as primarily the enforcer of behavioral sanctions. Thus, full implementation of PBIS across a facility, not only within the educational unit, will require buy-in from all personnel groups and a collaborative effort across all staff in an environment that is often focused on punishment. The daily, continuous nature of most juvenile justice facilities further increases the necessary level of commitment to and effort for instituting such a comprehensive behavior management and support program. However, facilities and systems that have adopted PBIS have shown it to be a highly adaptable approach to behavior management: It can be implemented 24 hours a day, seven days a week (Jolivette & Nelson, 2010) and should be considered for facility-wide implementation as a means to unify consistent

2. See for example: The National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention's [Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports \(PBIS\) Brief](#) [PDF] (2008) and the Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports' [Implementation Blueprint and Self-Assessment Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports](#) [PDF] (Sugai et al., 2010).

## Exhibit 1. Continuum of School-Wide Instructional and Positive Behavior Supports<sup>3</sup>



Source: National Center on Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

expectations and services across all systems (e.g., education, housing, security, recreation, vocation, mental health), for all students, through all staff (Nelson et al., 2010).

Those familiar with the PBIS approach may quickly come to the conclusion that the makeup of the student population in juvenile justice education settings—youth who may present the greatest behavioral challenges to their community schools—necessitates that the majority of interventions be at the secondary and tertiary levels, thus rendering it ineffective as a whole (Nelson, Scott, Gagnon, Jolivet, & Sprague, 2008). However, researchers and administrators have seen that

[I]f an effective disciplinary system is in place for all youth, universal prevention strategies will reduce initial instances of problem behavior, so that staff are not distracted by frequent minor behavior problems and can focus more effectively on youth who require more intensive levels of intervention. (Jolivet & Nelson, 2010, p. 31)

Further, researchers note that, regardless of the severity of their behavior issues, students in juvenile justice settings where PBIS has been implemented are able to adapt to a behavior management approach that sets clear and consistent expectations, provides consistent support from all staff that facilitates success, and sets clear and consistent consequences for failure to meet expectations (Nelson et al., 2010). Especially for the youth in juvenile justice settings with emotional and behavioral issues who typically have past experiences of school failure, “the implementation of PBIS mitigates the effects of their negative histories by explicitly teaching the positive expected behaviors in that environment” (Sugai & Horner, 2002, in Jolivet & Nelson, 2010, p. 29).

Adopting PBIS across a juvenile justice setting will likely represent cultural, philosophical, and practical change for the facility and its staff. To better understand and address the impact of such a change, the juvenile justice community can benefit from

the lessons learned by facilities that have successfully implemented PBIS, including:

1. Get buy-in and support at the State level to ensure that the effort is seen as important and beneficial within the agency.
2. Conduct an assessment of facility/system capacity to determine realistic goals and allocate appropriate resources.

Jolivet & Nelson’s (2010) [Adapting Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports for Secure Juvenile Justice Settings: Improving Facility-Wide Behavior](#) (PDF) offers extensive information on adapting PBIS for juvenile justice settings, including detailed explanations of important implementation steps.

3. Find more on the full continuum of PBIS interventions at <http://www.pbis.org/school/default.aspx>.

3. Link to ongoing school-wide PBIS or related initiatives that may be occurring at the State level already.
4. Adopt a data collection and decision model to monitor progress, inform decisionmaking, and provide key information to support the effort among students, parents, staff, and administrators.
5. Incorporate PBIS into the already existing treatment and/or discipline models, if they are compatible and support such an approach (Nelson et al., 2008).<sup>4</sup>

Successful adoption of PBIS in a juvenile justice setting will depend on whether improving youth behavior and outcomes is a priority and staff are committed to changing policies and practices to do so (Jolivet & Nelson, 2010). It is also important to keep in mind that intensive training and ongoing assistance for all facility staff are critical to implementing PBIS with fidelity across a juvenile justice setting (Houchins, Jolivet, Shippen, & Lambert, 2010). As Grisso asserts in his 2007 overview of efforts in juvenile justice to address mental health and behavior issues, “If [a] program is not implemented correctly, the result can be worse than doing nothing” (p. 164).

## The Impact of School- and Facility-wide PBIS

A number of studies have shown that, when well-implemented in traditional school settings, PBIS

can decrease problem behavior and disciplinary action (Frey, Lingo, & Nelson, 2010; Skiba & Sprague, 2008), increase time spent in academic instruction (Najaka, Gottfredson, & Wilson, 2002; Walker & Shinn, 2002), and increase student engagement (Greenwood, Delquardi, & Hall, 1989), all of which ultimately lead to improved academic outcomes. Given these benefits, the School-to-Prison Pipeline Reform Project, National Council on Disability, the National Technical Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, Appleseed, and many others have promoted PBIS as a preventive approach to “reduce the number of students with academic and behavioral deficiencies, educational disabilities, mental health needs, and those representing minority groups, from entering the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems” (Nelson et al., 2008, p. 3).

PBIS has also shown promise for addressing problem student behaviors in secure care settings. For example, data from a youth correctional institution in Illinois show that both major and minor behavior incidents decreased markedly over a 5-year period after adopting PBIS in 2002 (Nelson et al., 2008). Similarly, a juvenile home in Iowa saw reductions in the number of problem behaviors requiring disciplinary action following the implementation of PBIS in 2001 (Nelson et al., 2008). The same facility had a 73 percent reduction in the use of restraint and seclusion following PBIS implementation (Nelson et al., 2008).

The National Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

continues to examine the impact of PBIS on juvenile justice settings. More research is needed to determine whether the reductions in behavior issues and disciplinary responses resulting from the use of PBIS in juvenile justice settings will translate into positive effects on student academic achievement. More work is also needed to identify a more complete set of effective implementation practices in these settings. Despite these limitations, however, PBIS has proven to be a prevention-focused approach that aligns with the goals of Title I, Part D, to keep students in the classroom engaged in learning and achieving academically.

Juvenile justice facilities in a number of States—including Alabama, California, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, New Mexico, North Carolina, Texas, and Washington—have taken on these challenges to successfully implement PBIS within portions of their programs, and realized positive changes to student behavior, increased academic engagement, improved youth-staff interactions, decreased discipline referrals and actions, and increased academic achievement (Nelson et al., 2008; Nelson & Jolivet, 2009; Gagnon, Rockwell, & Scott, 2008; Scott, Gagnon, & Nelson, 2008; Houchins, Jolivet, Wessendorf, McGlynn, & Nelson, 2005; Sidana, 2006).

## Conclusion

There is a critical need for evidenced-based behavior management approaches—in both traditional and institutional school settings—that address student behavior issues proactively and in ways that support students’ academic achievement. We have seen the negative impact of traditional school discipline responses, which have further hindered the academic performance and progress of students—especially those with emotional and behavioral issues. We have also seen the more dire consequences of these policies and practices in the increase in juvenile justice system involvement resulting from zero-tolerance school policies that remove youth from the classroom and school. With all of these facts in mind, State and local programs working to improve outcomes for youth in the juvenile justice system and those at risk through Title I, Part D, funds may want to consider the implementation of a framework like PBIS to supplement core educational practices and create more positive learning environments for all students. Ideally, a strong behavioral support system would be applied State- or district-wide (including detention and corrections) to (1) help keep students out of the juvenile justice system, (2) provide needed support to students who are in the system, and (3) provide continuity for students transitioning back to their community schools. Administrators and practitioners could find that a systems approach to behavior management like PBIS can truly make a difference for their students.

4. Full descriptions of these implementation recommendations are also available through the PBIS Center’s newsletter, [Positive Behavior Support in the Juvenile Justice System](#) (Nelson et al., 2008).

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