Reducing Behavior Problems in the Elementary School Classroom

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The goal of this practice guide is to formulate specific and coherent evidence-based recommendations for use by educators to address the challenge of reducing behavior problems in elementary school classrooms. The guide provides practical, clear information on critical behavior-related topics and is based on the best available evidence, as judged by the panel. Recommendations presented in this guide should not be construed to imply that no further research is warranted on the effectiveness of particular strategies for preventing and intervening with behavior problems.

Reducing Behavior Problems in the Elementary School Classroom

September 2008

Panel

Michael Epstein (Chair)
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA–LINCOLN

Marc Atkins
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS–CHICAGO

Douglas Cullinan
NORTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY

Krista Kutash
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA
RESEARCH AND TRAINING CENTER FOR CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH

Robin Weaver
PRINCIPAL, HARMONY HILLS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Staff

Michelle Woodbridge
Jennifer Yu
Mary Wagner
SRI INTERNATIONAL

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U.S. Department of Education
Margaret Spellings
Secretary

Institute of Education Sciences
Grover J. Whitehurst
Director

National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance
Phoebe Cottingham
Commissioner

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Reducing Behavior Problems in the Elementary School Classroom

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Introduction

This guide is intended to help elementary school educators as well as school and district administrators develop and implement effective prevention and intervention strategies that promote positive student behavior. The guide includes concrete recommendations and indicates the quality of the evidence that supports them. Additionally, we have described some, though not all, ways in which each recommendation could be carried out. For each recommendation, we also acknowledge roadblocks to implementation that may be encountered and suggest solutions that have the potential to circumvent the roadblocks. Finally, technical details about the studies that support the recommendations are provided in Appendix D.

We, the authors, are a small group with expertise in various dimensions of this topic and in research methods commonly used in behavior research. The evidence we considered in developing this document ranges from experimental evaluations, to single-subject research studies,[1] to expert analyses of behavioral intervention strategies and programs. For questions about what works best, high-quality experimental and quasi-experimental studies,[2] such

as those meeting the criteria of the What Works Clearinghouse (http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc), have a privileged position. In all cases, we pay particular attention to patterns of findings that are replicated across studies.

The process for deriving the recommendations began by collecting and examining research studies that have evaluated the impacts of individual, classwide, and schoolwide behavioral interventions. Research conducted in the United States in the last 20 years was reviewed by the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) to determine whether studies were consistent with WWC standards.

Behavioral interventions almost always include multiple components. This bundling of components presents challenges when reviewing levels of evidence for each recommendation because evidence of the impact of specific intervention components on students' behavior cannot formally be attributed to one component of an intervention. Identification of key components of each intervention therefore necessarily relied, to a significant degree, on the panel's expert judgment.

After identifying key components of individual interventions, the interventions and their key components were placed in a working matrix that helped us identify features that were common to multiple interventions and, therefore, were logical candidates for generally successful practices.

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1. Single-subject studies rely on the comparison of intervention effects on a single participant or group of single participants, where outcomes of the participant are compared in nontreatment (baseline) phases and in treatment phases. Some single-subject methods use subsequent withdrawal and reapplication of treatment to estimate effects. Others estimate effects using several baselines with variable-length durations for different subjects (see Horner et al. 2005).

2. Experimental studies, often called randomized controlled trials, estimate effects of interventions by comparing outcomes of participants who are randomly assigned to experimental and one or more comparison groups (Schwartz, Flamant, and Lellouch 1980). Using random assignment rules out any pre-existing differences between groups as a reason for different outcomes and the

intervention becomes the probable cause of those differences. Quasi-experimental studies, such as studies that match intervention participants with individuals who are similar on a range of characteristics, also are used to estimate effects of interventions. However, because quasi-experimental approaches cannot rule out pre-existing differences between participants and the group created by matching as reasons for different outcomes, they are considered to be less valid approaches for estimating intervention effects.

The panel determined the level of evidence for each recommendation by considering the effects of the intervention as determined by the WWC (table 1), the contribution of each component to the impacts found in the evaluation, and the number of evaluations conducted on the behavioral interventions that included the component.[3]

Strong refers to consistent and generalizable evidence that an intervention strategy or program causes an improvement in behavioral outcomes.[4]

Moderate refers either to evidence from studies that allow strong causal conclusions but cannot be generalized with assurance to the population on which a recommendation is focused (perhaps because the findings have not been widely replicated) or to evidence from studies that are generalizable but have more causal ambiguity than offered by experimental designs (statistical models of correlational data or group comparison designs for which equivalence of the groups at pretest is uncertain).

Low refers to expert opinion based on reasonable extrapolations from research and theory on other topics and evidence from studies that do not meet the standards for moderate or strong evidence.

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3. A number of specific classwide and schoolwide interventions are cited in this guide as examples of programs that include both components that align with the panel's recommendations of effective strategies to reduce student behavior problems and rigorous research methods in the study of program effectiveness. Other programs with similar components may be available. The panel recommends that readers consult the WWC website regularly for more information about interventions and corresponding levels of evidence (http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/reports/).

4. Following the WWC guidelines, we consider a positive, statistically significant effect or an effect size greater than 0.25 as an indicator of positive effects.

It is important for the reader to remember that the level of evidence is not a judgment by the panel of how effective each of these five recommended practices would be when implemented in a classroom or school or of what prior research has to say about an intervention's effectiveness or whether the costs of implementing it are worth the benefits it might bestow. Instead, these levels of evidence ratings reflect judgments by the panel of the quality of the existing research literature to support a causal claim that when these recommended practices have been implemented in the past, positive effects on student behaviors have been observed. They do not reflect judgments by the authors of the relative strength of these positive effects or the relative importance of these individual recommendations.

The What Works Clearinghouse standards and their relevance to this guide

For the levels of evidence in table 1, we rely on WWC evidence standards to rate the quality of evidence supporting behavioral prevention and intervention programs and practices. The WWC addresses evidence for the causal validity of programs and practices according to WWC standards. Information about these standards is available at http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/references/review_process. Each study is assessed according to standards and placed into one of three categories:

- *Meets Evidence Standards* for randomized controlled trials and regression discontinuity studies that provide the strongest evidence of causal validity.

- *Meets Evidence Standards with Reservations* for all single-subject research studies[5] and quasi-experimental studies

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5. At the time this practice guide was developed, the WWC did not have standards for assessing the validity of single-subject studies (although a

Table 1. Institute of Education Sciences levels of evidence for practice guides

Strong	In general, characterization of the evidence for a recommendation as strong requires both studies with high internal validity (i.e., studies whose designs can support causal conclusions) and studies with high external validity (i.e., studies that in total include enough of the range of participants and settings on which the recommendation is focused to support the conclusion that the results can be generalized to those participants and settings). Strong evidence for this practice guide is operationalized as: • A systematic review of research that generally meets the standards of the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) (see http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/) and supports the effectiveness of a program, practice, or approach with no contradictory evidence of similar quality; OR • Several well-designed, randomized controlled trials or well-designed quasiexperiments that generally meet the WWC standards and support the effectiveness of a program, practice, or approach, with no contradictory evidence of similar quality; OR • One large, well-designed, randomized controlled, multisite trial that meets the WWC standards and supports the effectiveness of a program, practice, or approach, with no contradictory evidence of similar quality; OR • For assessments, evidence of reliability and validity that meets the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing.[a]
Moderate	In general, characterization of the evidence for a recommendation as moderate requires studies with high internal validity but moderate external validity, or studies with high external validity but moderate internal validity. In other words, moderate evidence is derived from studies that support strong causal conclusions but where generalization is uncertain, or studies that support the generality of a relationship but where the causality is uncertain. Moderate evidence for this practice guide is operationalized as: • Experiments or quasiexperiments generally meeting the WWC standards and supporting the effectiveness of a program, practice, or approach with small sample sizes and/or other conditions of implementation or analysis that limit generalizability and no contrary evidence; OR • Comparison group studies that do not demonstrate equivalence of groups at pretest and therefore do not meet the WWC standards but that (a) consistently show enhanced outcomes for participants experiencing a particular program, practice, or approach and (b) have no major flaws related to internal validity other than lack of demonstrated equivalence at pretest (e.g., only one teacher or one class per condition, unequal amounts of instructional time, highly biased outcome measures); OR • Correlational research with strong statistical controls for selection bias and for discerning influence of endogenous factors and no contrary evidence; OR • For assessments, evidence of reliability that meets the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing[b] but with evidence of validity from samples not adequately representative of the population on which the recommendation is focused.
Low	In general, characterization of the evidence for a recommendation as low means that the recommendation is based on expert opinion derived from strong findings or theories in related areas and/or expert opinion buttressed by direct evidence that does not rise to the moderate or strong level. Low evidence is operationalized as evidence not meeting the standards for the moderate or high level.

a. American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, and National Council on Measurement in Education (1999).

b. Ibid.

with no design flaws and randomized controlled trials that have problems with randomization, attrition, or disruption.

• *Does Not Meet Evidence Screens* for studies that do not provide strong evidence of causal validity.[6]

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panel was being convened to develop evidence standards for single-subject studies). To ensure that the single subject studies cited in this report met basic criteria for supporting causal statements, a special review process was established for these studies. A review protocol was prepared to assess the design of each study. This protocol was reviewed by the chair of the panel developing evidence standards for single-subject studies. Five WWC reviewers with backgrounds in single-subject research methodology received training on this protocol and then applied the protocol to the relevant single subject studies. Reviewers were directed to identify issues that could compromise the validity of the study, and these issues were examined by a second reviewer. Only studies that reviewers deemed valid are referenced in this practice guide.

Following the recommendations and suggestions for carrying out the recommendations, Appendix D presents more information on the research evidence that supports each recommendation.

Dr. Michael Epstein
Dr. Marc Atkins
Dr. Doug Cullinan
Dr. Krista Kutash
Ms. Robin Weaver

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6. Studies that were eliminated included those with major design flaws that seriously undermined the technical adequacy of the research, such as comparison studies that did not establish equivalent groups at baseline. In addition, only studies conducted in the United States in the last 20 years that examine the effects on student behavioral outcomes were included in the review.

Reducing Behavior Problems in the Elementary School Classroom

Overview

Much of the attention currently given to improving students' academic achievement addresses issues of curriculum, instructional strategies, and interventions or services for struggling learners, and rightfully so. However, even after addressing these issues, barriers still remain for some students. An estimated one-third of students fail to learn because of psychosocial problems that interfere with their ability to fully attend to and engage in instructional activities, prompting a call for "new directions for addressing barriers to learning."[1] These new approaches go beyond explicitly academic interventions to take on the learning challenges posed by problematic student behavior and the ways schools deal with it. Approaches aimed at improving school and classroom environments, including reducing the negative effects of disruptive or distracting behaviors, can enhance the chances that effective teaching and learning will occur, both for the students exhibiting problem behaviors and for their classmates.

In many schools general education elementary classrooms are generally orderly, teacher-student and student-student relationships are positive, and teaching and learning go on without major disruption. Teachers in such classrooms recognize the importance of preventing significant behavior problems and are effectively using fundamental prevention tools—engaging instruction, well-managed classrooms, and positive relationships with students.

Looking to these prevention fundamentals should always be the first step in promoting good behavior at school. However, some teachers have a class in which one or a few students exhibit persistent or significant problem behaviors—those that are disruptive, oppositional, distracting, or defiant. Sometimes when a number of students in a classroom demonstrate such behaviors, it can create a chaotic environment that is a serious impediment to learning for all students. In these cases teachers have exhausted their classroom management strategies without successfully eliminating the obstacles to learning that problem behaviors pose. The purpose of this practice guide is to give teachers additional tools to help them deal proactively and effectively with behaviors that seriously or consistently fail to meet classroom expectations.

This practice guide offers five concrete recommendations (see table 2) to help elementary school general education teachers reduce the frequency of the most common types of behavior problems they encounter among their students. The recommendations begin with strategies teachers can use immediately on their own initiative in their classrooms (recommendations 1–3), then broaden to include approaches that involve resources from outside the classroom. We recognize that teachers encounter situations where they need the guidance, expertise, and support of parents and other teachers or behavior professionals (for example, a school psychologist or behavior specialist) in the school or community, and that school administrators play a critical role in enabling mentoring and collaborative opportunities for staff (recommendation 4). We also acknowledge that the social and behavioral climate of a classroom can reflect the climate of the school more broadly, and we address the contributions of schoolwide strategies or programs to improving student behavior (recommendation 5).

1. Adelman and Taylor (2005).

Table 2. Recommendations and corresponding level of evidence to support each

Recommendation	Level of evidence
1. *Identify the specifics of the problem behavior and the conditions that prompt and reinforce it.* Every teacher experiences difficulty at one time or another in trying to remedy an individual student's behavior problem that is not responsive to preventative efforts. Because research suggests that the success of a behavioral intervention hinges on identifying the specific conditions that prompt and reinforce the problem behavior (i.e., the behavior's "antecedents" and "consequences"), we recommend that teachers carefully observe the conditions in which the problem behavior is likely to occur and not occur. Teachers then can use that information to tailor effective and efficient intervention strategies that respond to the needs of the individual student within the classroom context.	**Moderate**
2. *Modify the classroom learning environment to decrease problem behavior.* Many effective classroom-focused interventions to decrease students' problematic behavior alter or remove factors that trigger them. These triggers can result from a mismatch between the classroom setting or academic demands and a student's strengths, preferences, or skills. Teachers can reduce the occurrence of inappropriate behavior by revisiting and reinforcing classroom behavioral expectations; rearranging the classroom environment, schedule, or learning activities to meet students' needs; and/or individually adapting instruction to promote high rates of student engagement and on-task behavior.	**Strong**
3. *Teach and reinforce new skills to increase appropriate behavior and preserve a positive classroom climate.* We recommend that teachers actively teach students socially- and behaviorally-appropriate skills to replace problem behaviors using strategies focused on both individual students and the whole classroom. In doing so, teachers help students with behavior problems learn how, when, and where to use these new skills; increase the opportunities that the students have to exhibit appropriate behaviors; preserve a positive classroom climate; and manage consequences to reinforce students' display of positive "replacement" behaviors and adaptive skills.	**Strong**
4. *Draw on relationships with professional colleagues and students' families for continued guidance and support.* Social relationships and collaborative opportunities can play a critical role in supporting teachers in managing disruptive behavior in their classrooms. We recommend that teachers draw on these relationships in finding ways to address the behavior problems of individual students and consider parents, school personnel, and behavioral experts as allies who can provide new insights, strategies, and support.	**Moderate**

5. *Assess whether schoolwide behavior problems warrant adopting schoolwide strategies or programs and, if so, implement ones shown to reduce negative and foster positive interactions.* Classroom teachers, in coordination with other school personnel (administrators, grade-level teams, and special educators), can benefit from adopting a schoolwide approach to preventing problem behaviors and increasing positive social interactions among students and with school staff. This type of systemic approach requires a shared responsibility on the part of all school personnel, particularly the administrators who establish and support consistent schoolwide practices and the teachers who implement these practices both in their individual classrooms and beyond.	**Moderate**

Source: Authors' compilation based on analysis described in text.

Fundamental to these recommendations is the notion that behavior is learned—children's behaviors are shaped by the expectations and examples provided by important adults in their lives and by their peers.[2] In the elementary grades, general education classroom teachers are arguably the most important adults at school for the large majority of students. As such, they can play a critical role both in proactively teaching and reinforcing appropriate student behaviors and in reducing the frequency of behaviors that impede learning. Accepting responsibility for the behavioral learning of all students is a natural extension of the responsibility for the academic learning of all students that general education teachers exercise with such purpose every day. The goal of this practice guide is to help teachers carry out their dual responsibility by recommending ways to shape and manage classroom behavior so that teaching and learning can be effective.

Understanding what prompts and reinforces problem behaviors can be a powerful tool for preventing them or reducing their negative impacts when they occur. The first recommendation emphasizes teachers' gathering information about important aspects of problem behaviors in their classrooms—for example, the specific behavior a student exhibits, its effects on learning, and when, where, and how often it occurs. This information can provide important clues to the underlying purpose of the problem behavior and a foundation for developing effective approaches to mitigate it.

The second recommendation points to classroom conditions or activities that teachers can alter or adapt to influence the frequency or intensity of problem behaviors. When teachers understand the behavioral hot spots in their classroom in terms of timing, setting, and instructional activities, for example, they can proactively develop classwide and individual student strategies (such as a change in instructional groupings, the seating plan, or the order or pace of reading and math instruction) to reduce the contribution of these classroom factors to students' problem behaviors.

The third recommendation recognizes that, just as poor academic performance can reflect deficits in specific academic skills, some students' failure to meet behavioral expectations reflects deficits in specific social or behavioral skills. And just as explicit instruction can help students overcome some academic deficits, explicit instruction can help students learn the positive behaviors and skills they are expected to exhibit at school. Showing

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2. Bandura (1977).

students how they can use appropriate behaviors to replace problem behaviors and consistently providing positive reinforcement when they do so can increase students' chances of experiencing social and behavioral success.

Recognizing the collective wisdom and problem-solving abilities of school staff, the fourth recommendation encourages teachers to reach out to colleagues in the school—other classroom teachers, special educators, the school psychologist, or administrators—to help meet the behavioral needs of their students. Similarly, by engaging family members, teachers can better understand their students' behavior issues and develop allies in intervening both at school and at home to help students succeed. When behavior problems warrant the services of behavioral or mental health professionals, teachers are encouraged to play an active role in ensuring that services address classroom behavior issues directly.

The fifth recommendation reflects an understanding that a teacher may be more successful in creating a positive behavioral environment in the classroom when there also are schoolwide efforts to create such an environment. Just as teachers can document and analyze the nature and contexts of behavior problems in the classroom, school leadership teams can map the behavioral territory of the school and use the information to develop prevention strategies and select and implement schoolwide programs for behavior intervention and support when warranted.

Several principles run throughout these recommendations. One relates to the importance of relationships in any focus on student behavior. Schooling is "an intrinsically social enterprise."[3] Student behavior is shaped by and exhibited and interpreted in a social context that involves multiple actors (teachers, students, support personnel, specialists), multiple settings (classrooms, hallways, lunch room, playground), and multiple goals (enhancing academic performance, encouraging development of the whole child). Positive behavior is more likely to thrive when relationships at all levels are trusting and supportive and reflect a shared commitment to establish a healthy school and community.

In the classroom, for example, positive teacher-student interactions are at the heart of the recommendation regarding modifying classroom environment and instructional factors to improve student behavior. Associations have been found between positive interactions with teachers and increases in students' social skills, emotional regulation, motivation, engagement, cooperation with classroom rules and expectations,[4] and academic performance. Associations also have been noted between negative interactions with teachers and increases in students' risk for school failure.[5] Teachers show the warmth, respect, and sensitivity they feel for their students through small gestures, such as welcoming students by name as they enter the class each day, calling or sending positive notes home to acknowledge good behavior, and learning about their students' interests, families, and accomplishments outside of school. Teachers also can help students develop peer friendships by having them work together, thereby learning to share materials, follow directions, be polite, listen, show empathy, and work out disagreements. Fostering students' social and emotional development can improve their interactions and attitudes toward school, thereby reducing problem behaviors.[6]

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3. Bryk and Schneider (2002), p. 19.

4. Greenberg et al. (2003); Hamre and Pianta (2005); Pianta et al. (2002); Solomon et al. (1992); Wentzel (2003); Zins et al. (2004).

5. Hamre and Pianta (2005).

6. Zins et al. (2004).

Enabling the development of strong teacher-teacher relationships in support of collaborative problem-solving regarding student behavior is central to the fourth recommendation. Schools with strong, trusting staff relationships are more likely to have teachers who are willing to engage in new practices and, consequently, who can help to produce gains in student outcomes.[7] The fifth recommendation also reflects the importance of relationships in seeking to establish "a schoolwide culture of social competence."[8] Changes in practices, structures, or programs within schools are unlikely to be implemented, sustained, or effective in the long term without concerted attention to enhancing the fundamental relationships within schools.

Another principle that underlies the panel's recommendations is the critical need for increased cultural competence in developing positive relationships in school and community contexts. As our school and community populations become increasingly diverse, all school staff are challenged to learn about, become sensitive to, and broaden their perspectives regarding what may be unfamiliar ways of learning, behaving, and relating. Teachers can establish an inclusive classroom environment through practices such as using and reinforcing language that is gender neutral and free of stereotypes, selecting curricular materials that reflect and honor the cultures and life experiences of students in the class, encouraging and respecting the participation of all students in classroom activities, and holding high expectations for all learners.[9] School leaders can be proactive in supporting opportunities for expanding the cultural competence of school staff through "a vigorous, ongo-

ing, and systemic process of professional development"[10] that involves building trusting relationships among school staff, taking on issues of personal culture and social disparities, and engaging the entire school community in creating a welcoming environment for all students and their families.

Additionally, the panel recognizes the need for and ability of school staff to translate the recommendations into actions that are appropriate to their specific contexts. One clearly important contextual factor is the age and developmental stage of the students with whom teachers work. The ways that recommendations involving rewards for positive behavior are carried out, for example, will necessarily look different in 1st and 5th grade classrooms, because different forms of motivation are appropriate to students' developmental stages. Schools in large urban districts often encounter different kinds and intensities of behavior issues than schools in affluent suburbs and have different forms and levels of resources in and outside the school to address them. The panel honors the insights of school staff in understanding what will work in their schools, classrooms, and communities. Thus, recommendations emphasize processes and procedures that can be adapted to a wide range of contexts rather than providing specific recipes that may have limited applicability.

Finally, the recommendations emphasize the importance of being data driven. This means having current, timely information about behavior problems and successes at the school, classroom, and student levels, such as where and when the behavioral hot spots occur in the school and during the school day, which classroom instructional periods or transitions are associated with increased behavioral disruptions, which students exhibit the most

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7. Bryk and Schneider (2002).

8. Vincent, Horner, and Sugai (2002), p. 2.

9. Davis (1993); Gay (2000); Harry and Kalyanpur (1994); Shade, Kelly, and Oberg (1997).

10. Howard (2007), p. 16.

challenging behaviors and when they are most likely to occur, and what strategies teachers have found to be effective in improving classroom behavior. Without a solid foundation in these kinds of data, interventions might not just be ineffective, but might even exacerbate the problems they are meant to solve. Observation and documentation of student, classroom, and school behavior challenges can be invaluable in targeting resources and changing strategies to improve behavior at school. Monitoring the effectiveness of strategies by continuing to collect and review data also can support continuous improvement to achieve maximum results. Challenging behaviors are learned over a long period of time; acquiring positive behaviors also takes time. Monitoring progress and celebrating small achievements along the way can help sustain the efforts needed to bring success.

Scope of the practice guide

The purpose of this practice guide is to help school staff promote positive student behavior and reduce challenging behaviors in U.S. elementary schools—those serving students in kindergarten through 5th grades. Because most students, including students who receive special education services, spend the majority of their school day in general education classrooms,[11] the teachers in those classrooms play a central role in influencing students' behaviors. Thus, they are a primary focus of this practice guide. Elementary school principals and other administrators also are an audience for the recommendations presented here because they establish the structures and direct the resources needed to support teachers and other school staff in promoting positive environments in classrooms and schoolwide.

In the panel's view, improving the behavioral climate at school must begin with an emphasis on prevention—heading off behavior problems through programs and approaches that set, encourage, and reinforce positive behavioral expectations for all students. These "universal prevention programs"[12] often are described as the first component of a three-tiered prevention model[13] and, when applied to children's behavioral health, are considered to be effective in preventing behavior problems

for 80–90 percent of students.[14] This emphasis on prevention is reflected in many of the panel's recommendations that involve, for example, collecting data on incidents of problem behaviors, communicating expectations and reinforcing positive behaviors, and managing classrooms effectively to avoid negative behaviors. We draw on the considerable research that explicitly addresses prevention strategies and intervention programs related to children's behavior and mental health needs in this guide. But the research on the most intensive interventions that are provided to students with the most serious behavior problems (tier 3), often outside the general education classroom, is not the primary focus of this guide. Rather, the panel suggests strategies to help general education classroom teachers address the needs of students for whom preventive approaches are insufficient to head off behavior problems but whose behavior does not warrant removal from their classrooms.

A focus on providing recommendations to help general education teachers deal with problem behaviors in part reflects the fact that many teachers come to the classroom poorly prepared to manage the range of behaviors common among today's students.[15] Indeed, only one-third of principals believe that their teachers are well prepared to maintain order in the classroom, and only 30 percent believe that teachers are well prepared to meet the needs of students with disabilities.[16] Improving teachers' preparation in classroom and behavior management at colleges and universities could be an important step in improving students' behavior at school.

Further, ongoing professional development provided by districts or schools is

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11. Wagner, Marder, and Chorost (2004).

12. Kutash, Duchnowski, and Lynn (2006).

13. Commission on Chronic Illness (1957). The three-tiered model of behavioral supports includes an emphasis on matching the intensity of the intervention to the severity of the behavior problem, including primary or universal (schoolwide) strategies, secondary targeted intervention efforts, and tertiary or intensive individual support for students with the most severe problems (Sugai et al. 2000).

14. Office of Special Education Programs (2008); Sugai et al. (2000); Sugai, Sprague, et al. (2000).

15. Levine (2006); MetLife, Inc. (2006).

16. Levine (2006).

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