

# Positive Behavioral Support at the Classroom Level: Considerations and Strategies

MERIDITH STROUT  
UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

Positive behavioral support (PBS) refers to the application of positive behavioral interventions and systems to achieve socially important behavioral changes (Sugai et al., 2000). When teachers use PBS at the classroom level, they are able to create environments that are positive and encourage students to be active participants in their learning. Much of what is done in a system of PBS precedes the arrival of students. The teacher must plan for a learning environment that supports the development of skills that promote successful academic and social interaction in the classroom. In short, PBS is a method of considering how the environment might make success more likely for all students.

Administrators of PBS are familiar with schoolwide expectations and strategies to promote student success in the commons areas of the school (Scott, 2001). Schoolwide systems require that all adults and students operate under the same agreed-upon set of expectations and strategies. However, every classroom includes students who are diverse and have different needs. For example, teachers in science lab might have different behavioral expectations than physical education teachers. Similarly, one teacher may feel that a student must raise his or her hand before going to the bathroom while another may feel that it is acceptable for a student to go to the bathroom without asking permission. Because each classroom is a unique system unto itself, each teacher should devise a set of rules and expectations that meet the needs of the student population and teaching goals within that classroom. That is, although schoolwide expectations

are designed and agreed upon by the staff and students of the school, they will not always be relevant or sufficient to ensure student success in specific classroom conditions. For this reason, teachers in each classroom must consider expectations and arrangements that are pertinent to specific classroom settings.

Implementation of PBS at the classroom level involves all stakeholders—those with interest and experience in that setting (e.g., teachers, paraprofessionals, students, and parents). The stakeholders' responsibility is to develop appropriate and agreeable behavioral expectations, instructional routines, and classroom arrangements to increase success and decrease the likelihood of failure. It is important to recognize that students are stakeholders too. When students are involved in developing and implementing classroom expectations, they will be more likely to take ownership of the

rules. Regardless of the quality of prevention, classrooms must also have appropriate management systems to encourage and enforce the agreed-upon expectations and procedures. However, the more effective prevention is, the less likely that behavioral management techniques will be necessary. The purpose of this paper is to describe and present examples of preventative, management, and daily strategies that can be used to effectively develop a proactive approach at the classroom level.

Many teachers observe students in class talking out of turn, getting out of their seats, or failing to engage in active listening. Although these problems are common in most classrooms (Choutka, Doloughty, & Zirkel, 2004), there are actions that teachers can take to prevent them. When teachers develop effective behavioral prevention strategies, they not only prevent predictable problems but also increase the chances of student success. There are many ways in which teachers can manipulate their classroom to promote a positive environment prior to students' arrival. Changing or rearranging furniture, posting expectations, organizing classroom routines, and defining and teaching classroom expectations are ways in which to structure classrooms to maximize student success and provide a positive start to the new school year. However, no matter how well one might consider and prepare for predictable problems prior to students' arrival, it is common sense to expect that some degree of problem behavior is inevitable. Thus, effective classroom PBS also will involve continued monitoring to identify and assess classroom problems as they

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appear during the school year. The remainder of this paper details and describes the types of thoughtful routines and physical arrangement decisions that might be considered as part of developing a classroom PBS system to facilitate student success.

### Preventive Strategies

Physical arrangement of classroom furniture is a logical place to start when considering the classroom environment. Students' desks, teachers' desks, workstations, computers, bookcases, and other physical structures need to be strategically placed in the classroom. Much of this arrangement can be considered and completed prior to students' arrival. Four important considerations necessary for creating positive physical classroom environments (Evertson, Emmer, & Worsham, 2003) are described below.

#### *Keep High-Traffic Areas Free of Congestion*

High-traffic areas might include those near trash cans, pencil sharpeners, workstations, computer stations, and teachers' desks. These areas should be widely separated from each other, allowing plenty of space between any two areas for teacher and students to move about. In addition, keeping high-traffic areas clear prevents pushing and shoving that is predictable when students are moving as a group during transition times.

#### *Be Sure Students Can Be Easily Seen by the Teacher*

Although some students are equally likely to have problems in a variety of circumstances, most misbehaviors will be less likely to occur when students know they are being monitored (Miller, McKenna, & McKenna, 1998). That is, when students are not being watched, they are more likely to engage in behaviors that we would consider inappropriate. Thus, monitoring students sets the occasion for more positive behavior.

Further, when teachers are able to easily monitor their students, they are more able to effectively and efficiently manage their classrooms. Classroom monitoring may be enhanced by standing in different parts of the room and checking for blind spots or areas that are not easily monitored. Teachers may wish to move their own desks, move about the room, or remove barriers to achieve a fully visible classroom.

#### *Keep Frequently Used Teaching Materials and Student Supplies Readily Accessible*

When students can quickly and efficiently access necessary materials and supplies, they are able to spend more time engaged in instruction. Teachers should think ahead and identify the materials and supplies that are typically used, in addition to the context and timing for their use. For example, having students keep textbooks at their desks minimizes the amount of time and effort necessary to transition between subject areas. Likewise, the science class that assigns students to pick up materials by group makes those materials accessible to all with minimal disruption to the instructional routine. Arranging the environment so that frequently used materials are readily accessible allows students to locate their materials quickly and minimizes unproductive and often troublesome transition times.

#### *Be Certain Students Can Easily See Whole-Class Presentations and Displays*

Effective instruction requires that all students be able to see the overhead, the board, or other presentation areas during instruction. When students cannot clearly view instructional presentations, they are less likely to pay attention and more likely to disrupt other students. Careful thought to the arrangement of the classroom is necessary to ensure active participation by all students. When instruction is at the front of the room, furniture needs to orient

students in that direction. When instruction takes place in small groups, furniture needs to orient students to a specific group. These are issues that must be considered separately for each instructional activity and likely will vary from context to context.

Once classroom furniture is appropriately arranged, the next step is to clearly post the agreed-upon classroom expectations and procedures. Giving students visual reminders for rules and procedures allows them to become more aware of the expectations in their environment. When posted around the class, in the areas where they are likely to be relevant, classroom behavioral expectations serve as prompts for students as they go about their daily routines. For example, a visual reminder or prompt at the sink, computer station, or water fountain might be useful in reminding students of the specific expectations or procedures in those locations or contexts.

### Teaching Strategies

Good classroom management is based on students' understanding of their expected behaviors. A carefully planned system of rules and expectations allows the teacher to communicate classroom expectations to students (Evertson et al., 2003). When given specific rules and guidelines, students are more likely to meet the teachers' expectations. Effective classroom expectations should be few in number (typically three to five), positively stated (what students *should* do), succinct (simple sentences), and enforceable (focused on observable behaviors). When classroom expectations are too numerous, complicated, or confusing, students will have a difficult time remembering and appropriately following them in the classroom.

When teaching expectations, teachers must present the rationale or need for a specific rule or expectation by engaging students in a discussion

of the identified potential problems. This discussion should include natural examples of what the problems might be and why a rule is necessary. Providing students with examples that are natural allows them to relate to the situation and enhances their understanding and ownership of the rules. In addition, facilitating student role-playing for each expectation provides them with an opportunity to practice under careful observation by the teacher and with immediate feedback. Involving students is part of effective instruction and allows them to feel part of the classroom community. In addition, student involvement in the discussion of rules creates the perfect point of discussion for reteaching and corrective responses to errors (Scott, Payne, & Jolivette, 2003).

One way to develop a teachable curriculum for classroom rules is to create a matrix for each location or context in the classroom—categorized as examples of the schoolwide expectations. For example, Juniper Elementary School has adopted the following three schoolwide rules: Respect Yourself, Respect Others, and Respect Property. A classroom matrix teaches all classroom rules as examples of the schoolwide expectations. Raising hands to speak is a classroom example of respecting others, and keeping feet on the floor is a classroom example of respect for property. The matrix allows students to understand what behaviors are expected from them in each area of the classroom and under specific conditions. For the teacher, the matrix is a systematic way to develop a set of rules that explicitly teach students how to respect themselves, their peers, and the property in the classroom. *Figure 1* shows a matrix for Ms. Hawkins' classroom at Juniper Elementary School.

The matrix is also designed so that teachers can review the rules or expectations before any given activity or transition. For example, if respecting others is defined as *treating others the way that you would want them to treat you*, the teacher may simply ask

**Figure 1** CLASSROOM EXPECTATIONS FOR SELF, OTHERS, AND PROPERTY

	Respect Yourself	Respect Others	Respect Property
<b>Desk (working independently)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be on task.</li> <li>• Try your best.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep your hands and feet to yourself.</li> <li>• Raise your hand when you need help.</li> <li>• Sharpen your pencil during snack time.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take care of your belongings.</li> <li>• Clean up after yourself.</li> </ul>
<b>Workstation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be on task.</li> <li>• Try your best.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep your hands and feet to yourself.</li> <li>• Help others.</li> <li>• Respect authority.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take care of your belongings.</li> <li>• Use only what you need.</li> <li>• Clean up after yourself.</li> </ul>
<b>Snack</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eat your own food.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Speak with a soft voice.</li> <li>• Practice good table manners.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pick up after yourself and clean your desk.</li> <li>• Stay seated.</li> </ul>
<b>Bathroom</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wash your hands with soap.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respect others' privacy.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep the bathroom clean.</li> <li>• Use only what you need.</li> </ul>
<b>Sink</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wash your hands with soap.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep your hands and feet to yourself.</li> <li>• Take turns.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use only what you need.</li> <li>• Throw paper in the trash can.</li> </ul>

students prior to snack time, "What kind of things do we need to remember to do at snack time to be respectful of others?" The common language of respect for others across the school

acts as an anchor for a set of expected behaviors that are attached to specific locations or contexts. Although each classroom may have a different set of specific expectations, each falls

under the same set of schoolwide expectations. Even if “respect property” is an expectation for every area of the school, the specific indicator behaviors will vary by location (gym, hall, individual classroom). Thus, when students are in another teacher’s classroom, there may be a different behavioral indicator, but respecting others is still the overriding rule. For example, students in the cafeteria will remember to respect others by using table manners and to respect property by throwing their trash away. When they go to music class, they remember to respect others by raising their hand before speaking and to respect property by asking before touching the instruments. The larger schoolwide expectations help students generalize and transfer schoolwide rules to individual classroom settings.

At Juniper Elementary, Ms. Hawkins and her paraprofessional, Mr. Taylor, found students in their class to be frequently off task and inattentive during transitions to specials. This is an area that was not considered with the original development of the matrix and must be added. Ms. Hawkins and Mr. Taylor discussed possible reasons why students were frequently off task and determined that they were talking and arguing during lineup or when walking from one activity to the next. As a response, Ms. Hawkins assigned each student to a color-coded group and then called out groups to line up by color. She and Mr. Taylor designed an addition to the

classroom expectations matrix (see *Figure 2*), presented it on a large poster board, and, each morning during the classwide meeting, discussed with students how they could respect themselves, others, and property while transitioning to specials.

**Teaching Behaviors**

Teachers should instruct students in what the expected behaviors are in the same manner as they provide instruction in how to read and how to complete a math problem. Successful instruction is one of the most effective strategies for facilitating appropriate student behavior (Northwest Regional Education Laboratory, 1991). Too often it is assumed that students have both the knowledge and the skills necessary to be successful, and misbehavior is met with punishment—without benefit of reteaching or positive correction. This is not an effective strategy for changing behavior.

Teaching specific behaviors should be part of the daily routine. Referring to the matrix, teachers can easily remind their students of what behaviors are expected in any location or context during the day. Classwide meetings are a great time to review and reinforce expected classroom behaviors. The amount of instructional time necessary for this activity will depend on the needs and population of the class. At the beginning of the year, instruction likely will be most intensive as teachers work to facilitate understanding

across all students. Later, instruction will depend on identified problems and the predictable times, locations, and contexts that are assessed.

During their classwide meeting at Juniper Elementary each morning, Ms. Hawkins reviews the expected behaviors of the day. During the week, she recorded times when her students had shown exemplary behavior and when she had to remind them about their behavior. During the classwide meeting, she reinforces their successes by giving specific examples of when they had engaged in expected behavior. She calls out specific students’ names and reinforces their good behavior. However, she recalls that on one afternoon there were many fights at the sink, and she had to remind many students to throw away their trash. During the classwide meeting, she reviews the expected behaviors for the sink. She asks students, “So how do we respect ourselves when we are at the sink?” One student raises his hand and answers, “We wash our hands and use soap.” Ms. Hawkins reinforces the response and continues prompting students with questions. “So who can tell me how we respect each other at the sinks?” Another student answers, “Take turns and keep our hands and feet to ourselves.” Ms. Hawkins reviews how they could take turns. She continues to review how to respect property, and students agree that, if they do not throw away the trash, people could get sick and the room would be dirty.

Remember that part of an effective instructional routine also includes the “why” question. Asking why helps teachers assess for student understanding and lets all students continually hear the rationale and connections. Ms. Hawkins reviews and models expected behaviors each morning at the classwide meeting. She places reminders by the sink, prompting students to throw away the trash. For the next few days, she acknowledges good behavior at the sinks, and students rarely have a problem. The daily reminders

**Figure 2** ADDITION TO THE CLASSROOM EXPECTATIONS MATRIX

	Respect Yourself	Respect Others	Respect Property
Transition to specials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Walk single file</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep hands and feet to yourself.</li> <li>• Use a whisper voice.</li> <li>• Wait for your color group to be called.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep supplies in your desk.</li> </ul>

in the morning and the friendly visual reminders at the sink helped them to improve their behavior.

### Maintenance Strategies

#### *Consistency*

All students can benefit from consistency, but many students need consistency and structure (i.e., consistently predictable routines and consequences) to be successful in school. They need to have expectations consistently taught, encouraged, and reinforced on a daily basis. When teachers are inconsistent, it portrays to students that the rules are not always applicable or in force, setting the occasion for students to test the applicability of rules. When expectations and routines are consistent, students are less likely to have trouble determining when they should and need not behave accordingly.

For example, in Ms. Hawkins' class, she noticed that her students were sharing lunch food, which was against the rule "Eat your own food." Sometimes Ms. Hawkins or Mr. Taylor would notice sharing and correct it—but other times they would ignore sharing. Over time, students shared more often, to the point that many students weren't eating their own lunches and some problems arose with allergies and students eating only candy. Ms. Hawkins and Mr. Taylor decided that they needed to be more consistent with that rule. They reviewed the lunch rules from the matrix and discussed with students why sharing food was not respectful to themselves or others because of the potential dangers. In the future, when students asked to share during lunchtime, Ms. Hawkins and Mr. Taylor both answered, "No, because that's not respectful to yourself or others," followed by a reteaching of the critical rule. After a few weeks of being consistent, students stopped asking if they could share food, and they ate their own food.

#### *Proximity Control*

Many teachers sit at a desk or stand at a lectern or in front of the classroom during instruction. These are great positions for students who are sitting near the front and center of the room but not for students in the back or at the sides of the classroom. Proximity control is used when the teacher moves to an area where there is easy supervision of students who are misbehaving or are about to misbehave. The teacher can also use proximity control when placing students in seats around the classroom. During any given activity, students who are prone to misbehavior should be seated close to the areas where the teacher spends most of the time (Mercer & Mercer, 1998). In addition, moving around the room during instruction allows the teacher to interact with the entire class. As a result, the teacher is immediately able to redirect inappropriate behavior as well as to reinforce appropriate behavior. For example, the teacher might be able to tap the student on the shoulder, give the student a nonverbal reminder, or make eye contact to redirect misbehavior.

Ms. Hawkins' first graders are often off task and inattentive during class instruction. They have a difficult time following along in their reading books and often lose their place in the story. Ms. Hawkins sits in a chair at the front of the room while reading and reviewing the story. Many of the students are on the wrong page in the book and sometimes even on the wrong story. Ms. Hawkins and Mr. Taylor decided to start circulating and moving around the room during instruction. During reading instruction, Ms. Hawkins rarely sits in her chair and now moves around the room, redirecting the students to where they should be in the story. Mr. Taylor also moves about the room, modeling appropriate behavior and occasionally working directly with a student, pointing at the words as Ms. Hawkins reads them.

Ms. Hawkins found that, when

she circulates around the room, her students are more likely to be on task because they know that she will be able to see if they are following along. Proximity control has allowed Ms. Hawkins to be closer to her students, to redirect their behavior the moment they are off task, and to provide nonverbal reminders, reducing the amount of time for which she has to stop the class.

#### *Student Choice*

During the day, students usually do not have opportunities to make decisions about their instruction. They walk into school and are given specific detailed instructions on what to do and how to do it. Recent research has demonstrated that giving students choices about their curricula is associated with higher rates of on-task behavior and work completion (Jolivet, Peck-Stichter, Scott, Ridgley, & Siblinsky, 2002). Examples of choices that may be provided in a typical classroom include giving students opportunities to make decisions about activities, routines, and curricula.

Each morning, Ms. Hawkins gives students a math review sheet to complete as they return from recess—just to allow them to settle down and to ease the transition. The students dislike the sheet because they perceive it as repetitive and boring—the same thing every morning. They are supposed to walk into the room, get their sheet, and continue working on it until math class begins. However, many of the students did not complete the sheet and expressed a dislike for the activity. Ms. Hawkins and Mr. Taylor decided that they would have three review sheets and that students could choose which sheet they wished to complete. Ms. Hawkins color coded the sheets so that students could easily identify the difference. All review sheets had the same problems but in different order. However, students focused on the layout of the sheet rather than the content. Many picked their favorite color and completed the sheet—some even asked if they

could do another. Thereafter, Ms. Hawkins provided choices of test forms, when to take breaks throughout the day, and the timing of specific activities. Students are more likely to complete work when they have some control over what they are to do.

When teachers take the time to consider prevention, teaching, and maintenance of appropriate behavior, student success rates can be increased. Classroom-based positive behavioral support is simply a framework in which teachers consider and apply specific strategies to increase the likelihood of student success.

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