

Effective Behavior Support Implementation at the District Level:

Tigard-Tualatin School District



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An Effective Behavior Support (EBS) approach was adopted as a district-wide program in the Tigard-Tualatin schools to improve school climate and prevent school violence. Tigard-Tualatin is a mid-sized suburban school district just south of Portland, Oregon. The district includes seven elementary, three middle, and two high schools, with a total population of 11,291 students. Students largely come from middle class homes, and although a majority of them are Caucasian, Hispanic students currently form a rapidly growing group. Last year out of 164 new students, 120 were Hispanic.

Tigard-Tualatin's interest in EBS began in the 1995–1996 school year, when several administrators and teachers within the district were invited to participate in a behavioral cadre sponsored by the Oregon State Department of Education and Behavioral Research and Teaching at the University of Oregon. It was clear from initial meetings of the cadre that our schools, like others throughout the nation, were in need of a new approach to discipline. Initial concerns centered on the rising statistics on antisocial behavior among our youth, declining resources, and the need for greater collaboration between general and special education, but the reality was that *all* of our children needed support, not just those who presented the most intense problems. We needed to move away from models that endorsed punishment and exclusion toward those that emphasized teaching and recognizing positive behavioral skills if we were to maintain the positive climate we treasured in our schools. The EBS approach offered an exciting opportunity for us to focus more on prevention.

I became involved in EBS that next summer as 8 of our 14 schools—the pilot group—engaged in the first phase of implementation. That first year (1996–1997) I was a mem-

ber of one of our elementary school EBS teams. We joined the seven other schools to receive our initial training from Dr. George Sugai from the University of Oregon in August 1996. We struggled a bit with the new terminology in relation to our schools: Effective Behavior Support, systems approaches, data-based decision making. In spite of some clumsiness, we went back to our schools and followed the EBS guidelines for improving school-wide support. We had our teachers complete the EBS survey, “Self-Assessing School Support,” and examined the results. We cleaned up and simplified our school rules. We worked with the staff on how the rules looked (our behavior expectations) across settings and dreamed up (and borrowed) ideas for school-wide reinforcement (“High Five,” “Gotcha”) so that we could better recognize the 90% of our students who typically wanted to follow the rules.

We found that the kids were pleasantly surprised to receive acknowledgment for “doing the right thing.” Some of our pilot teams developed “Cool Tools” lessons to help teach their school rules, while others saw how programs they were already using, like “Life Skills” and “Conflict Managers,” seemed to fit that bill. Some invented new ways to get the word out to their students and teachers. One of our schools developed a daily “radio program” over their intercom that was a special hit and continues to this day, now with a weekly Spanish language component.

The EBS pilot schools all started collecting data on office referrals that year as well. One of our schools had actually been collecting data for several years but had not used the data in any systematic way. We taught each other best ways to track referrals on the basic data we needed (e.g., types of referrals, location, grade, gender, time of year, and repeat referrals). We saw how tracking these data

could help us explore with our teachers the different levels of behavior problems that occur, which ones they were able to take care of on their own in the classroom (and in many cases, were already managing well), and which ones they should refer to the office.

We began to grasp the concept of "repeat referrals." We referred to our students with the chronic problem behaviors as our "high fliers." Several of our teams worked on procedures for dealing with these kids, including setting up or clarifying the role of Teacher Assistance, Action, and Care Teams. We dabbled in functional assessment technology and individual programming that first year, but for the most part we concentrated our efforts on the larger systems: school-wide, classroom, and other settings. We started thinking about the usefulness of data for evaluating program effectiveness. For example, my school's EBS team used data to identify the cafeteria as a "hot spot," while others found that the majority of their problem behaviors were occurring on the playground. They instituted clearer playground rules, rewards, and consequences. Our team developed a training video to help students and staff better understand cafeteria behavior expectations, entitled "Trays, Trash, and Travel." The video was featured in a presentation to the district's board of directors that spring and helped solidify their support of EBS.

The board adopted EBS as a district-wide program that spring and approved a half-time position for a district coordinator for the coming school year. I was lucky enough to be chosen for the position. It sounds kind of trite to call it a "dream come true," but I can't think of any other way to say how profoundly convinced I was that helping to establish EBS was my particular "calling." As a school psychologist within this district for more than 15 years, I had studied the development of positive behavior support in the literature and discussed it with my colleagues. We knew its potential for creating what every child in our district needed: to be every educator's responsibility. Moreover, EBS was about teaching behavior like we teach academics, about moving away from blaming and punishing toward a systematic district-wide philosophy of prevention.

In my first meeting with our associate superintendent in charge of EBS, I was pleased with her complete understanding of and support for the concepts of EBS and what was needed to make it a viable district-wide program. She pulled funds from a variety of sources and established a small training budget (\$30,000) and we were off and running. In my 2 years of working with her now, I've never had to back track, explain, or defend some idea or stance; her trust in my work and belief in EBS has kept us moving forward. Such positive leadership is critical to sustaining innovations like EBS.

In our district this kind of administrative support has occurred at all levels from the board and district to the building level. Principals and associate principals have

demonstrated a steady commitment to EBS in spite of all the other initiatives demanding their attention. The most successful have utilized the EBS team process and systems focus to examine and enhance all student behaviors, including academic achievement along with social and behavioral competence. By modeling constant interest and commitment to EBS, our administrators have maintained enthusiasm in their staff and thus ensured continuation of EBS teaming in their buildings.

During Years 2 and 3 (1997–1998 and 1998–1999), our EBS effort grew from the original 8 pilot schools to all 14 schools. The last to join were two elementary schools that had been developing extensive "Success for All" programs and were now ready to integrate that programming with EBS. By the fall of 1997, there were 115 EBS team members throughout the district, with the average team including six to eight members. We came together three times a year for training with Dr. Sugai and some of his colleagues to receive support and training.

In addition, during Years 2 and 3, we held EBS Leadership Team meetings every other month. For these meetings, building teams sent one to two representatives. Consistently, eight of our nine elementary principals attended these meetings, while associate principals attended from the middle and high schools. In the hour-long leadership meetings held at the end of a school day, we shared our accomplishments and resources and brainstormed needs for upcoming training. After each of these meetings, I wrote and sent out a newsletter, the *EBS Update*, to keep all team members informed of discussion that had occurred during the leadership sessions—to keep communication and collaboration open to everyone. This fall, the newsletter documented consistent, continuing EBS programming across the district with about 120 staff members now serving on the various building teams.

During Year 2, district coordination focused on supporting teams in their school-wide efforts. During Year 3, the emphasis was on supporting our middle schools in individual behavior planning.

At a year-end meeting, district administrators noted that fewer students had been referred for expulsion hearings from the two schools where we had focused this extra behavior support effort. This, my third year as coordinator, has included a focus on (a) developing our district-wide database on discipline referrals, (b) overseeing program evaluation for a Second Steps (a violence prevention curriculum for students in K–8) implementation at eight of our schools, and (c) implementing a grant for First Step to Success (a school- and home-based program for helping aggressive young children). Funding for these initiatives came about partly because I attended many meetings last year to help plan county programs that addressed safety in our schools and communities, proudly informing whoever would listen to me about the success of EBS in our district. We wrote a very good, research-based proposal for the im-

plementation of First Step, but I'm convinced that it was our strong EBS base that secured support for this proposal.

My presentation to the board of directors last spring focused on the role of EBS in maintaining safe schools. I promised more data and have been working toward that end since then. In our district, seven of our schools use a large district-level database (AS 400) to track discipline, among other student variables. Several of our other schools use their own tracking systems. Three schools are planning to try out the University of Oregon's new system, the School-Wide Information System. My challenge has been to integrate data from these various systems so that district-level reports, such as this spring's report to our board of directors, will include some more objective data on the connections between EBS and safer schools. School systems are less prepared than we realize for being data based and research oriented; it takes the kind of emphasis that is available through EBS coordination to begin to create this outcome.

In the summer of 1999, we developed a way to "capture" the discipline referrals from our large district main-frame system and to put the data to work for EBS planning. We have 2½ years of records for eight of our schools. With an ACCESS database developed with the help from an expert consultant, our database now has more than 17,500 records that can be analyzed for trends. Monthly reports are being produced for the schools and include typical EBS charts (referrals by incident type, grade, location, and day/month).

The following examples illustrate how the data have been used by EBS teams to guide their intervention planning and implementation:

1. In an elementary school, the EBS team observed that office discipline referrals have been declining steadily over the 3 years of implementing EBS. Referrals per day for fall of 1999 decreased by 35% from fall of 1998 (2.66/day in 1998 vs. 1.74/day in 1999).
2. One middle school EBS team has learned that 50% to 80% of its discipline referrals were coming from the classrooms. On the basis of these data, the team arranged for increased classroom management support for their teachers.
3. On the basis of their data, another middle school team, along with their cafeteria staff, implemented a lunch activity program. As a result, they noticed that office discipline referrals during lunchtime decreased from 10% in fall of 1998 to 4% in fall of 1999.
4. Although the total number of referrals increased, one middle school team found that the types of office discipline referrals changed considerably: Inappropriate behaviors decreased from 33% of the total referrals to 12%, disruptive behavior increased from 11% to 35%, and aggressive behavior decreased from 10% to 4%. Minor behavior incidents (e.g., tardies, truancy) remained relatively stable at about 19% to 20% of total referrals.

Although these data do not have the rigor associated with experimental studies, they provide school teams with useful guides for refining their intervention planning. Needless to say, I've spent considerable time scanning the database—and although I predict that our third and fourth year of discipline data will show positive effects over prior years, these objective data are only one way that we demonstrate the effectiveness of EBS. Another, and, perhaps more compelling, way is through comments made by teachers, students, and parents about differences they perceive in our school climate. One teacher recently told me: "I don't know what it is exactly, but EBS has made our school just feel better; we are noticeably calmer and more positive." Last week at another school I watched several children proudly enter the principal's office after their names were called over the intercom to receive their award for earning a "Caught ya—Doing Good" yesterday. The mood was wonderful. In other schools office staff have told me that things are different from how they used to be: "Kids just aren't lined up in here [the office] to see the principal like last year . . ." And, my last but not least, one of our hardest working counselors remarked, albeit jokingly, that she was "bored this year; there just aren't as many problems to solve these days . . . thanks to that darn EBS stuff!"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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