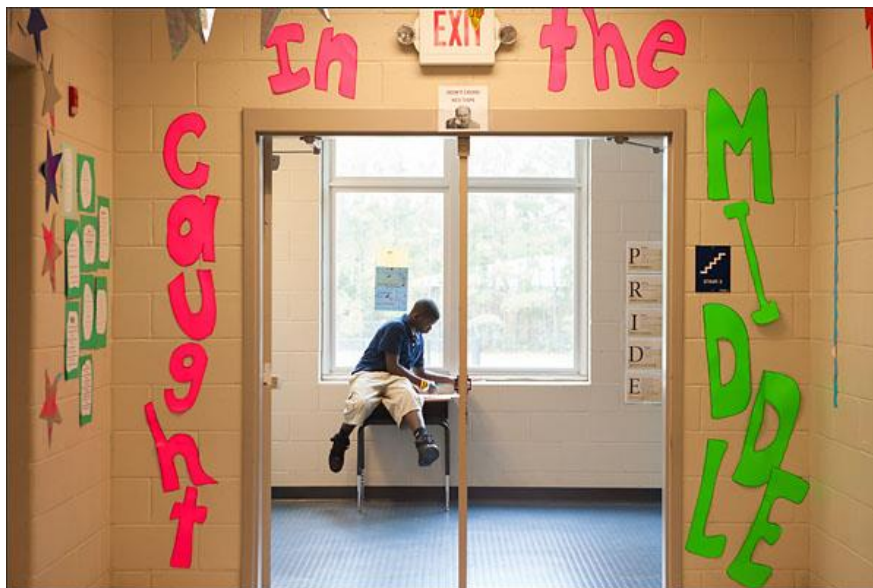


At S.C. School, Behavior Is One of the Basics

A Charleston middle school joins the growing number nationwide that use **PBIS** strategies to teach students how to behave

By **Nirvi Shah**

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Kenneth Thomas, a 7th grader, ponders a lesson in his PRIDE 101 class at Haut Gap Middle School. As part of the school's approach to addressing behavior, all students take a course in how to be a Haut Gap student.

—Amelia Phillips Hale for Education Week

Along with reading, science, and mathematics classes, every student here at Haut Gap Middle School takes a course in how to be a Haut Gap student.

For most students, the class is 40 minutes a day for nine weeks—even for returning students. But it can last 18 weeks for students who need extra time to nail concepts such as how to own up to mistakes, accept feedback, and apologize appropriately.

Those lessons are part of a schoolwide approach to addressing student behavior that **Haut Gap** has used for about five years: Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, or PBIS. "The whole goal of PBIS is so instruction doesn't have to stop" later for teachers stuck dealing with problem behaviors, said Julianne Moffatt, the school's PBIS coach. She teaches the behavior courses and some writing classes along with overseeing the school's behavior approach.

While the classes and the many other facets of PBIS take time, educators here say there's a payoff: Haut Gap recorded about 170 out-of-school suspensions when PBIS was adopted in 2007—and student enrollment was just 250. Last school year, it had nearly 500 students, and the school suspended fewer than 100 of them.

"You don't have time not to teach this," said Katherine Lewis, a school climate specialist for the 45,000-student Charleston County district who helped establish the PBIS approach at Haut Gap.

The approach, developed in the 1980s by education researchers, has since been adopted—and adapted—by about 18,300 schools nationwide.

PBIS values teaching all students appropriate behavior as much as teaching any academic subject. It's the opposite of what many school rules say: everything students shouldn't do. It emphasizes creating a common set of expectations for students' behavior, no matter where they are on campus. The underlying premise: Schools must become predictable, consistent, positive, and safe environments for students. "Creating that common set of expectations is really what creates a learning community. Culture makes a huge impact on the effectiveness of the school," said Robert Horner, a co-director of the U.S. Department of Education's [Technical Assistance Center](#) on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports and a special education professor at the University of Oregon, in Eugene.

Data-Based Discipline

The original intent of PBIS was to help students improve their chances for academic success by reducing overall problem behavior, but now it is more commonly being looked to as a way to reduce out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, Mr. Horner said. That's especially true now as schools search for alternatives to zero-tolerance discipline policies, which have been linked to high numbers of suspensions—especially among African-American students, Latinos, boys, and students with disabilities.

"When you have an increase in students engaged, you have a decrease in minutes spent managing deviant behavior," added Mr. Horner. A [new study](#) by Johns Hopkins University researchers looking at more than 12,000 elementary school students in schools using PBIS found that the approach has significant effects on their behavior problems, concentration problems, and social-emotional functioning, and that children in those schools were 33 percent less likely to receive an office discipline referral than peers elsewhere. The younger the students were when PBIS was introduced, the stronger the effect. But getting to that point is a major undertaking—and the effort doesn't end even after a school has used the approach for a few years.

Schools establish their own common expectations for students, consistent rewards for appropriate behavior, and consequences for behavior that isn't right, and quickly add interventions for students who don't always do the right thing. Educators also constantly evaluate their campuses, tracking student behavior and determining how to change something about the school to address inappropriate behavior. Schools must constantly gather data about how students act, when, and where.

"When you're looking at your data, where is it that you need to improve?" said Isabel Villalobos, the coordinator of student discipline and the expulsion-support unit for the Los Angeles schools. "Maybe it's the hallway. Look at the lunch area. Do we need more supervision? Is it a lighting issue?" In 2007, the 664,000-student district adopted PBIS and other strategies to address an epidemic of out-of-school suspensions. So far, about a third of the district's schools have fully implemented the approach, Ms. Villalobos said. Days of instruction lost to suspension in Los Angeles [have dropped](#) from nearly 75,000 in the 2007-08 school year to about 26,300 last school year.

Haut Gap Middle School went through a similar self-evaluation, bolstering student supervision in some campus trouble spots. Expectations for how to behave on campus are posted everywhere now. Like many others that employ PBIS, the school created an acronym to define its expectations so students can remember them: PRIDE, for personal responsibility, respect, individual readiness, demonstrated learning, and effective behaviors.

In the hallways, respect is defined as keeping hands and feet to yourself; in the restroom, flushing the toilet. Personal responsibility means walking single file on stairs and two abreast elsewhere. In class, individual readiness means arriving on time, having all materials, and following the dress code. The approach may seem prescriptive, said Robert Stevens, the Charleston County district's PBIS coordinator, but shifts in societal and cultural norms demand it. "One of the things PBIS does, it levels the

playing field: Everybody is taught the same things. We're taught how to behave. We are reinforced for doing it properly," he said.

Ms. Lewis puts it another way: "We have to have a set of behaviors that are neutral to where you come from. The [school] culture has to be as strong as their culture is."

Good-Conduct Rewards

To encourage students to stick to the rules, PBIS schools work hard to reinforce appropriate behavior. For example, once every quarter, Haut Gap students who have collected the right number of PRIDE coupons earn a special privilege. They also can cash in their coupons for prizes. They earn coupons for asking thoughtful questions in class, being prepared for a lesson, and asking for permission the right way. Coupons or not, when students behave the right way, they are told.

"You have your reading book out," English teacher Brandon Bobart told his students during a recent class. "I can tell you're committed to your learning."

Earlier this month, 6th grader Saniyah King happily reported she had earned 10 PRIDE coupons. If she has 20 by month's end, she'll get to take part in a schoolwide dress-up day, when students swap school uniforms for business attire.

The steps to earning those coupons roll off Saniyah's tongue. "When you show personal responsibility, when you have your materials, accepting feedback—positive or negative," said Saniyah, 11. "It feels easy."

Tracking and rewarding students' behavior—along with all the standard responsibilities of lesson planning, grading, and teaching itself—is a lot of work, said Lindsay Lawes, who teaches algebra and geometry to Haut Gap 7th and 8th graders and is in her second year at the school. For a while, she and her colleagues sent detailed weekly reports to parents outlining students' progress. The letters acknowledged students who are sometimes overlooked: Those who neither excel academically nor have chronic behavior issues. "It forces you to look at those kids," Ms. Lawes said. In the PBIS system of tiers that group students by whether their behavior needs much, some, or minimal intervention, students who aren't engaged get attention, too.

"It ups the game," Ms. Lawes said. "They have to be engaged."

When Haut Gap first adopted PBIS, the school had failed to make adequate yearly progress under the federal No Child Left Behind Act for several years, giving parents the option of transferring their children from the school. Enrollment had declined to about 200—so low the school board contemplated closing the school, which is on rural **Johns Island** on Charleston's southern side. Although Haut Gap is just a few miles from the resorts and golf courses on Kiawah Island, most families living within the school's attendance zone are poor and African-American.

After the program was implemented, the school's academic performance swung in the opposite direction, which the school attributes at least in part to its new focus on student engagement. The school went from an F grade to an A on the state's school grading system. When it added a magnet program, more parents opted to take a chance on a school previously labeled persistently dangerous. Now Haut Gap has 523 students; enrollment is a blend of white, black, and Hispanic students.

Next-Level Interventions

While PBIS operates on the principle that most students respond to clear expectations and positive reinforcement, 15 percent to 20 percent of students are likely to need something more intense, Mr. Horner of the University of Oregon said. Those next-tier interventions could include a mental-health

screening or daily, one-on-one check-ins with students but in some cases, interventions can be simpler—and downright ingenious.

For Haut Gap 6th grader Travis Coach Jr., peppering teachers with comments and questions—regardless of whether he was called on or his commentary was on point—was a big problem. It's the kind of behavior that elsewhere might have been regarded as insubordinate or defiant. But Haut Gap didn't want to squelch Travis' exuberance. Instead, the school equipped him with a stack of Post-it notes. "Each class, I get three comments," said Travis, 11. After that, he can jot his thoughts down on the sticky squares of paper and pass them to his teachers.

Similarly, in Memphis, Tenn., which adopted PBIS districtwide about six years ago to replace corporal punishment, one student's knack for vulgarity was channeled into something else entirely, said Brady Henderson, the district's PBIS supervisor.

"This child liked throwing hand signs—vulgar hand signs," Mr. Henderson said. He was instructed to learn two American Sign Language words each day as an intervention.

"He took to it like duck to water," Mr. Henderson said. "They looked at it in terms of a strength." And his crude hand gestures haven't been seen since.

These strategies are a far cry from the "get out" approach that suspensions and expulsions convey, said Paul Padrón, who was Haut Gap's principal for five years and worked to implement PBIS. "It's 'I want you here, I need you here.' "

Getting On Board

Handling behavior so differently takes major staff buy-in, said Charlotte Baucom, the coordinator of the center for safe and drug-free schools in the 100,000-student Memphis, Tenn., district, which **adopted PBIS** about six years ago to replace corporal punishment. "It has to be believed [that] we can do something besides something punitive to get a child to do what you want them to do," she said.

Groups of staff members at each Memphis school went through PBIS training. And, as at every school working on PBIS, commitment from the whole school is required.

One reason that two-thirds of Los Angeles schools still haven't adopted PBIS fully is that buy-in occurred only on some campuses, said Cheri Thomas, the district's lead coordinator of school operations. When behavior problems arise, she said, some staff members still think first of calling the police.

PBIS presents other challenges: Mr. Horner said more research needs to be done on using PBIS in high schools, for example. And because staffs can turn over quickly, districts must build capacity to train new employees. For that reason, the technical-assistance center now prefers to work with whole districts rather than individual schools.

At Haut Gap, where PBIS is going strong, the school's new principal, J. Travis Benintendo, set aside the first three days of school for teaching students the skills they need to meet Haut Gap expectations. "That shows how important this is," he said. "Everything else follows nicely."

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