

The Arizona Behavioral Initiative: Learner Centered Education Targeted at Achieving Disciplined School Environments

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Abstract: The ABI is a statewide collaborative effort to introduce schools to an ongoing strategic planning process that leads to the development of effective discipline practices. The purpose of this paper is to present an overview of the program, examine the multiple technology resources being used to achieve project goals, and discuss the outcomes of various strategies and procedures implemented at participatory schools.

Operation Rationale

Behavior problems incur serious concerns for teachers not only within the classroom, but school-wide. Adverse behaviors offset the social, academic, and vocational success of all the students within a classroom. Fewer resources limit the ability to improve literacy, integrate current technologies, and facilitate state-mandated standards. The increasing number of students with limited English proficiency, multiple disabilities, and families struggling with poverty issues contribute to the rising incidence of behavioral problems within an educational institution (Nelson, 1999). Although students with severe behavioral concerns constitute a mere 5% of a school population, approximately 50% of behavioral incidents reported in schools are representative of this targeted group (Sugai, Sprague, Horner, & Walker, 2000). As schools struggle to meet the needs of an overwhelming population of students with severe behavior concerns, they also strain to properly educate the faculty and staff about effective behavioral interventions that address specific school-related issues. In addressing school-wide concerns, valuable information can be gained from students in evaluating not only academic, but social validity of objectives, procedures, and outcomes of intervention implementation efforts (Lane, 1999). Ineffective professional development practices lead to inconsistencies in promoting optimal learning environments for students (Nelson, 1996).

School-wide Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (SWPBIS) programs have proven effective in advancing the overall competence of students as a result of systemic change at the district, school, and student level. A Safe Schools Evaluation Rubric is implemented to assist educators in the development and implementation of a SWPBIS program (SSER: Nelson & Ohlund, 1999). The goal to develop a safe school environment by identification and change agents directed toward school and classroom organization efforts that promote inappropriate behaviors. Site-specific resolutions, which target the unique needs of the school and its community, result from a committed effort on behalf of the entire school.

The Arizona Behavioral Initiative (ABI) was developed to address the increasing amount of problem behaviors that challenge K-12 schools. The ABI is a collaborative effort between the Arizona Department of Education, Arizona State University, Northern Arizona University and the University of Arizona, and is supported by the Center for Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports at the University of Oregon. ABI promotes ongoing planning processes directed toward identifying school-specific, professional development needs. The project provides schools with the expertise and resources of several organization and numerous individuals with expertise in Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports to address one of the greatest challenges facing Arizona schools – achieving disciplined learning environments that support high academic standards.

Currently, in the second phase of the ABI, twenty school districts have competed for and won the Creating Disciplined Schools Grant (CDSG) disseminated by the Arizona Department of Education, and are active participants in the ABI. School-based teams comprised of educators, administrators, parents, and school psychologists participated in training seminars during the academic year. Leadership cadres are given materials from experts in the field who serve as the school's ABI consultant. Ongoing assistance is provided, training opportunities are scheduled, and local as well as distance support is facilitated through discussion forums and accessible distance education courses. Course content is directed toward school-wide discipline concerns, data collection and analysis methods, system management, functional behavioral assessment, individual behavior modification, and academic interventions (Podrazik, 2000).

Program Accessibility

The ABI provides direct support to schools as they engage in the process of self-evaluation, planning, and implementing changes that will best fit their school's needs. Rural, inner city, and urban locales encompass the geographic regions targeted by ABI. Currently, 20 local education agencies representing schools throughout the state of Arizona are working toward improving their educational environments via this strategic planning process. The Arizona Department of Education, Exceptional Student Services supports the participation of education agencies within Arizona. Applications from local agencies are submitted from the school district or individual school. Partnerships with outside agencies are encouraged, as are joint applications.

In order to determine eligibility for funding, project plans are rated on a point system comprised of a needs statement which outlines a program for improved discipline, an implementation plan including goals, objectives and activities for improvement, and a statement of commitment detailing participants and their expectations of improving policies and organizational practices at their school. Program goals are developed to support justification of the projected cost. Development of district PBIS strategies and leadership teams to implement training models, as well as evaluation of project effectiveness are typical of the goals set by schools applying for the grant. Funding for projects are allotted for two one-year grant periods, ranging from \$10,000 for schools, and up to \$30,000 for school districts. A one-year renewable timeframe may be granted depending on program and fiscal monitoring. Evaluations detailing the progress of the project are required bi-annually in order to receive continued support (Podrazik, 2000). Funds are utilized to sustain participation in semi-annual conferences and other support activities that target implementation of PBS strategies developed by the school. Such activities range from professional development, parent involvement, to treatment practices involving other service agencies. Support may also be used to sustain consultant fees, faculty stipends, substitute reimbursement, and training materials.

Program Operation

The ABI is grounded in research on successful school change and School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS). Strategic planning processes provide schools with systematic methods of addressing and analyzing specific discipline problems within a school, and identifying the practices that will prove the most effective for the targeted school. Environmental concerns are examined in order to identify where overlapping practices occur to reduce effort so that the school may proceed to increase discipline outcomes.

School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) are systems approaches to increase a school's capability to identify, adopt, and maintain the use of researched practices. SWPBIS is an ongoing process that includes data-based decision making utilized in assessment procedures to guide discipline decisions within the school, and research-validated strategies to directly improve student learning and instruction. Policies and procedures related to discipline concerns are applied globally throughout the school. A positive and high-status leadership team, comprised of educators, parents, teachers, school psychologists, counselors, and administrators promotes implementation of SWPBIS. The key to effective execution of SWPBIS is active participation on behalf of the administration to address discipline across all school environments. Efforts to enforce violence-free environments within schools rely on behavior support models to initiate the process (Horner & Sugai, 2000). Attention is given to the

examination of learning and teaching environments in order to enhance academic and social success for all faculty and students. These efforts provide the schools with the opportunity to establish positive teaching environments school-wide, in and outside the classroom, and with the individual student.

An ongoing strategic planning process is used to enable schools to identify their specific needs in regards to creating a more disciplined and productive learning environment. The template used to outline this process is the Safe Schools Evaluation Rubric, (SSER). The SSER targets the school's leadership teams, school-wide promotion, classroom and non-classroom interaction policies, and individual systems. Problems are identified and analyzed within each problem area. Best practices are established and then implemented at a global level. Effectiveness is continually monitored along a prescribed timeline in order to provide further analysis and possibly other alternatives for specific incidences (SSER, Nelson & Ohlund, 1999). All decisions originate from data-based results in order to provide the schools with opportunities to implement positive instructional and learning environments. The school is able to decide what its primary focus and needs is, and analyzes where redundant practices exists so that minimal effort and maximum potential may be achieved.

Site visits requested by participating schools are conducted by ABI consultants; a free service offered to those who have met program eligibility. Instructors, administrators, and psychologists, heavily experienced in behavior management and intervention support, are able to visit a school and assist in developing site-specific plans of action (Podrazik, 2000). Assistance may be provided by observations in assessing individual classrooms, students, and specific problem areas concerning environmental variables. Additional support is also offered for faculty and staff in-services, and meetings with leadership or behavior teams in offering assistance with implementation and data collection issues.

ABI's comprehensive web site enables synchronous and asynchronous communication with experts online as well as access to university level courses, and information focusing on school-wide discipline issues, data collection and analysis, best practices, functional behavioral assessment, individual behavior management, and academic interventions (<http://abi.ed.asu.edu>). Topics of online discussions can include how technology resources are being used to achieve project goals at the school level. Technology-based staff development components of the ABI also include ongoing technical assistance, both face-to-face and online consultations. Program participants are trained to use the project specific online tools to submit data and quarterly reports via the website.

Instructional procedures, when practiced consistently, can elicit effective management and instruction in a classroom setting (Armedariz and Umbreit, 1999). ABI offers university graduate level courses and workshops with curriculum specifically designed to incorporate identification, implementation, and analysis of successful behavior practices.. Online courses, available using an anytime, anywhere model, focus on positive intervention support and best practices. Students are provided utilization strategies directed toward implementation in classroom and non-classrooms settings. Interactive instructional television, (IITV), classes, also offered for university credit, are broadcast via live video. The IITV course are designed to enable students to listen, respond, and notate information focusing on common language, discipline procedures, and academic interventions. These courses are directed, although not limited, to special educators and are commonly offered on the weekend in order to provide full-time educators with the opportunity to gain relevant information pertaining to their projected plans of action.

Semi-annual face-to-face conferences are conducted for school-based teams to participate in training seminars and panel discussions centered on plans of action for behavior and organizational strategies. Both current grant recipients and those schools newly acquainted with ABI attend seminars and are able to network and share best practices for implementation. The ABI staff, comprised of seasoned educators, researchers, and state representatives host these symposiums in an effort to address the process of

implementing behavioral practices, and problem-solving techniques focusing on systemic communication and consistency.

Documentation of Program Success

Ongoing feedback provided from program participants has elicited interesting results. Common problems identified in school settings as a result of surveyed responses were racial tension, student dropout rate, staff competence at managing at-risk behavior, and physical aggressiveness within specific student populations. Among the 29 primary and secondary respondents surveyed regarding staff development, 14 of the participants ranked classroom and school-wide expectations of student behavior as being foremost in creating a more positive and productive school environment. Although disruptive behavior is simply one of the challenges teachers face when including students exhibiting behavior disorders in the classroom, other factors surface as potential deterrents of instruction (Umbreit, 1995). Another critical area of interest was reflected in targeting the top priority discipline issues for each school. Lack of consistency and clarity of communication throughout the curriculum was reported as a key component in adversely affecting the behavior of the students within the classroom. Undefined behavioral expectations and negating consequences also proved to be of primary importance in being able to effectively control classroom discipline.

Conclusion

Efforts within ABI are helping to promote safer school environments by effective intervention techniques. As behavioral gains can be lost if the interventions are removed, continued support for the schools is essential for implementing an efficient positive behavioral intervention plan (Fox, 1998). During the first two years of the grant-funded period of assistance, educators are establishing consistent practices designed to instill progressive success in classroom and non-classroom settings. Utilizing resources such as online courses directed toward identification and implementation of successful behavioral intervention techniques, expert consultation for effective problem-solving strategies, and financial support providing teacher in-services, conference attendance, and additional personnel if necessary, educators are able to globally implement proactive techniques for preventing disruptive behaviors in Arizona's educational system. As further advancement of the program continues, further research is warranted for identifying contemporary behavioral concerns and the methods utilized to improve and assess the overall learning atmosphere for all learners.

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