

## **Beyond the Safety Team- A Holistic Approach to Disruptive Behavior**

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### **Question**

*How can we create a more integrated, effective and safe method of response to disruptive behavior?*

### **Rationale**

When I began working as an Educational Assistant, managing behavioral issues was limited to one's own classroom or recess duty. Many things have changed since that time. The frequency and severity of behaviors have increased significantly just in the last few years, and seem to affect the youngest learners disproportionately. After a lawsuit this past summer involving a former student, I began to reflect in earnest about the policies and protocol in place both in our district and in my school. News of this lawsuit came at the end of a year in which another classroom situation had disintegrated so thoroughly that safety calls were a daily, if not day long, affair for many months- a situation that impacted countless students and staff members in unprecedented ways.

### **Literature Review**

The framework for my research came from the CDC's most recent data and statistics on children's mental health, a 2019 publication entitled "A Crisis of Disrupted Learning", and a 2019 survey published by EAB (formerly the Education Advisory Board) called "Breaking Bad Behavior". "Heading Off Disruptive Behavior" served as a kind of historical reference. For action steps I referred to the ATF task force recommendations for revisions to the 2020-2021 Albuquerque Public Schools Student Behavior Handbook, a report published by the National Association of School Psychologists, and a Crisis Plan Guide written by a behavior support specialist in Los Angeles. Finally, an article published by the American Association of School Administrators regarding the role of restraint and seclusion in education shed some light on a subject no one really wants to talk about.

### **Research Design**

A mixed methods survey was used to gauge staff experiences with disruptive behavior. Respondents included general education teachers in grades K-2, special education teachers with cross-category students in grades K-5, and Educational Assistants working in Kindergarten and Cross-cat. Seventeen surveys were collected, with highest participation from teachers in Kindergarten, Crosscat, and EA's- arguably those with the greatest exposure to disruptive behavior. Several surveys were used with base questions asked of all and specific questions for different role groups. Quantitative data was used to determine the distribution of answers to a given question. Qualitative data was analyzed for common themes that occurred in response to write-in questions.

## **Findings**

**Disruptive behavior has increased** - 94% of respondents reported an increase of more/significantly more disruptive behavior over the last three years. Almost 70% said that behavioral issues affect them frequently/daily and are very/extremely disruptive. Over 83% of teachers encounter tantrums and oppositional defiance often/daily. Verbal and physical abuse towards students or staff occur less frequently, most often in grades K-1. Kinder teachers felt that 10-20% of their students display disruptive behavior, First grade 20-30%, and Second grade 10-15%. Crosscat teachers estimate anywhere from 25-60%.

**Education and training are inadequate**- 94% of teachers said their education did not prepare them for addressing disruptive behavior. Just six years ago, when one respondent got her license, 'behaviors of the caliber and frequency we are seeing now were a rarity'. Newer teachers feel equally unprepared by their education, and said it's been 'trial and error' and they had to 'figure it out on their own'. While trauma and mental health were cited as the top two factors affecting behavior, only three respondents had received any training on trauma or social emotional learning (SEL). The lack of SEL training was a common thread in many responses. One new teacher said she'd be open to anything that would empower her to handle escalated behaviors in the classroom rather than just calling the safety team.

### **Policy and protocol regarding behavioral disruptions are unclear**

67% of teachers don't know if the *district* has an explicit protocol for behavioral disruptions, the other 33% evenly split between yes and no. Roughly 41% of teachers felt that their *school* does have an explicit protocol for behavioral disruptions. However, most EA's currently on the school safety team felt that no clear set of procedural directives exists to guide their actions on a safety call. Nearly 65% of total respondents either felt there was no explicit protocol or were 'not sure'. Incidentally, there is no official district policy regarding school safety teams.

### **Safety Team troubles**

Safety team duties are primarily staffed by EA's and are very/extremely stressful, and can interfere with classroom responsibilities significantly. Teachers must 'be prepared to be alone at a moment's notice', and are sometimes left alone with severely disruptive behaviors in their own classroom. EA's often have little information going in and feel only somewhat/not very comfortable providing on-call behavior assistance. All reported having been injured by a student on at least one occasion. Teachers and EA's alike have concerns about clearly communicated expectations, consequences and follow-up after a safety call. Nearly all respondents agreed that de-escalation training for all staff would help prevent behavioral disruptions.

### **Resources are stretched to capacity**

Over 83% stated that timely and adequate support for students with behavioral issues is inaccessible in many cases, citing the lengthy SAT process, excessive documentation for teachers, and lack of human resources as significant barriers to getting kids the help that they need. Health and Wellness meetings are now required for every student who begins SAT for

behavior, effectively creating another roadblock to timely support. Students in crisis may struggle for months or even years, while impacting the educational process of all and the ability of teachers and staff to maintain a safe learning environment.

## **Recommendations**

### **Early Identification and Teacher Preparation**

Ideally, high quality Pre-K programs would be available to all, but in the meantime resources like Childfind can be further utilized. Transition programs for incoming Kindergarteners and universal screening to identify at-risk students could address potential problems proactively rather than simply reacting once those behaviors show up in the classroom. We might consider reinstating the teacher home visit program for Kindergarten. Teacher prep programs must provide a comprehensive curriculum with specific content on behavior management and disruption, as well as concrete strategies for success. Content on SEL and trauma should be integrated. Programs should include extended exposure to multiple classroom settings and students, and a minimum of two years with meaningful mentorship.

### **Training and Support**

Teachers and staff need (and want!) training to address disruptive behavior. De-escalation and crisis prevention training should be provided to all staff. These skills ought to become a part of how we interact with students. Trauma informed principles and SEL curriculum and support must be integrated in grades K-12 throughout the district. Training should manifest in concrete ways; classrooms organized to promote order and self-regulation, direct instruction of key social emotional skills, and making these skills an integral part of daily routines. Liaison support personnel should be provided to consult with staff on implementation. A full time re-director should be in place to address immediate behavior concerns, as well as a social worker not tied to IEP's to help offset the overwhelming caseload of our counselor. Limiting mandatory meetings for administrators and counselors during school hours would be ideal.

### **Explicit and Clearly Communicated Policy and Protocol**

School rules and expectations must be continually reviewed, retaught and reinforced consistently by all staff. A revised staff handbook should include specific information about everything from playground rules to safety team guidelines. Specific protocol regarding behavioral disruptions, especially those of an extreme or chronic nature, must be devised. Team responsibilities should be shared with teachers when possible, to relieve EA's of the burden and liability associated with a task well beyond their pay grade, training and job description. School administrators have the final authority and should have the means to compel parents of highly disruptive children to effectively partner with the school to address these needs. The district must develop an explicit policy regarding school safety teams and union approved protocol.

### **Areas of Inquiry:**

Yoga, mindfulness and breathing techniques in the classroom. Use of art/play therapy in school settings. Parent Training and education. Relationship mapping strategies.

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**Appendix A**  
***Behavior Research Survey***

How many years experience do you have teaching?

How has the frequency of disruptive behaviors in your school/district changed over the last 3 years?

1. Significantly fewer now
2. Fewer now
3. No change
4. More now
5. Significantly more now

In the past three years, how often would you say that behavioral issues have affected you and/or the students in your classroom?

1. Almost Never
2. Rarely
3. Occasionally
4. Frequently
5. Daily

In this same time frame, how disruptive have behavioral issues been to your teaching and student learning?

1. Not at all
2. Minimally
3. Somewhat
4. Very
5. Extremely

What percentage of your student population would you say exhibits disruptive behavior?

Do you feel that your education adequately prepared you in terms of disruptive behavior and classroom management? What do you think new teachers need in order to be prepared and successful in these areas?

<i>HOW OFTEN DO YOU SEE THE FOLLOWING BEHAVIORS?</i>	Rarely	Occasionally	Often	Frequently- Several times a week	Very Frequently- Daily
Tantrums/ oppositional defiance					
Emotional disconnect/ unresponsiveness					
Bullying other students					
Eloping/running					
Verbal abuse or threats toward another student					
Physical aggression toward another student					
Verbal abuse or threats toward teacher/staff					
Physical aggression toward teacher/staff					

To what degree do you think each of the following factors contribute to increased occurrence of disruptive behavior? Please rate each factor. (A lot, a little etc.)

- Family history of trauma
- Underlying/untreated mental health issues
- Generational changes in parenting
- Inadequate free play or recreation
- Overexposure to electronic devices
- Increased academic pressure
- Decreased funding for education
- Other (please elaborate)

Does your district have an explicit District-Wide protocol for managing behavioral disruptions?  
 \_\_\_ yes \_\_\_ no \_\_\_ not sure

Does your school have an explicit School-Wide protocol for managing behavioral disruptions? \_\_\_ yes \_\_\_ no \_\_\_ not sure

On a scale of 1-10, how well supported do you feel by your school in managing disruptive behavior? In what ways do you feel supported, or not?

<i>HAVE YOU RECEIVED TRAINING IN THE FOLLOWING?</i>	YES	NO	NOT SURE
Social Emotional Learning (SEL)			
Conflict De-escalation strategies			
Trauma informed care principle			
Restorative practices			
Positive Behavioral Intervention & Supports (PBIS)			

Do you feel that you have all the training/skills you need to handle escalated behavior in your classroom? What kind of training(s) would you like to have?

Do you feel that adequate and timely supports and services are available for students in your classroom who demonstrate higher than average needs? Why or why not? What are the barriers to accessing these things?

In the last three years, safety calls have been increasingly frequent. What is your experience with the Safety Team? Do you know what to call for and what to expect when someone comes? Are you aware of what sort of protocol is followed before, during or after? Are there any unintended consequences from the way the Safety Team operates? (ie. bells going off all the other time, students being stigmatized for behavior...)

Do you think that school-wide de-escalation training could help manage disruptive behavior and keep EA's in the classroom to which they are assigned? Why or why not.

What other ways can we reduce or prevent chronic Safety Team calls and ensure that classrooms who are assigned EA's get the adult support they need?

Are there any trends you see in the behavior, social and/or emotional skills and general readiness of incoming students?

What advice would you give to parents about things they can do at home to help their kids be ready to learn, especially those who have a hard time self-regulating and managing their own behavior and emotions?

If money were not an issue, what programs, supports or personnel do you think would help address the trend toward increasingly disruptive behavior in schools? What can we do with the funds or resources that we do have access to?



