Best Practices for Addressing Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Issues

This summary of Nathan Levenson's best practices for improving social, emotional, and behavioral supports for students appeared in The Marshall Memo *on November 6, 2017. The source article, "Improving and Expanding Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Supports: 10 Best Practices," was originally published in* The District Management Journal, *Fall 2017 (Vol. 22, p.10-27).*

In this article in *District Management Journal*, Nathan Levenson says principals and teachers he works with are reporting an increase in the number of students coming to school with significant social, emotional, and behavioral problems. When these needs are not addressed, they create disruptions in classrooms, undermine learning, and put great stress on educators, contributing to teacher and administrator attrition.

Districts across the country are investing in curriculum, programs, and additional staff to address these issues, and some are getting a much bigger bang for their buck than others. What's the difference? Levenson and his colleagues conducted a thorough investigation and came up with ten practices that maximize the impact of existing staff, focus on prevention, and get the most from outside expertise:

Make the best use of the talent, expertise, and time of current staff.

Before investing in additional staff, says Levenson, "schools and districts can first take steps to ensure that teachers, psychologists, social workers, behaviorists, counselors, and others are able to effectively use their talents and time to do the most good for the most children." The biggest challenges are paperwork and meetings. The most effective schools:

1. STREAMLINE MEETINGS AND PAPERWORK TO INCREASE TIME WITH STUDENTS.

The average social worker is with students 32 percent of the school week, but some manage to spend 66 percent of their time with students. Similarly, most school psychologists spend 14 percent of their time counseling students, but some spend more than 30 percent. It can take 3.5 days to complete a special-education evaluation, but some psychologists need only 1.5 days.

Levenson and his colleagues have analyzed every step educators take creating an IEP and attending

meetings. The most efficient schools set targets for boosting student contact time and reducing non-student hours in several ways:

- Pre-meetings of teams are not necessary for students with simpler diagnoses.
- Sharing reports in advance is not always necessary.
- Certain psychological assessments aren't needed for every IEP.
- Psychologists don't have to attend every IEP, RTI, and staff meeting.
- The same is true for other service providers' attendance at IEP and staff meetings.

All this significantly increases time with students without pushing paperwork into evenings and weekends. Streamlining can save as much as two hours of professional time a week.

2. ASSIGN ROLES BASED ON STRENGTHS, NOT TITLES.

In one school, a psychologist was assigned to coordinate the PBIS program, despite having no formal training in behavior management. People assumed she was "good at everything" and didn't ask about specific strengths. Levenson recommends that service providers be surveyed to identify the areas in which they have the most training and experience, including:

- Academics (reading, English, math)
- Supporting students with challenging behaviors
- Counseling
- Substance abuse and addiction work
- Case management
- IEP assessments
- Scheduling paraprofessionals and other staff
- Managing outside partners

"While many staff have multiple strengths," says Levenson, "it is unrealistic to think all staff are equally skilled in all of these areas. When administrators allow staff to identify their areas of expertise and then match job responsibilities to their skills, both students and staff can benefit."

3. STRENGTHEN TEAMWORK THROUGH COMMON PLANNING TIME.

In many schools, there are very few opportunities for administrators, guidance counselors, school psychologists, social workers, special-education teachers, behaviorists, classroom teachers, and paraprofessionals to discuss students they're working with. Yet this kind of cross-disciplinary meeting is essential to share insights, monitor progress, and serve students effectively. Levenson recommends that schools build their schedules around "sacrosanct" times once or twice a week when it's possible to convene staff working with particular students.

4. PROVIDE BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT SUPPORT TO TEACHERS IN THEIR CLASSROOMS.

Too much is being asked of front-line teachers with behaviorally challenging students, says Levenson. "What classroom teachers want, deserve, and need is in-the-classroom support from staff skilled in behavior management," he says. "Such support includes hours-long observation of students; leading conversations with students to help identify triggers; observations of the student, class, and teacher after the behavior strategies have been set; and acting as a parent liaison at times as well."

Focus on prevention.

5. IDENTIFY AND MANAGE BEHAVIORAL TRIGGERS.

Levenson tells the story of a first grader in a suburban school who periodically screamed ugly insults at his teacher, threw scissors and other objects, and ran out of the classroom. The boy's teacher and principal had disciplined the boy numerous times and worked with his parents, and had reached their limit. They demanded that this student be removed from the school and sent to an out-of-district placement. But the superintendent brought in a behavioral specialist who observed the boy and figured out that he exploded when he felt embarrassed – even when the embarrassment was subtle, like being given a hint to answer a question. Once the teacher understood the trigger and adjusted her approach, the boy improved dramatically and was able to be successful in the district.

6. INCREASE ACCESS TO STAFF WITH EXPERTISE IN BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT.

"Some teachers and special educators may have a knack for identifying triggers," says Levenson, "but few have formal training." It's important for schools to have access to educators with this highly specialized and valuable skill. Districts should be on the lookout for opportunities to bring such people on board when vacancies occur. Effective behavior specialists will reduce severe problems and make it possible to economize on one-on-one paraprofessionals, shifting those funds to specialists and other resources. Levenson also recommends having a small, highly skilled district-wide team to do initial planning for the most challenging students and share insights and support across schools.

7. DON'T LET DISCIPLINE POLICIES CREATE MORE DISCIPLINE PROBLEMS.

A fair and comprehensive discipline code has these basic provisions:

- It ensures student and teacher safety.
- It has consistent expectations from classroom to classroom.
- Suspensions are used as a last resort and not for nonviolent infractions.
- It minimizes loss of learning time.
- It mitigates for unconscious bias.
- It is applied similarly regardless of race, gender, or school.

But a discipline code should not be so rigid that it can't account for individual prevention efforts and behavior management plans – for example, a student walking to a time-out space without a pass being disciplined by an overly rigid assistant principal.

8. STAY FOCUSED ON ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT.

"Too many 'behavior programs' seem to undervalue the importance of academic learning and student achievement," says Levenson. Behaviorally challenged students are often academically able, and if they sense that teachers believe they're not, that can be a trigger. The key is figuring out and addressing behavioral issues as quickly and effectively as possible and then providing rigorous academic instruction with general education teachers.

Seek and support outside expertise.

9. NURTURE PARTNERSHIPS.

Local mental health agencies, nonprofit counseling services, and universities can often provide social and emotional services at little or no cost, waiving copays and deductibles and billing students' insurance for services. Levenson cites a 5,000student district that was able to leverage over $1 million in counseling services a year for almost no cost. In addition, outside agencies might address areas in which the district doesn't have in-house expertise – body image issues, alcohol and substance abuse, dealing with trauma, summer and school vacation coverage, and coaching district staff on best practices.

10. SUPPORT AND COORDINATE LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS.

Small problems can become dealbreakers with external partners, says Levenson – for example, a counselor showing up at a school and finding that someone else is in the room he was scheduled to use. To get the most out of partnerships, says Levenson, schools need "a dedicated point person who has time to manage, communicate, and smooth over the inevitable bumps in the road."

Specifically:

- Providing counseling space inside schools
- Providing an online room calendar to avoid double-booking
- Scheduling services on a five-day cycle, even if the school's master schedule isn't on that cycle
- Placing services into student schedules
- Introducing outside partners to all school-based staff
- Inviting partners to faculty, department, and other key meetings
- Checking in weekly by phone, and monthly in person, with each provider
- Having a single point of contact.

About the Expert

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Nathan Levenson has spent the last 25 years working to improve the lives of and outcomes for students. He brings a unique perspective to this mission, having served as a school superintendent, school board member, and consultant to over 250 districts in more than 30 states and around the world.

Nate is a frequent speaker and widely recognized expert on the topic of improving social, emotional, and behavioral supports cost-effectively, and he is the author of numerous books, including *Six Shifts to Improve Special Education and Other Interventions: A Commonsense Approach for School Leaders*.