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SLIIDEA: Positive Approaches for Addressing Behavioral Issues

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Introduction

When Congress passed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1997, it authorized an evaluation to track progress at the state and local levels on the legislative goals of IDEA. The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) commissioned a national longitudinal study, the Study of State and Local Implementation and Impact of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (SLIIDEA), toward that end. SLIIDEA was tasked with investigating the following nine topics of congressional interest:

- improving the performance of children with disabilities in general scholastic activities and assessments;
- providing for the participation of children with disabilities in the general curriculum;
- helping children with disabilities make effective transitions from preschool to school and from school to work;
- increasing the placement of children with disabilities, including minority children, in the least restrictive environment;
- decreasing the numbers of children with disabilities who drop out of school;
- increasing the use of effective strategies for addressing behavioral problems of children with disabilities;
- improving coordination of the services provided under the reauthorization with other pupil services and with health and social services;
- reducing the number of disagreements between educational personnel and parents; and
- increasing the participation of parents in the education of their children with disabilities.

This document synthesizes information from SLIIDEA pertaining to increasing the use of positive approaches for addressing behavioral issues of students with individualized education programs (IEPs), as reflected in a comparison of the 1999-2000 data to 2002-2003 data. This synthesis brief was completed by Project Forum at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education Directors (NASDSE) as part of its cooperative agreement with OSEP.¹

¹ Project Forum extends its thanks to Abt Associates staff, including Julie Fritts and Ellen Schiller, Senior Associate of SLIIDEA, for reviewing a previous draft of this document.

Methodology of SLIIDEA Study

In the 1999-2000, 2002-03 and 2003-04 school years, surveys were sent to key personnel responsible for or familiar with special education issues in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, and a nationally representative sample of 959 districts and 4,448 schools at the elementary, middle and high school levels. Project Forum's document synthesizes the SLIIDEA chapter, "Increasing the Use of Positive Approaches for Addressing Behavioral Issues of Students with IEPs," (Schiller, Bobronnikov, O'Reilly, Price & St. Pierre, 2005).

Background

Recently, educator and public concern about the prevention of violence has led to tougher discipline codes, many of which rely heavily on suspensions and expulsions as behavior management tools (Skiba, Peterson & Williams, 1997). Education policy reforms, such as the Gun Free Schools Act of 1994 and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 introduce serious consequences to schools for students' inappropriate or dangerous behavior in school. These changes coincide with significant changes in student population, including increasing diversity of student populations in schools and growing numbers of students entering schools with limited family supports, significant learning or behavior problems and a need for support and assistance (Sugai, et al., 2000; Schiller, et al., 2002).

The 1997 amendments to IDEA required schools to assess troubling behavior of students with disabilities and to develop positive interventions to address that behavior. In the case of students with disabilities who are subject to serious disciplinary action, such as extended periods of removal from school, schools were required to conduct a functional behavioral assessment (FBA) and develop or revise a behavioral intervention plan. Research and best practice supports the use of FBAs in broader practice to prevent and address problem behavior.

SLIIDEA presents findings on schools' use of positive approaches for addressing the behavioral issues of students with IEPs and the policies and resources used by states and districts to support these practices (Schiller et al., 2005).

Descriptive Profile of the 2002-03 School Year

Progress Toward Goals

Four types of practices that address the challenging behaviors of students with disabilities are:

- use of systemic and individualized positive behavioral approaches;
- availability of staff resources from inside and outside the school to support staff to use positive approaches;
- special and general education teacher professional development to use positive behavioral approaches and corresponding teacher preparedness; and

- use of suspensions and expulsions as a disciplinary tool for students classified with emotional disabilities.

States, districts and schools were asked whether they were just beginning to make progress, were making satisfactory progress or had reached or almost reached their goals in the past 12 months toward (1) increasing the use of positive approaches for addressing behavioral issues of students with IEPs; and (2) decreasing disciplinary actions for students with IEPs. Survey findings indicate that:

- One-half or more of all states, districts and schools reported that they had made satisfactory progress toward the goals of increased use of positive behavior approaches and decreased disciplinary actions for students with IEPs.
- About one-half of the schools surveyed used positive classroom and schoolwide behavioral approaches to a great extent in order to address students with disabilities' challenging behaviors.

Systemic and Individualized Positive Behavioral Approaches

School-Wide Behavior Plans

School-wide behavior plans include the use of the following strategies or programs to some extent: classroom-level behavior management approaches, school-wide behavior management approaches, counseling, individual behavior management plans, social skills training, crisis intervention skills, FBAs and student conflict resolution strategies.

- Almost all schools used school-wide behavior management approaches with nearly half of schools using them *to a large extent* for students with disabilities who consistently exhibited behavior problems.
- In addition to school-wide approaches, almost all schools reported using classroom-level behavior management approaches, including just over one-half of all reporting schools using them *to a large extent*.
- Student conflict resolution strategies were the least likely strategy to be used, with one quarter of schools not using these strategies at all.

Functional Behavioral Assessments

FBAs systematically identify problem behaviors as well as events that trigger and maintain those behaviors.

- Most schools reported using FBAs, with just under one-quarter using them *to a large extent*.
- Almost one-half of schools use individual behavior management plans *to a large extent* to address behavior problems presented by students with disabilities.

Multiple Strategies and Programs

More than one-half of schools reported using all of the following strategies or programs *to some extent* (small, moderate or large) but almost none reported that they used all of these *to a large extent*:

- classroom-level behavior management approaches;
- school-wide behavior management approaches;
- counseling;
- individual behavior management plans;
- social skills training;
- crisis intervention skills;
- FBAs; and
- student conflict resolution strategies.

Staff Resources to Support Positive Approaches

More than two-thirds of all schools had access to staff resources that focused on behavioral issues of students with IEPs. Seventy percent of schools reported that staff, other than the principal, had specific responsibility for developing or implementing positive approaches for addressing the behavioral issues of students with IEPs.

Professional Development to Use Positive Behavioral Approaches

Proportionally, more special education teachers than general education teachers participated in professional development in the use of positive approaches for addressing the behavioral issues of students with IEPs and were reported by schools to be well-prepared to use these approaches. Professional development activities were focused on six positive behavior approaches:

- FBAs;
- school-wide behavior management;
- classroom-level behavior management;
- individual behavior management plans;
- behavioral goals for IEPs; and
- student conflict resolution.

Across all approaches, special education teachers were more likely to participate in professional development activities than general education teachers.

Suspensions, Expulsions and Discipline

- The majority of schools reported suspending and expelling students with emotional disturbances or behavior disorders at the same or lower rate than students without disabilities.

- States and districts relied most heavily on written policies for discipline of students with disabilities and to a lesser extent on written guidelines for positive approaches. Districts were considerably more likely than states to provide schools with all three types of written guidelines, these being guidelines for disciplining students with IEPs, for students without IEPs and on the use of positive behavioral approaches. In the 12 months prior to the survey, only two percent of states and two percent of districts reported rewarding districts and schools on the basis of their suspension and expulsion rates, and less than one percent of districts and no states based sanctions on these rates. Even fewer based their decisions on students with IEPs. However, many states and districts provided resources to schools through training or technical assistance on this topic.
- More than one-half of all states and one-fourth of all districts reported disaggregated data on suspension and expulsion rates for students with disabilities.

Demographic Profiles of Districts and Schools That Took Action

In this section, the demographic characteristics of the districts and schools that took action to increase the use of positive approaches for addressing the behavioral issues of students with IEPs is described. Demographic factors explained some of the variation in district and school responses.

- Small- and medium-sized schools were more likely than large schools to report that their general education and special education teachers were well prepared.
- Large districts were more likely than medium and small districts to provide resources to schools based on the number or percentage of students with IEPs who have been suspended or expelled and to provide professional development to schools on positive behavior approaches for students with disabilities.
- Urban districts were more likely than suburban and rural districts to provide resources to schools based on the number or percentage of students with IEPs who have been suspended or expelled.
- Districts offering resources to address behavioral issues were more often districts with a medium or large enrollment of minority students than districts with fewer minority students.
- School use of strategies to address consistent behavioral problems of students with IEPs was associated with school demographics. Larger schools were more likely than smaller schools, and middle schools were more likely than elementary and high schools to have used all eight strategies or programs.
- School reports on the preparedness of their teachers were related to school demographics. Small- and medium-sized schools were more likely than large schools to report that their general education teachers were well prepared to use positive approaches for addressing the behavior of students with and without IEPs and to report that their special education teachers were well prepared to use positive approaches for addressing behavior issues of students with IEPs. Schools serving small and moderate percentages of minority students were more likely than schools serving large percentages of minority students to use positive approaches for addressing the behavior of students with IEPs.

Changes between the 1999-2000 and 2002-03 School Years

The following section discusses the extent to which the ability to discipline students has changed from 1999-2000 to 2002-2003. Particularly, schools were asked about their ability to discipline students with disabilities who presented challenging, disruptive or dangerous behaviors and what factors, if any, limited the school's ability to appropriately discipline students with disabilities (Schiller, et al., 2002).

There was a slight decline from the 1999-00 to the 2002-03 school years in the ability of schools to adequately and appropriately discipline their students with disabilities.

When asked about the factors that limited their ability to discipline students with disabilities, schools reported that the same five factors that limited their ability to discipline students during the 1999-00 school year still limited their efforts in the 2002-03 school year. These include:

- lack of or inadequate alternative placements;
- lack of parental support for school policies;
- federal policies on disciplining students;
- inadequate funds; and
- state policies on disciplining students.

Three other factors related to teachers that seemed to increase from the 1999-00 to 2002-03 school years but did not limit the ability of schools to discipline students with disabilities included:²

- teachers' fear of student reprisal;
- lack of teacher support for school policies; and
- teacher contracts.³

Another factor was the inconsistent application of school policies.

Relationships Between Actions and Outcomes

This section reports on whether actions taken by states and districts are likely to be associated with district and school outcomes. District actions and school resources were associated with increased likelihood that schools reported their special education teachers were well prepared to use positive approaches for addressing the behavior issues of students with IEPs.

- Districts that provided written guidelines to schools on the use of positive behavioral approaches were more likely to report providing eight hours or more of in-service professional development on similar topics.

² There were few respondents to these questions, therefore conclusions must be made tentatively.

³ The concerns regarding contracts were not detailed in the original report.

- Districts that received state resources for increasing the use of positive approaches for addressing behavioral issues of students with IEPs were considerably more likely to provide at least eight hours of professional development than districts that did not receive state resources.
- Schools in which more teachers participated in professional development to increase the use of positive behavioral supports were more likely to report that their general education teachers were well prepared to use positive behavioral approaches.
- There was a positive relationship between school reports of well-prepared general education teachers and whether the school provided workshops or discussions or support groups for parents on using interventions for students with IEPs who have behavioral issues.

Three other types of school resources were significant predictors of whether a school reported their special education teachers were well prepared:

- Schools in which more special education teachers received professional development on the use of positive behavioral supports were considerably more likely than other schools to report their special education teachers were well prepared to use positive approaches for addressing the behavioral issues of students with IEPs. District provision of at least eight hours of professional development also had a positive association with preparedness of special education teachers.
- Schools that used additional funds to increase the use of positive approaches for addressing behavioral issues for students with disabilities were more likely to report that their special education teachers were well prepared to use positive approaches for addressing the behavioral issues of students with IEPs.
- Schools that provided workshops or discussion or support groups for parents on using interventions for students with IEPs who have behavioral issues were more than twice as likely to report that their special education teachers were well prepared to use positive approaches for addressing the behavioral issues of students with IEPs.

State, district and school actions (i.e., provision of written guidelines on the use of positive behavioral supports, district provision of at least eight hours of professional development and general and special education teacher participation in professional development regarding positive behavioral supports) had positive associations with schools' reported use of school-wide behavior management strategies. These same state, district and school actions had positive associations with the likelihood that schools reported using FBAs to a large extent.

Summary

States, districts and schools were more likely to use positive behavioral approaches if written policies and additional resources were available for special and general education teacher training and parent training and support. In general, positive behavioral approaches were applied schoolwide and at the classroom level and included multiple strategies. States and districts can

increase the positive outcomes of positive behavioral strategies by increasing the access to high quality professional development activities for all educators.

Primary Reference

Schiller, E., Bobronnikov, E., O'Reilly, F., Price, C., & St. Pierre, R. (2005). Increasing the use of positive approaches for addressing behavioral issues of students with IEPs. In *The Study of State and Local Implementation and Impact of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act: Final 2nd Interim Report (2002-2003 School Year)*. Bethesda, MD: Abt Associates.

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