**[A problem with success](http://smartblogs.com/education/2013/07/02/a-problem-with-success/" \o "A problem with success)**

By [Jim Dillon](http://smartblogs.com/tag/Jim-Dillon) on July 2nd, 2013 | [Comments(3)](http://smartblogs.com/education/2013/07/02/a-problem-with-success/)

16  
[inShare](javascript:void(0);)

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports — PBIS — has become a permanent, organizing structure for more and more schools. For schools where behavior problems take time and energy away from teaching and learning, PBIS can be a “lifesaver” bringing stability and order to an often chaotic school environment.

In many of these schools, punishments, threats, yelling and inconsistent reactions to student behavior often become the norm for responding to student misbehavior. For schools stuck in these negative patterns of behavior, PBIS can start to turn things around.

Here is how PBIS provides order and predictability to the school:

* Eliminates harsh, thoughtless and emotional responses to student misbehavior
* Provides consistent and positive ways for adults to respond to student behavior
* Changes the focus from what students should NOT do to what they should do
* Makes sure that students learn and practice positive behaviors
* Clarifies the expectation for appropriate behavior for a variety of school situations
* Provides a method for measuring, monitoring and evaluating progress
* Makes sure that positive, cooperative behavior gets the most attention

In short, the order and stability that PBIS can provide for some schools can be a necessary first step for meaningful school improvement. To use a medical analogy, it does a good job of “stopping the bleeding” or providing emergency room care. My concern however is that instead of becoming a starting point for schools in trouble, it becomes the final solution for many schools. PBIS can be like triage for schools in crisis, but who would want triage to the solution to long-term health and wellness?

Once a school has “stabilized,” it has a responsibility to build on its positive accomplishment. Schools that have been successful with PBIS should challenge themselves to change not just how they handle behavior, but to examine how they educate their students.

The best schools have courage to ask themselves questions like:

* Would students misbehave if the content of their lessons was more engaging and meaningful to them?
* Would students misbehave if the teachers established more trusting and supportive relationships with them?
* Would students misbehave if the teachers used instructional methods that allowed more student interaction and physical movement instead of long periods of sitting and listening?
* Would students misbehave if they had more choice in what they were learning?
* Is it our goal for the students to comply with the rules of the school? Or is it to help learn how to make wise decisions in situations that are not covered by the rules when there are no adults around to supervise?
* What is the type of environment that students need to be successful in the 21st century world outside of school?

To go beyond just settling for order and stability, schools need to develop a learning environment that focuses on three key interrelated areas:

**1. Autonomy/Agency**: Students who feel like they can act to meet their needs and achieve their goals, learn more than those who feel like their behavior is externally determined. The best opportunity for developing a sense of autonomy/agency is in solving problems. PBIS runs the risk of sending the wrong message to students that problems are aberrations and the goal of school should smooth sailing with everybody following the rules and doing what the teachers say.

**2. Belonging:** Since learning to get along with others is an essential life skill, schools should emphasize the importance of community in addition to individual achievement. Social support only enhances individual learning anyway.  This sense of belonging and commitment to the common good will help students develop a moral compass that will guide them throughout their life.

**3. Competency:** Students are “works in progress” where mistakes and problems are an integral part of learning. They will ultimately come to value learning for its own sake when they experience the gratification of always getting better, i.e.  learning from mistakes. They will learn more and love learning when they become “hooked” on the learning process.

Think of an optimal learning experience and these areas were present: You felt that like you were in charge, you had social support and it was safe to make mistakes and learn from them. PBIS can be of value if it can help schools take an important first step toward this optimal learning. Educators, not programs, have the responsibility to educate students beyond just getting them to behave.

*Jim Dillon (*[*@dillon\_jim*](https://twitter.com/dillon_jim)*) has been an educator for over 35 years including twenty as a school administrator. He is currently the director of the Center for Leadership and Bullying Prevention. He has written two books, Peaceful School Bus (Hazelden) and No Place for Bullying (Corwin). He writes a blog at* [*www.jim-dillon.com*](http://www.jim-dillon.com)*.*