Marshall Street

Conclusion

ANCHORING EMOTIONS

A collection of research-to-impact practices developed with the Networked Improvement Community for Students with Disabilities

Conclusion

Black and Latinx students with disabilities who are experiencing poverty sit at the intersection of three of the most pervasive systemic barriers to a high-quality education in the United States. Add this reality to the fact that students of color are disproportionately identified as having emotional disabilities[1] that lead to their placement in restrictive learning environments away from their peers, it is clear that this specific population of students faces significant obstacles before even entering the school building. Furthermore, the **school-to-prison pipeline** is well documented by the ACLU and others and disproportionately affects students with emotional support needs based on their over-suspension and expulsion.[2] It is clear that, while there is no one-stop solution to this problem, schools need to be taking steps to ask themselves, "How can we best serve our students?" and perhaps more importantly, "Which of our students are we failing to serve at all?"

Mastery Schools recognized these problems and created the Anchor program — a comprehensive therapeutic support program for students who receive supplemental emotional support. Students in the Anchor program receive an individualized functional behavior assessment and positive behavior support plan as well as supports that may include, but are not limited to, an emotional support classroom, access to a clinician and classroom counselor, individual therapy, group therapy, and communication with the school social work team and outside mental health service providers.[3] When Mastery joined the Marshall Street Networked Improvement Community for Students with Disabilities (NIC), they set out to refine the program and expand it to more schools within their own network, and to disseminate it broadly to further the reach of its impact. This collection highlights the work that Mastery's Anchor program did within the NIC and the promise Mastery and Marshall observed in pilot efforts between 2019 and 2023.



The improvement team at Mastery's Simon Gratz High School, one of the 25 schools in the Mastery network, pushed themselves to consider how students in the Anchor program were situated within the larger school community. By joining the NIC, the Anchor team set out to explore how they could create school-wide programmatic supports to significantly increase student attendance rates and decrease suspension rates for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities, ensuring this group of students had equitable access to their education. This collection identifies two best practices that support students with emotional and behavioral disabilities in the general education setting: **Building Student Leaders: Peer-to-Peer Mentorship for Secondary Students** and **Providing Timely Behavioral Feedback Across Classrooms**. There are also two case studies, **Maximizing Student Progress Through Data-Informed Systems** and **Refining Program Implementation via Quarterly Collaborative Evaluation at Mastery Schools**.

The improvement team at Gratz focused on practices that would increase attendance and decrease multi-day suspensions for the students in their program. They hypothesized that they could achieve these outcomes by increasing students' sense of belonging to the school community, working with staff to unpack biases, adjusting school policies that deal with how suspensions are approved, and explicitly teaching coping skills and strategies to students with academic and behavioral needs. In 2019, prior to participating in the NIC, only 37% of students in Anchor had 90% attendance rates, compared to 71% of general education students. By June of 2023, after careful implementation and adjustment of these strategies, that number had increased from 37% to 63%. Over the same time period, the students in Anchor who were suspended one or more days decreased from 76% to 40%, and the average suspension duration decreased from 3.8 days to 1.5 days. Mastery's impact continues to trend positively, showing further improvements in the first semester of the 2023–24 school year in attendance rates and ongoing reduction in days of suspensions for students in Anchor.

Though the Anchor program is comprehensive, the practices that Mastery has implemented are accessible to schools and networks of all sizes and could be put into place individually rather than all at once. When done well, each of these practices can lead to positive outcomes for students with disabilities and for the overall student population. Considering the key lever of ensuring that all students feel a sense of belonging and that this target population spends at least some time away from the general education setting, implementing peer-to-peer mentorship is a way to build important connections, foster a sense of community, and support leadership growth for mentors. Additionally, explicitly teaching behavioral skills throughout the year can lead to life-long learnings that are transferable across groups and settings. As one student in the Anchor program shared, "Here I can be motivated to do the right thing… When my non-Anchor peers get in trouble, I tell them to use the things [our counselor] tells us, like calm down and get water or something… I think I will still use what Anchor is teaching me throughout my life."

Key Takeaways

IT IS POSSIBLE TO SERVE STUDENTS WITH EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL DISABILITIES IN NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOLS.

Too often, schools push out students with emotional and behavioral disabilities to more restrictive settings. Yet Anchor demonstrates that many of these students can thrive in traditional schools alongside their peers. When schools rethink their policies and interventions to maximize inclusion – and educators embrace aligned mindsets, habits, and beliefs – it is possible to create an environment that sets up students with emotional and behavioral disabilities for success.

DATA IS A KEY LEVER IN SUCCESSFULLY SUPPORTING STUDENTS.

The use of timely, relevant data is crucial in ensuring that all students are receiving the support that they need. Too often, schools fall into the trap of infrequent monitoring and static support, leaving students stuck at a support level that no longer meets their needs. By using shorter data cycles and fluid resource allocation, schools can ensure that their model fits their students, instead of trying to force all students into a pre-existing model. As students' quantitative and qualitative data demonstrate progress, they can be gradually integrated into less restrictive environments within their neighborhood school setting.

CHANGING THE CULTURE CAN DISRUPT THE STATUS QUO.

The school-to-prison pipeline is pervasive and disproportionately affects students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. Only by shifting the culture of how we see and treat students can we begin to disrupt the status quo. Programs that focus on acknowledging and eliminating bias in classroom discipline, policies that favor additional support rather than longer suspensions, and mentorship programs that encourage students to attend school more frequently are all ways that schools can begin to change this culture.

The practices laid out in this collection are examples of how a school has dedicated time, personnel, and resources to addressing inequity within its community.

Not all schools will be able to make all of these shifts, especially considering the multitude of challenges that each individual school faces. However, it is crucial that schools push themselves to ensure that each of their students is being supported and that students' needs are being addressed regardless of what has been done in the past. Perhaps that looks like using data more frequently in evaluating the level of support students receive. Perhaps it involves mentorship. Or perhaps this collection provides inspiration for a new program. Start by asking, "Which of our students are we failing to serve?" and then make a plan for how to start.

Appendix

Notes

1 Grindal et al., “Racial Differences”

2 Achilles, Mclaughlin, and Croninger, “Sociocultural Correlates”; Anderson, “The Relationship between Inclusion, Absenteeism, and Disciplinary Outcomes”; Bowman-Perrott et al., “Patterns and Predictors”

3 Mastery Schools, “Specialized Services”

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