

Suspended Progress: 5 Proven Interventions & Alternatives

#1: MyTeachingPartner

Supportive teacher-student relationships and effective teacher-student interactions are essential to preventing misbehavior.¹ MyTeachingPartner (MTP) is a system of professional development designed to improve teacher-student interactions and student engagement.² MTP provides online resources and activities, coaching, and video feedback for teachers.³ See Figure 1.

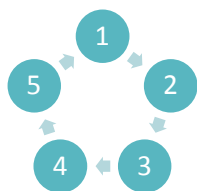


Figure 1: The MTP cycle⁴

- 1) The teacher videotapes himself or herself in the classroom.
- 2) The consultant reviews the video, selects clips, and drafts reflection prompts.
- 3) The teacher reviews the clips and responds to the prompts.
- 4) The teacher and consultant meet to discuss teaching practices.
- 5) The teacher and consultant develop an action plan.

The MTP coaching model uses the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) to provide teachers with regular and rigorous feedback about their behavior in the classroom and interactions with students. Teachers are evaluated in three domains: emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support. See Figure 2.

Figure 2: Theoretical model of the CLASS – Secondary (*i.e.*, CLASS in middle and high schools)⁵

Domain	Dimensions	Description
Emotional Support	Positive climate	The emotional tone of the classroom (<i>e.g.</i> , warmth and connection among teachers and students)
	Teacher sensitivity	The teacher’s responsiveness to academic, social, and emotional needs of students
	Regard for adolescent perspectives	The extent to which the teacher offers leadership, autonomy, and content relevance to students
	Negative climate	The level of expressed negativity (<i>e.g.</i> , irritability, frustration, and anger)
Classroom Organization	Behavior management	The teacher’s use of effective methods to encourage desirable behavior and redirect misbehavior
	Productivity	The teacher’s management of time to maximize instruction
	Instructional learning formats	The teacher’s provision of interesting, varied lessons, and materials
Instructional Support	Content understanding	The depth of lesson content and integration of facts, skills, concepts, and principles
	Analysis and inquiry	The degree to which the teacher facilitates higher level thinking skills, problem-solving, and metacognition
	Quality of feedback	The provision of feedback that expands or extends learning and understanding

Studies of MTP have found statistically significant beneficial effects tied to positive classroom climate, teacher sensitivity, teacher regard for adolescent perspectives, instructional learning formats, and analysis and inquiry. Findings indicate benefits, across diverse classrooms, when it comes to student achievement, engagement, and prosocial peer relations.⁶

One randomized, controlled trial of MTP showed that MTP nearly eliminated racial discipline gaps. The study compared two sets of classrooms – one using MTP and one not using MTP. The study found that, on average, 13.7% of African American students and 5.1% of all other participating students in control teachers’ classrooms received at least one exclusionary discipline referral. In MTP teachers’ classrooms, 6.0% of African American students and 5.8% of all other participating students received at least one exclusionary discipline referral. The professors who conducted the study theorized that MTP reduces teachers’ reliance on exclusionary discipline, particularly with African American students, because it focuses on improving the quality of interactions and relationships between teachers and their students. With stronger relationships and more engaging instruction, negative interactions are more likely to be prevented in the first place. Then, if a student misbehaves, stronger relationships increase the likelihood that the student and teacher give each other the benefit of the doubt and disrupt any preconceived notions or unconsciously held stereotypes.⁷

#2: Social and Emotional Learning

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.⁸ See Figure 3.⁹ SEL programs are designed to create learning environments that meet the developmental needs of students, including feelings of belonging, safety, and community, and thus, provide ideal conditions for success across the domains of their lives – academics, relationships, personal, and later in the workforce.¹⁰ The social and emotional education of children may be provided through a variety of efforts, including as classroom instruction (*i.e.*, directly teaching skills), extracurricular activities, implementation of specific instructional and classroom-management practices, and involvement in community service.¹¹

Several hundred studies conducted using experimental designs with control groups have documented the positive effects of SEL programming on children of diverse backgrounds from preschool through high school in urban, suburban, and rural settings. The research clearly demonstrates that SEL programming significantly improves children’s academic performance on standardized tests. Moreover, compared to control groups, children who participate in SEL programs have less disruptive classroom behavior, perform better in school, and are less likely than children in control groups to be suspended or otherwise disciplined. These outcomes have been achieved through SEL’s positive impact on social relationships, school attachment, motivation to learn, and reducing anti-social, violent, and drug-using behaviors. Findings indicate that SEL programs with the best outcomes are multi-year in duration, use interactive rather than purely knowledge-based instructional methods, and are integrated into the life of the school rather than implemented as marginal add-ons.¹²

Rigorous experimental studies of several specific SEL structures demonstrate improvements regarding student behavior. They include empirical evaluations of PATHS (Providing Alternative THinking Strategies), Second Step, Steps to Respect, and Caring School Communities (formerly the Child Development Project). Significant findings include reductions in aggression and disruptive behavior, decreases in antisocial behavior, increases in socially competent behavior, and less bullying and argumentative behavior.¹³

A randomized clinical trial involving 198 classrooms using the PATHS and 180 comparison classrooms in four U.S. locations found, based on reports from students and observers, significant positive effects on behavior and classroom atmosphere – *e.g.*, less aggressive and disruptive behavior, and more rule following and on-task behavior.¹⁴

A different study evaluated the effects of the Second Step.¹⁵ Students in intervention and control groups were assessed by teacher ratings, self-reports, and observations. Children in groups participating in the Second Step program required less adult intervention and behaved less aggressively. Additional studies of Second Step – one using trained observers of preschool classrooms¹⁶ and one using elementary school playgrounds¹⁷ – found decreased levels of physically aggressive and disruptive behavior in children participating in the program. The playground observations also showed more positive social behaviors among participants relative to those in control schools. Middle and junior high school students reported that social-emotional skills were easier to perform after participating in Second Step, while their normative beliefs were less supportive of physical, verbal, and relational aggression than those of students in the comparison group.¹⁸

Figure 3: Five interrelated sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies



#3: Multi-Tiered System of Supports

Multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) is a framework that promotes school improvement through research-based academic and behavioral practices. To oversimplify, MTSS combines two frameworks:¹⁹ Response to Intervention (RTI)²⁰ and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS).²¹ RTI involves academic interventions, whereas PBIS involves behavioral interventions. MTSS typically involves three levels. See Figures 4 and 5. If implemented well, each level involves:

- A team-based approach (schools typically have a “leadership team,” which may also be the “child study team”);
- Staff professional development;
- Evidence-based strategies;
- Culturally relevant implementation;
- Frequent and continuous progress monitoring; and
- Data-based decision-making (*i.e.*, using data to decide when to move students between tiers, what interventions to attempt, etc.).

Figure 4: MTSS tiers

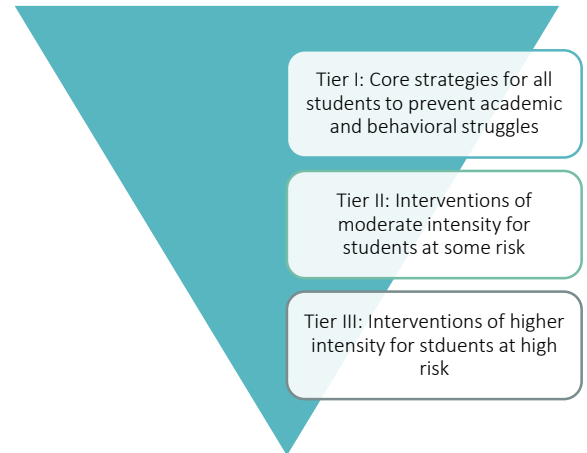


Figure 5: Examples of RTI and PBIS strategies

Tier	RTI Examples	PBIS Examples
I	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High-quality core instruction • Universal screenings of students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defining core behavioral expectations • Communicating and teaching what expected behaviors look like in various school settings • Effectively designing the physical environment of the classroom • Acknowledging and rewarding appropriate behavior • Establishing a consistent continuum of consequences for inappropriate behavior
II	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More instructional time • Small group instruction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased adult supervision • Increased instruction and practice with self-regulation and social skills • Increased antecedent manipulations (<i>i.e.</i>, changing the events, actions, or circumstances that occur immediately before a behavior)
III	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smaller group instruction • One-on-one assistance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Functional behavioral assessments (<i>i.e.</i>, a process used to determine why a student exhibits specific behaviors and how the environment influences those behaviors) • Individualized behavioral intervention plans • Wraparound supports that actively involve family and community supports

Research has shown that PBIS is effective in reducing the need for disciplinary action, improving school climate, and improving students’ academic, social, emotional, and behavioral health outcomes.²² A three-year, randomized study conducted in over 100 elementary schools in two states found that, overall, PBIS significantly improved social skills, decreased the amount of time and resources needed to address behavior problems, and resulted in higher test scores and academic achievement.²³ A study of 22 New Hampshire schools found that after only two years of implementation, 73% of PBIS schools had increased math scores on standardized tests. The schools also significantly lowered suspensions and disciplinary office referrals, allowing schools to recover hundreds of days of instructional time that had previously been lost to behavioral disruptions.²⁴ A five-year, longitudinal, randomized control study compared 21 Maryland schools trained in PBIS to 16 untrained schools, and found reductions in rates of suspension among the PBIS schools, whereas the rate in other schools remained unchanged.²⁵ A study of an urban elementary school found that, as a result of school-wide PBIS implementation, the annual rate of office disciplinary office referrals decreased by 562, and suspensions fell by 55 over a two-year period.²⁶

PBIS has produced similar positive results in Virginia. Since 2010, Virginia schools implementing Virginia Tiered Systems or Supports (VTSS) have experienced, on average, a 37% decrease in office discipline referrals, a 46% decrease in in-school suspensions, and a 21% decrease in out-of-school suspensions.²⁷ Higher PBIS fidelity of implementation correlated with fewer school disciplinary actions in Virginia.²⁸

#4: Threat Assessments

Threat assessment is a violence prevention strategy that involves: (a) identifying student threats to commit a violent act; (b) determining the seriousness of the threat; and (c) developing intervention plans that protect potential victims and address the underlying problem or conflict that stimulated the threatening behavior.²⁹ It emphasizes early attention to problems such as bullying, teasing, and other forms of student conflict before they escalate into violent behavior.

The Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines involve a seven-step decision-tree. See Figure 6. In brief, the first three steps constitute a triage process in which a team leader (e.g., the principal or assistant principal) investigates a reported threat and determines whether the threat can be readily resolved as a transient threat that is not serious. Examples of transient threats are jokes or statements made in anger that are expressions of feeling or figures of speech, rather than expressions of a genuine intent to harm someone. Any threat that cannot be clearly identified and resolved as transient is treated as a substantive threat.³⁰

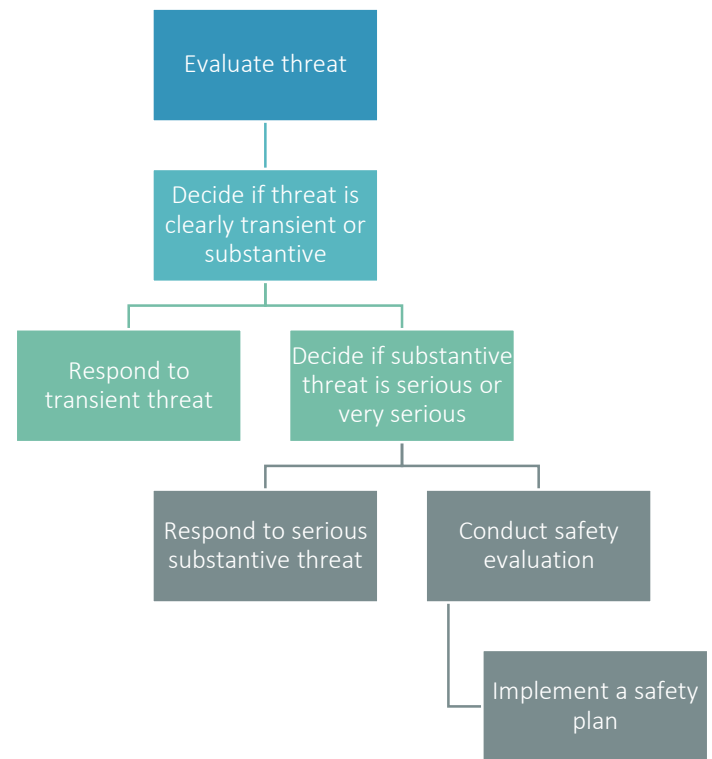
The remaining four steps guide the entire team through a more extensive assessment and response based on the seriousness of the threat. In the most serious cases, the team conducts a safety evaluation that can include both a law enforcement investigation and a mental health assessment of the student. The culmination of the threat assessment is the development of a safety plan that is designed to address the problem or conflict underlying the threat and prevent the act of violence from taking place. For both transient and substantive threats, there is an emphasis on helping students to resolve conflicts and minimizing the use of suspensions as a disciplinary response.³¹

A study published in 2009 examined the use of the Virginia Guidelines in 95 high schools compared to 131 schools using a locally developed threat assessment model and 54 schools not using a threat assessment approach. The study found that students in schools using the Virginia Guidelines reported less bullying, greater willingness to seek help for bullying and threats of violence, and more positive perceptions of the school climate than students in either of the other two groups of schools, and fewer long-term suspensions. Group differences could not be attributed to school size, minority composition or socio-economic status of the student body, neighborhood violent crime, or the extent of security measures in the schools, all of which were statistically controlled.³²

More recently, a study completed in 2015 compared 166 middle schools using the Virginia Guidelines to 119 schools not using threat assessment and 47 schools using an alternative model of threat assessment.³³ According to students in a statewide school climate survey, schools using the Virginia Guidelines had fairer discipline and lower levels of aggressive student behaviors. Teachers reported feeling safer in schools using the Virginia Guidelines. Additional analyses of school records found that the longer a school used the Virginia Guidelines, the lower its long-term suspension rates, the better its student reports of discipline fairness, and student aggressive behaviors. All analyses controlled for school size, minority composition, and socioeconomic status of the student body.

A report about Threat Assessment in Virginia during 2014-15 examined 1,985 threat assessments. The data revealed *no* racial disparities in outcomes among participating students, including suspension, expulsion rates, school transfer, arrests by law enforcement or incarceration in juvenile detention.³⁴

Figure 6: Virginia Model for Student Threat Assessment



#5: Restorative Practices

Broadly, restorative justice (RJ) is a philosophy, culture, and set of values. In the school discipline context, the U.S. Department of Education defines RJ practices as, “non-punitive disciplinary responses that focus on repairing harm done to relationships and people, developing solutions by engaging all persons affected by a harm, and accountability.” The RJ process generally involves the offender, victim, community (e.g., staff, family, and other students), and a facilitator, all of whom are sitting in a circle. See Figure 7. It proceeds in two steps: (1) a non-adversarial, facilitated dialogue about the harms and needs of participants; and (2) the development of a plan for how everyone involved will contribute to repairing the harm done, preventing future harm, and restoring relationships.

Examples of RJ processes include community conferencing, class meetings, peer juries, peer mediation, and circle processes. Examples of RJ outcomes are apologies, restitution, and community service. RJ processes can also be used for non-disciplinary reasons, such as for a teacher to introduce lesson plans, for a student to discuss a struggle she is having (e.g., worrying about an ill relative, witnessing violence, or facing peer pressure), or for discussing current events or controversial issues.

RJ has been used successfully in elementary, middle, and high schools across the country,³⁵ including in Baltimore,³⁶ Chicago,³⁷ Cleveland,³⁸ Denver,³⁹ Madison,⁴⁰ Minneapolis,⁴¹ New Orleans,⁴² New York,⁴³ Oakland,⁴⁴ Palm Beach,⁴⁵ Philadelphia,⁴⁶ Portland,⁴⁷ San Francisco,⁴⁸ districts across Texas,⁴⁹ Fairfax County (Virginia),⁵⁰ and Loudoun County (Virginia).⁵¹

Figure 7: RJ Process Participants

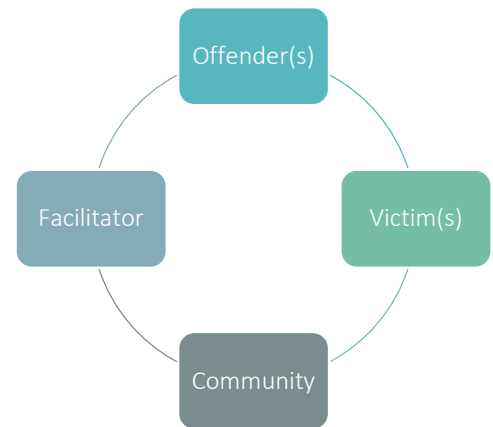


Figure 8: Restorative justice versus traditional school discipline (e.g., suspensions and court referrals)

	Traditional Discipline	Restorative Justice
Focuses & Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Retribution and punishment for the offender Enforce rules Address offender React swiftly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Address harms Healing, learning, and growth for all involved Build relationships and community Prevention and meaningful process
Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What rule was broken? Who broke the rule? What punishment is warranted? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Who was harmed and what harm was done? What are the needs and responsibilities of all affected? How do all affected parties address needs and repair harms?
Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exclusion and isolation Stigmatization and alienation Offender accepts punishment Mental health problems for offender Victim not heard/has less satisfaction High recidivism Lower attendance and graduation rates Larger disparities Damage to school climate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inclusion and connectedness Repaired, restored, and strengthened relationships Offender takes responsibility Social and emotional learning for all involved Victim heard/has more satisfaction Lower recidivism, suspensions, and court referrals Higher attendance and graduation rates Reduced disparities Improved school climate

Empirical studies report a decrease in exclusionary discipline and harmful behavior (e.g., violence) after implementing some type of RJ program.⁵² For examples:

- A study examining out-of-school suspensions among sixth graders in one Texas school reported an 84% drop in out-of-school suspension and a 30% drop in in-school suspension during the first year RJ was introduced.⁵³
- In Denver, schools that implemented restorative circles and conferencing reported a 44% reduction in out-of-school suspensions, as well as an overall decrease in expulsions across the three-year post-implementation period.⁵⁴

- In Oakland, California, Cole Middle School experienced an 87% drop in suspensions across the first two years of implementation; expulsions were eliminated entirely after RJ was put in place. More recent figures from Oakland suggest continued success, with a 74% drop in suspensions and a 77% decrease in referrals for violence during a two-year follow up.⁵⁵
- West Philadelphia High School reported that “violent acts and serious incidents” dropped 52% in the first year of RJ implementation; this was followed by an additional 40% drop through the first-half of the second year.⁵⁶
- An alternative education program in Pennsylvania used RJ to reduce offending by 58% after three months.⁵⁷ In a follow-up study of the same program, those effects were sustained through two years of implementation, with reductions in offending around 50%.⁵⁸

Schools that offered intensive RJ training and follow-up for staff also demonstrated positive results across a range of disciplinary outcomes.⁵⁹ In one instance, an elementary school experienced a 57% reduction in discipline referrals, a 35% reduction in average time in in-school suspension, and a 77% reduction in out-of-school suspensions. Results from other schools in Minnesota with strong training were similar – ranging from a 45% to a 63% decrease in suspensions.⁶⁰

Results from a study of a restorative conferencing program in Minnesota indicated a decrease in self-reported incidents of physical fighting and skipping school among participants. Additionally, results suggested that participants who were referred to the program experienced gains in attendance, credit accrual, and progress toward graduation in the year following implementation of the program. Participants also experienced a significant decrease in suspensions.⁶¹

Finally, there are findings to suggest that RJ improves school climate. The study of a restorative conferencing program in Minnesota reported increased school connectedness and improved problem-solving among students in a six-week follow up.⁶² A 2014 study noted that two-thirds of staff perceived the RJ program as improving the social-emotional development of students, and 70% of staff reported that RJ improved overall school climate during the first year of implementation.⁶³

Positive Developments in Virginia

MTP: Experts in the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia developed MTP. The program has been used successfully in Virginia divisions.

SEL: Albemarle County Public Schools has focused on improving SEL in its schools. The division introduced a mindfulness program for teachers, a bullying prevention program and a “Responsive Classroom” program for students, and flexible classrooms in which students choose how they learn in a collaborative environment. Many Fairfax County schools also use “Responsive Classroom,” and the division incorporates SEL into its PBIS framework.

PBIS: PBIS of Virginia is a joint partnership with Old Dominion University and the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) designed to “to build the capacity of schools to develop, implement, and sustain school-wide, classroom-level, and pupil-specific research supported strategies and procedures.” School divisions throughout the state are working with PBIS of Virginia to create a more “safe and effective instructional environment.” The VDOE also assists school divisions with adopting the Virginia Tiered Systems of Support framework that combines PBIS and RTI.

Threat Assessment: In 2013, the Virginia General Assembly passed legislation mandating that: (a) the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services developed model threat assessment policies, procedures, and guidelines (§ 9.1-184(A)(10)); and (b) each school have a threat assessment team (§ 22.1-79.4).

RJ: In 2011, Fairfax County Public Schools initiated system-wide implementation of RJ, hired specialists, and partnered with Northern Virginia Mediation Services. In 2014, the division, along with the Police Department and the Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court, initiated a program that allows school resource officers to refer students who commit select offenses to RJ instead of the justice system. Loudoun County Public Schools have also successfully utilized RJ.

Endnotes

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