Functional Behavioral Assessment, Behavioral Intervention Plans, And Positive Intervention And Supports:

An Essential Part Of Effective Schoolwide Discipline In Virginia

Virginia Department of Education
Richmond, Virginia

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A Message From the Superintendent of Public Instruction

Dear Colleagues:

It is gratifying to know that most students in Virginia's schools are performing very well academically. However, there are some students who are struggling to be successful learners. I believe that all children can attain academic success, and in recognition of recent federal legislation and regulations, the Virginia Department of Education is working closely with schools throughout the Commonwealth to address the overlapping relationship between classroom conduct and academic achievement. This is being accomplished by means of the Effective Schoolwide Discipline Project. I am pleased to report that we are witnessing significant progress in terms of a decline in disciplinary problems, a recouping of lost administrative and instructional time, and promising increases in student achievement.

This booklet entitled, *Functional Behavioral Assessment, Behavioral Intervention Plans, and Positive Intervention and Support,* explains what educational personnel, parents, and students can do to enhance safe and effective schooling for all 1.2 million students in our public schools. I encourage you to use this resource and join me in supporting this positive approach to providing an environment conducive to improving the educational outcomes for all students in Virginia's public schools.

Sincerely,

Patricia I. Wright, Ed.D.
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Introduction

The 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), contains various provisions that relate to the academic performance and classroom conduct of students with disabilities. These legislative provisions will have a significant impact on the roles and responsibilities of school personnel in Virginia. In response to this legislation, the Virginia Department of Education formed committees to examine various aspects of IDEA 1997 and IDEIA 2004. Our committee was charged with addressing those legislative provisions that relate to student behavior that impedes the teaching/learning process. The information contained in this booklet grew out of a series of discussions on evidence-based practices for dealing with student behavior problems and is intended to emphasize information already available. Committee members included parents, school administrators, psychologists, general and special education classroom teachers representing the public and private sectors, university researchers, teacher educators, and mental health and other community agency personnel (see Appendix A). Subcommittee members responsible for authoring the original version of this booklet included:

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Emerging Challenges and Opportunities for Virginia Schools

School administrators, classroom teachers, and parents share a common goal—to help students increase academic achievement, experience positive relationships, and develop qualities and skills that lead to a successful and satisfying life. To accomplish these goals, schools throughout the Commonwealth have begun a number of initiatives. Progress to date is extremely encouraging. However, numerous challenges remain to ensuring safe and effective schools for all students.

Teachers at all grade levels recognize that not every student comes to school ready to learn. Because of diverse backgrounds and experiences, students possess differing levels of readiness for learning. For that reason, both general and special educators must work collaboratively to meet these diverse learning needs for both academic and behavioral/social skills.

One or two students can monopolize a substantial amount of teacher time and energy and impede the teaching/learning process. When these situations arise, practitioners usually rely on standard strategies to deal with misbehavior. Either independently or with the support of their colleagues, teachers look for ways to intervene to eliminate the problem. The majority of students respond positively to these efforts because previous experience has enabled them to learn from simple interventions and negative consequences. Intervention strategies used by teachers include: sharing behavioral expectations with students, using physical proximity to students, promoting high levels of academic engagement, praising appropriate student behavior and giving regular feedback on performance, providing corrective instruction following misbehavior, and enforcing classroom rules. Unfortunately, for some students, these strategies fail to produce the desired outcome and may even exacerbate an already difficult situation. Today, a growing number of youngsters exhibit behaviors that challenge the success of daily classroom instruction. Recent federal legislation includes provisions that address function-based interventions as a way to address student behavior that impedes classroom teaching and learning.

Federal Legislation and Its Impact on Schools

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) requires schools to address impeding behavior through the use of functional behavioral assessment, behavioral intervention planning, and positive academic and behavioral supports. The Act states what is required of teams that develop individualized education programs (IEPs) in addressing problem behaviors of children and youths.

- The team must explore the need for strategies and support systems to address any behavior that may impede the learning of the child with the disability or the learning of others.

- In response to certain disciplinary actions by school personnel, the IEP team must, within 10 days, meet to formulate a functional behavioral assessment plan to collect data for developing a behavioral intervention plan; or, if a behavioral intervention plan already exists, the team must review and revise it (as necessary), to ensure that it addresses the behavior upon which disciplinary action is predicated.

- The 2004 version of IDEA requires that positive behavioral interventions must be included in a student's IEP if his or her behavior impedes his or her learning or the learning of others. When the behavior problem is a manifestation of a disability, the IEP team must conduct a functional behavioral assessment. If a plan has been developed, it should be reviewed and modified, as necessary, to address the behavior.

Today, the IEP team must be prepared to assume these new roles and responsibilities, including conducting a functional behavioral assessment and developing a behavioral intervention plan. It is with the mandates contained in the IDEA Amendments of 1997 and its reauthorization in 2004 in mind that the Virginia Department of Education has compiled information on the process of functional behavioral assessment and positive behavioral interventions. The following discussion summarizes the content of a larger body of information available to schools through the Training and Technical Assistance Centers (T/TACs) and other providers of technical assistance, such as the Virginia Institute for Developmental Disabilities (VIDD) and the Parent Education Advocacy Training Center (PEATC),

located throughout the Commonwealth. For a list of the regional Virginia Department of Education's Training and Technical Assistance Centers, see Appendix D.

A Rationale for Positive Behavioral Intervention

In the past, teachers usually relied on negative consequences to deal with student misbehavior that interfered with classroom instruction (e.g., verbal warnings or reprimands, timeout, or suspension from school). The intent was to reduce or eliminate the immediate problem. However, we now know that these approaches are not only time consuming, but also do not teach the student more acceptable classroom behavior. Also absent is an understanding of why the student misbehaved and the circumstances under which the misbehavior occurred.

Today, there is growing recognition that success in dealing with student misbehavior depends on promoting behavior that serves the same function (or results in the same outcome) for the student as the problem behavior. That approach begins with looking beyond the problem behavior and trying to understand the motivation behind it. Knowledge of what motivates a student to engage in a particular behavior, as when Charles swears at the teacher to get classmates' approval or Susan acts up in geography class to avoid a difficult assignment, is essential to developing an effective intervention plan.

With the introduction of functional behavioral assessment, there has been a fundamental shift in the way we view behavior problems in school. The logic behind functional assessment is that practically all student behavior is purposeful—it satisfies a need and is related to the context in which it occurs (e.g., in the classroom, on the playground, in the hallway). And, we know that students are likely to cease behaving a certain way when a different behavior will more effectively and efficiently satisfy the same need. For this reason, identifying the motivation for a behavior—what the student gets, avoids, or communicates through the behavior—is essential to finding ways to effectively address behavior that disrupts the learning environment and interferes with academic instruction.

The Relationship between Behavior and Achievement

Teachers have long understood that resolving student academic difficulties begins with a thorough assessment. Questions teachers routinely ask include: "Does the student possess the prerequisites to learning the skill? Has the student been taught the skill? Has the student mislearned one or more aspects of the skill? Does the student know when to apply a particular skill? Does the student have any interest in the subject being taught?" Today, we understand that the same logic applies to behavior problems. As with academic problems, most behavior problems reflect "errors in learning" (meaning a student has gotten what he wants by means of what we see as inappropriate/unacceptable behavior—but it works for him) and/or skill deficits (can't do rather than won't do) that can be resolved through the use of a quality plan of direct instruction. The content of those programs stems from what is known as functional behavioral assessment (FBA).

Functional behavioral assessment (FBA) is a data-driven, team problem-solving process. It calls for a variety of techniques and strategies to identify the reason or reasons behind inappropriate or unacceptable behavior and ways to deal with the behavior. Accordingly, teams seek to identify the major factors associated with the problem situation to better understand the motivation behind the behavior. The purpose for conducting a FBA is to identify and promote behavior that serves the same function for the student as the inappropriate behavior but is more acceptable or appropriate. By examining the problem, the context in which it occurs, and identifying the reason(s) why a student misbehaves, school personnel are in a position to reduce or eliminate behavior that impedes learning and facilitate more acceptable behavior.

While the language of IDEA emphasizes the use of these practices for students with disabilities, the same procedures can apply to students without disabilities. There are circumstances under which schools must afford students without disabilities the same procedural safeguards as students with disabilities. Examples include when a student's performance or behavior demonstrates a need for special education, a change in classroom placement is being considered, or

when a parent has formally requested an evaluation. In the next section, we discuss briefly the steps school personnel can take to conduct a functional behavioral assessment.

Steps to Conducting a Functional Behavioral Assessment

1. Verify the Seriousness of the Problem

Experience has shown that many classroom problems can be eliminated by consistently applying standard strategies of proven effectiveness. In an effort to address minor problems so they do not grow into larger ones, school personnel usually introduce one or more of these strategies before initiating a functional behavioral assessment. When it is clear the behavior manifested by a student cannot be resolved through standard means as well as in response to situations for which the law requires a functional behavioral assessment and a behavioral intervention plan, school personnel should consider initiating a FBA.

2. Define the Problem Behavior

Before choosing the data collection techniques to be used to conduct a functional behavioral assessment, the teacher and the IEP team should define the problem behavior in measurable, observable, and objective terms. If descriptions of behaviors are vague, such as "Susan has a poor attitude," it will be difficult for the team to accurately measure the behavior, identify the function the behavior serves, decide on an appropriate intervention, or devise an appropriate way to evaluate its success. Later, after more information has been collected, the team can refine the definition of the behavior by including multiple examples of the behavior (e.g., Susan refuses teacher assistance, argues with the teacher, never offers to answer questions in class, and never hands in homework).

3. Collect Information on the Reasons Behind the Problem

Once the IEP team has defined the problem behavior, team members can begin to observe the student and the school environment to determine the exact nature of the problem. The team generally collects information on the times, conditions, and individuals present when

problem behavior is most versus least likely to occur; the events or conditions that typically occur before and after the behavior; and other relevant information regarding the problem behavior.

The team might begin the assessment process by conducting a series of formal classroom observations. An examination of these data may suggest times and settings in which to conduct further observations to document the variables that are most predictive of appropriate versus inappropriate student behavior. It often is useful to observe situations in which the student performs successfully to compare classroom conditions that evoke appropriate versus inappropriate behavior. For example, Jackie may perform successfully in science class but routinely disrupt the history class by calling out or teasing other students.

Teams are not always able to observe the events that precipitate student misbehavior. Depending on the behavior of concern, it is crucial that teams use indirect as well as direct means to identify the likely reasons behind the misbehavior. Indirect methods include a review of the student's cumulative records, such as health, medical, and educational records, as well as structured interviews with teachers, other school personnel (e.g., bus driver, cafeteria workers), or the student of concern. For example, we might discover that the student has failed repeatedly in the past and therefore, sees little reason to anticipate success or that the student is acting-up to hide academic deficits and to "save face" with peers. Gaining knowledge of the student's strengths and preferences is also useful.

Teachers know that events that occur outside the classroom may increase the likelihood of classroom problems. Both past and present events can increase the chance that the student will pose a challenge in the classroom. These "setting events" can range from a longstanding pattern of negative classroom interactions to a fight with another child at the bus stop. For these reasons, interviews conducted with the student and his or her parents or guardian can be an important source of information in understanding the function(s) of the misbehavior. Fortunately, there is mounting evidence that factors we can manipulate, such as: clear expectations, academic success, and positive student/teacher relationships, actually have a more powerful impact on

academic performance than those factors we cannot control (e.g., economic status, home environment).

In most cases, various persons repeatedly collect multiple types of information, since a single source will not produce accurate information—especially if the problem behavior serves various functions under different circumstances. IEP teams have learned that since no two students misbehave for exactly the same reasons, no two functional assessments are likely to produce the same kind or amount of information.

4. Analyze Information Collected on the Problem Behavior

Once the IEP team is satisfied that enough information has been collected to identify the source of the problem, the next step is to determine what can be learned about the problem behavior and the context in which it occurs. Such an analysis helps the team to decide whether there are any specific patterns associated with the behavior. The team carefully reviews the information they have collected to look for any pattern of events that predict when and under what circumstances the behavior is most or least likely to occur, what is maintaining the behavior, and the likely function(s) of the behavior.

Upon review, the team may conclude that Charles disrupts class by shouting and cursing whenever the teacher calls on him to read material he feels is too difficult. In this example, Charles's behavior typically leads to his removal from class and the reading task. The team collects different kinds of data on Charles and uses that information to identify patterns or other indicators of the possible function of his behavior. In collecting information on student behavior, teams understand that even an occasional event or unusual condition cannot be ruled out as a reason for the misbehavior.

5. Develop a Hypothesis About the Function of the Problem Behavior

Next, the IEP team formulates a hypothesis statement or "best guess" regarding the likely function(s) of the problem behavior. The statement relates to what the student gains from misbehaving, avoids or

gets out of by misbehaving, or may be communicating with the misbehavior. The hypothesis can then be used to predict the social and/or academic environmental context under which the behavior is most likely to occur and the possible reason(s) why the student engages in the behavior. For example, removal from the classroom may have been exactly what Charles wanted to happen. If that is the case, he is more likely to engage in the same disruptive behavior in the future.

6. Verify the Hypothesis About the Function of the Problem Behavior

Before proceeding with an intervention, it is usually a good idea to take time to modify various classroom conditions in an attempt to verify the IEP team's assumptions regarding the likely function(s) of the behavior. For instance, the team may hypothesize that during class discussions, Charles makes rude remarks or calls out to get the attention of classmates. Thus, the teacher arranges for peer tutoring for Charles to get the attention he seeks for appropriate rather than inappropriate behavior. If this strategy produces a positive change in Charles' behavior, then the team can assume its hypothesis was correct and a behavioral intervention plan can be fully implemented; however, if Charles' behavior is unchanged, then a new hypothesis needs to be formulated and tested.

In some instances, it may not be necessary or appropriate to manipulate classroom conditions to observe their effects on student behavior. For example, with severe acting-out behavior, the team should immediately implement an intervention and evaluate its impact against subsequent assessment information. Based on that evaluation, the team should be ready to make any necessary adjustments in the plan.

7. Develop and Implement a Behavioral Intervention Plan

After collecting enough information to identify the function(s) of the student behavior, the IEP team must develop or revise an existing behavioral intervention plan. The plan should include positive strategies, program modifications, and the supplementary aids and supports required to address the behavior, as well as any staff supports or training that may be needed. Many teams develop an intervention

plan that includes one or more of the following strategies or procedures:

- Teach the student more acceptable behavior that serves the same function as the inappropriate behavior (e.g., ways to get peer attention through positive social initiations).

- Modify the classroom setting events (e.g., physical arrangement of the classroom, general classroom management strategies, grouping arrangements).

- Modify the antecedent events (e.g., clear expectations with examples, introduce advanced organizers, or use scaffolded instruction).

- Modify the consequent events (e.g., physical proximity, descriptive praise, verbal and nonverbal feedback).

- Modify aspects of the curriculum and/or the instruction (e.g., multilevel instruction, matching student abilities and interests).

- Introduce a reinforcement-based intervention (e.g., reinforcement of alternative or incompatible behavior).

- Seek student input regarding an acceptable intervention, such as: rank ordering a list of three possible interventions.

For the majority of problem situations, there is more than one solution that can result in a positive outcome. Generally, a behavioral intervention plan includes steps to accomplish the following:

- Deal with any recurrent episodes of the problem behavior.

- Teach the student more appropriate ways to get what he or she wants by means of adult or peer modeling, repeated practice, reinforcement, and routine acknowledgement.

- Ensure frequent opportunities for the student to engage in and be reinforced for demonstrating acceptable behavior.

In developing behavioral intervention plans, IEP teams should take into account gender, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic differences among students.

Most authorities agree that it is usually ineffective and often unethical to use punishment as the only means of addressing student misconduct. With functional assessment, the emphasis is on teaching students new skills with which to become more effective and efficient learners.

The success of an intervention plan rests on the student's engaging in the appropriate behavior without continued external support. Accordingly, teams may need to incorporate strategies to promote the maintenance, durability, and longevity of appropriate student behavior. One strategy is to teach peers to prompt and reinforce the positive behavior of classmates; another is to instruct the student to use self-management, self-talk, and/or self-cueing.

In some cases, supplemental aids and supports may be necessary to help the student to maintain the appropriate behavior. For example, the student may need to work with classmates to satisfy a need for peer attention in appropriate ways. Supports may also include curricular modifications to decrease a student's avoidance of academic situations or instruction to increase the student's verbal skills and ability to respond appropriately to stressful situations.

8. Evaluate Fidelity in Implementing the Plan

It is especially important that the IEP team monitor the accuracy and consistency with which the intervention plan is implemented. Otherwise, it will be impossible for the team to distinguish between a flawed intervention and a potentially effective intervention that was poorly implemented. To do so, the team might spell out the various components of the intervention plan, along with the individual(s) responsible for its implementation. Then, a checklist of steps or a script—a step-by-step description of the intervention and its application, can be developed for each person responsible for implementing the plan.

9. Evaluate the Effectiveness of the Intervention Plan

A second evaluation procedure should be developed to evaluate changes in the behavior itself. Initial or baseline information can serve as a standard against which to judge any changes in behavior. Evaluating the effects of the intervention will yield data upon which the team can judge future changes in the intervention plan. Subsequent review of the data collected on student behavior can help to determine the effects of the intervention across time. In many cases, it is appropriate to collect data on changes in both the inappropriate behavior and the replacement behavior. Collecting these data allows the IEP team to more closely evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention plan.

10. Modify the Intervention Plan

IDEA states that a behavioral intervention plan must be reviewed and revised whenever the IEP team feels that an adjustment is necessary. The circumstances that may warrant such a review include the following:

- The student no longer exhibits problems in behavior and the team terminates the plan.

- The situation has changed and the plan no longer addresses the student's needs.

- The IEP team determines during a manifestation determination review that the behavior intervention strategies are inconsistent with the student's IEP or placement.

- The original plan is not producing positive changes in the student's behavior.

In the end, the process of functional behavioral assessment is not complete until we see meaningful changes in student behavior.

Summary and Conclusion

By following the steps involved in conducting a functional behavioral assessment, IEP teams can devise behavioral intervention plans and provide academic and behavioral supports to teach students how to achieve better results in school. The actual composition of the team responsible for conducting the functional behavioral assessment may vary from school to school and according to the severity of the problem behavior. With in-service training, experience, and technical support, IEP teams can successfully conduct functional behavioral assessments and develop sound behavioral intervention plans to address a wide range of problem behaviors that impede the teaching/learning process.

As mentioned earlier, most student behavior problems reflect errors in learning that can be decreased or eliminated by providing quality instruction that promotes skill mastery. The Virginia Department of Education fully supports a positive approach to addressing the disciplinary provisions of IDEA and its implementing regulations. Behavioral supports should be identified and developed in response to minor episodes of student misconduct to prevent their escalation into more serious behavior problems.

Research and experience substantiate that incorporating functional behavioral assessment into a larger organizational framework of proactive schoolwide and classroom-level academic and behavioral supports will make Virginia schools safer and more effective learning environments for all students. For that reason, the Virginia Department of Education is committed to increasing the capacity of local school divisions to implement functional behavioral assessment and positive behavioral intervention plans and supports. Statewide training is being offered on Effective Schoolwide Discipline (ESD) and positive intervention practices, of which functional behavioral assessment is only one part. Effective Schoolwide Discipline is a proactive, multi-tiered approach to creating a positive teaching and learning environment and is complementary to response-to-intervention (RtI) which is another part of the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA.

Based on the assertion that all children can learn, the Virginia Department of Education supports five basic assumptions about increasing student academic achievement. All students learn best in an educational environment where:

1. Safety and security is maintained and mutual respect is nurtured.
2. Schoolwide and classroom-level academic and behavioral supports are routinely available.
3. Emphasis is on prevention of and early intervention for academic and behavioral problems.
4. Administrators, faculty, and parents assume a collaborative relationship in addressing the teaching/learning process.
5. A school/home partnership promotes positive academic and behavioral outcomes for all students.

This material has been reviewed by the National Advisory Board for the Commonwealth Institute for Positive Academic and Behavioral Supports

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Appendix A

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Appendix B

Selected Readings on Functional Assessment

The following references served as the basis for this monograph and represent useful sources of additional information on functional behavioral assessment and behavioral intervention plans.

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Appendix C

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