

## **EXPANDING THE ROLE OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS: BUILDING SAFE AND CIVIL SCHOOLS**

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School psychologists in Guilford County are doing more than assessments, teacher/parent consultations, crisis intervention, and working with school teams. With the support of our district administration, we are providing essential services by implementing a district-wide, proactive, positive behavior management initiative to create safer and more civil schools.

Guilford County Schools (GCS), North Carolina's third largest school district, encompasses 107 schools located in urban, suburban, and rural areas. Our 66,000 students speak 82 different languages and dialects and represent 123 different cultural and ethnic groups. GCS has a minority population of 51 percent, 45 percent of our students are on free/reduced lunch programs, and 38 percent of our families are characterized as low-income.

With its size and diversity, you might expect GCS to experience behavior difficulties in its schools on occasion—and we do. For instance, several years ago in one of our middle schools, walking through the hallways during class transitions was sometimes an exercise in survival. Students routinely engaged in overly exuberant behavior, running, jumping, leaping down whole flights of stairs. Adult visitors were sometimes apprehensive to be in the hallways during class change. Teachers also reported spending 10-15 minutes at the beginning of each class just getting students calm enough to start teaching their lessons.

But, all of that has changed. Today, visitors to that middle school witness how calmly and quietly students change classes. Visitors to many of our campuses are observing a calmer, more respectful and responsible student body, and as a result, a more productive learning environment. While there are many factors that could contribute to such a culture change in our schools, I believe that one of them is a program initiated by Psychological Services in 1999.

### **Finding Foundations on Which to Build**

At that time (as we do now), the Psychological Services Department performed a variety of functions. School psychologists were responsible for Intervention, Consultation, Assessment, Education and Prevention. We routinely offered workshops to teachers on classroom behavior management strategies. However, throughout our district irresponsible and harmful behaviors were occurring in the schools, like the middle school hallway situation I described earlier. Members of Psychological Services started looking for a more comprehensive program to address the district's needs. Much had already been written about school-wide positive behavior support (PBS) systems. A 1997 report described several developmental models geared towards helping all students manage their own behavior at school (ERIC, 1997). It described the research as "promising." By 1999, Cynthia Warger was able to cite research that demonstrated a causal relationship between the implementation of PBS strategies and responsible student behavior.

Research articles describe several different models of PBS systems; however, common features do exist. Covin, Kameenui, & Sugai (1993) identified them as:

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- Consistency
- Success orientation
- Positive expectations
- Active support from school leaders
- Collegial participation
- Effective staff development

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As school psychologists, we were looking for a program that incorporated theories of learning and theories of child development. In *Foundations: Establishing Positive Discipline Policies* (Sprick, Garrison, & Howard, 2002), we found a positive, proactive, school-wide program that incorporated the qualities described by Covin, Kameenui, & Sugai (1993) and had a sound theoretical basis. *Foundations* is a comprehensive program that guides a school improvement team through two to three years of planning and in-service, with the ultimate goal of designing and implementing an effective, positive and instructional school-wide behavior policy. We decided on this program because it is thorough, user-friendly, and flexible, allowing us to incorporate the values and traditions of our community.

Since students spend most of their on-campus time in the classroom, we decided to augment our school-wide effort with *CHAMPs: A Proactive and Positive Approach to Classroom Management* (Sprick, Garrison, & Howard, 1998). *CHAMPs* assists classroom teachers in designing (or fine tuning) a classroom management plan and does in classrooms what *Foundations* does in schools—explicitly teaches behavioral expectations.

*Author's Note: The Foundations and CHAMPs programs are a part of the Safe & Civil Schools series, which was evaluated in a March 2004 Communiqué book review by Kathy Robison.*

We submitted a proposal to the district to implement a pilot program, incorporating *Foundations* and *CHAMPs*. We called the program the Responsible Discipline Process (RDP). The district accepted the proposal and in the fall of 1999, we started the process in six of our schools.

**The Responsible Discipline Process**

The RDP provides a participating school with a process to develop and implement a safer and more civil school over a three-year period. It involves two components:

- A process for developing and implementing proactive, positive, school-wide discipline policies and practices (*Foundations*);
- Training in effective classroom management techniques (*CHAMPs*).

As a first step, participating schools identify members of a Responsibility Team, whose primary function will be to lead the process of developing and implementing school-wide discipline policies and procedures.

Members of the Responsibility Team receive training in the fall of their first year in RDP, as well as ongoing training and coaching throughout the process. During the first two years, with the help of its Responsibility Team, a participating school develops:

- A mission statement;
- Guidelines for Success (life-long skills needed to be successful in school and in life);
- Policies for common areas and activities in the school (i.e., hallways, cafeteria, playground, before/after school, restrooms, assemblies, levels of misbehavior for making office referrals, etc.).

Policies and their related procedures are adopted by the entire faculty, taught to the students, implemented by faculty, and consistently monitored and evaluated. These policies are designed to create more responsible student and staff behavior, which, in turn, will result in fewer behavior problems in common areas.

During the third year, while the school-wide program progresses, all certified personnel receive additional training in effective classroom management. We use the *CHAMPs* training program because it incorporates what over 35 years of research has found to be best practice in managing student behavior in the classroom (as summarized in Cotton, 1990), namely to:

- Hold and communicate high expectations for student learning and behavior;
- Establish and teach classroom rules and procedures;
- Specify consequences and their relationship to student behavior;
- Enforce classroom rules promptly, consistently, and equitably;
- Share with students the responsibility for classroom management;
- Maintain a brisk pace for instruction and make smooth transitions between activities;
- Monitor classroom activities, providing appropriate feedback and reinforcement.

For a large implementation (district- or service center-wide), *Foundations* recommends using coaches to coordinate the implementation effort. In our district, we decided to use school psychologists in this role for a variety of reasons. We have the consulting and training expertise required, as well as a solid handle on classroom management. In addition, Psychological Services had the ability to commit time and resources.

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### Our Expanded Roles

Four school psychologists and the department's supervisor agreed to start the pilot program in 1999. With the support of district management, we were able to reduce our regular psychological services (i.e., assessment, teacher and parent consultation, work with school teams, etc.) by one fewer school. This reduction in school assignments afforded us the time needed to develop and implement RDP in the six schools.

Today, there are eleven coaches, each serving two or three RDP schools. There are 31 schools implementing RDP—4 high schools, 6 middle schools, and 21 elementary schools. Coaches typically spend a substantial portion of their time delivering coaching services to their schools each school year. Currently, three of our coaches devote 66 percent of their time to RDP while other full time coaches devote 33 percent. In addition, we have three part-time psychologists who spend half of their time on RDP.

RDP coaches provide a wide range of consultation, training, and evaluation services:

- Planning and delivering the three years of training for new Responsibility Teams.
- Consulting with the Responsibility Team and the Principal.
- Observing common areas in the school (i.e., hallways, cafeteria, playground, etc.).
- Attending faculty meetings when RDP issues, policies and/or recommendations are addressed.
- Coordinating the annual completion of RDP surveys and office referral data.
- Training school staff how to enter office referral data into a database and how to analyze the data.
- Planning and directing any system-level meetings of Responsibility Teams.
- Providing *CHAMPs* training to certified staff.
- Conducting annual district-level orientation sessions about RDP for principals and school leadership teams from schools who are deciding whether or not to become RDP schools.
- Conducting evaluations of RDP.
- Consulting with Responsibility Teams and principals about program maintenance and improvements at RDP schools who have completed formal RDP training.

When we started RDP in 1999, Randy Sprick provided the only formal training for the Responsibility Teams, and this was 2 days of training in the fall of their first year of implementation. Under our current model, our coaches have taken on the major responsibility of training in addition to the existing coaching duties. Now we provide six days of training (one by Randy and five by our coaches) for a Year 1 school, followed by three days of training by coaches during Year 2 and one day of training by coaches during Year 3. We started this new model last school year (2003-04) and our initial impressions indicate it has strengthened the RDP process in the new schools.

Coaches are selected because of their consultation and training skills. They must also be flexible, organized, and creative. A new coach works with other coaches for consultation and advice and is usually assigned to an experienced coach who serves as a mentor. New coaches also typically attend Train the Trainer workshops conducted by Randy Sprick during their first year of coaching.

### How is it Working?

In December 2002, we completed an initial evaluation of RDP. By then, the program had been in operation for three years and there were 14 participating schools. Of these:

- four had reached full implementation (typically a three-year process in which the school had implemented most of its school-wide policies and had received *CHAMPs* training);
- four had partially implemented the program (typically a two-year process in which the school had implemented many of its school-wide policies but had not yet received *CHAMPs* training);
- six were in beginning stages (typically a one-year process in which the school had implemented one or two of its school-wide policies, developed a mission statement, and written guidelines for success).

We evaluated only the eight schools that had fully or partially implemented the program, reasoning that the remaining six had not been in the program long enough to have generated meaningful data. The evaluation measured:

- staff perceptions on school safety and civility
- trends in the number of office referrals
- trends in the number of suspensions

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		Initial Survey	Spring 2002
Full Implementation	Percent of staff indicating that there is a clear understanding of the school's approach to discipline by all constituents (staff, students, and parents).	63	85
	Percent of staff rating student behavior in common areas as safe, orderly, and respectful.	55	74
	Percent of staff indicating that there is a consistent and fair approach to discipline among staff members.	60	75
Partial Implementation	Percent of staff indicating that there is a clear understanding of the school's approach to discipline by all constituents (staff, students, and parents).	62	71
	Percent of staff rating student behavior in common areas as safe, orderly, and respectful.	62	69
	Percent of staff indicating that there is a consistent and fair approach to discipline among staff members.	70	71

Table 1: Results of RDP surveys

For those schools that had completed the CHAMPs training on effective classroom management (full implementation), we also evaluated teacher understanding of classroom management practices and how effective they perceived these practices to be.

**Staff Perceptions on School Safety and Civility**

We used an anonymous RDP Staff Survey to assess staff perceptions of the school's safety and civility. The survey is extensive, but we focused on three areas of interest:

1. The understanding of the school's approach to discipline by staff, students, and parents.
2. Student behavior in common areas of the school.
3. The use of a consistent and fair approach to discipline by staff.

We administered the survey to each school initially during the fall of its first year of RDP involvement and then again during the spring of each subsequent year.

Staff at full implementation schools (elementary and middle) reported improvement in the safety and civility of the school in all three areas surveyed. Partial implementation schools demonstrated an increase in the first two areas but not significantly in the third. However, **overall** both full and partial implementation schools demonstrated an increase in the percentage of staff that perceived the school to be safe and civil.

Another finding to note is that a higher percentage of staff perceived their school to be safe and civil in full implementation schools than in partial implementation schools. This suggests that schools that fully implement RDP demonstrated greater improvement in staff perceptions of safety and civility than did schools that partially implement RDP.

**Trends in the Number of Office Referrals**

Schools began tracking the number of students referred to the office for rule violations in Spring 2001 and continued throughout the 2001-02 school year.

	Spring 2001	Spring 2002
Full implementation elementary schools	40	31
Partial implementation elementary schools	37	30
Full implementation middle school	172	249

Table 2: Average Number of Office Referrals

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	1998-99	1999-2000	2000-01	2001-02
Full implementation elementary schools	33	40	34	40
Partial implementation elementary schools	59	74	80	75
Full implementation middle school (out-of-school)	248	253	265	148
Full implementation middle school (in-school)	301	324	254	269

Table 3: Average Number of Suspensions

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These results demonstrate that both full and partial elementary schools decreased their average number of office referrals from Spring 2001 to Spring 2002. In Spring 2001, full implementation elementary schools had a higher number of office referrals than partial implementation elementary schools, but the two groups had a similar number of office referrals in Spring 2002. This indicates that full implementation elementary schools had a greater decrease in office referrals than partial implementation elementary schools. The full implementation middle school demonstrated an increase in the number of office referrals from Spring 2001 to Spring 2002. This may be due to the consistent application of behavioral expectations among staff and the gradual implementation of effective behavior management strategies. For instance, prior to RDP, a teacher might have issued a referral to a student for misbehavior that another teacher might have ignored. Now that teachers are applying consequences for misbehavior consistently, the number of referrals is increasing. As students become more aware of the rules and the consequences of misbehavior, we would expect a reduction in this number.

**Trends in the Number of Suspensions**

We analyzed trends in the number of suspensions since the 1998-99 school year (four years of data). Full implementation elementary schools demonstrated slight changes in suspension rates from year to year, with an overall slight increase from 1998-99 to 2001-02. Partial implementation elementary schools evidenced a noticeable increase from 1998-99 to 1999-00 and have hovered around the same level since. When comparing these two sets of schools, it appears that the full implementation elementary schools have lower suspension rates than partial implementation elementary schools overall. The full implementation middle school demonstrated a marked decrease in out-of-school suspensions during the 2001-02 school year in comparison with the previous three years, and a lower level of in-school suspensions in

2000-01 and 2001-02 than the previous two years. This data reflects that a middle school that fully implemented RDP showed a trend toward decreased suspension rates, while elementary schools that have fully implemented RDP have lower rates of suspension than elementary schools that have partially implemented RDP.

**Understanding and Perceived Effectiveness of Classroom Management Practices**

We developed a *CHAMPs* Training Survey to assess teachers' perceptions of *CHAMPs* training on effective classroom management practices. Specifically, we asked teachers to rate their understanding of the practices before and after the training, and then to rate how effective the practices were six weeks after implementing them. Teachers at full implementation elementary schools reported a greater understanding of effective classroom management practices after *CHAMPs* training. In addition, 98 percent indicated they were fully or partially implementing these practices six weeks after training (76 percent fully implementing, 22 percent partially implementing). Finally, 95 percent found the practices to be effective for improving student behavior (66 percent fully effective, 29 percent partially effective). Teachers in the full implementation middle school also reported an increased understanding of effective classroom management practices following *CHAMPs* training. Furthermore, 96 percent reported that they fully or partially implemented practices (73 percent fully implemented, 23 percent partially implemented), and 98 percent reported the practices to be effective for improving student behavior (74 percent fully effective, 24 percent partially effective). Overall, a high percentage of teachers in both elementary and middle schools indicated that they had improved their understanding and use of effective classroom management practices following *CHAMPs* training.

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Final Analysis

We found that full implementation schools demonstrated positive outcomes in most areas. Partial implementation elementary schools also evidenced positive outcomes in the areas of improved staff perceptions of school safety and civility and decreased office referrals. However, full implementation elementary schools' outcomes showed greater positive changes than partial implementation elementary schools on all measures.

This suggests two conclusions regarding the success of the RDP:

- 1. Full or partial implementation of RDP is associated with positive changes in several measures of a school's safety and civility.
2. Schools reaching full implementation status achieved more positive outcomes than schools reaching partial implementation status.

These findings seem to suggest that fully implementing the RDP improves school climate. While I believe this to be so, I also recognize that further study is required. Our data were neither extensive, nor complete. We evaluated only eight schools on three measures. There were no comparison groups, no control for intervening variables, and no standardized research method. In an ideal future, we would conduct more rigorous and structured studies.

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Final Thoughts

In spite of this lack of experimental data, GCS feels the qualitative evidence is strong. The district has reaffirmed its commitment to the Responsible Discipline Process. School psychologists/RDP coaches at Psychological Services are pleased with the continued support of the school system for this program. For us, it has been a tremendously rewarding effort—exhausting, but exhilarating.

The road to implementation isn't easy, hence the exhaustion.

For instance, in building a program like this, we have found that having the same strong principal in a given school throughout the process makes it much easier to implement RDP. Principal leadership and commitment are extremely important. If a principal leaves the school,

or if s/he doesn't provide the leadership to maintain the RDP policies and CHAMPs strategies, RDP is less effective. Another issue is finding the time to conduct CHAMPs training in a teacher's schedule already overburdened with the district's other instructional initiatives. This year, we are covering only the core concepts and skills in a ten-hour workshop, with an option of an additional six hours if requested. Finally, RDP never had a separate budget. Funding had to be found by working with various existing programs in the district. This has been a constant challenge which required us to be flexible in adapting RDP to our fiscal realities.

In spite of all this, it's been an exciting process. Every day we see, and hear about, positive outcomes for students and staff. RDP campuses are calmer, safer, more civil and more productive. Our students appear more secure, happier, more responsible in their behavior, and more productive in their schoolwork. Among coaches, a camaraderie has developed over the years that contributes to our sense of accomplishment. Early on in the process, we found that communication is key. We continue to meet every two weeks to discuss status and

issues confronting RDP. These meetings enable us to support and encourage each other in our collaborative efforts to develop, revise, and implement the various RDP components. Our meetings are invaluable in keeping us strong and focused and greatly contribute to the success of the RDP.

Today, RDP in the Guilford County Schools is thriving. In 2003-2004, twenty-one schools participated. This year, we are adding ten more (seven of those by direct request of our superintendent).

Over the years, we have worked hard to create safe and civil schools where students feel protected, act responsibly, and are receptive to learning. It isn't easy. Everyday we show that school psychologists can offer valuable services in addition to testing and consultation. Serving as an RDP coach is another way to effect positive change in the lives of our students. The truth is, we are making a difference. Is anything more satisfying than that?

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**For further information on program materials, see [www.safeandcivilschools.com](http://www.safeandcivilschools.com).**