

# 13 TEACHERS TEACHING TEACHERS™

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF TEACHER LEADERS

## TACKLING BEHAVIOR FROM ALL SIDES

By Valerie von Frank

Principal Robin Weaver saw a problem and developed a passion. Too many children of color, particularly African-American boys, were showing up in special education classes. She believed children were being over-identified, based more on their behavior than abilities. So Weaver turned to her teachers.

“We wanted to develop the capacity of the general education teacher to change behavior,” said Weaver, principal of the multicultural Harmony Hills Elementary School in Silver Spring, Md. “What skill set do you need to be able to address the needs of a changing demographic, or because you’re a first-year teacher?”

The questions raised at Harmony Hills mirror a national trend. Teachers “are now expected to teach a population that is increasingly diverse not only in terms of unique cultural backgrounds, but also in terms of academic, behavioral, and social



skills sets” (Lane, Kalberg, & Menzies, 2009, p. 1).

Recent surveys by MetLife indicate that many teachers are challenged by the issue. The *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher* (2006) showed principals reporting that only about 30% of newly graduated teachers were prepared to manage children’s behavior. The *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Past, Present and Future* (2008) said, “Major changes in how special needs students are educated in public schools have increased diversity in regular classrooms.” Nearly half of teachers agreed that classes now have such a mix of ability

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"We develop the capacity of teachers to deal with student differences."

— Robin Weaver

### PERCEPTION GAP BETWEEN TEACHERS AND PRINCIPALS

Teachers spend 75% of their time or more on instruction rather than discipline or administration.

53%

81%

Our school's disciplinary policy is excellent/good.

71%

96%

Classes have such a mix of ability levels that teachers can't teach them effectively.

43%

24%

Source: The *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Past, Present, and Future* (2008).

levels that they can't teach effectively. Only half in the survey agreed that they spend more than 75% of their time teaching, as opposed to dealing with discipline or other matters. And, critically, while 71% of teachers surveyed rated their schools' discipline policies highly, the survey also found "there is a larger difference between the number of teachers and principals who rate their school discipline policy as excellent or good than on any of the other school condition issues explored."

"There are a lot of reasons behavior is such a prominent issue" for teachers across the country, said Michael Epstein, a University of Nebraska-Lincoln professor in the College of Education and Human Services who, with Weaver, co-authored an Institute of Education Sciences (IES) report on behavior management. He said national polls show 20% of school-aged children are at risk of having emotional or behavior problems. And many educators are not being prepared well to manage these needs.

"We spend very little time — only about 10% of professional development covers managing behavior," Epstein said. The IES guide (Epstein, Atkins, Cullinan, Kutash, & Weaver, 2008) cites research showing that just 36% of students had teachers who spent at least eight hours — over three years — in professional development related to behavior management.

"We don't provide staff development opportunities in sufficient intensity," Epstein said. "We know so much about the prevention of problems; if we implemented several recommendations, we could prevent the onset of more severe behavioral challenges."

At Harmony Hills, Weaver said her job is to carve out regular time from the school day for teachers to meet together in grade-level teams to address common needs, to arrange for classes to be covered during the released time, and to be sure that the time is honored.

Giving teachers leadership in addressing classroom concerns has made the difference. The school's suspension rate is less than 1%; despite an

#### Harmony Hills Elementary School Silver Spring, Md.

Grades: PK-5

Enrollment: 542

Staff: 44 teachers

Racial/ethnic mix:

White: 6.8%

Black: 24.5%

Hispanic: 61.8%

Asian/Pacific Islander: 6.6%

Native American: 0.2%

Limited English proficiency: 39.5%

Free/reduced lunch: 80.3%

Special education: 7.7%

80% poverty rate, it has made Adequate Yearly Progress; and special education referrals are down over the four years since classroom teachers began focusing on interventions for students with behavioral problems. In 2005, before the focus on behavior, nearly 10% of students received special education services. In 2008, that number was just over 7%. And throughout the 2007-08 year, just 30

students were referred to building-level intervention from the grade-level teams. Of those, eight were screened for special education services and six of the eight received individualized education plans.

"We develop the capacity of teachers to deal with student differences," Weaver said. "It's a collaborative, professional community around behavior and learning. It's usually behavior that impacts learning. If you can get the behavior in line, you can see the progress in math."

Grade-level teams meet for one hour a week on reading, one hour a week on math, and twice a month for 45 minutes to talk about student cases and make group decisions. Teachers identify a child with problem behaviors, then focus on addressing the teacher's single greatest concern. The teacher sets a four- to six-week goal and contracts with the student, rewarding the student for achieving positive behavior benchmarks. After working with the student for several weeks, the teacher updates the team on progress.

The ideas come from the teacher, Weaver stresses, with support from the grade-level team and a "coach" who volunteers from each team at the start of the school year. Those coaches spend one hour a month working with the school reading specialist, math specialist, nurse, psychologist, social worker, and administrator to review case data, learn about behavior interventions, and bring their developing expertise back to their teams.

"It's general education teachers working with general education teachers to set the goals, monitor the goals, report on the goals, and determine whether the intervention did what it was supposed to do or we need to tweak it," Weaver said.

“Kids who need special services get them,” she continued, “but they get them after we have tried many, many interventions. Educators often fall into the trap of thinking, ‘We did it already, and it didn’t work.’ Change doesn’t happen in a week. It comes incrementally and with practice, as the child gets feedback on what he or she is doing that is appropriate — what does it look like, what does it sound like.”

She said seven or eight students out of 10 respond to interventions before needing a special education referral, and attempts to modify the child’s behavior may last throughout a school year.

Epstein said focusing more professional learning around behavior interventions could help teachers, and more importantly, student achievement.

“There’s a clear relationship between academic performance and behavior,” he said. “Kids who misbehave, are disobedient, unruly, or uncooperative are at risk of having (academic) problems. ... The more active they are in learning, the lower the discipline problems.”

Epstein recommended that school administrators develop their awareness of classroom discipline issues with frequent walk-throughs. Then provide professional learning. Epstein said there are evidence-based practices to improve student behavior, for example, the First Step to Success program (Walker, 1998).

“The onus falls on universities (preparing teachers) and school districts to provide relevant, evidence-based staff development on managing behavior,” Epstein said.

He said professional development should help prepare teachers to:

- Observe and record student behavior, developing data about when and where students misbehave most often and to use that data to change the conditions for misbehavior.
- Set up the classroom to be physically effective for managing instruction.
- Schedule and pace the content and create an environment in which students understand the teacher’s expectations.
- Manage behavior of individual children and groups through praise/recognition and ignoring certain behaviors.
- Work collaboratively with colleagues, especially young teachers, around developing effective

**Model standards**

In 2001, the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), a project of the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), published *The Model Standards for Licensing General and Special Education Teachers of Students with Disabilities: A Resource for State Dialogue*.

These standards outline what general and special education teachers should know and be able to do to meet the general classroom needs of students with disabilities. The project uses these standards to articulate the information and activities that help general classroom educators address the needs of students with disabilities in the regular classroom and connects general classroom teachers with excellent resources available from governmental and non-profit resources. See [www.ccsso.org/projects/interstate\\_New\\_Teacher\\_Assessment\\_and\\_Support\\_Consortium/Projects/Special\\_Education\\_Resources\\_for\\_General\\_Educators\\_SERGE/](http://www.ccsso.org/projects/interstate_New_Teacher_Assessment_and_Support_Consortium/Projects/Special_Education_Resources_for_General_Educators_SERGE/)

interventions.

- Work collaboratively with parents/guardians on modifying the student’s behavior.

Weaver stressed the potential of grade-level teaching teams to bring about significant successes in modifying students’ behavior. She talked about the school’s mascot, the Harmony Huskies.

“The characteristics of that dog are really what we are,” Weaver said. “It’s a team dog with a leader, and then that leader drops back (into the team) and another leader comes up. Yet we’re all going in the same direction, with a purpose.”

**References**

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The entire *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher* is available online at the ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) web site: [www.eric.ed.gov](http://www.eric.ed.gov)

**NSDC’S BELIEF**

Remarkable professional learning begins with ambitious goals for students.

To answer the question: *How do I manage my classroom to optimize learning?* See [http://serge.ccsso.org/question\\_3.html](http://serge.ccsso.org/question_3.html)