

Positive Behavior Support

Penn High School today looks very different from the school of the last century; it reflects the digital age. Part of our new look involves making this large school seem smaller and more personal by grouping our students into the smaller learning communities (SLCs). The SLCs consist of freshman academy houses for ninth graders and achievement academies for upperclassmen. Every traditional department and office including Student Services has participated in the transformational process into SLCs.

The process of learning what we needed to know to restructure our school into smaller learning communities inspired us to redesign not only how we view discipline, but also how we view the daily operation of our Student Services office and deans. In order to support the SLC model, we reconfigured our Student Services to focus on advancing and supporting the learning and achievement of every individual. Now we see ourselves as partners with the classroom teachers, and as teachers assume a more active role in managing minor misbehaviors so that students can stay in class and continue learning, Student Services plays a supportive role rather than operate as the self-contained office that fixes student misbehavior through detentions and suspensions.

Penn High School's Positive Behavior Support approach to discipline acknowledges desirable behavior and builds upon what is successful in and out of the classroom. Positive Behavior Support is new school thinking, clearly uncommon in schools 50 years ago where disciplinarians most often employed the obedience model, a reactive approach that punishes students for breaking rules and a version of the same model used in the American prison system today. In the traditional obedience model, a list of progressively serious punishments awaits those who misbehave while the disciplinarian hopes that the offender will improve his behavior to avoid further punishment. Current research has not

shown this obedience model to be effective enough to deter chronic misbehavior either in schools or in prisons.

Positive Behavior Support, on the other hand, has been shown to be effective by flipping the focus to behaviors we want to perpetuate. Its foundational key, focusing on success, helps create learning environments where students can function in a state of relaxed alertness, a state the neuroscientists tell us is critical to maximize learning. So when we see students acting positively, doing the right thing, and helping themselves and others succeed, we showcase those efforts with positive, specific praise. We don't wait to tell them they're behaving well; we try to express the praise at the moment we see behavior we appreciate and want to perpetuate.

Embracing Positive Behavior Support has changed the tenor of our Student Services conversations when we talk to students struggling with behavior issues. Foremost in our minds is that the student is more important than his misbehavior. His success, his achievement, and eventual graduation matter most to us. We start with the glass half full: we ask what is going well. We want to focus on what is going right, the positive notes, rather than what is going wrong.

In the process of discussing what is going well and what is challenging, we are able to learn more about our students personally and align various supports for learning. These conversations build relationships, an important goal in our SLC initiative. Knowing the students' personal challenges in and out of school helps us help them by focusing on their strengths.

Seeing the possibility for positivity in dire circumstances can require a stretch at times, but in discipline, we know we'll get farther starting with what we have rather than starting with what is missing. So we ask the student what he is learning, how he learns best, what he likes about the particular class where he is experiencing behavioral difficulties, and what we can do to support him so that he can learn more effectively and efficiently. Thus the student becomes a

resource in the conversations that involve his behavior; he becomes a problem solver and a key contributor in the discussion. This way both the approach and the actual disciplining process stem from a positive vantage point.

We strive to keep all office conversations quiet, unhurried and relaxing. We want to help the student feel he is in control of himself because when he is in control, he is able to learn and make decisions using the executive portions of his brain necessary for success. We know that a student who feels his status or safety threatened in any way will struggle with rational or logical thinking, so maintaining a calm, reasonable, non-threatening environment where the student can feel control is one of our primary goals.

More than anything, Positive Behavior Support is an attitude. It's seeing the possibility that we all can be successful in some way, recognizing the good in each other, and expressing that good aloud.