

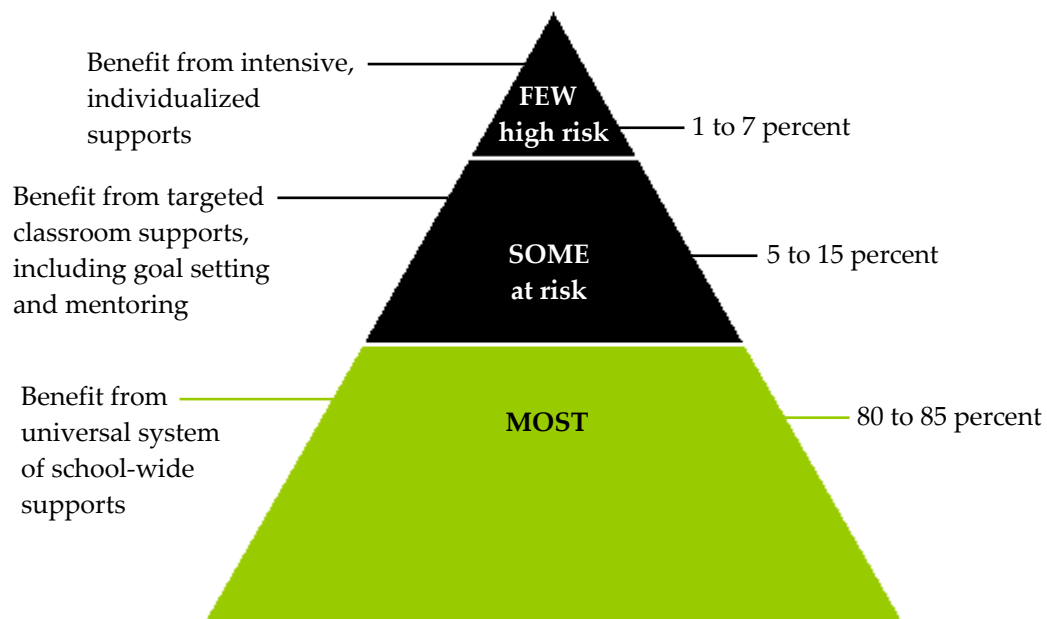
Introduction

Drawing on current research and best practices, this three-part resource, *Supporting Positive Behaviour in Alberta Schools*, provides information, strategies, stories from schools and sample tools for systematically teaching, supporting and reinforcing positive behaviour.

This integrated system of school-wide, classroom management, and individual student support is designed to provide school staff with effective strategies to improve behavioural outcomes in their school. The goal of this approach is to facilitate academic achievement and healthy social development of students in a safe, supportive learning environment.

Behaviour issues in schools can interfere with learning, instruction and positive school climate. Not all students come to school ready to learn. Some students, for a variety of reasons, may not understand acceptable social behaviour and be unable or unwilling to meet the school's behavioural expectations.

The following pyramid model illustrates the behavioural issues in a typical student population. Studies show that 80 to 85 percent of students generally meet the school's behavioural expectations. Another 5 to 15 percent chronically do not meet expectations and are at risk of developing severe behaviour disabilities. One to 7 percent have behaviour disabilities severe enough that they cannot meet behavioural expectations without intensive, individualized interventions.



Three-tiered model of positive behaviour support

The three tiers of this model represent a continuum of increasingly intense interventions that correspond to the responsiveness of students.

- All students will benefit from a **universal system of interventions**, and for 80 to 85 percent these supports are sufficient to maintain positive behaviour.
- More **targeted interventions**, such as social skills instruction and behavioural management, will benefit the 5 to 15 percent of students who are at risk of developing serious behaviour problems.
- **Intensive, individualized supports** will benefit the 1 to 7 percent of students who do not respond to universal and/or targeted interventions.

This three-part resource, *Supporting Positive Behaviour in Alberta Schools* is organized around this model. The three sections deal with:

- a **universal** school-wide approach
- a **targeted** classroom management approach
- an **intensive**, individualized approach.

A school-wide approach to positive behaviour supports

A school-wide approach to positive behaviour supports effectively promotes a safe, orderly and predictable environment for learning and teaching. This approach has significant effects within the school community: it creates a positive school culture that students, parents and staff perceive as safe and caring.

Creating safe and caring schools is a professional obligation of teachers, mandated by the *Alberta School Act* (RSA 2000): “A board shall ensure that each student enrolled in a school operated by the board is provided with a safe and caring environment that fosters and maintains respectful and responsible behaviours” [Section 45(8)].

Creating a safe and caring school requires a team effort and a problem-solving approach. This resource, *Supporting Positive Behaviour in Alberta Schools: A school-wide approach*, describes a comprehensive school-wide approach that involves **all** students, **all** staff and **all** school settings. It is a flexible process for identifying the specific behavioural needs of individual schools and then developing an action plan to meet those needs.

The focus of this approach is on establishing, maintaining and reinforcing the positive behaviour of the majority of students by providing clear expectations, but it also addresses problem behaviour. Although students in the at-risk category (less than 15 percent of the total school population) benefit from clear expectations and other universal supports such as positive reinforcement and active supervision, they often need additional supports such as targeted social skills training and mentoring.

A school-wide approach also helps staff clearly identify the one to seven percent of students who demonstrate high-risk behaviour, and need intensive, individualized interventions and support on an ongoing basis.

Positive behaviour supports create a structure, and they provide tools and strategies for school staff to positively affect how students behave and interact with one another. Students are reinforced for behaving in socially acceptable ways and encouraged to carry this learning and positive behaviour into their homes and the larger community.

These are some of the indicators that might cause school staff to either adopt a school-wide approach to positive behaviour supports, or take steps to improve current school-wide systems.

- Academic goals are not being achieved at the school-wide, classroom and/or individual levels.
- The school has high rates of problem behaviour and office referrals.
- The current school discipline plan is not adequate for consistently managing problem behaviour.
- Parents and community members are dissatisfied with school climate or concerned about frequent public incidents.
- School staff are dissatisfied with the way problem behaviour is being managed.
- Staff satisfaction is low. Teachers report problem behaviour is interfering with their ability to deliver effective instruction.

Provincial history

Since 2001, a number of Alberta schools have used a school-wide approach to positive behaviour supports, often called Effective Behaviour Supports (EBS). These schools report that when they teach students the skills and give them the support necessary to behave positively, a safe and caring learning culture flourishes. Alberta schools implementing school-wide behavioural change systems over a period of one to three years reported:

- a 70 percent reduction in office discipline referrals
- a 40 percent decrease in out-of-school suspensions
- a 40 percent reduction in expulsions.

A positive behaviour support approach helps schools create environments in which all students learn to cooperate and the likelihood of academic success for all students is increased.

At the beginning, the elementary students seemed out of control. Many were fighting, stealing and bullying. The number of students being sent to the office seemed to be growing and growing. Many students were referred for just being downright disrespectful.

I had a basic understanding of the Sugai research (www.pbis.org) and it seemed so practical that I suggested we try it. The question was, how could I facilitate this new approach with staff? I knew that collecting data about behaviour incidents would be a challenge.

The first year we formed a committee that met weekly. Our first focus was to come up with monthly themes by combining the effective behaviour approach with character education. The first theme was respect. We aligned all of the co-curricular activities for the year with effective behaviour supports. This helped staff realize that they didn't have to do more work. They just had to work differently.

At the beginning of the second year, we realized we were trying to do too much at one time, so we scaled down our efforts. Staff then concentrated on fewer goals and continued the focus on respect. In September, when we looked at the Provincial Achievement Test scores for year one, we saw that our results were up. With this tangible evidence, staff commitment really went up. Any last naysayers now came on board. By the end of the second year, students were taking ownership of their own behaviour and talking about how this approach was making their school a better place.

During the third year, students stopped the negative behaviour before it happened. We were thrilled to see how much time that was previously needed to deal with discipline issues was now freed up for learning. It meant an increase in instructional time in the classroom and contributed to 100 percent of our students passing the Provincial Achievement Tests. This all happened within the first two years of implementation. The results of our school survey also showed 100 percent of respondents felt our school was safe and caring!

We asked the staff about the magic secret of our success and they responded, "Effective behaviour supports." That was the first time we realized how an effective discipline system increases time for teaching and for students' on-task behaviour. We regained a lot of instructional time because the students were no longer in the office or suspended; they were in classrooms learning.

– Principal, rural elementary/junior high school

Impact of positive behaviour on school completion

Current research indicates that positive behaviour, successful school performance and social engagement are all factors that contribute to school completion.¹ The decision to drop out of school before graduation is a long-term process of academic and social disengagement from school. It is influenced by a variety of academic, personal and family experiences. Although students may not actually withdraw completely until senior high school, for many of them the process begins at different points in their schooling—even as early as Grade 1.

Studies have identified these risk factors in relation to early school leaving:

- school attendance
- social engagement
- behavioural issues
- school discipline policies.

The school environment and discipline policies and practices can also influence students' decisions to stay in school or drop out.

School attendance

Absenteeism is a primary indicator of a student's level of disengagement from school: the number of days a student is out of school has an impact on his or her chances of dropping out, starting in Grade 1. In a recent survey of students, missing too many days and having difficulty catching up was the second most reported reason for early school leaving. Other behaviours that can signal academic disengagement include truancy, consistently not completing homework and coming to class unprepared.

Social engagement

Students who leave school early are more likely to have limited social skills and difficulty getting along with peers at school. One study found that the students who were most likely to drop out were often not socially isolated but rather had made friends with other students who were also at risk of dropping out. Social disengagement at school also occurs when students are not involved in extracurricular activities such as clubs, sports, science fairs, scouting and the school newspaper. In senior high, social engagement through school or community clubs or activities is an important factor in keeping students in school until graduation. This is particularly true for students with disabilities.

1. Hammond et al. 2007 (<http://dropoutprevention.org/resources/major-research-reports/dropout-risk-factors-and-exemplary-programs-a-technical-report/>)

Behavioural factors

Negative behaviour is a strong indicator that a student is not fully engaged with school. Also, if a student's behaviour results in repeated suspensions or an expulsion, his or her alienation from school is likely to increase.

The following factors have also been consistently linked to early school leaving:

- problem behaviour resulting in suspensions or expulsions in middle school and high school
- getting into conflict with the justice system.

School environment

Negative school climates, which often include high rates of absenteeism and/or high rates of behaviour issues, are linked to increased early school leaving rates. Students also tend to drop out of school when:

- they don't feel safe at school
- large proportions of students view discipline at their school as unfair or not supported by staff
- academic and discipline policies call for involuntary withdrawal.

Supervision and discipline policies

Many schools have zero tolerance discipline policies that require reporting to the police, and suspension or expulsion for any and all violations of school rules. This type of punitive response can lead to situations in which students face inappropriately serious consequences for relatively minor offences. Such policies often give students a double dose of punishment. They may be suspended or expelled and also have to appear in court. Such policies may increase the number of students who are at-risk of not completing school.

School performance

Poor academic performance is one of the most consistent predictors of early school leaving, whether measured through grades, test scores or course failure. Research indicates that the impact can begin as early as Grade 1 and continue throughout a student's years at school. In several major surveys, students said that poor academic performance was a major reason for leaving school before graduation.

Engagement with school

Early school leaving is a long process of progressive disengagement that includes markers or warning signs along the way. In a recent survey, students who left school early reported that they felt increasingly alienated from school for one to three years before they dropped out. Seventy-one percent lost interest in school in Grade 9 or 10,

over a third reported missing class often the year they dropped out, and the majority reported missing class often during the years preceding dropping out. In interviews, students described a pattern of refusing to wake up, missing school, skipping class and taking three-hour lunches. They also said that each absence made them less willing to go back.

Attitudes toward school

Having low educational expectations significantly increases the likelihood that students will leave school before earning a high school diploma. Low expectations may take the form of being uncertain about high school graduation or lacking plans for education beyond high school. Surveys show that students who left school early commonly felt they didn't belong at school, had trouble getting along with their teachers or just had a general dislike of school.

Parents' attitudes toward school are also important, as well as their actions related to education. Parents of students who leave school early tend to have infrequent contacts with the school about their child's academic performance and/or behaviour, and rarely talk to their child about school or get involved in school activities. One study found a link between early school leaving and a lack of study aids such as books and reference material at home. Another study linked a low level of parental monitoring of homework with high dropout rates.

Addressing risk factors

The risk factors that influence early school leaving are interrelated and complex. No single factor causes students to leave school before graduation, and even though a factor is related to early school leaving, it is not necessarily a *cause* of early school leaving.

Information about risk factors can help schools develop universal, targeted and intensive individualized strategies to successfully engage students in learning, and provide the resources and support they need. A school-wide approach to positive behaviour support can provide schools with a context and framework for developing, implementing and monitoring these strategies.

School staff may wish to consider the following kinds of strategies that have both the potential to positively affect school completion rates and that align with a positive behaviour support approach.

Attendance

- Track attendance and take action to improve attendance rates for all students. For example, a school might develop flexible schedules, offer high-interest activities at the beginning of the school day and have school staff mentor targeted students.

Low achievement

- Work as a school team to develop and communicate high learning expectations for all students.
- Use a differentiated instruction approach that considers the individual learning needs of all students.
- Create opportunities for students to set goals for their own learning.
- Create opportunities to reinforce student effort and teach students to recognize, monitor and assess their own efforts.
- Explicitly teach and reinforce work habits and study skills.
- Identify students with learning disabilities and/ or emotional disorders and develop individual plans for supporting these students.
- Consider the negative effects of having students repeat a grade.

Parental involvement

- Work with parents to develop and communicate high expectations for learning.
- Create positive opportunities for parents to be involved in school activities.
- Create and maintain channels of communication with parents through special events, “meet the teacher” sessions and school newsletters.

Social engagement

- Create opportunities for all students to be involved in extracurricular activities.
- Build positive relationships between adults and students.

Behavioural support

- Set clear behavioural expectations and reinforce positive behaviour.
- Teach and reinforce social skills, including managing frustration, anger and social conflict.
- Provide proactive supervision and create effective routines that reduce opportunities for negative behaviour.
- Teach and reinforce resiliency skills such as social problem solving, emotional regulations, and the ability to identify and respect the perspectives and needs of others.
- Provide opportunities for students to develop strong, realistic beliefs in their abilities, gifts and talents.