

Reducing Discipline Referrals:
Collaborative & Proactive Solutions in Four Schools

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Introduction

Students with social, emotional, and behavioral challenges are referred for discipline in schools far more often than other students, and therefore are the recipients of a significant number of punitive interventions, including detention, suspension, expulsion, corporal punishment, and arrests. According to the most recently available data from the U.S. Department of Education, American public schools doled out over 100,000 expulsions in 2017-18 (the last year for which data are available), over 5 million in- and -out-of-school suspensions, over 100,000 uses of corporal punishment, and over 120,000 arrests. These interventions are applied disproportionately to Black and Brown students and those with disabilities (Shollenberger, 2015). Researchers have pointed to these interventions as contributing to a failure and punishment cycle that greatly heightens the likelihood that a student will ultimately be incarcerated (what is referred to as the school-to-prison pipeline (Losen & Martinez, 2013; Balfanz, Byrnes, & Fox, 2015; Fabelo, et al., 2011), and have prompted Presidential calls for change (Executive Office of the President, December 2016).

Office discipline referrals typically set this cycle in motion. Recent studies provide important information about the nuances of discipline referrals. Findings include the fact that Black students are more than twice as likely to have received at least one disciplinary referral as their white peers in the same school, which may partially account for the racial disproportionality of the punitive/exclusionary disciplinary procedures that follow such referrals. However, it was also found that the conversion rate of referrals into suspensions across all types of referrals is significantly higher for Black than for white students even after controlling for a battery of student characteristics, including their demographics, neighborhood conditions, and their prior achievement and behavioral outcomes (Liu, Hayes, & Gershonson, 2022).

The disproportionality doesn't end with who is being referred. It continues with those who are making the referrals. It has been shown that most teachers refer few students for discipline, but some teachers – about five percent – issue a disproportionate share of such referrals (45 referrals per year, or one every four school days) as compared to their average-referring colleagues, who issue less than one referral for every two months of school) (Liu, Penner, & Gao, 2022). “Top referrers” accounted for 34.8% of all referrals made in the four-year period of the study. More importantly, “top referrers” effectively double the Black-white, Hispanic-white, and multiracial/other-white referral gaps. A closer look at the widened referral gaps by “top referrers” suggests that they are driven by high numbers of referrals due to interpersonal offenses and defiance, which are considered more subjective than other referral reasons such as violence (Liu, 2023).

Finally, consistent with a large literature that suggests same-race teachers matter (e.g., Dee, 2004), it was found that Black students' probability of receiving at least one referral is significantly lower when they have a Black teacher. The reduced likelihoods of receiving referrals from same-race teachers also convert to reduced likelihoods of being suspended. There was also suggestive evidence that new-to-school teachers are much more likely than their senior colleagues to refer students (Liu, Penner, & Gao, 2022).

Understanding the factors underlying such findings is important. However, given that office discipline referrals are the gatekeeper for many forms of punitive/exclusionary discipline, there is a pressing need for models of school discipline that move schools away from discipline referrals for all students.

Collaborative & Proactive Solutions (CPS) is an evidence-based psychosocial treatment model for youth with concerning behaviors first articulated in published form in 1998 in the book *The Explosive Child* (Greene, 1998) and later in books describing the application of the model in schools (*Lost at School*; Greene, 2008, 2014; *Lost & Found*, Greene, 2016). Over the past 30 years, the CPS model has been applied and studied in a diverse array of settings, including families, general and special education schools, inpatient psychiatry units, and residential and juvenile detention facilities (Greene & Winkler, 2019). While its effectiveness in school settings has been noted anecdotally, this finding has yet to be documented in actual studies.

The CPS approach emanates from the same broad social learning theoretical foundations as other well-established forms of psychosocial intervention for concerning behaviors. However, CPS represents a significant departure from these procedures and practices. The CPS model relies heavily on the vast findings in neuropsychology delineating the skills frequently found lagging in youth with social, emotional, and behavioral challenges. Rather than focusing on overt behavior, the model centers on the specific conditions in which concerning behaviors occur. An important premise of the CPS model is that concerning behavior occurs when individuals lack the skills to respond to problems and frustrations adaptively, including flexibility/adaptability, frustration tolerance, problem solving, and emotion regulation (Greene, 2023). These frustration responses are said to occur in conditions in which individuals are having difficulty meeting specific expectations. In the CPS model these unmet expectations are referred to as “unsolved problems.” The goal of intervention is to help caregivers and kids engage in collaborative and proactive efforts to solve those problems, thereby reducing or eliminating the concerning behavior that is the byproduct of those problems (Greene, 2023).

In schools, use of the CPS model involves two primary components: (1) engaging school staff in the process of identifying a child’s lagging skills and unsolved problems, using an instrument called the Assessment of Lagging Skills and Unsolved Problems (ALSUP) and then (2) having school staff and kids engage in efforts to solve those problems collaboratively and proactively. Another important premise of the model is that the person in the best position to solve a problem with a student is the person whose expectation the child is having difficulty meeting. If a student is having Difficulty completing the double-digit division problems on the worksheet in math, then the ideal person to solve that problem with the student is the math teacher. If a student is having Difficulty agreeing on the rules of the four-square game with Billy during recess, then the person who monitors recess is ideally suited to facilitate a solution to that problem. If those unsolved problems are causing concerning behavior and the student is simply sent to the office or to a school counselor or psychologist -- who may know little about those problems and are therefore ill-equipped to solve them -- then the problems will remain unsolved and the concerning behaviors being caused by those problems will persist.

The ALSUP (see Appendix A) is neither a behavior checklist nor a rating scale but is instead used as a discussion guide. It is intended to help adults shift their explanations for concerning behavior (from lagging motivation to lagging skills). There is another advantage to the ALSUP: because caregivers are identifying unsolved problems proactively, those problems become highly predictable and can therefore be prioritized and solved proactively. Thus, the CPS model helps schools move away from intervention that is

primarily reactive toward intervention that is primarily proactive, thereby reducing the need for punitive interventions that occur as reactions to concerning behavior.

The problem-solving process -- known as Plan B -- involves three steps:

- the Empathy step, in which caregivers gather information from the student about the factors making it difficult for them to meet a particular expectation
- the Define Adult Concerns step, in which caregivers articulate why they feel it's important that the expectation be met
- the Invitation step, in which the child and caregivers collaboratively arrive at a solution that addresses the concerns of both parties.

Implementation in Four Schools

Beginning in 2017, four public schools in Maine began implementing the CPS model. Existing school data collection systems were used to track changes in discipline referrals, detentions, and suspensions for the years before, during, and following implementation of the CPS model.

As described by Greene (2014, 2016), implementation began with a core group in each school, consisting of 8-10 school staff that became proficient in the model first by becoming skilled in the two key components of the CPS model: the ALSUP and solving problems collaboratively and proactively (Plan B) with students. This cadre of staff then assisted in expanding the model to other staff throughout the building. Core group members received weekly instruction, supervision, and feedback from a trainer provided by grant funding through the Maine Juvenile Justice Advisory Group.

The CPS model was tailored to each school environment as follows:

School #1 (K-8). CPS was implemented school-wide in this school. Spearheaded by the assistant principal, implementation followed the general pattern described in the paragraph above.

School #2 (PK-3). Led by the principal and school counselor, the model was first implemented in one classroom. In the subsequent school year was implemented in the classrooms of five core group members, and in the following year implementation was expanded to another ten classrooms.

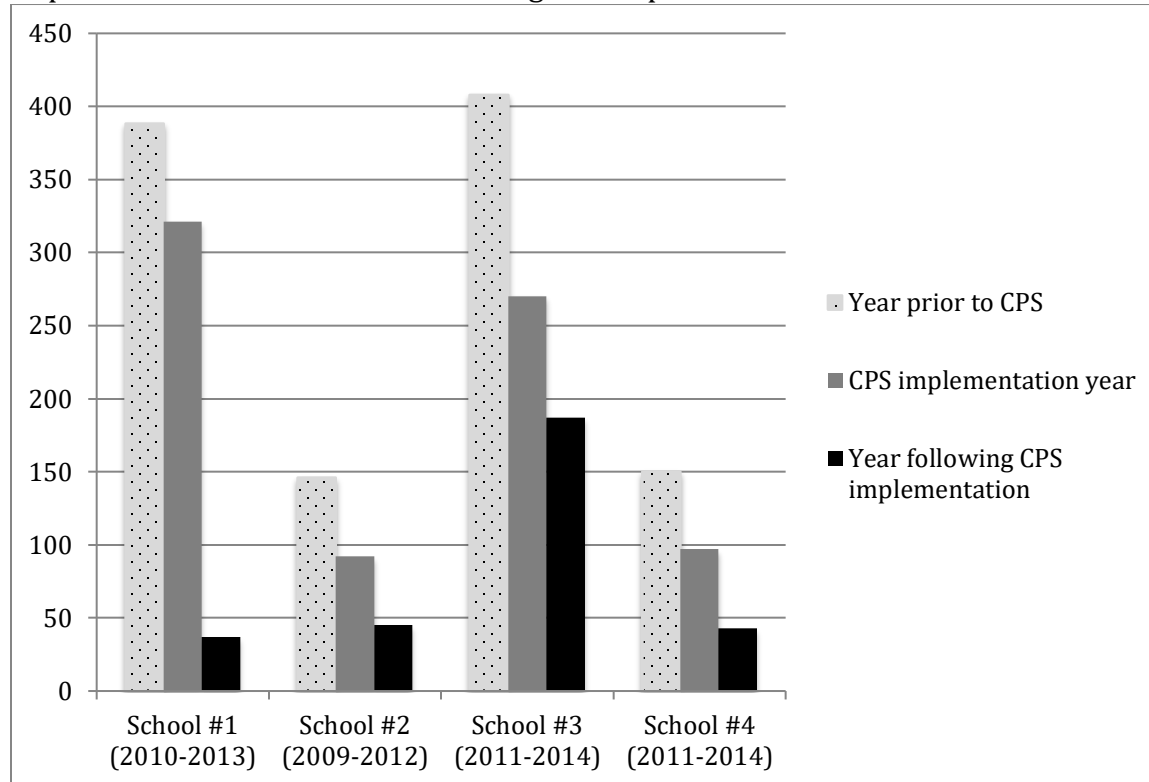
School #3 (K-3). CPS was implemented on a limited scale in this school between 2012 and 2014, and was led by the principal and several classroom teachers. It was difficult for the core group to meet with reliability, and then difficult for core groups members to extend proficiency to other staff in the building. However, the general themes of the CPS model were disseminated throughout the building.

School #4 (PK-5). CPS was implemented between 2012 and 2014. Led by the assistant principal, the core group met reliably and was trained to proficiency in the CPS model. It was difficult for proficiency to be extended beyond the core group, although the key themes of the CPS model were disseminated throughout the building.

Results

Table 1 details the office referrals recorded in each of the four schools for which data are available for the year prior to CPS implantation, the CPS implementation year, and the year following CPS implementation. In all four schools there was a significant decline in discipline referrals in each of the years following CPS implementation.

Table 1: School Discipline Referrals for Four Maine Schools for the Year Prior to CPS Implementation to One-Year Following CPS Implementation



Discussion

Reducing disciplinary referrals -- and the punitive/exclusionary interventions that result from such referrals -- is an important component of transforming school discipline practices. Such referrals place responsibility for discipline on school staff (principals, assistant principals) who are distal to situations in which challenging behaviors occur.

Given the focal point of the CPS model -- proactively and collaboratively solving the problems that are causing challenging behavior -- its effectiveness at reducing discipline referrals is not surprising: the responsibility for the problem-solving process rests squarely on the staff member whose expectation a student is having difficulty meeting. School administrators and school psychologists, counselors, and social workers can play a crucial role in facilitating the problem-solving process -- and in putting in structures that encourage and support these processes -- but they cannot be the primary problem-solvers.

In our experience, while helping school staff master the two key components of the CPS model is challenging -- after all, these components typically represent a major departure from business-as-usual school discipline -- the most difficult aspect of implementation involves the alteration of school structures that support traditional discipline. Driven by mandates related to high-stakes testing, the school day is structured around academics, not problem-solving. Indeed, with so much hinging on student test performance (e.g., the job security of teachers and administrators), high-stakes testing may have simply increased the desire to deal with classroom disruptions and behavior problems immediately and efficiently. Unfortunately, immediacy does not translate into

efficiency if intervention is ineffective. So schools that have embraced the CPS model have had to create new structures that allow classroom teachers the time (and encouragement) to solve problems with their students.

Fortunately, classroom teachers have always played the role of “problem-solver” when it comes to academics; the CPS model is extending that role to the challenging behaviors that are often caused by difficulties with academics. Classroom teachers have always been relied upon as crucial socialization agents for our youth; the CPS model breathes life into and formalizes that important role as well.

The CPS model has been shown not only to reduce challenging behaviors (on a par with traditional operant procedures) but also to solve the problems that are causing those behaviors, teach the lagging skills that are contributing to those problems (Ollendick et al., 2015; Dedousis-Wallace et al., 2016), and improve communication and relationships between kids with behavioral challenges and their caregivers (Greene et al., 2004; Booker et al., 2016). Those relationships are at the core of helping behaviorally challenging students overcome their difficulties. Discipline referral systems remove classroom teachers from the very processes that foster those relationships. The CPS model creates structures and promotes practices that facilitate those relationships.

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