

A Sample of Evidence-Based Behavior Interventions

School social workers have the expertise to identify interventions, evaluate their effectiveness, and help staff members implement them with fidelity.

Christine Anauf Sabatino, Patricia Pricher, and Michelle Alvarez

It is early Monday morning during the third week of classes, and the principal and the school services/response to intervention (RTI) team are reviewing data on students who might benefit from tier two interventions. The team discusses a student who has missed three days of school, and they are concerned that this trend may continue and prompt the student to drop out of school.

Several other students with similar attendance problems also are identified. The school social worker shares several evidence-based options for tier two interventions that can be implemented. Rather than taking a “wait to fail” approach, the team decides to be proactive and makes a plan for the student.

The team refers the student to the Check & Connect program, which has had a positive impact on student retention and improved attendance. The program will be implemented by the school social worker and the student will also attend small group sessions. Her individual progress will be monitored, and the team will review it at an upcoming meeting.

Background

After the passage of NCLB, the focus of school administrators and other school curriculum and support services has shifted to scientifically supported programs that address the academic and behavior challenges faced by students. Meanwhile, a growing number of schools are adopting RTI frameworks, requiring school leaders to identify scientifically supported programs that address needs at the schoolwide, small group, and individual levels.

School administrators are familiar with academic interventions, but they must turn to their specialized instructional support personnel, such as school social workers, to identify programs and interventions that are supported by research and address the specific needs of their schools. School

social workers know where to find such programs, and they have skills to analyze how well the programs meet their schools’ needs (e.g., target population, problem issues, methods of program implementation, and costs).

Assessing Fit

School social workers can support principals in decision-making processes by providing information about effective interventions that fit with each RTI tier. For example, research from the Institute of Community Integration (2012) about the Check & Connect program indicates that:

- A body of research demonstrates positive outcomes with the use of the program, including decreases in the likelihood of dropping out of school
 - The populations studied include students with learning, emotional, or behavioral disabilities
 - Rural and urban schools have had positive results
 - A detailed implementation handbook is available
 - Although training is recommended, it is not required.
- Check & Connect not only has

Created in collaboration with the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) to facilitate partnerships between principals and school psychologists and to remove barriers to learning. Additional resources are available at www.nasponline.org/resources/principals.

research to support its effectiveness in middle and high schools, but reports also showed that it is a cost-effective approach to addressing truancy, a long-standing and complex school issue (Institute of Community Integration, 2012; What Works Clearinghouse, 2012).

School social workers are also equipped to seek out other resources, such as grants and donations, that can fund programs that require an investment in training and curriculum, such as Reconnecting Youth (RY), a program for middle and high school students that is designed to increase school performance, decrease drug involvement, and decrease emotional distress. Depression or suicide attempts often lead to an invitation to join RY, as do office referrals, poor grades and attendance, and drug use.

Students in the RY program attend a semester-long class that concentrates on improving self-esteem and learning how to make positive decisions, how to maintain personal control in stressful and difficult situations, and interpersonal communication techniques. As the name suggests, another component of RY is helping students become involved in activities that promote their bonding to school, which leads to change in their problem behaviors.

According to its website, RY (2012) is an evidence-based program that has resulted in significant effects, such as:

- 35% reduction in dropout rates
- 50% reduction in hard drug use
- 75% reduction in depression/hopelessness
- 80% reduction in suicidal behaviors
- 18% increase in GPA for all classes (excluding RY)
- 7.5% increase in credits earned per semester.

AN EXAMPLE

In seventh grade, Dan received multiple office referrals for defiance, class disruption, and disrespect to teachers. The following year, the student services team recommended that Dan attend the RY class. The school social worker approached Dan about joining the class, and although he was reluctant, he agreed after they discussed his performance during the previous year and the changes he would like to make before high school. The school social worker and the teacher facilitator told Dan's teacher that he was attending the RY class and asked to be notified of any issues.

Dan had been having problems at school and at home with controlling his anger and not thinking before speaking. During the RY class, Dan learned a variety of techniques to manage his behavior, including monitoring his mood, practicing stopping and thinking before acting, and stress management skills. The school social worker provided support for Dan at school, and when Dan revealed



School social workers can support principals in decision-making processes by providing information about effective interventions that fit with each RTI tier.

Resources

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning
www.casel.org

Empirically Supported Interventions in School Mental Health
<http://csmh.umaryland.edu/Resources/ResourcePackets/files/empiricallysupported.pdf>

Evidence-Based Behavioral Practices (EBBP)
www.ebbp.org/

Institute of Medicine
<http://iom.edu>

Safe Schools Healthy Students: Framework for Effectively Implementing Evidence-Based Programs and Practices
<http://sshs.promoteprevent.org/ebpframework>

School-Based Mental Health: An Empirical Guide for Decision-Makers
<http://rtckids.fmhi.usf.edu/rtcpubs/study04/default.cfm>

National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP)
<http://nrepp.samhsa.gov/>

Society for Prevention Research
www.preventionresearch.org

The Campbell Collaboration
www.campbellcollaboration.org

The Cochrane Collaboration
www.cochrane.org/

What Works Clearing House
<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc>

that he enjoyed drawing, the school social worker helped him enroll in an advanced art class and an after-school art program. Connecting school to something he enjoyed allowed Dan to bond with the school community, especially several teachers, and he became more comfortable talking about what was bothering him instead of acting out. His office referrals dropped dramatically and the rare referral was for small issues, such as chewing gum or fooling around in the hallways.

Although Dan did not attend RY class during the second semester of eighth grade, his relationships with the school social worker and the art teacher continued. He maintained his behavior and entered the school's art show, where one of his drawings made it to the finals. The school social worker and art teacher facilitated Dan's transition to high school by introducing him to the high school art teacher and talking about the art programs the high school offered.

EVALUATING PROGRAMS

School social workers are trained in research methods and statistical analyses, making them excellent consumers of scientifically supported interventions. School social workers take the following approach when selecting behavior interventions:

- Asking well-formed questions about the behavior of concern
- Tracking down the best scholarship and research that address the behavior
- Identifying scientifically supported interventions and assessing their fit with the school (see figure 1)
- Analyzing and critiquing material

- Sorting the best evidence according to the RTI framework
- Evaluating the best evidence to determine how well the interventions address student behavior
- Implementing the scientifically supported interventions with fidelity
- Evaluating the outcome of this process to improve the next set of behavioral interventions (Springs, 2007).

Fixen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, and Wallace (2005) identified six contextual issues that strengthen or weaken successful implementation of scientifically supported interventions. The principal plays a vital role in achieving program success by determining the answers to the following questions:

- Do the people who are implementing the intervention need to meet specific requirements or have specific qualifications for the intervention to be effective?
- Are new knowledge and skills or observation and rehearsal needed to successfully implement the intervention?
- Are experts available to ensure that the core intervention components are in place?
- Is this intervention relevant for the student's needs and goals? Might there be sound reasons for not applying the intervention?
- What leadership and supports are needed to apply the intervention successfully?
- What financial, organizational, and professional resources are needed to sustain the full and effective application of the interventions?

Figure 1

Evaluating Tier 2 Behavior Interventions in School						
Intervention	Evaluation					
	Evidence-based?	Function addressed	Non-responder decision rule?	Implementation fidelity assessed?	Effective?	Decision
	Y / N	Attention Escape Both	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N	E S*
	Y / N	Attention Escape Both	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N	E S*
	Y / N	Attention Escape Both	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N	E S*
	Y / N	Attention Escape Both	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N	E S*

This table is a tool for determining whether tier two programs are evidence-based and address the function of the behavior. It can also be used as a screening tool to determine the fit between the program and the needs of the school.

*Eliminate – Sustain

Source: Filter, K. J., & Alvarez, M. E. (2012). *Functional behavioral assessment: A three-tiered prevention model*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.



Conclusion

With so many requirements on school administrators to provide evidence-based interventions it is comforting to know that there is an expert in the building who can help assess, facilitate, and implement those programs. **PL**

-youth

- Springs, B. (2007). Steps for evidence-based behavioral practice. Retrieved from www.ebbp.org/steps.html
- What Works Clearinghouse. (2012). *Intervention: Check & connect*. Retrieved from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/reports/dropout/check_conn

REFERENCES

- Institute of Community Integration. (2012). *Check & Connect*. Retrieved from <http://checkandconnect.org/model/default.html>
- Fixen, D. L., Naoom, S. F., Blase, K. A., Friedman, R. M., & Wallace, F. (2005). *Implementation research: A synthesis of the literature*. Retrieved from <http://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/resources/implementation-research-synthesis-literature>
- Reconnecting Youth Inc. (2012). *RY program*. Retrieved from www.reconnectingyouth.com/programs/reconnecting

Christine Anauf Sabatino (sabatino@cua.edu) is associate professor of social work at the Catholic University of America.

Patricia Pricher (pat.pricher@evsc.k12.in.us) is a school social worker at North Junior High School with the Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation in Evansville, IN, and an adjunct professor and school social work program coordinator at the University of Southern Indiana.

Michelle Alvarez (michelle.alvarez@mnsu.edu) is an associate professor of social work at Minnesota State University and president of the School Social Work Association of America.