Using Office Discipline Referrals as a Behavioral Screener: Considerations From NCII and the Center on PBIS

October 2020

National Center on Intensive Intervention and The Center on Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports

National Center on
INTENSIVE INTERVENTION
at American Institutes for Research ■

CENTER ON
PBIS Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports

https://www.pbis.org/

1000 Thomas Jefferson Street NW
Washington, DC 20007-3835
www.intensiveintervention.org

AIR®
AMERICAN INSTITUTES FOR RESEARCH®

IDEAs that Work
U.S. Office of Special Education Programs

Few schools use validated screening assessments to proactively identify students for behavioral supports. This lack of utilization could be due to the time and effort it takes teachers to complete them (McIntosh, Frank, & Spaulding, 2010), the monetary burdens on schools (Severson, Walker, Hope-Doolittle, Kratochwill, & Gresham, 2007), and concerns about identifying students for intervention when evidence-based practices are not yet in place at Tier 2 or 3 (McIntosh, Reinke, & Herman, 2009).

Instead, educators often use office discipline referrals (ODRs) to identify students for behavioral intervention. ODRs are defined as representing an event where "(a) a student engaged in behavior that violated a rule or social norm in the school, (b) the problem behavior was observed or identified by a member of the school staff, and (c) administrative staff delivered a consequence through a permanent (written) product that defined the whole event" (Sugai et al., 2000, p. 96). ODR data are cost-effective (Predy, McIntosh, & Frank, 2014), easily collected (Wright & Dusek, 1998; Irvin et al., 2006), and readily available (McIntosh, Fisher, Kennedy, Craft, & Morrison, 2012), and therefore appealing to schools as a way to identify students for behavioral intervention. In the research literature, however, ODRs have been critiqued for use as a behavioral screener for the following reasons:

- The marked differences between teacher tolerance of behavior and diverse classroom management styles create variability in which behaviors warrant discipline referrals (Girvan, Gion, McIntosh, & Smolkowski, 2017; Morrison, Peterson, O'Farrell, & Redding, 2004; Morrison & Skiba, 2001);

- ODRs do not identify students with internalizing challenges (e.g., anxiety, withdrawal) that need intervention (McIntosh, Campbell, Carter, & Zumbo, 2009; Walker, Cheney, Stage, & Blum, 2005); and

- Students from the following demographic groups are more likely to receive ODRs than their peers: Black/African American, students receiving free or reduced-price lunch, students with emotional or behavioral disorders (EBDs), and males (Anyon et al., 2014; Skiba et al., 2011; Smolkowski Girvan, McIntosh, Nese, & Horner, 2016).

Because of the widespread use of ODRs as a behavioral screener, leaders from the National Center on Intensive Intervention (NCII), along with the Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), offer the following considerations for using ODRs to make data-based decisions:

- ODRs, in general, are a reliable measure of overall school health (e.g., school climate, school engagement, and effectiveness of schoolwide interventions; Morrison et al., 2004; McIntosh, Frank, & Spaulding, 2010).

- ODR data may be used to identify teachers and staff who may benefit from further classroom management training.

- ODRs may be an effective tool for individualized decision making within a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) if there is a systematic and consistent understanding among staff of ODR definitions (Wright & Dusek, 1998; Todd, Horner, & Tobin, 2010) and consistency in behavioral data collection (McIntosh et al., 2009).

In light of the limitations noted above, ODRs on their own are unlikely to be reliable for student-level decision making. However, they may be used in combination with other data sources to identify the needs of students. Consider using a multiple-gate screening system alongside ODR data to capture the behaviors of students with internalizing challenges (McIntosh, Ty, & Miller, 2014). In a multiple-gate screening system, schools could initially use ODRs to provide students with Tier 2 or Tier 3 behavior intervention, but then also administer a screener to identify students with internalizing challenges. Multiple-gate screening is designed to increase the accuracy of screening while focusing more intensive measurements on a smaller number of targeted individuals.

Conclusion

The use of ODR data may be a cost-effective means of identifying students who could benefit from extra behavior support. At the same time, using ODRs alone may provide insufficient information for decision making. With this in mind, we recommend using ODR data as part of a gated screening process where stakeholders have (a) clear schoolwide behavioral expectations, (b) consistent and operationalized definitions for behavioral infractions, and (c) systematic procedures for collecting and analyzing discipline data. As with any screening process, after a student is identified as "at-risk"—academically or behaviorally—educators should verify risk status before making any high-stakes educational decisions. Verification may be achieved by using other validated assessments or triangulation of other available data.

References

Anyon, Y., Jenson, J. M., Altschul, I., Farrar, J., McQueen, J., Greer, E., Downing, B., & Simmons, J. (2014). The persistent effect of race and the promise of alternatives to suspension in school discipline outcomes. *Children and Youth Services Review, 44*, 379–386.

Girvan, E. J., Gion, C., McIntosh, K., & Smolkowski, K. (2017). The relative contribution of subjective office referrals to racial disproportionality in school discipline. *School Psychology Quarterly, 32*(3), 392–404. https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000178

Irvin, L. K., Horner, R. H., Ingram, K., Todd, A. W., Sugai, G., Sampson, N. K., & Boland, J. B. (2006). Using office discipline referral data for decision making about student behavior in elementary and middle schools: An empirical evaluation of validity. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions, 8*(1), 10–23.

McIntosh, K., Campbell, A. L., Carter, D. R., & Zumbo, B. D. (2009). Concurrent validity of office discipline referrals and cut points used in schoolwide positive behavior support. *Behavioral Disorders, 34*(2), 100–113.

McIntosh, K., Fisher, E. S., Kennedy, K. S., Craft, C. B., & Morrison, G. (2012). Using office discipline referrals and school exclusion data to assess school discipline. In S. R. Jimerson, A. B. Nickerson, M. J. Mayer, & M. J. Furlong (Eds.), *Handbook of school violence and school safety: international research and practice* (2nd ed., pp. 305–315). New York, NY: Routledge.

Mcintosh, K., Frank, J. L., & Spaulding, S. A. (2010). Establishing research-based trajectories of office discipline referrals for individual students. *School Psychology Review, 39*(3), 380–394.

McIntosh, K., Reinke, W. M., & Herman, K. E. (2009). School-wide analysis of data for social behavior problems: Assessing outcomes, selecting targets for intervention, and identifying need for support. In G. G. Peacock, R. A. Ervin, E. J. Daly, & K. W. Merrell (Eds.), *The practical handbook of school psychology* (pp. 135–156). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

McIntosh, K., Ty, S. V., & Miller, L. D. (2014). Effects of school-wide positive behavior support on internalizing problems: Current evidence and future directions. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions, 16*(4), 209–218.

Morrison, G. M., Peterson, R., O'Farrell, S., & Redding, M. (2004). Using office referral records in school violence research: Possibilities and limitations. *Journal of School Violence*, *3*, 39–61.

Morrison, G. M., & Skiba, R. (2001). Predicting violence from school misbehavior: Promises and perils. *Psychology in the Schools, 38*(2), 173–184.

Predy, L. K., McIntosh, K., & Frank, J. L. (2014). Utility of number and type of office discipline referrals in predicting chronic problem behavior in middle schools. *School Psychology Review, 43*(4)*,* 472–489.

Severson, H., Walker, H. M., Hope-Doolittle, J., Kratochwill, T., & Gresham, F. M. (2007). Proactive, early screening to detect behaviorally at-risk students: Issues, approaches, emerging innovations, and professional practices. *Journal of School Psychology, 45*(2), 193–223. Retrieved from http://faculty.washington.edu/dcheney/EDSPE503ClassroomManagement/Readings/Oct27%20SeversonScreening.pdf

Skiba, R. J., Horner, R. H., Chung, C., Rausch, M. K., May, S. L., & Tobin, T. (2011). Race is not neutral: A national investigation of African American and Latino disproportionality in school discipline. *School Psychology Review, 40*(1), 85–107.

Smolkowski, K., Girvan, E. J., McIntosh, K., Nese, R. N. T., & Horner, R. H. (2016). Vulnerable decision points in school discipline: Comparison of discipline for African American compared to White students in elementary schools. *Behavioral Disorders, 41*(4), 178–195.

Todd, A. W., Horner, R. H., & Tobin, T. J. (2010). SWIS office referral definitions. Available at http://www.swis.org/index.php?page=resources;rid=10121

Walker, B., Cheney, D., Stage, S. A., & Blum, C. (2005). Schoolwide screening and positive behavior supports: Identifying and supporting students at risk for school failure. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions, 7*(4), 194–205.

Wright, J. A., & Dusek, J. B. (1998). Compiling school base rates for disruptive behaviors from student disciplinary referral data. *School Psychology Review, 27*(1), 138–147.