


Instructional and Restorative Alternatives to Exclusionary Discipline: A Guide to Implementing
the Five Components of the Inclusive Skill-building Learning Approach (ISLA)

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Abstract

In this brief, we outline the five components of the ISLA model, as well as steps that school and district teams can take to begin implementing these practices within their positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) framework.

Key Takeaways

- The ISLA model was created to support teachers, staff, and students by focusing on preventative strategies that promote affirming equitable learning environments within schools.
- Building and sustaining positive relationships with students helps increase engagement and decrease disruptive behaviors.
- The ISLA Process gives school staff and students instructional and restorative tools for dealing with challenging situations.

**Instructional and Restorative Alternatives to Exclusionary Discipline: A Guide to
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(ISLA)**

Decades of research have shown that exclusionary discipline practices can negatively impact student and teacher wellbeing, disproportionately impact marginalized and minoritized students, and lead to a host of detrimental life outcomes. For example, a single out-of-school suspension in 9th grade has been shown to increase the likelihood of a student dropping out of school and decrease the likelihood of a student enrolling in postsecondary education (Balfanz et al., 2015). For teachers, higher levels of emotional exhaustion have been associated with increased use of office discipline referrals and in-school suspensions, leading to teacher burnout and turnover (Eddy et al., 2020). Schools that commonly use exclusionary practices have been shown to have lower school-wide achievement and lower perceptions of school safety by the student body (American Psychological Association, 2008), and the disproportionate use of exclusionary practices in the classroom contributes to widening the access and development gap for students of color, especially those with a disability (Losen & Martinez, 2020). Thus, there is a need for preventative and sustainable supports, with a direct focus on dismantling systems that have historically excluded our most impacted communities.

The Five Components of ISLA

The [Inclusive Skill-Building Learning Approach](#), or ISLA, is a school-wide, universal model designed to strengthen positive relationships, reduce the use of exclusionary practices, support all students and staff with building beneficial social skills to aide them in repairing harm, making amends, and moving on. ISLA is a multi-layered approach that begins with classroom prevention first and layers on additional in-class supports to reduce the number of students being

sent out of the classroom for low level behaviors, so that out-of-class supports are reserved for the students with more significant behavioral challenges (See Figure 1 for a visual of ISLA multi-layered approach). Investing in classroom prevention and including all teachers and educators in the effort to create and sustain positive, inclusive, and restorative environments are critical features of ISLA. In this brief, we outline the five components of the ISLA model, as well as steps that school and district teams can take to begin implementing these practices within their positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) or multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) framework. For each component, we provide the link to additional resources and training materials, which can be found [here](#).

Component 1: Relationship Building and Classroom Prevention

The importance of positive student-teacher relationships has been well-documented in the literature. Roorda and colleagues (2011) found that positive student-teacher relationships were linked with positive student engagement and achievement, whereas student-teacher relationships characterized by negative behavior patterns were associated with poor student engagement and achievement. The ISLA model includes a collection of best practices aimed at strengthening student-teacher relationships. This collection is called the [ISLA WOW Strategies](#), which stands for: Welcome Students at the Door, Own your Classroom Environment, and Wrap Up with Intention (Nese et al., 2021):

Welcoming students at the door is a powerful, yet simple, strategy for establishing trusting and positive relationships with your students. Cook and colleagues (2018) found that when teachers welcomed students by name at the door, engagement increased by 20% and disruptive behavior decreased by 9%. By welcoming students at the door, educators can set a positive tone and promote a sense of belonging.

Owning your classroom environment means teaching, modeling, and acknowledging the behaviors you expect from students. It takes intention, planning, and work by teachers to establish, teach, and practice classroom routines and procedures. Teaching routines at the beginning of the school year sets students up for success in the classroom. Research shows students in these classrooms are more engaged in academic activities and disrupt instruction less, resulting in improved progress in school throughout the year (Oliver et al., 2011).

Wrapping up class with intention aims to improve the sometimes-chaotic nature of transition times, which lead to unwanted behaviors. Ending class with a routine is a proactive approach which can support students by providing a practice opportunity to self-regulate their emotions and behaviors. Wrapping up with intention can have many benefits for teachers and students. It supports maintaining strong relationships between teachers and students, builds community, provides a predictable routine, and provides a mechanism for teachers to assess skill mastery in a quick, efficient way (Verschueren & Koomon, 2012).

Component 2: Effective Responses to Behavior that Consider Function

Effective classroom management often hinges on thoughtful and instructive responses to behavior concerns (Green & Stormont, 2018). [Effective responses to unwanted behaviors](#) are often:

- **Calm and respectful:** be mindful of your own reactions and approach students respectfully.
- **Discreet:** communicate directly and privately with the student instead of having a class-wide audience; aim to avoid public shaming.
- **Focused on skill building:** target skills the student needs to learn and practice to demonstrate the desired behavior; teacher-led modeling and practice is especially helpful.

Behavior serves as a form of communication. When students engage in unwanted behavior, they are communicating, and school professionals that seek to understand what is being communicated are better positioned to respond effectively. Both appropriate and inappropriate behaviors are often “functional,” meaning that they serve a purpose or lead to an outcome the students find reinforcing. Considering what occurs right before an unwanted behavior (i.e., antecedents) and right after (i.e., consequences) helps to determine the possible function of the behavior (Loman et al., 2019). This information allows school professionals to teach students a different, more appropriate alternative behavior that similarly addresses the same function; this behavior should be more efficient and reinforcing than the unwanted behavior. More information on identifying the function of behaviors and teaching alternative behaviors can be found [here](#).

Component 3: “Break Systems” for De-escalation

Breaks keep our brains healthy and allow our minds to reset (Immordino-Yang, et al., 2012). Taking breaks play a key role in cognitive abilities such as reading comprehension and critical thinking. Additionally, breaks can prevent “decision fatigue” and restore motivation for long-term tasks. The potential benefits of implementing a [school-wide break system](#) include allowing students to take a break before behaviors escalate, teaching students the important skill of de-escalation, providing an opportunity for students and teachers to recalibrate, identifying students early who might need more supports, and reserving out-of-class ISLA supports for students who are not successful with universal supports alone.

Many schools already have some form of breaks in place. For example, teachers may have a break or reflection space set up in their classroom. Individual students may have regular breaks built into their daily schedule as an accommodation. ISLA breaks, however, take these

individual practices and expand on them to develop a school-wide, preventative system that all students can access any time of the day. A school-wide break system is a preventative, universal system taught to all students, used in all classrooms, and continuously available. This is not a tool for students to avoid difficult academic tasks, but a mechanism for self-advocacy when needs, emotions, or environmental factors may already be disrupting one's ability to focus and learn.

Breaks can be student-selected or prompted by the teacher. School teams and staff can also differentiate breaks that take place in the same classroom or happen in another classroom. In either case, breaks should be short (5-15 minutes), positive, and aimed at teaching students the value of taking time for a brief respite when needed.

Component 4: ISLA Process with Reconnection and Restoration

The next step in ISLA is what happens when the previous preventative practices are not enough for students to be successful in the classroom, but prior to more intensive Tier 2 or 3 interventions being implemented. Students receive out-of-class supports with an adult who listens, provides skills coaching, and prepares students to return to class and reconnect with their teachers. This is called the [ISLA Process](#) (Nese et al., 2020). The ISLA Process, like the problem-solving logic of PBIS, is a major part of moving away from punitive discipline practices and taking an instructional approach. The instructional restorative conversation with a staff member who has time dedicated to working with individual students, like an educational assistant or administrator, and reconnecting with the classroom teacher are critical features of ISLA that keep relationships at the center of this effort (see Table 1 for the goals and steps of the ISLA Process). The five steps in the ISLA Process are as follows:

- **Triage:** To determine if the behavior is a safety concern and who the most appropriate staff member is to work with the student.
- **Debrief:** To listen and identify behavioral and emotional needs. This guided conversation gives students the space to share their version of events without judgement. It also gives adults the time they need to identify which skills a student might need to work on.
- **Behavior Skills Coaching:** To give students the opportunity to learn and practice replacement or pro-social skills with a trusted adult. The coaching that happens during this conversation helps students understand how they can handle situations like this next time and gives them the opportunity to practice those new skills – with an understanding adult – in a low-stakes way.
- **Reconnection Conversations:** To support students in the process of going back to class and reconnecting with their teacher. Together, the student and staff member plan out how to reconnect with the teacher and complete the [ISLA Reconnection Card](#). The student and staff member use the ISLA Reconnection Card to document (a) What did the student learn? (b) What can they say to make things right? c) How can they prevent this from happening in the future? (d) What do they need from their teacher to be successful? and (e) What else do they want their teacher to know about them?
- **Classroom Re-Entry:** The last step is reconnecting with the teacher and making amends. When they are ready, the student walks back with the staff member to rejoin class. The Reconnection Conversation is the student's time to identify their part in the way things escalated and ask for the support they need from their teacher moving forward. The ISLA support staff member is there to help the student own their part and get their voice heard. The teacher's role here is very important; it is their time to listen, acknowledge the student's point

of view, commit to working with them on the skill they identified, and invite them back into the learning environment when appropriate.

The ISLA Process gives school staff and students tools for dealing with challenging situations in a way that is both instructional and restorative. When implemented with fidelity, these steps can improve relationships with students and teachers, keep students in class and engaged, and teach students the skills they need to be successful both in and out of school (Nese et al., 2020).

A Note on Staffing Shortages

It is important to acknowledge that many schools face staffing shortages. Schools implementing ISLA are not an exception. In such contexts, teams identify adults in the building whose everyday interactions include daily conversations with students and have the disposition of getting trained on restorative and instructional skills that support debriefing, skills coaching, and supporting reconnection conversations. For instance, many schools have trained their school receptionists, administrative and instructional assistants, librarians, and custodians on the ISLA Process and how to serve as the ISLA support staff member. These individuals have often been identified by their colleagues for having strong relationships with students and staff, and their ability to support their community in this capacity has only strengthened the sticking power of this important work in their schools.

Component 5: Data-based Decision Making for Improved Supports

Among the multiple types of data collected to guide decision making within a PBIS framework, [fidelity and outcome data](#) are useful to assess impact of the ISLA Process (McIntosh et al., 2010). Fidelity data indicate how well adults are implementing procedures or

interventions. Are we implementing the way it was designed and using the methods we said we would? Outcome data indicates the impact of our systems and practices. How well are the students responding to interventions or the social environment? In ISLA, teams can use school-wide outcome data to monitor the impact of implementation on levels of office referrals, in-school, and out-of-school suspensions, as well as academic engagement and achievement. Teams can also monitor fidelity of implementation of ISLA using the data collected when students are [sent to the office](#) for unwanted behaviors. Information can be collected and tracked in a spreadsheet, such as this example [tracking sheet](#), which allows teams to better understand why a student was sent to the office and what parts of the ISLA Process were completed with that student. The tracking sheet also automatically calculates the minutes of lost instruction, which is both an indicator of fidelity and outcome data. A [dashboard](#) can also be put into practice to monitor ISLA implementation and inform school-wide and individual student intervention plans.

As members of a team, the main responsibilities when looking at data are to evaluate the implementation fidelity of the various components of the ISLA Process and the impact that implementation is having on student outcomes and student-teacher relationships. Data reviewed during ISLA team meetings are used to inform (a) reductions in the amount of instructional time typically lost when students are sent out of class, (b) the possible need to modify efforts to achieve fidelity of implementation, (c) recurrent skills reinforced through the ISLA Process, and (d) the need for more intensive Tier 2 or 3 interventions when ISLA supports alone are ineffective at improving student behaviors and engagement in the classroom.

How Do We Start Implementing ISLA?

To get started implementing ISLA, teams should build on the existing PBIS framework in their school. ISLA is sometimes called “Tier 1 Plus” because it starts with universal prevention

and then adds components for instructional and restorative alternatives to exclusion. As such, the ISLA Process can be used as an intermediate step prior to more intensive Tier 2 or 3 interventions, but also in conjunction with individualized supports for students with more intensive needs. Teams are encouraged to ensure core features of universal supports are implemented with fidelity, such as school-wide expectations that are explicitly taught to all students and a system for acknowledging and reinforcing expected behaviors. School teams that represent various grade levels, subject areas, and school staff and that meets regularly to discuss school-wide behavior supports for students will guide ISLA implementation along with the other universal PBIS systems and practices. This team can also identify what school staff are already doing that aligns with ISLA implementation. Schools should have an efficient system for collecting and reporting data on critical student behaviors (e.g., office referrals, suspension, discipline, attendance) and the representative team should conduct regular school-wide behavior data reviews and use this data for decision making. The team should develop and utilize a formal process for teachers and staff to request more behavior support for students who may need it. Finally, the team supports all school staff in providing professional development on the function of behavior and have established consensus on classroom-managed versus office-managed unwanted behaviors. The goal is to braid ISLA with the existing PBIS framework to expand on the systems currently in place.

For more information about the Inclusive Skill-building Learning Approach (ISLA) as well as materials, videos, and resources for implementation, please visit www.neselab.org

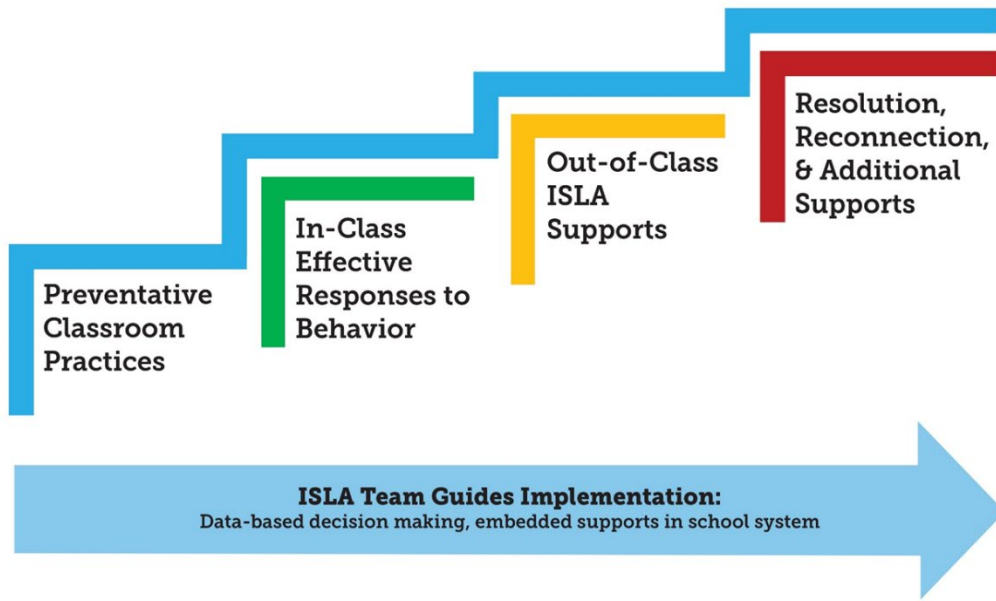


Figure 1.

Multi-layered approach of the Inclusive Skill-building Learning Approach (ISLA)

ISLA Process	Goal	Steps
Triage	Determine if behavior is a safety concern	Follow school safety protocols to determine appropriate staff member to work with the student
Debrief	Provide space for behavioral and emotional skill growth and allow student to share viewpoint	<p>Check-in, allow time for student to de-escalate, if needed</p> <p>Start the debrief conversation:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Assess the context of the situation, student behavior, and what others did too b. Reframe the narrative and assess personal understanding of details c. Understand the student need at the time of that incident d. Provide the opportunity to reflect and consider the impact of decisions made e. Help identify alternative responses and supports needed when in that context <p>Listen and build trust by empathizing with the student</p>
Behavior Skill Coaching	Help the student consider another way of handling similar situations in the future and provide students the opportunity to practice skills with a trusted adult	<p>Identify the prosocial skills that would help next time in a similar situation (connect to school/classroom expectations)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Teach the student what the skill is b. Model what the skill looks like c. Practice the appropriate skill through role-play d. Provide student with feedback on skill development
Reconnection Conversations	Support students with the process of going back to class and reconnect with their teacher	<p>Help the student plan how to reconnect with their teacher or communicate</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Identify a lesson learned b. What can be said and done to make things right c. A way to prevent things from happening again

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> d. Support they may need from their teacher in a similar situation e. What else they would want the teacher to know about them
<p>Classroom Re-entry</p>	<p>Support amends with teacher, holding oneself accountable, and asking for help</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Walk student back to classroom b. Teacher engages in re-entry routine to welcome student back right away or during a determined time c. Staff may support teacher by watching class, if needed d. Staff may support student in owning their part and have their voice heard, if needed e. Allow student back into the classroom without punishment, retribution, or a grudge <p>If Reconnection Conversation does not happen by the end of the period, or is not facilitated by the ISLA Support Staff, find a time to have it within 24 hours. It is important for you and the student to make amends the same day, if possible.</p>

Table 1. Goals and Steps of the ISLA Process

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