District Management Group

10 Mistakes to Avoid

Improving and Expanding Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Services Despite Tight Budgets

Despite tight budgets, schools and districts can create a more effective and comprehensive system to meet the rising social, emotional, and behavioral needs of their students. Best practices focused on better leveraging the talents and time of existing staff, emphasizing prevention over reaction, and leveraging the support of outside partners can yield significant benefits for students needing these services as well as improve the climate for all students and staff. These 10 lessons help guide the way.

1 Don't wait for new funding.

Children with social, emotional, and behavioral needs have immediate challenges to be addressed. While more funding would be helpful, districts can improve and expand services within current budgets by implementing best practices.

2 Don't assume job titles indicate specific skills and training.

Not all school psychologists, counselors, or special educators have similar training and strengths. Some are expert at behavior management, for example, while others excel at conducting evaluations or at teaching reading. Thoughtfully assigning staff based on their skills and strengths instead of based on their titles will benefit students and staff alike.

3 Don't let staff work in silos.

Districts have assembled a diverse team of professionals to support students' social, emotional, and behavioral challenges. These staff members are busy and often work across different departments and across multiple schools. It's important that they be provided common planning time to share, advise, coordinate services, and fine-tune interventions.

4 Don't let meetings and paperwork consume staff time.

Social workers, behaviorists, counselors, school psychologists, and special educators have valuable skills that can help students in need. However, meetings and paperwork often consume more than half their day. Process mapping, reviewing who attends which meetings, streamlining paperwork, and setting guidelines for desired time with students can result in providing more services to more students without adding to staff workload.

Don't ask too much of classroom teachers.

Classroom teachers are an important part of meeting students' social, emotional, and behavioral needs, but they have a lot on their plate and more is added every year—new curricula, new initiatives, and new mandates. Classroom teachers need help in the form of in-the-classroom support from staff skilled in behavior management, not just "sit-and-git" professional development.

Don't try to go it alone.

Meeting the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students is challenging, and schools seldom have enough staff and enough experts to meet all their needs. Fortunately, many local nonprofits and insurance-funded providers can be integrated into a school's efforts at little or no cost.

Don't just react to problematic behavior; focus on prevention.

When students have outbursts, schools must react. But outbursts can be reduced by proactively identifying the triggers and methodically addressing the conditions that cause the flare-ups. Focusing on prevention takes skill and patience, but can greatly reduce problematic behavior.

Don't forget to actively support outside partners.

Outside partners need to be tightly integrated into the life of the schools in which they work. Having a dedicated point person to communicate and provide facilitation can allow the district to leverage outside partners and garner more supports for students.

Don't let discipline policies create more discipline problems.

Few topics generate as much heated debate as discipline rules. Each school and district must find the right balance of support and discipline, but any discipline code should avoid creating future discipline problems, minimize loss of learning, and be reviewed if the policies are chronically failing to improve student behavior.

Don't lose hope!

Meeting the rising social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students isn't easy and is often stressful, but a growing body of best practices can help every school help nearly every child.