



Prioritizing Mindset and Relationships in a Tiered Behavior System

**KIPP Lanning Square Middle School
Case Study**

THE CHALLENGE	The importance of supporting students' social, emotional, and mental health needs is now more critical than ever. As students across the country re-adjust to in-person learning, many have experienced significant trauma. Therefore, schools need to establish systems that are effective for supporting students' needs.
THE COST	When educators are not equipped to support students' behavioral and emotional needs, they might resort to exclusionary discipline techniques like suspensions. Suspensions mean that students lose learning time and are disproportionately used for students with disabilities, Black students, and boys.
KEY TAKEAWAYS	This case study highlights the lessons elicited from a renaissance school in Camden, New Jersey that implemented a new schoolwide tiered behavior system upon returning to in-person learning. This case illustrates the importance of taking time to shift educator mindsets and hiring educators with asset-based views of their students, particularly those from the communities they serve. For the case study school, these factors were an important foundation for the success of their tiered behavior system.

Purpose

This case study features the KIPP Lanning Square Middle School (KLSM), detailing the school's efforts to better support all students behaviorally and emotionally. This case study provides a rich description of KLSM's tiered behavior system, the early successes that have come from this approach, and the broader factors that may enable its success. KLSM is not alone in its effort to more adequately support students with disabilities behaviorally and emotionally. Recent research found that the prevalence of depression and anxiety among adolescents has nearly doubled since the pandemic (Racine et al., 2021). When educators lack the tools to support students' social and emotional wellbeing, schools may see influxes in challenging student behaviors and suspensions. Historically, students with disabilities are two to three times more likely to be suspended than their non-disabled peers (Center for Learner Equity [CLE], 2021). The high suspension rates lead to students with disabilities missing out on instructional time. Black students, particularly Black boys, are most likely to face lost instructional time due to suspensions (Losen & Martinez, 2020). Addressing students' social and emotional learning and mental health in schools is now a top federal priority, and schools are encouraged to invest their emergency federal funding for the implementation of evidence-based approaches that respond to students' academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs (American Rescue Plan Act, 2021). Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is one such popular evidence-based approach (Horner et al., 2020) and was the inspiration for KLSM's tiered behavior system. While PBIS is not a new approach, KLSM's experience implementing PBIS provides lessons for other schools that are looking to improve their approach amid pandemic-related challenges.



Research Methods

CLE worked with the Camden Education Fund to identify schools in Camden, New Jersey that were experiencing success in their strategies for educating students with disabilities. CLE selected KLSM to be one of the case study sites after speaking with the director of special education at KIPP Camden and learning of KLSM’s newly implemented tiered behavior system. CLE interviewed three administrators, namely, the principal, assistant principal of special education, and dean of students. CLE also conducted a focus group with the school’s seven behavior specialists. The administrators and behavior specialists were selected as research participants because of their central roles in designing, leading, and/or implementing the school’s tiered behavior system. The information in this case study was collected during the spring semester of the 2022 school year.

CLE used the interviews and focus group to create a detailed description of KLSM’s tiered behavior system and identify consistent themes about the early successes of this system and the broader factors that may enable this success. The research team at CLE looked for convergence across the accounts of the different research participants to strengthen the validity of these themes. CLE also shared a draft with the research participants and integrated their feedback to ensure that this case study accurately portrays their tiered behavior system.

Background of KLSM

KLSM is part of the nationally recognized “Knowledge Is Power Program” non-profit network of college-preparatory, free, public charter schools educating elementary, middle, and high school students. The model emphasizes effective educators, strong bonds to families, more time in school learning, services that support a variety of student needs, and a culture focused on achievement. KLSM is a public renaissance school in Camden, serving students in grades 5 to 8 (see Table 1 for more details). The leaders at KLSM expressed a desire to build a comprehensive emotional support program to provide more intensive and targeted support for students who have experienced trauma. While plans for this program are still underway, the administrators realized they needed to do more to support the students immediately upon returning to in-person instruction in Fall 2021.

I think the biggest [factor] was for us as educators to realize that what we were facing as adults used to being at home and then suddenly being back was culture shock: ‘Oh I’m back at school.’ We saw a spike in challenging behaviors. Even adult interactions with kids just weren’t the same. They were more negative. Everyone was just getting back into the routine of wearing a mask. Meanwhile, [educators were reminded] how to address kids who have behavior issues or are exhibiting some type of incompletion. It was about developing both the educator and the student to be empathetic and understanding of the situation. We saw a lot of shifts that made the space feel negative. I guess it was more combative. – Assistant principal of special education

Table 1

KIPP LANNING SQUARE MIDDLE SCHOOL DETAILS	
Grade levels served	5th - 8th
Year opened	2015
Total enrollment	469
Percentage of students with disabilities (district average)	17.3% (18%)
Percentage of Black students	51%
Percentage of Latinx students	38%
Percentage of students qualifying for Free or Reduced Price Lunch	98%

Findings

Approach

The KLSM team has been refining schoolwide behavioral supports over the past few years. In the 2021-2022 school year, they put a robust tiered behavior support system in place. The administrator led the rollout of this tiered system to provide students with varying levels of support based on their behavioral and emotional needs.





Tier 1 is the support provided schoolwide to all students. The administrators explained that their approach emphasizes positive reinforcement of character traits, social-emotional learning (SEL), culturally responsive practices, student leadership and belonging, consistency across classrooms so that students know what to expect, and removal of punitive practices. According to administrators, tier 1 support is sufficient for approximately 80 to 85 percent of students at KLSM. Throughout the school, students earn “dollars” for exhibiting positive character traits, such as kindness, integrity, and responsibility. They can cash out their earnings in the school store every two weeks. Students also receive explicit instructions in SEL once per week using the same lesson throughout the school so that all educators can reinforce the lesson in different settings. The administrators also encourage educators to think about how their classrooms make students feel when designing and decorating the space.

Shifting the educators’ mindset around student behavior and building their capacity to use culturally responsive practices is also a big aspect of tier 1 support at KLSM. Educators continually engage in conversations about their students’ cultural backgrounds and how their own cultural backgrounds as educators influence how they perceive and respond to student behavior.



We had to do a lot of work, and I don't think we're there yet. Suspension or discipline that is punitive is not always the answer, so we've done a lot of equity work around that. What does it mean to have conversations with kids, and what actually is disrespect? What is a cultural response that kids have just been normed to? Even if we are of the same race or ethnicity or we've grown up in similar economic backgrounds, we're also much older. So I think our building has shifted to be more reflective. There are still things we do and we question, which is good. – Principal

Tier 2 is for students who need extra behavioral or emotional support beyond what is offered to all students. Approximately 10 to 20 percent of students at KLSM receive tier 2 support. All students at tier 2 have a “Rev sheet” that tracks their progress toward three target behaviors in each class for each day of the week.

Everyone [student] has different target behavior goals. So we take note of some data and observe the child, let's say, at the beginning of the year. We actually observe the child first and see how he/she interacts with peers. How does he/she interact with the educators? How does he/she behave during schoolwork? Does the child exhibit avoidance of a specific work? – Behavior specialist

Students can earn up to two points every period for each target behavior goal they display. Moreover, they can earn weekly incentives for achieving their goal behaviors 80% of the time or even more. Building relationships with students at tier 2 and giving them ownership over their incentives is key to this approach. The behavior specialists described a range of incentives their students enjoyed, including ordering food for lunch, playing basketball in the gym, or spending extra time with friends.

Tier 3 refers to the more intensive support provided to a small number of students at KLMS. Tier 3 includes all of the support provided in tier 2, but the process is more individualized and intensive. Students receiving tier 3 support often have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs) in place, so their support is designed with these plans in mind. Administrators explained that less than 10 students in the school required tier 3 support.

A tier three student may have shown trends of crisis evaluations, violence, verbal threats, or being a harm to themselves or others. For this reason, depending on the frequency the data will show, as soon as they arrive, their behavior specialist greets them at the door. They'll have a check-in in the morning, separate from the population. The behavior specialists praise them, and they'll let them know what they're working toward each day. Like, 'Hey you did an awesome job yesterday. Let's make sure we work on this goal today since you do have three of them. – Assistant principal



Students receiving tier 3 support may also have alternate plans for recess or transitions that are created alongside the students to obtain their input. For instance, a student opted to play video games in a quiet classroom with a friend instead of going to recess with the larger group, as recess triggers anxiety for the student. Check-ins and opportunities to earn incentives on their Rev sheets happen more frequently in tier 3 than tier 2, giving students more frequent positive reinforcement. Behavior specialists may also support the students in their academic classes. In addition, many students at tier 3 receive counseling services from a social worker.

Behavior specialists play a key role in supporting students in tiers 2 and 3. They check in with the students each morning to set their intentions and discuss their goals for the day. They also often check in with them throughout the day to track their progress toward the behavior goals, give encouragement, and help them refocus. At the end of each day, they input the Rev sheet scores from the tier 2 and 3 students assigned to their caseload in an Excel spreadsheet. This spreadsheet tracks which students are making progress and which may need different or extra support. The behavior specialists agreed that helping students see their progress over time and giving them control over their incentives are critical to their effective support. While managing the Rev sheets and conducting check-ins with students are a big part of their job, the role of the behavior specialists at KLSM goes far beyond this. Behavior specialists build deep and trusting relationships with students. These relationships often extend to the students' families. Behavior specialists update the families each day on their child's progress toward their goal behaviors. Sometimes, families arrange a get-together for their child and his/her behavior specialist over the weekend as a reward. Behavior specialists also work with educators to help coach them in using effective strategies to foster positive student behavior.

We take care of the kids... but we also take care of our educators, right? It's not just about managing our kids. We manage our educators as well. We have conversations like, 'Hey, you made this kid feel this way. Let's have an educator-to-kid conversation. Can we have that now?' That's the important part. We are the bridge between the educator and the student, and I think building that gap is what makes our team so strong. We're literally the bridge.

- Behavior Specialist

The "Scholar of Concern Team" meets regularly to guide data-driven decisions for supporting students behaviorally. The Scholar of Concern Team consists of the principal, dean, assistant principal of special education, and two school social workers. The team meets weekly to review behavioral data and discuss any students on tier 2 or 3 who have been flagged for behavioral concerns. Before the Scholar of Concern Team meetings, the dean meets with the behavior specialists one-on-one each week to review the progress of each tier 2 or tier 3 student on their caseloads. The administrators from this team also field concerns from grade-level teams. When a concern about a student is raised, the administrators stress the importance of involving all stakeholders in decision-making, including the student and the parent, and making decisions based on data. For instance, if the educators believe a student could benefit from tier 2 behavioral support, they are asked to fill out a Scholar of Concern form to describe the frequency of the behaviors and what triggers the student's behaviors. A member of the Scholar of Concern Team will then observe the student in different classrooms for a period of 5-10 days to try to get a better understanding



of the behavior. If the team determines that the student’s behavior is persistent across settings, they will work with other stakeholders, such as the educators, students, and behavior specialists, to create a tier 2 or tier 3 plan. If the behavior seems to stem from a particular classroom, the administrators will provide targeted coaching to the educator instead.



Educators believe that students are becoming more emotionally intelligent. Specifically, educators believe that the structure of KLSM’s tiered behavior system is helping students become more reflective on their behaviors and empowering them to make better choices. For some students, having the accountability of knowing that the behavior specialists would be regularly checking in on their behavior seemed to be a big motivator. Others were motivated to keep earning the incentives of their choice. Regardless of their motivator, behavior specialists are encouraged to see students applying the lessons they are trying to instill in them.

I actually heard a student repeating what we told him to another student like, ‘Hey, man. It’s not worth it.’ We turn around, and like, ‘Good. There it goes. You understand it’s not worth it, man.’ That’s why we do our job—to see those moments that you actually listen to and assimilate what we taught you. You bring it with you, and you try to deliver it to your peers as well. – Behavior specialist of special education

These were some things that the students initially didn’t want to do, and it’s really just amazing to see their growth, and they want to grow now. It’s not just like, ‘Oh you have this drive for them.’ No. Now, they have this drive for themselves. – Behavior specialist

Student suspensions and moments of crisis have decreased since the beginning of the year. Mitigating suspensions, particularly for students with disabilities, was one of the primary motivations underpinning KLSM’s tiered behavior system. The principal has been encouraged to see a suspension rate decrease since the start of the school year. This has been particularly true for students who require intensive behavioral support, according to the administrators. The administrators also reported that students have had fewer moments of crisis since the beginning of the year when the tiered behavior system went into effect. The principal recalled that they were averaging about one moment of crisis every three weeks at the start of the year, but in the last two months, there had only been one. The administrators are optimistic that these rates will continue to improve with time and consistency and as absences from COVID-related quarantines become more infrequent.



Educators are better equipped to support students behaviorally. The administrators and behavior specialists alike believe that the data-driven nature of their tiered behavior system left them better equipped to support students behaviorally.

Before, it was just kind of subjective, what the kids needed and what we thought was true. You know, instead of saying, ‘This student gets suspended all the time’ or ‘This student doesn’t listen,’ now, we are really zoned into what the behavior is... I think it’s really built a framework for us living in the data. – Assistant principal of special education

The behavior specialists are already skilled in building strong relationships with students. Learning to implement the tiered system gave them the specific tools and strategies to use when relationships were simply not enough. The Rev sheet was central for anchoring the behavior specialists’ conversations with the students. Using the Rev sheet helped the behavior specialists focus on specific behaviors, as they leveraged their positive relationships to coach students.

We want them to have accountability. We ask them, ‘Why did you get zero on a particular behavior on the Rev sheet? What happened?’ Which kind of leads them into telling you, not you telling them. Sometimes, we try not to scold them. We’re trying to educate them, not change their character. We’re just trying to guide them. – Behavior specialist

Educators agree that the school culture feels more positive than it was at the start of the school year. Furthermore, the administrators agree that one of the biggest successes that came from their tiered behavior system is the positive school culture. The principal and other administrators agree that removing punitive systems and implementing a system that reduces student crises has made the whole building feel more positive. For educators, this translates to an enjoyable work environment. The behavior specialists agree that the positive school culture is a big part of what they love about the school. They described the culture as one in which all educators work together and care about students. The principal theorized that the school’s improved culture through the tiered behavior system may improve educator retention and ultimately benefit all students:

School culture is the best it has been in four years. It feels good every day when there aren't fires that need to be put out. I think you have less of the 'I hate school.' When you have punitive systems, kids feel that a lot. Even kids who don't 'get in trouble' feel that... I think the educators enjoy not having to deal with discipline issues all day. That feels really good. I also think about the retention of educators. I don't think we're going to lose many teammates this year. What happens in urban education is that you get burnout with discipline. I just think it shows that we stuck with a system even when people were out all the time, and we're now reaping the benefits of being consistent and not throwing caution to the wind when COVID-19 was hitting us... I think those are huge wins because if adults are happy and consistent, that's actually how you make great change. - Principal

Enabling Factors

Examining the race and power dynamics inherent in school discipline systems was critical for shifting the educators' mindsets. Even before the administrators rolled out the new processes for their tiered behavior system at the start of the 2021-2022 school year, work that is intended to shift educators' mindsets and school systems for supporting student behavior was already underway. Educators had already been undertaking professional development toward making their academic instruction more culturally responsive, and the administrators felt it was important to do the same for their approach to behavior.

Discipline systems are inherently racist and discriminatory against kids. After our second year, it just became really punitive and was about power and purpose, which resulted in suspensions and kids hating school. Increasing suspensions or increasing strictness just doesn't do it. We had to do a lot of work, and I don't think we're there yet. - Principal

The principal believed that having some difficult conversations virtually when schools were shut down made communicating about difficult topics easier. The administrators agreed that the school's tiered behavior system would not have been as effective were it not for these conversations and the mindset shifts that followed.



I think it's also a lot easier to call in and call out virtually. It was easier for people to be able to say, 'I'd like to hear from a White educator. I'd like to hear from a Black or Latino educator. How do you feel about this?' And it just got to some places where we had some real conversations. We had some sessions where it was like, 'Well, we're racist in our own practices with each other, and we don't even say it,' or like, 'We allow this or we do this.' For a building that's pretty close and connected and everyone's like, 'Yeah, we love each other,' for that to come out, it's like, 'Well, if that's what's coming out in a place where we feel that, imagine what it feels like on the other end for our kids.' - Principal

Hiring educators who have an asset-based view of the students has enabled them to form trusting relationships with students. When KLSM hired its behavior specialists, their ability to relate to and see the good in the students was the most important attribute the principal looked for. Other skills can be acquired through training over time. The behavior specialists typically did not have formal experience working in schools but were passionate about helping kids and had worked in other youth-serving organizations.

I honestly just looked for people who I thought could see our kids for how beautiful they are, and that was my number one standard. If you can't see the beauty in them, you can't help them when they're in need the most. That's really my standard: that you can be real and take feedback. The rest of the stuff, we can figure out. - Principal

The behavior specialists exemplified high expectations and an ability to see the best in their students. During the focus group discussion, they attributed their capacity to build deep and trusting relationships with students to being raised in Camden or other urban neighborhoods and being able to relate to the students.

We are really good at what we do. We bring a different environment to our school. They can relate to us. We can relate to them. Right? Whereas you might have an educator who's not even from this environment. But guess what? I got somebody who understands both sides of it. I got somebody who understands my environment completely because not only did they live in my environment, they came back to help the environment.

- Behavior specialist



Having a clear set of tools and consistency from the administrators helped the educators implement the tiered behavior system. Having clear systems and tools at their disposal helped the behavior specialists and educators integrate the tiered behavior system into their current work. The Rev sheet, data tracking spreadsheet, and Scholar of Concern referral form are tools that all educators we interviewed described as easy-to-use and readily available. The administrators used classroom walk-through rubrics to disseminate their expectations for behavioral supports that should be provided in all classrooms through tier 1 of the system. Important decision-making processes for the tiered behavior system were embedded into existing team meetings. For instance, the dean used her check-ins with the behavior specialists to examine the students’ behavioral data. The administrators also joined grade-level team meetings to determine which students may need additional support. The administrators expressed a deep commitment to keeping these systems in place as much as possible despite disruptions from the pandemic.

Plans for Continued Improvement

The administrators at KLSM hope to add even more intensive emotional and behavioral support to their programming. The school has plans for adding an emotional support classroom in the near future. The school educates students who have experienced severe trauma and may benefit from more immediate and focused support in this area. Building programming within the school to keep students who may otherwise need more intensive placements is a motivator for the administrators.

There are some students on tier 3 who I think could benefit from a little bit more support, although we’re giving them as much as we can. We are very family-oriented with all of our kids, so we don’t do the whole thing of kicking a kid out of our school or anything like that. We just try to find another way. – Dean

The administrators perceive the school’s tiered behavior system to be a foundation for the program. The assistant principal of special education explained that putting the tiered behavior system in place has built educator capacity for making data-informed decisions. She believes that this capacity will be critical for making informed decisions about which students would benefit most from the emotional support classroom.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Building a positive, tiered behavior system can be an important foundation for more intensive behavioral programming. Tiered behavior systems like PBIS can equip educators to more effectively support student behavior, which is critical for reducing disproportionate discipline outcomes for students with disabilities.
- Hiring educators that bring an asset-based view of the students they educate, particularly those from the same community, can facilitate relationship building with students.
- Creating a space to examine racial and power dynamics in the school and shifting educators' mindsets around student behavior may be a valuable precursor for improving school behavioral support systems.

GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR SCHOOLS

- What practices are in place in your school to support all students behaviorally and emotionally? How do suspension rates for students with disabilities compare to suspension rates for students without disabilities? Based on behavioral data, are teachers equipped with the right tools to effectively support student behavior?
- What strategies is your school using to hire more educators from the local community or to diversify the educators to better resemble the student population? How can the assets of the current educators be better leveraged for building student relationships?
- To what extent have educators examined the racial and power dynamics in the school? What support will educators need to feel comfortable engaging in these conversations? Are there any punitive practices in the school's discipline system that should be reconsidered?



About the Center for Learner Equity

The Center for Learner Equity is working to ensure that public schools – both within the charter school sector and beyond it – are designed for inclusivity and equity from the start. When we improve access and outcomes for students with disabilities, all students benefit.

MISSION

We are committed to ensuring that students with disabilities, particularly those in under-resourced communities, have the quality educational opportunities and choices they need to thrive and learn. We accomplish this through research, advocacy, coalition formation, and capacity building with national, state, and local partners.

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Students with disabilities will have the same opportunities for success as their peers.

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About the Camden Education Fund

The Camden Education Fund (CEF) is a non-profit organization dedicated to accelerating progress in Camden’s public school system. CEF works with families, school partners, and community leaders to identify citywide needs in education. CEF then provides grants and develops strategic partnerships to address these citywide needs. Grantees may include schools, non-profits, and universities.

MISSION

To sustain and accelerate progress in Camden’s public school system.

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