


A Proactive Approach

Emphasizing Student Success



Big Ideas

- Behavior is predictable.
- Success begets success, and failure begets failure.
- It is the educator's challenge to ensure student success.
- Failure needs to be addressed early before it begets more failure.
- Multitiered systems provide a schema for considering intervention.
- Quality instruction is the surest strategy for facilitating student success.

Picture a snowball perched precariously at the peak of a steep hill (see Figure 1.1). Chances are that as weather and conditions change, the snowball will roll to the left or the right. In either case, once that snowball begins rolling downhill we know two things: It will tend to increase in speed, and it will get bigger. In fact, as it moves downhill the chances of stopping it become increasingly difficult—and the chances of pushing it back up the hill even more difficult. Now consider that this snowball is a student. Rolling to the right represents success, and rolling to the left represents failure. As the student experiences success, the chances of further successes are greater. Just as the snowball goes faster and gets bigger, the student becomes more and more successful.

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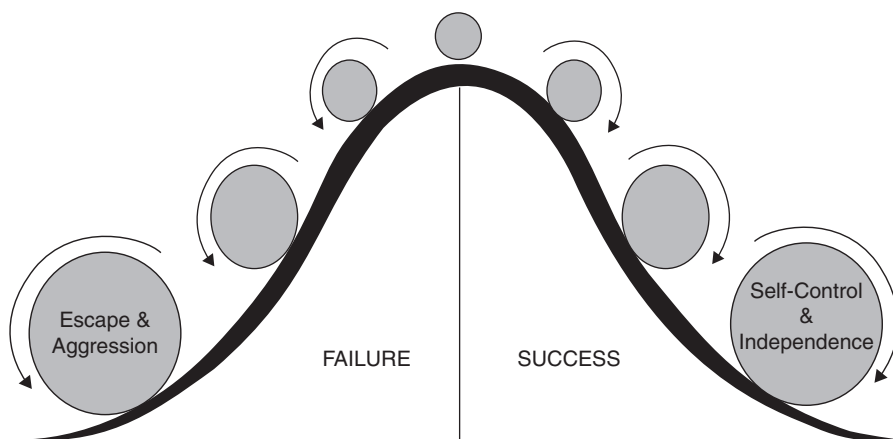
Similarly, as the student experiences failure, the chances of further failures are greater. At some point, the snowball becomes so large and fast that the likelihood of stopping it, or changing direction, becomes virtually impossible.

Let us look at two groups of students. One group gets work done in class; the students do their best and get their homework completed to a desirable standard. These students show success. Their parents are pleased, and the teachers are pleased. Interactions between students and adults are positive. The students get good grades and are given privileges at school and at home and so it goes. These students are on track and experience success. Success begets success.

The other group talks a lot in class; the students do not do their work and do not complete their homework. It is not long before the teachers become concerned with the students' performance and parents become bothered. Interactions between students and adults become more negative. These students get low or failing grades and begin to lose privileges, which makes them more belligerent in class and at home. These students are not on track and begin to experience more and more failure. Failure begets failure.

It is clear that it is all very positive when students are rolling to the success side, but for students rolling to the failure side, the situation becomes negative. The implication is clear. We must find ways to enable the snowball to roll to the success side and to prevent the snowball from even getting started on the failure side. We simply cannot wait for students to fail. Our efforts must be proactive, and we must look ahead to ask these questions: What can I do to ensure student success right now and again

Figure 1.1 Snowball Depiction of Student Success or Failure



tomorrow? What can I do to prevent failure or catch it very early so that the snowball has barely started to roll? Standing at the bottom of the hill and waiting for the big snowball is simply a very unproductive and futile strategy.

We know that success begets success and failure begets failure; this is logical and intuitive. For example, an observer is coming to your school tomorrow and wishes to see a student have perfect behavior; if the observer sees this, you will receive \$10,000. Which student would you choose to be observed? Logically, the student with 20 successes has a 20 times greater chance of having a 21st tomorrow, the student with 50 successes has a 50 times greater chance of having the 51st tomorrow, and the student with 1,000 successes has a 1,000 times greater chance of having his or her 1,001st success tomorrow. Success predicts success. Similarly, the wager is now changed, and the observer is looking for a student who will exhibit a behavior problem tomorrow. You'd be wise to select the student with the most failures so far this year because he or she has the highest probability of another failure tomorrow—that snowball is rolling left and continues to get bigger and roll faster. Because failure begets failure, at what point will we be realistically unable to stop it, and what level of effort would be required to roll it back up the hill? If we know that success begets success and failure begets failure, then the best chance we have of predicting success is to be proactive in promoting success and minimizing failure.

The snowball at the top of the hill is relatively simple to push to the success side. We do this with effective instruction that minimizes errors and sets the student up for building self-confidence and eventual independence. But no matter how good the instruction, errors are still a part of learning. Thus, while the student is calm and experiencing success, we have the opportunity to teach him or her how to handle the inevitable failures. If you've hit a golf ball straight one hundred times, then one stray shot will not make you quit because the snowball is rolling to the right. But if you've hit it stray one hundred times in a row, the likelihood of giving up is great—the snowball is rolling to the left. As the snowball rolls to the right, its speed and size provide the best inoculation against the failures. That is, the snowball rolling fast to the right cannot be slowed by the occasional failure. Likewise, the snowball rolling fast to the left will not be slowed by the occasional success. As students experience increasing failures, they lose self-confidence, and they are increasingly likely to withdraw, attempt escape from the situation, or even become aggressive. All of this makes the teacher's job more difficult as students are reluctant to engage in activities that have historically resulted in failures. Logically, if you can't swim, then swimming is something to be avoided, and if you

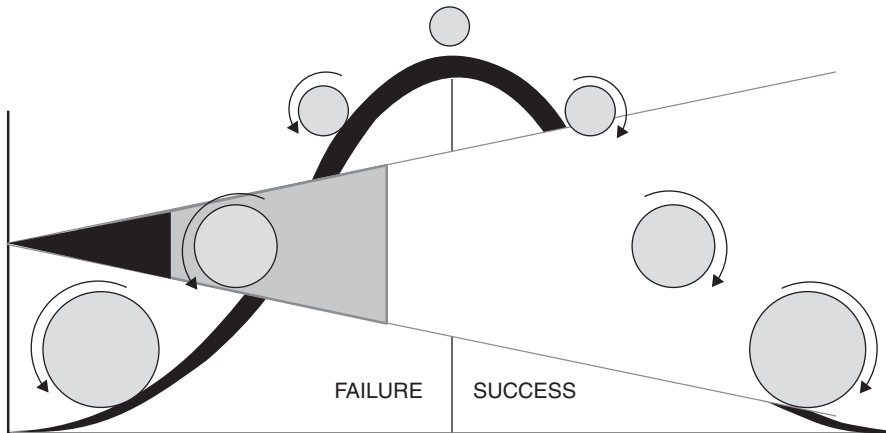
can't read, then reading is something to be avoided. If someone were to try and force you into the water, you may even become aggressive.

Repeated failures are a major predictor of acting-out behavior and must be considered as a key in prevention efforts. The goal of every parent and teacher is to promote self-control and independence in the child. A common refrain with frustrated teachers is this: "But he's old enough—he should be doing this the right way!" We can agree that the student should be doing it the right way, but we also must agree that if he or she isn't then the adult must take responsibility for doing something. To simply assume that the student is at fault will not increase the chances of a success in the future. To return to our wager analogy, the observer is now offering \$10,000 tomorrow if a given volatile student handles a trigger situation without escalating behavior. Knowing that the student has failed with that behavior repeatedly in the past would not keep you from intervening in some new way—there's \$10,000 on the line! Again, the mind-set must continue to be proactive: What can we do to increase the probability of success? Of course, when instruction, environmental arrangements, and additional de-escalation strategies are not sufficient it is not the fault of the teacher. However, failure does give us feedback that what we are doing is not working and we must commit to trying something different.

MULTITIERED SYSTEMS CONSIDERATIONS

Not all students require the same level of intervention to keep their snowball rolling to the right. In fact, there are students who maintain high levels of success with very little effort from teachers. These students have snowballs that, for a number of reasons, have consistently rolled to the right and are now of sufficient size and speed to maintain on their own. Other students require an additional layer of support to maintain success, and then there are those students who require rather intensive interventions. Multitiered systems, such as positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) (Walker, Ramsey, & Gresham, 2004), provide instruction and support to promote success across the entire school (primary systems—large white area of the triangle) while continually monitoring to find students who are not successfully responding to these interventions (see Figure 1.2). These are the students whose snowballs have begun to roll left. Once identified, these students require additional instruction and support strategies to maintain success (secondary systems—gray section of the triangle). Continuous monitoring eventually reveals those students who have not responded to all previous efforts and require highly individualized interventions (tertiary systems—black section of the triangle).

Figure 1.2 Multitiered Systems Leading to Student Success and Avoiding Student Failure



The better a school does with implementing at the primary level (white section of the triangle), the lesser the likelihood of student failure. The better a school does with implementing at the secondary level, the lesser the likelihood of students being identified as needing the most intensive and individualized interventions.

Of course, a school could just simply look at data halfway through the year and quite easily identify students whose snowballs are at the bottom of the left side of the hill. But such a strategy is completely reactionary, providing no focus on prevention. Further, the school has now put itself in the difficult position of attempting to push a large number of very big and fast rolling snowballs uphill—a difficult proposition even when the number is low. While this reaction often is the strategy employed by schools, the illogic is obvious when considered in light of an academic example. For instance, the school could forgo effective instruction in math while awaiting math achievement scores in April. At that point, the school could point to a large group of students failing in math and require intense interventions in an attempt to stop snowballs from rolling to the left. Clearly, effective math instruction from the beginning of the year provides a better strategy for reducing the number of snowballs rolling to the left.

The focus of this book is on individual students rather than the school. However, the same logic applies when considering students with escalating behavior. The better job we do of teaching appropriate behavior while students are calm, the lesser the likelihood of students requiring the largest, most complex, and most intensive interventions. Further, the earlier we identify those students who continue to escalate, the sooner

we can attempt a second level of intervention to minimize the likelihood of further escalation. At some point, however, our strategies shift focus from simple prevention to safety and minimization of the most dangerous behaviors. Thus, the logic of prevention, early intervention, and tiered levels of intervention applies to escalating behavior in much the same way as it applies to school-wide systems of PBIS.

PROBABILITY AS THE EMPHASIS FOR ACTION

For any given student and problem, there are numerous possible interventions available. In the typical school setting, teachers have the freedom to select from among the array of intervention strategies. Even among the so-called “evidence-based practices,” there are those that simply provide a better chance of success than others. There are no sure things—no interventions that are guaranteed to work. However, given a student, behavior, and circumstance, there are clear probabilities for success associated with different interventions. Thinking logically in terms of early intervention and stopping a snowball as soon as possible, high-probability interventions should always precede low-probability interventions. The teacher that ignores a high-probability intervention with the excuse of “this doesn’t work for all students” is ignoring the fact that this same statement can be made about most every intervention. The issue at hand is the degree to which an intervention has a probability for having a positive effect.

Because probability is the foundation of wagering, we can again return to a wager as an example. If you were told that you’d receive \$10,000 tomorrow if an unknown student behaves successfully in a given time or context and you could implement just one strategy, what would you do? Thinking in terms of probability, instruction is the most logical strategy. Telling the student what is expected, modeling and demonstrating, providing a range of effective examples and non-examples, guiding practice, and providing performance feedback prior to the time and context provides a better chance of facilitating the student’s success than offering a large reward (Brophy, 2006; Hattie, 2009). Obviously, the student who has no experience of success with a given behavior is less likely to pull it off on the first try. Instruction provides the basis for the highest possible probability of success.

Instruction as a fundamental strategy plays a large role throughout this book. Teaching specific desired alternatives to problem behavior provide the highest probability for preventing and remediating problem behavior (Greer-Chase, Rhodes, & Kellam, 2002; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005). After instruction, reminders, environmental arrangements, and a variety of teacher-initiated routines can be used to increase the

probability of students using what has been taught. But, as noted, there are no guarantees, and there will be students for whom even the best instruction will be necessary but insufficient. These students require a more detailed analysis of behavior known as functional behavior assessment (FBA). The FBA is a process of identifying how behaviors are related to the environment in which they occur. Information from the FBA is used to individualize environmental conditions, instruction, and consequences for behavior. Throughout the book, there are examples of students with behaviors that look quite similar yet require vastly different intervention strategies. Again, the question is not whether to use instruction or any other of the array of highly effective intervention strategies; it is to what degree and with what individual modifications are needed.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Student success and failure in any area—academic or social—is the best predictor of future success. It is the job of the teacher to develop effective arrangements, routines, instruction, strategies, and feedback to predict more success than failure. To the extent that this is ineffective for a given student, it is the teacher's responsibility to continue assessment and systematic revisions in a continued quest for the right recipe for success. However, the process by which teachers go about selecting revisions is not random; it is based on a logic and probability—using those strategies that provide the highest probability of success. The remainder of this book will focus on high-probability strategies under a range of circumstances.