

## Using Positive Behavior Approaches

### How One School Changed its Focus -- and its Students' Lives

Dr. Michael George, longtime CEC member, former president of CEC's Council for Children with Behavior Disorders (CCBD), and currently director of the Centennial School of Lehigh University, testified recently at a U.S. Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pension (HELP) Committee hearing, "Beyond Seclusion and Restraint: Creating Positive Learning Environments for All Students" (see [Policy In Action section of CEC Today](#)).

*CEC Today* talked with Dr. George about the benefits of using positive behavior approaches, and how he and his leadership team not only changed the environment at Centennial School, but dramatically reduced the use of restraint and seclusion practices.

***CEC Today:*** First of all, tell us a little more about Centennial School.

**Dr. George:** Centennial School is an Approved Private School, funded by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and governed by Lehigh University, which serves children and youth classified with emotional disturbance and autism as defined under the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*. As an alternative to public school education, it is one of more than 10,000 alternative schools in the country.

***CEC Today:*** How would you describe Centennial's student population?

**Dr. George:** Students who attend Centennial School are referred from 40 surrounding local area school districts and range in ages from 6 through 21 years. Local school districts refer students to Centennial School after a determination is made that their needs have not been met in previous placements that include the local school districts, intermediate units, residential treatment facilities, and hospitals. Children and youth who enter Centennial School have a wide range of learning problems but share one trait in common: chronic challenging behavior and scores in the first percentile on behavior rating scales, meaning their behavior is more severe than 99% of the population.

***CEC Today:*** Before your PBIS program was initiated, how did Centennial handle violent behavior?

**Dr. George:** In 1997-1998 data show that Centennial School staff relied heavily on the use of seclusion and physical restraint as a response to violence within the school setting, a trend that can be traced back by word of mouth for the previous 20 years. Not unlike practices at many other alternative schools for children and youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities, the 76 students in attendance that year were physically restrained 1,064 times, typically with basket holds, involving two to three adults. Afterwards, students were physically escorted to a time-out room. Time-out was conducted in one of two locked time-out rooms that were occupied as soon as the schoolhouse doors were open in the mornings until the final bus pulled away in the afternoons. Such methods continue to be employed and in some cases routinely employed in alternative schools around the country today because many professionals in the field believe them to be helpful.

**CEC Today:** But, today, Centennial doesn't agree with that philosophy.

**Dr. George:** That's right, we don't.

**CEC Today:** Describe the atmosphere of Centennial pre-PBIS.

**Dr. George:** One result of the nearly six physical restraints that Centennial had each day was that the noise level in the school was loud, punctuated with intense or screaming voices, pounding on the time-out room walls, slamming of doors, and frequent shouts of "crisis" from teachers and other support personnel. According to the data collected that year, the high usage of seclusion and physical restraints did not decrease the need for those practices in the future. Accompanying the high levels of seclusion and restraint were high rates of police involvement, suspensions, and emergency hospitalizations. Vandalism to the building was commonplace as was destruction of classroom equipment and materials. Truancy was high as were staff absences from work.

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**CEC Today:** How many staff did you have?

**Dr. George:** The school was densely staffed with 71 adults, nearly 50 percent of them males, a hiring practice adopted in part because of the high frequency of seclusion and restraint. A former Centennial teacher whom I recently met told me that he was hired to stand at the door to keep students in the room. Centennial had six crisis staff, 11 one-to-one aides and five mental health workers hired to assist with particularly violent children. One elementary classroom, for example, was comprised of six children and six adults.

**CEC Today:** Learning must have been difficult in that environment.

**Dr. George:** It was. Students didn't complete homework; nor were they much engaged in academic tasks at school. Parents seldom entered the building and when they did, it was

primarily for disciplinary meetings or for annual Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. Our time on task data averaged approximately 11 percent to 13 percent across classrooms.

**CEC Today:** And restraint was a common, everyday occurrence?

**Dr. George:** The year I arrived at the school, 1998, began very much like the one before it. During the first 20 days of school, 112 physical restraints were conducted. By the end of the first 40 days, the number of physical restraints was up to 233. If left unabated the rate of restraints would have easily exceeded 1,000 for yet another school year.

**CEC Today:** How did Centennial create a safe and civil learning environment?

**Dr. George:** We use a positive and proactive approach for teaching classroom and school behaviors, with an emphasis on teaching self-control and responsibility. The system is grounded on the assumption that all children and youth can learn courteous and respectful ways for meeting their needs and obtaining their goals. The key of course is teaching them.

**CEC Today:** So, how did you set about creating the change in culture? What exactly did you do?

**Dr. George:** Fundamental to the change process was creation of a new vision and goals for the school and the development of a team process for assessing the school environment, introducing research-based practices, evaluating implementation, and making adjustments for improving outcomes, when necessary, a process that remains in place to this day.

The team was encouraged to envision a welcoming and caring school environment that students would be eager to attend; where students would speak politely to teachers, encourage one another, make friends, complete schoolwork and even complete homework. Teachers were asked to envision the type of environment in which they would like to work and to describe how they would like to be treated by the students as well as by their colleagues. They were exhorted to examine current practices and how those practices might be inadvertently contributing to the very problems they came to work every day to solve.

The team discussions eventually resulted in a new vision for the school, "to make Centennial School a place where students, parents and teachers want to be and where they can learn new skills that would benefit them now and into the future." Given the circumstances at the time, the vision was ambitious, but having a vision of the future helped to unify the staff's commitment to change and had other advantages as well.

**CEC Today:** You've said that providing an engaging and stimulating curriculum and using evidence-based practices are some of the most important ingredients in Centennial's success. How so?

**Dr. George:** Teaching proper school and classroom behavior within the context of sound academic curricula is the most "sacred" thing Centennial teachers do in the day. The academic curriculum supplies the milieu for teaching proper school and classroom behavior and is

designed to be accessible to the students, to stretch their skills, and to capture students' interest and cause them to be actively engaged.

Centennial School teachers ascribe to the belief that a rich and engaging academic curriculum helps prevent the occurrence of problem behaviors and also prepares students for reintegration to home school environments. Centennial teachers use research-based teaching practices that include matching curriculum to students' functioning levels, systematic analyses of student error patterns, positive error correction, frequent feedback, high rates of active engagement and praise, systematic progress monitoring and a tenacious pursuit of mastery learning.

***CEC Today:*** What kind of intervention systems do you use?

**Dr. George:** The Centennial school-wide intervention system is The Take Five Program, modeled after the nationally recognized [High Five Program of Fern Ridge Middle School in Veneta, Oregon](#). The Take Five Program consists of three tiers of interventions and offers a positive approach to school discipline. The "Take Fives" inform students of social behaviors in the following areas:

- Be There - Be Ready
- Be Responsible
- Be Respectful
- Keep Hands and Feet to Self/Maintain Personal Space
- Follow Directions

Each of the Take Five expectations is defined in accordance to the specific settings in which the student performs. The Take Five Program incorporates the use of a token economy as part of its reinforcement plan. Students are taught proper conduct and reinforced for following the expectations with praise and acknowledgements and the use of Take Five tickets that can be exchanged for privileges or items at the school store.

Class-wide interventions are those elements that differ by program, that is, elementary, middle and high school programs. Point sheets are one example of a class-wide intervention. The Steps to Success system (a level system) is another, as is the format and presentation of social skills instruction.

Students at Centennial School carry point sheets throughout the day. The point sheet lists goals from the student's IEP along the left-hand column and spaces to the right of the goals for rating the child's performance across the school day. Feedback and points are provided at the end of every period, thereby providing quick, immediate, and private feedback on performance. As students progress through the program they eventually take responsibility for rating their own behavior and completing their point sheets.

Students earn points for meeting school and classroom expectations and start every class period with zero points. They do not lose points for misbehaviors rather they earn points for appropriate behaviors. Every activity at the school is tied in some manner to the point system, and because

the point system structures teachers' as well as students' conduct, it may well represent the most powerful tool for modifying behavior in the school.

**CEC Today:** Can you talk about student specific "PBS plans?"

**Dr. George:** Positive Behavior Support (PBS) Plans comprise the third component of the Centennial school-wide intervention system and are for students who fail to prosper under the school-wide and class-wide intervention systems and thus require more intensive supports to succeed in school. Program teams develop plans that are grounded in Functional Behavior Assessments that identify the antecedents and consequences associated with the problem behavior. PBS Plans consist of (a) antecedent and prevention strategies, (b) behavior replacement strategies, (c) positive consequences, and (d) reduction-oriented procedures and are included as part of students' Individualized Education Programs. Teachers use performance data to monitor the effectiveness of the Positive Behavior Support Plans.

Centennial teachers manage low-level misbehaviors in the classroom to decrease the likelihood of behavior escalation, based on the notion that the best way to manage crises is to prevent them from occurring in the first place.

Low-level misbehaviors are minor peer provocations, cursing, side talking, talk-outs, and other off-task behaviors that tend to disrupt a class (e.g., tapping pencils, out of seat, disrespectful verbalizations). When confronted with minor misbehavior, teachers employ a specific sequence for managing it that includes a review of expectations for success prior to every class period, and the use of the "good model" procedure. Public praise for appropriate behavior and private reminders or prompts for correcting inappropriate behavior are also used, as are prompts to "take time" for students who are showing signs of frustration. Persistently disruptive students are asked to report to the program coordinator's office for "problem solving."

**CEC Today:** There's so much more to your story, but let's talk about the outcomes in year one. They're pretty astonishing.

**Dr. George:** By the end of 1998-1999, the first year of restructuring, episodes of seclusion and restraint had decreased dramatically. The number of minutes of seclusion time out for the 79 students in attendance decreased by approximately 77 percent, from a high of 15,774 minutes of seclusion time-out during the first 20-days of school to 3,627 during the final 20-day period. The number of physical restraints decreased by 69 percent as compared to the previous year, (1064 to 327 physical restraints). There were no physical restraints during the final 20-days of the year, even though the student population was nearly the same as the year before.

Viewed another way, during the first 40 days of 1998-1999 there were 233 episodes of physical restraint. During the final 40 days only one physical restraint was conducted. The student population was largely the same throughout the year.

One of the time-out rooms was closed at mid-year and converted to a supply closet; at year's end, the second time-out room was closed and converted to the school store and was filled with trinkets, notebooks, paper, pencils, snacks, and other items that students could purchase with

points they earned for meeting school and classroom expectations. In a span of just over six months, a 20-year pattern of seclusion and physical restraint was broken.

***CEC Today:*** What are some of the most significant lessons learned?

A number of lessons emerge from the Centennial School experience. Perhaps one of the most encouraging lessons is that as a field we have the technical information necessary to reform chaotic school environments and to decrease and perhaps eliminate the use of seclusion and physical restraint from our schools. Moreover, this past May, the [U.S. Department of Education](#) published an excellent overview of the practices as well as guidelines for school officials to follow so that seclusion and restraint are unnecessary; and the practices to replace them are neither highly specialized nor arcane but well within reach of professionals. To use the words of Douglas Reeves, founder of the Leadership and Learning Center, "the practices are mundane, inexpensive, and [most important] replicable."

Some other important lessons include:

- **Physical restraints not only disrupt the learning environment, they disrupt the learner, as well.**  
Physical restraints are messy, loud, and violent affairs that effectively shut down any instruction occurring in the vicinity. Physical restraints teach nothing in and of themselves and they interfere with the main business of schools— learning. The practices of seclusion and restraint like other forms of aversive consequences engender some rather nasty side effects for the learner: fear, resentment, anger, resistance, and feelings of hatred. Needless to say, such emotional predispositions are hardly conducive for the learning process to occur.
- **Teachers are more at-risk for injury with the use of seclusion and restraint than without those practices.**  
As a measure of staff safety, data were collected on the number of Workers Compensation Claims that were filed by injured employees at Centennial School. During the year of more than 1,000 physical restraints, injured staff filed 22 Workers Compensation Claims; 82 percent of those injuries occurred while staff was conducting physical restraints with students. As the number of restraints decreased so did injuries to staff. The following year when 327 physical restraints were conducted, 18 Workers' Compensation claims were filed with 52 percent of the injury claims directly related to restraint situations. The subsequent year, when no physical restraints were recorded, only four Workers Compensation Claims were filed, none of which, of course, were associated with physical restraint.
- **The frequent use of seclusion and physical restraints is relatively expensive.**  
It usually requires additional personnel to conduct the restraints, often personnel who are fully unrelated to the instructional process. At least that is what we found at Centennial School. As preventive procedures based on positive behavior support proved successful at Centennial School, the need for personnel who were hired solely to conduct physical restraints diminished. In 1998, for example, Centennial School employed 71 people; today there are 51. Monies saved through reductions in unnecessary personnel were

reinvested for such things as renovations to the facility, curriculum materials, furniture, technology, and other items designed to improve the overall work environment.

- **There is too much emphasis on the consequences for behavior and too little attention to restructuring learning environments.**

Too many professionals continue to view the child as defective, dangerous and unpredictable and fail to see the connection between students' behaviors and the practices they have in place. It wasn't the students at Centennial School who were restraining themselves to the floors or escorting themselves to time-out rooms—it was the adults. It is the adults and not the students who establish the culture in schools, define the professional behaviors, and erect the standards of conduct for students as well as themselves to follow.

*CEC Today:* So, what is biggest lesson for administrators?

**Dr. George:** Among the many lessons learned at Centennial School, there is good news for school administrators. The techniques and strategies for increasing pro-social behavior at Centennial School work equally well in public schools. Administrators might wish to adopt practices that lead to the creation of favorable instructional environments especially in classrooms serving students with disabilities within their buildings, if not within the entire school altogether.

A final lesson is that students with emotional and behavioral disabilities wish to succeed in school just like their peers without disabilities. They work diligently on lessons that are engaging and challenging yet within their capabilities. When his probation officer asked Joe, a new Centennial student who came by way of a long-term placement in a juvenile detention facility, why he was now doing so well in school, Joe responded, "Here they teach you something. In my other placements we just sat around and talked about our problems."

*CEC Today:* What advice do you have for administrators thinking of moving to a Centennial model?

**Dr. George:** Moving from a violent school climate to a positive educational climate is hard work. It is daunting to begin a change process in the midst of a violent student population. In fact, once the change process begins, things will likely get worse in the short-term: more suspensions, more police, and possibly even more violence, as teachers and staff are called upon to change their beliefs and their behavior. Nonetheless, the long-term results in terms of teacher satisfaction, student performance and parent support are well worth the effort.

To learn more about Centennial School, visit <http://centennial.coe.lehigh.edu/>.