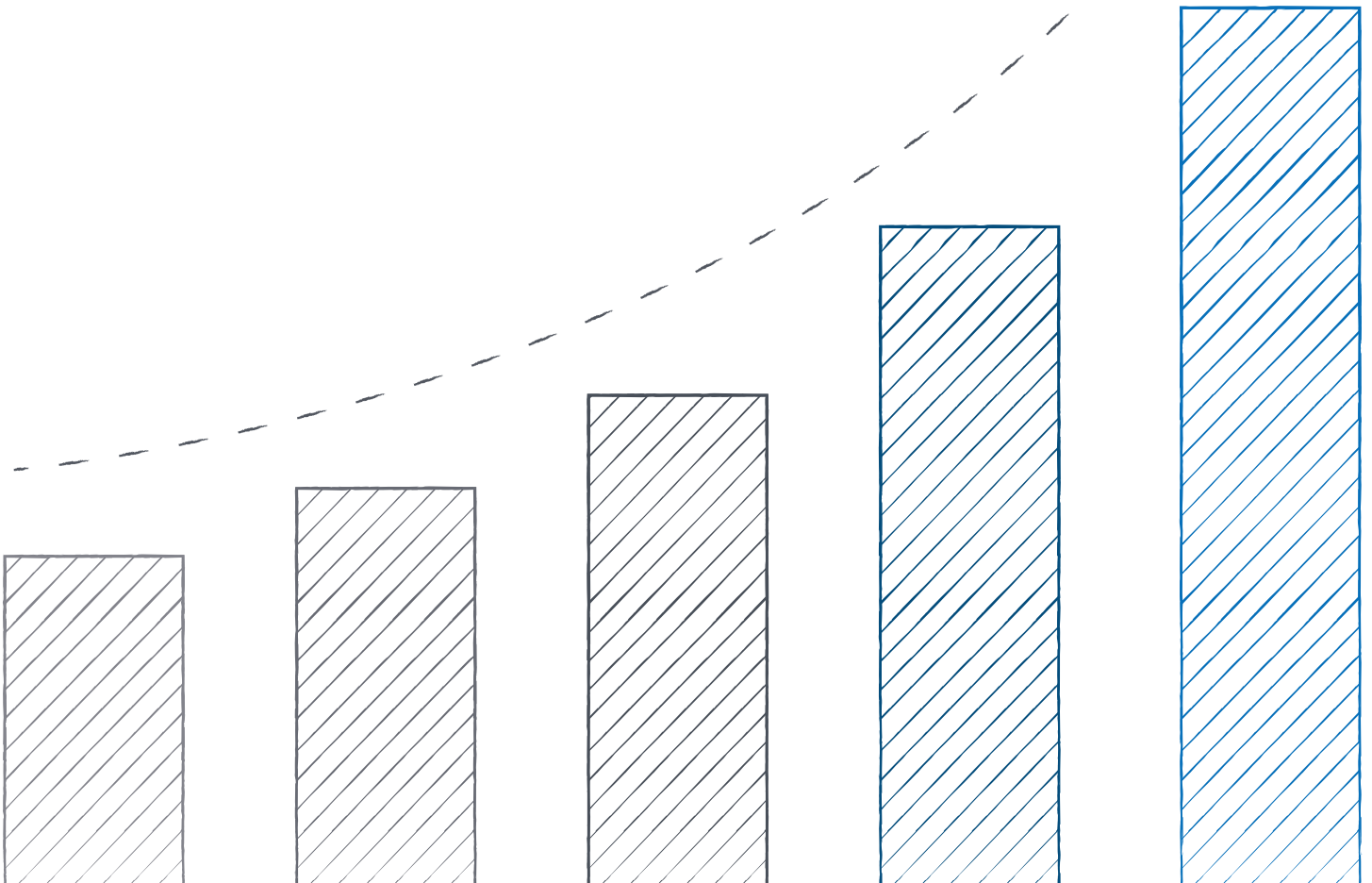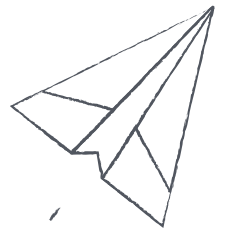# Breaking **Bad Behavior**

The Rise of Classroom Disruptions in Early
Grades and How Districts Are Responding

Breaking Bad Behavior

The Rise of Classroom Disruptions in Early Grades and How Districts Are Responding

District Leadership Forum

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Survey Overview

Executive Summary

Driven by a perceived dramatic increase of disruptive behavior among their youngest students, Forum members asked EAB to conduct a survey to better understand the scope of the problem and how districts, schools, and teachers are responding to it.

Responses from multiple stakeholders outlined several important trends:

▶ **Teachers and Administrators Report an Alarming Recent Increase in Disruptive Behavior**

The vast majority of educators perceive student misbehavior to be on the rise, regardless of their position or background. However, teachers report disruptions among a much larger percentage of their students than administrators.

▶ **Districts and Schools Lack Clear and Consistent Behavior Management Guidelines**

Most districts and schools do not have a clearly communicated and consistently followed protocol for managing behavioral disruptions. Guidelines or recommendations for how to handle disruptive behavior often do not reach school administrators or teachers.

▶ **Teachers Report Lack of Preparation and Support in Managing Disruptive Behavior**

Teachers report feeling unprepared and poorly supported by school leaders in managing their classrooms. Training in evidence-based programs varies from teacher to teacher and school to school, making it difficult to assess what works.

Demographics of Participating Districts

Location

Urban	**14**
Suburban	**24**
Rural	**3**

Size

2,000–10,000	**18**
10,001–20,000	**13**
20,001–50,000	**10**

% FRPL[1] Students

0–10%	**1**
11–30%	**11**
31–60%	**19**
61–100%	**10**

Race

% Black		*% Hispanic*		*% White*	
0–10%	**20**	0–10%	**17**	0–10%	**3**
11–30%	**15**	11–30%	**13**	11–30%	**6**
31–60%	**5**	31–60%	**10**	31–60%	**13**
61–100%	**1**	61–100%	**1**	61–100%	**19**

1) Free and Reduced Price Lunch.

Survey Overview

Profiles of Survey Respondents

100+

District Administrators

Superintendents, CAOs, CFOs, directors, etc.

220+

School Administrators

Principals, vice principals, etc.

1100+

General Education Teachers

K-5

300+

Special Education Teachers

K–5

150+

Support Specialists

Counselors, psychologists, behavioral experts, etc.

Areas of Inquiry

Basic District and Demographic Data

- Respondent position and tenure
- Size of district, school, class
- Support specialist-to-student ratio

Training in and Perceived Effectiveness of Behavioral Management Strategies

- PBIS[1]
- SEL[2] curricula
- Trauma-informed care
- Conflict de-escalation strategies
- Restorative practices

Observed Frequency of Common Disruptive Behavior

- Emotional disconnect/unresponsiveness
- Tantrums/oppositional defiance
- Eloping
- Bullying
- Verbal abuse or threats toward students, teachers, or other school personnel
- Physical violence toward students, teachers, or other school personnel

Reported Frequency of Common Responses to Student Misbehavior

- Verbal management
- Time-out
- Withholding of privileges
- Referral to principal or other official
- Physical restraint
- Seclusion
- Calling police or school-authorized security

1) Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports.
2) Social Emotional Learning.

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Disruptive Behavior Is on the Rise

Data Reveals Widespread Student Behavior Concerns Among Educators

Educators Report Significant Recent Increase in Classroom Disruptions

How Has the Frequency of Disruptive Behaviors in Your School/District Changed over the Last 3 Years?

% of respondents

	Significantly fewer now	Fewer now	No change	More now	Significantly more now
District Administrators	2	6	11	45	36
School Administrators	7	16	13	30	34
Teachers	2	8	18	33	38
Support Specialists	0	13	14	34	39
Special Ed Teachers	7	13	22	29	29

■ District Administrators ■ School Administrators
■ Teachers ■ Support Specialists
■ Special Ed Teachers
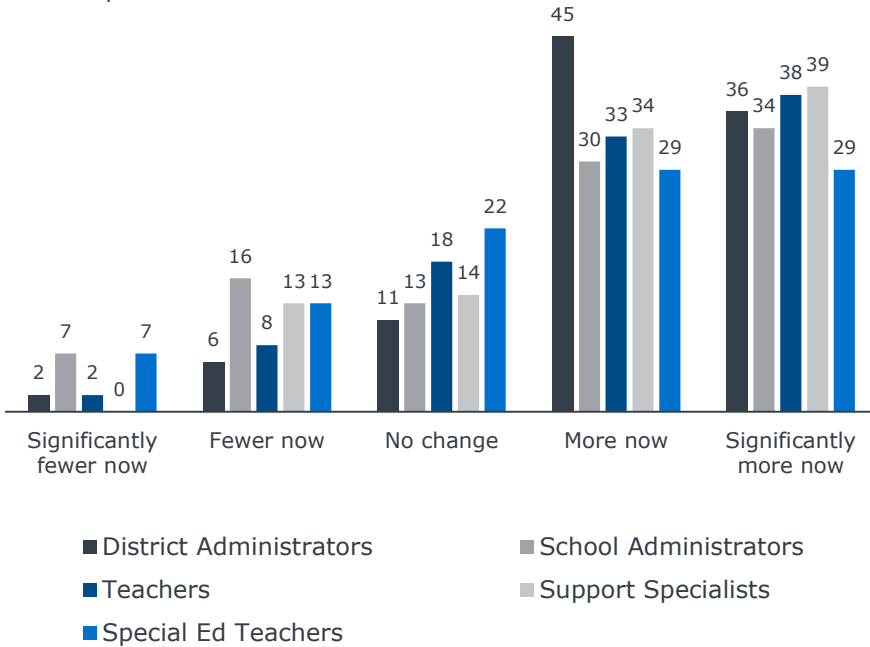
The vast majority of educators responding to the survey identified an alarming increase in behavioral disruptions in early grades over the last three years.

This perception holds steady across various school and district roles. More than a third of all respondents note that behavioral disruptions have increased "significantly" during this time period.

Notably, fewer than one in seven respondents believes there has been a recent decline in behavioral disruptions.

Substantial Disconnect Between Teachers and Administrators on Share of Students Exhibiting Disruptive Behaviors

What Percentage of Your Student Population Would You Say Exhibits Severe Behavioral Disruptions?

District Administrators	School Administrators	Support Specialists	Teachers	Special Ed Teachers
6	8	12	23	26
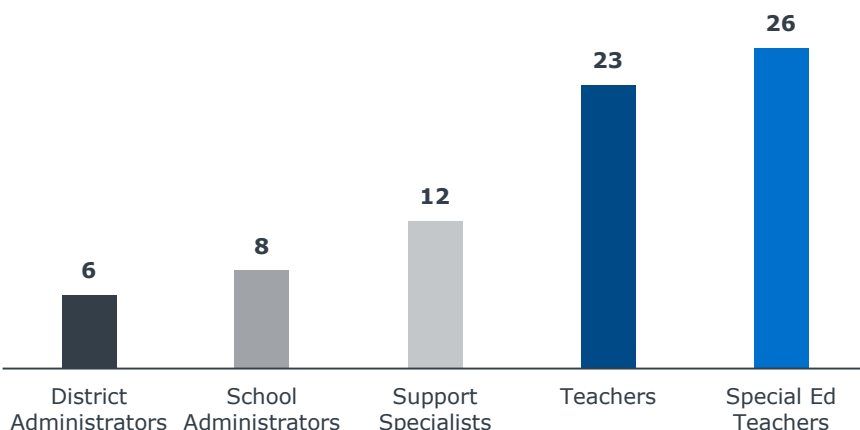
While educators agree on the rise in disruptive behavior, they disagree on how many students are exhibiting those behaviors.

District and school administrators tend to believe the issue is confined to a small percentage of students who have significant behavioral issues and are repeat offenders.

Teachers, on the other hand, estimate that nearly one-quarter of their students exhibit disruptive behavior.

Facing a Generational Challenge

Students Surrounded by Distractions and Distress

Rise in Disruptive Behavior Could Have Multiple Possible Explanations

Rise in Mental Health Diagnoses

Effects of the Great Recession

Increased Substance Abuse

Decreased Funding for Education

Changes in Family Structure

Elementary Student

Increased Academic Pressure and Testing

Decline in Free Play and Physical Activity

Excessive Screen Time

There are many potential factors that may be contributing to the observed rise in disruptions.

Some of these are related to the effects the Great Recession had on families and education funding.

Other factors—from increased use of mobile devices to declines in free play and physical activity—may also play a role.

Broader societal changes, including dramatic increases in substance abuse and mental health diagnoses, are also likely contributing to some of these behavioral shifts.

Survey Respondents Note Similar Concerns, with Some Important Differences Between Educators

To what degree do you attribute this behavior to each of the following?
% of respondents responding "a lot" or "a great deal"

History of trauma in the family: 83, 82, 86, 64

Untreated mental health conditions: 70, 65, 78, 48

Modern-day changes in parenting: 60, 70, 65, 72

Inadequate amount of playtime and recreation: 51, 47, 49, 62

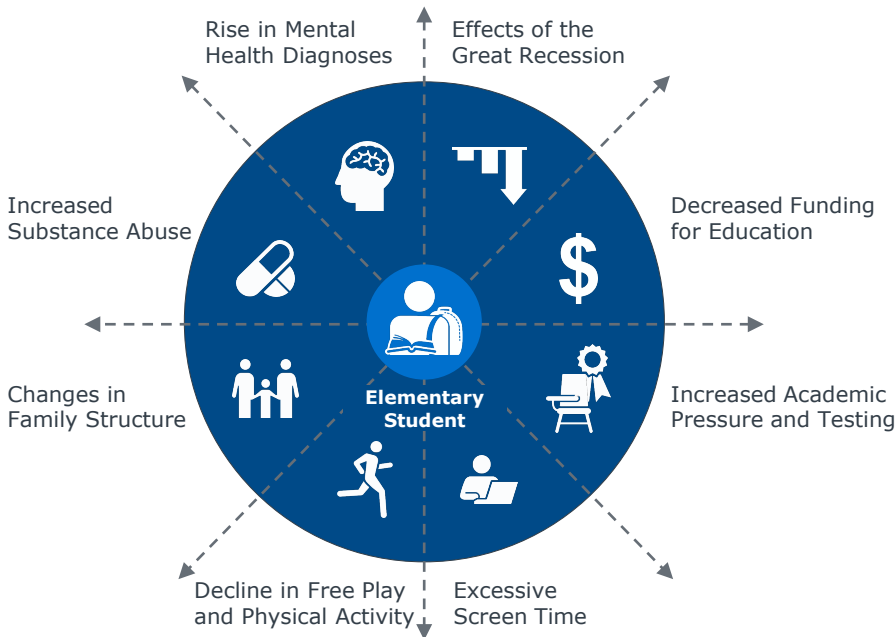Overexposure to electronic devices: 45, 55, 59, 65

Increased academic pressure[1]: 40, 24, 45, 46

■ District Administrators ■ School Administrators ■ Support Specialists ■ Teachers

1) E.g., abuse, drug use, poverty, food and housing insecurity, etc.

The majority of survey respondents identified similar causes. Of particularly high concern for educators were the effects of family trauma, mental health, and modern-day changes in parenting.

However, there were some notable differences between respondent groups as to the relative importance of each category.

For example, teachers were much less likely to point to mental health issues or trauma than administrators or support specialists.

On the other hand, teachers were the group most likely to blame the trend on increased academic pressure and inadequate amounts of play time and recreation.

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Frequency of Disruptions Reduces Instructional Time

Classroom Misbehavior Comes at a Significant Cost for All Students

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Teachers Report Disruptions Are a Frequent Occurrence in Classrooms

% of Teachers Who Report Experiencing the Following Classroom Disruptions

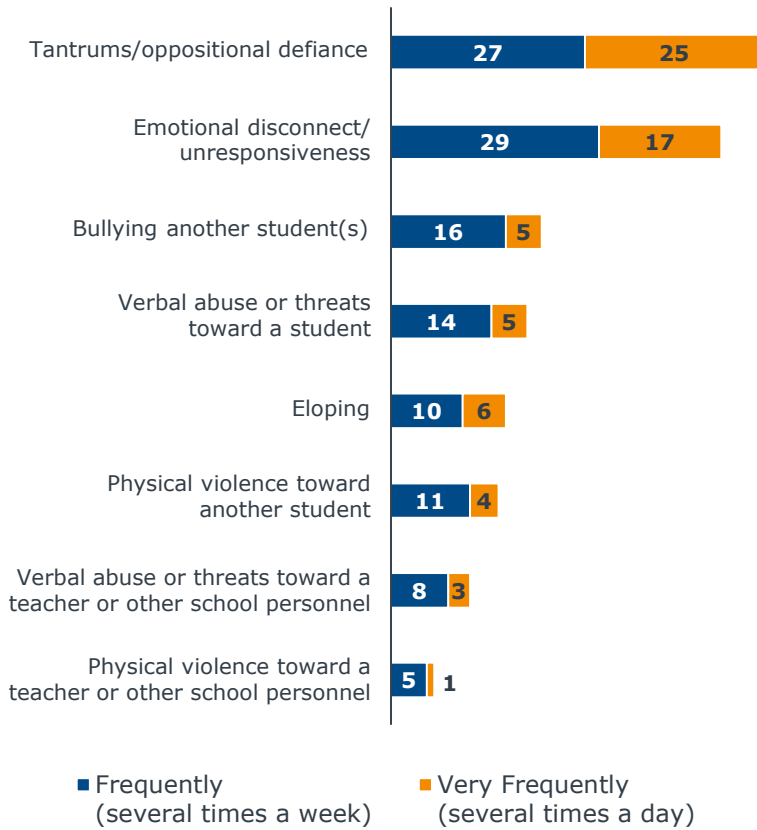| Disruption	Frequently	Very Frequently
Tantrums/oppositional defiance	27	25
Emotional disconnect/unresponsiveness	29	17
Bullying another student(s)	16	5
Verbal abuse or threats toward a student	14	5
Eloping	10	6
Physical violence toward another student	11	4
Verbal abuse or threats toward a teacher or other school personnel	8	3
Physical violence toward a teacher or other school personnel	5	1

■ Frequently (several times a week)   ■ Very Frequently (several times a day)

A closer look into the kinds of disruptive behavior teachers report sheds light on the nature of their concerns.

About half of teachers experience tantrums or unresponsiveness at least several times a week and often several times a day.

Nearly one-fifth of teachers report frequent or very frequent verbal abuse or bullying other students. About one in every seven teachers reports frequent eloping or physical violence toward another student.

The least commonly reported behavioral disruptions were those directed at adults: verbal abuse, threats, or even physical violence. Frequent verbal abuse was experienced by one in ten teachers, while frequent physical violence was cited by one in twenty.

Cost of Lost Instructional Time Adds Up Across the School Year

Teacher-Estimated Average Instructional Time Lost to Behavioral Disruptions

144 minutes per week → **14.5** school days per year

The intensity and frequency of the disruptions add up to a significant loss of instructional time.

Surveyed teachers estimate losing nearly two and a half hours of learning time each week to behavioral disruptions. Over the course of a standard academic year,[1] this adds up to almost three weeks of lost instructional time.

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1) Defined here as 180 school days, 7 hours each.

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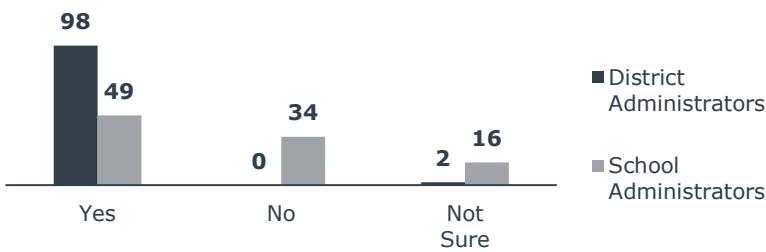# District-Led Efforts Not Always Embraced by Staff

Educators Differ on Whether and Which Behavioral Guidelines Are Currently Used

Survey Respondents Disagree on Whether Behavioral Protocols Exist

Does Your District Have an Explicit District-Wide Protocol for Managing Behavioral Disruptions?

% of respondents

- District Administrators
- School Administrators

	Yes	No	Not Sure
District Administrators	98	0	2
School Administrators	49	34	16

Does Your School Have an Explicit School-Wide Protocol for Managing Behavioral Disruptions?

% of respondents

- School Administrators
- Teachers
- Support Specialists

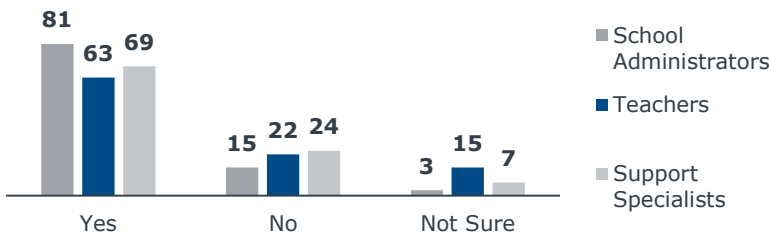|	Yes	No	Not Sure
School Administrators	81	15	3
Teachers	63	22	15
Support Specialists	69	24	7

Among the most striking findings of our survey is the disconnect among educators about what basic behavioral management policies are in place at their own schools and districts.

This disconnect is not just limited to a difference in perception between teachers and administrators. Virtually every surveyed district administrator indicated that a district-wide behavioral protocol existed, while only half of school administrators believed that to be the case.

This demonstrates that districts have failed to communicate effectively what policies are in place to manage behavioral disruptions.

School-level data reveals a similar pattern. Building leaders are much more likely to report the existence of school-wide behavioral protocols than their teachers.
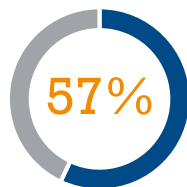
Teachers Not Always Implementing District-Adopted Best Practices

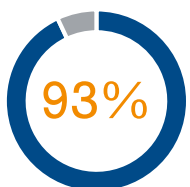*% of **districts** reporting using PBIS*

100%

*% of **teachers** using PBIS practices frequently or very frequently*

57%

*% of **districts** implementing an SEL curriculum*

93%

*% of **teachers** using an SEL curriculum in their classes*

25%

A closer look at the adoption of some common approaches to managing disruptions and building student self-regulation skills paints a similar picture.

While all districts reported employing PBIS, only about 57% of their teachers reported using PBIS practices frequently in their work. Given that the success of PBIS is predicated on consistency across classrooms, this significantly undermines the effectiveness of the approach.

Similarly, virtually every district reported using at least one dedicated social-emotional learning curriculum. However, only about a quarter of teachers use the curricula in their classes.

Teachers Feel Poorly Prepared to Manage Disruptions

Teachers Often Given Inadequate Training in Evidence-Based Approaches to Classroom Management

There are multiple research-supported approaches and strategies to prevent and respond to disruptive behavior. However, data reveals that teachers are not familiar with or trained in many of those approaches.

This is consistent with findings from the National Council on Teacher Quality, which in a 2014 report concluded that the vast majority of teacher education programs in colleges and universities fail to adequately prepare future teachers in the area of classroom management.

Our findings confirm that districts and schools have not yet been able to close that gap.

Training Our Future Teachers: Classroom Management
National Council on Teacher Quality (2014)

Report finds that classroom management strategies in teacher preparation programs are:

- Given inadequate course time
- Scattered across the curriculum
- Rarely evidence-based
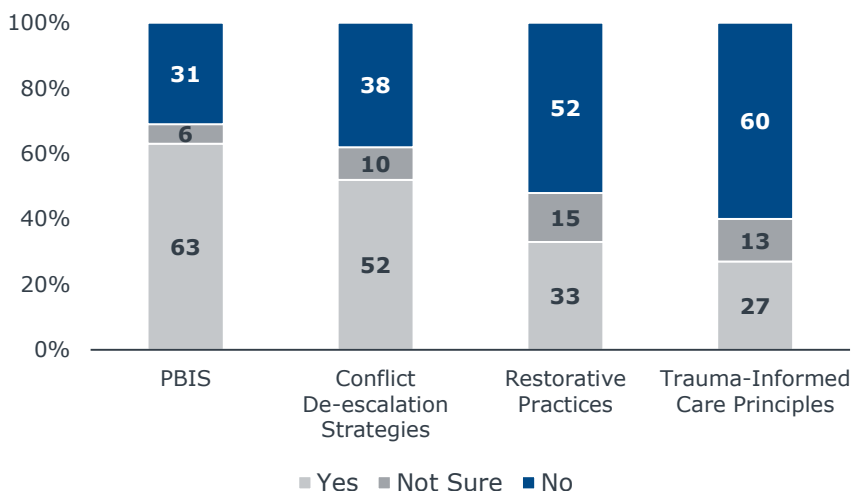- Taught only theoretically

40% of 1 Course

Average time teacher preparation programs spend on classroom management

(average load = 10 to 15 courses)

Teachers Often Not Sufficiently Trained in Common Behavior Management Approaches

Have You Been Trained in the Following?
DLF Survey, % of teacher respondents

	PBIS	Conflict De-escalation Strategies	Restorative Practices	Trauma-Informed Care Principles
No	31	38	52	60
Not Sure	6	10	15	13
Yes	63	52	33	27

■ Yes ■ Not Sure ■ No

Our survey responses revealed wide variations in teacher training in multiple evidence-based strategies to manage disruptive student behavior.

While a slight majority of teachers reported receiving training in PBIS and conflict de-escalation strategies, between one-third and half had not. Furthermore, fewer than one-third had been coached in restorative practices or trauma-informed care principles.

Teachers also reported average levels of satisfaction with the support they currently receive from their leaders in managing behavioral disruptions.

Taken together, these numbers reveal a significant opportunity for districts and schools to provide classroom management training.

How Well Supported Do You Feel by Your School in Managing Disruptive Behaviors?

(Average teacher rating, scale 1–10; 1 = least effective, 10 = most effective)

5.5/10

1) E.g., creating a safe setting, providing personal space, showing open body language, communicating and reassuring an agitated student, etc.

Source: "Training Our Future Teachers: Classroom Management," National Council on Teacher Quality, January 2014, https://www.nctq.org/dmsView/Future_Teachers_Classroom_Management_NCTQ_Report.

Helping Districts Contain the Epidemic

EAB Study Details 15 Best Practices to Manage Disruptive Behavior

Study in Brief: Managing Behavioral Disruptions in Early Grades

Educators around the United States report a rapid increase in behavioral disruptions across early grades over the last three years. This research offers district leaders a playbook with detailed advice and **15 best practices** to address the alarming trend and better prepare their staff to manage student behavior.

The best practices are organized around **four critical imperatives for district leaders**:

1

Prevent Misbehavior Through Early Intervention

by effectively using multiple screening and assessment methods to identify at-risk students and support them before disruptions occur.

1. Transition Program for Incoming High-Risk Kindergarteners
2. Universal Behavioral Screening to Identify Students in Need of Support
3. Teacher Home Visit Program
4. Trusted Adult-Student Relationship Mapping

2

Create Conditions for Positive Classroom Behavior

by reorganizing the physical classroom space, expanding time for free play, and clarifying behavioral guidelines to better serve student needs.

5. Self Regulation-Friendly Classroom Audit
6. Expanded Time for Free Play
7. Districtwide PBIS Implementation
8. Standardized Behavior Guidelines and Data Collection

3

Promote the Social-Emotional Well-Being of Students and Teachers

by embedding evidence-based social-emotional learning curricula and approaches to support both teachers and students.

9. Direct Instruction of Key Social-Emotional Skills
10. Embedded SEL Routines for Adults
11. Teacher Burnout Coping Supports

4

Enhance Support for Higher-Needs Students

by developing more effective support teams, improving help for trauma-affected students, and focusing alternative settings on reintegration.

12. Trauma-Informed Perspective of Student Behavior
13. Cross-Functional Behavior Health Intervention Team
14. Cognitive Behavioral Support for Students with a History of Trauma
15. Reintegration-Focused Alternative Classroom