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## **Addressing the Behavioral and Emotional Needs of Elementary School Students: A School Improvement Project**

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**Addressing the Behavioral and Emotional Needs of Elementary School Students: A  
School Improvement Project**

Katherine Ross

Capstone Project: A School Improvement Plan

Northwestern College, Orange City, Iowa

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**Abstract**

Elementary school students are found to have increased behavioral and emotional needs require support above and beyond the scope of a general educator's capabilities. Research indicates the need for additional teacher training in the areas of adolescent behavioral disorders and trauma informed care in order for them to provide the best possible education, academically and socially. School counselors are often called upon to address student social emotional needs, however classroom teachers are typically the first to notice when a student needs access to additional support and also spend the most time with students; this school improvement plan addresses the necessity to better prepare educators for the varying needs of their students outside of academics.

*Keywords:* behavioral disorders, trauma, mental health illness, counseling, professional development

## **Addressing the Behavioral and Emotional Needs of Elementary School Students: A School Improvement Project**

“Mental disorders are considered the chronic diseases of youth in the United States, and estimates suggest 20% of all school-age children have enough symptoms to warrant a formal mental health diagnosis” (National Institute of Mental Health [NIMH], 2010, 2011).

Although teachers are often the first to identify children with mental health needs, link students to programs, and assist in the implementation of programs; they are limited in their ability to detect early warning signs or recognize the symptoms of mental health illness in students due to lack of proper professional development and education surrounding this topic. Research has found the onset of mental illness generally occurs early in childhood or adolescence, yet diagnosis is often delayed for years or even decades (NIMH, 2010).

The purpose of this school improvement plan is to explore available resources for teachers and administrators to access and implement in an attempt to support elementary school students behaviorally and emotionally, in an effort to mitigate problematic behaviors and foster a positive learning environment for all students. Supports being explored include professional development surrounding trauma informed care and student mental health awareness, staffing additional counselors and school based therapists, and the implementation of various social emotional curricula. Classroom management strategies promote positive behavior will also be reviewed including the use of positive praise, check in/check out interventions, and peer behavioral supports.

Research conducted for this school improvement plan was conducted through the Northwestern College DeWitt Library using peer-reviewed articles published in the last ten years. Topics researched included student mental health, social and emotional learning, trauma

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informed practices, behavioral disorders, self-regulation, and multi-tier systems of support. This scope of research provides background information on what causes student mental health illness to possible solutions teachers can implement in order to support students struggling behaviorally and emotionally.

The intention of this plan is to provide teachers at Garfield Elementary School the proper training and tools needed to identify and support students with behavior and emotional deficits in an attempt to foster a positive learning environment for all students. Implementing these supports will lead to less office referrals and loss of instructional time due to behavioral issues in the classroom.

### **Review of the Literature Student**

#### **Mental/Emotional Health**

Promoting positive student mental and emotional health is a critical piece in education is lacking urgent attention. Despite the high percentage of students with mental health issues, a recent survey suggested only 4% of teachers strongly agreed with the statement they had the knowledge and skills to meet their students' mental health needs (Reinke et al., 2011).

The student mental health concerns covered in this study include depression, anxiety, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and autism spectrum disorders, as well as learning, communication, and behavior disorders.

Although schools are viewed as an optimal location for the promotion of youth mental health, various barriers prevent educational staff from providing the necessary support needed. These barriers include "limited budgets, time, physical space, and personnel resources needed to operate new services" (Powers, J. D., Wegmann, K., Blackman, K., & Swick, D. C., 2014). Additionally, there is increased pressure for teachers to focus on academics versus social

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emotional health, and a severe lack of formalized training and professional development regarding mental illness, as there is little to no specialized training in child mental health incorporated into preservice training programs for school professionals” (Powers, J. D., Wegmann, K., Blackman, K., & Swick, D. C.,2014).

In an attempt to increase school staff member’s knowledge of student mental health problems in an urban school located in a Southern state, 157 staff members were given a pre and posttest regarding their current knowledge of the above mentioned mental health concerns. Participants’ knowledge of mental health was measured using a 27 item instrument developed by the research team at the participating university which consisted of true/false and multiple choice questions; “Analysis of individual item scores revealed at pretest, five items were answered correctly by 80% or more of participants. At posttest, the number of items answered correctly by 80% or more of participants increased to 19 items” (Powers, J. D., Wegmann, K., Blackman, K., & Swick, D. C.,2014). These results indicate the effectiveness of professional development and training being provided to teachers and other educational staff in the area of student mental and emotional health.

Student mental and emotional health can also be negatively impacted by psychological trauma. According to the American Psychological Association, “As many as 46 million children living in the United States have experienced psychological trauma” (McIntyre, E. M., Baker, C. N., & Overstreet, S.,2019). This trauma can lead to various negative school outcomes including lower cognitive functioning, academic performance, and school connectedness. Exposure to trauma is also associated with higher rates of grade retention, special education placement, and absenteeism (McIntyre, E. M., Baker, C. N., & Overstreet, S. (2019).



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A study conducted in a New Orleans public charter school in 2015 provided 210 primary and secondary teachers with a two day professional development training to create a common understanding of trauma and the widespread impact it has on students. Components covered included: “National, local, and school-specific prevalence rates of childhood trauma exposure, negative impacts of childhood trauma exposure, national movement to create trauma informed schools, relationship between trauma triggers and student behavior, avoiding and responding to trauma triggers, applying trauma informed approaches in the classroom, and six key principles of trauma informed approaches (Safety, Trustworthiness and Transparency, Peer Support, Collaboration and Mutuality, Empowerment, and Cultural Issues)” (McIntyre, E. M., Baker, C. N., & Overstreet, S. (2019). Findings indicated a significant growth in teacher knowledge regarding student trauma following the training, with a 50% increase in teachers answering at least 80% of posttest questions correctly. Equipping teachers with information surrounding trauma informed care is a necessary step in promoting positive student mental health.

Despite the vital role teachers play in promoting mental health among children, they often reportedly feel ill prepared to handle these issues, regardless of the need for early identification and referrals for children feeling psychological distress (Long, M. W., Albright, G., McMillan, J., Shockley, K. M., & Price, O. A. (2018). A trial conducted in 2017 using a brief 45-90 minute online role-play simulation called *At-Risk for Elementary School Educators* was administered to 18,896 randomly selected elementary school teachers in an attempt to improve educator attitudes and behaviors surrounding adolescent mental health. The simulation allowed participants to practice role-plays and receive ongoing feedback from a virtual coach on how to apply 4 core MI (motivational interviewing) skills included: (1) asking open-ended questions; (2) providing affirmation; (3) reflective listening; and (4) summarizing client self-assessment. The trial was

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found effective at “improving teacher preparedness, likelihood, and self-efficacy to perform positive gatekeeping behaviors for students experiencing psychological distress” (Long, M. W., Albright, G., McMillan, J., Shockley, K. M., & Price, O. A. (2018). Addressing student mental health requires appropriate training such as the *At-Risk for Elementary School Educators* to ensure teachers are prepared to handle the various social and emotional needs of their students.

### **Student Behavioral Health**

Students who exhibit problematic behaviors in the classroom often require additional support outside the capabilities of the general education teacher however are not always provided those supports. According to the Division for Emotional and Behavioral Health, “Students in schools exhibit challenging behaviors on a daily basis; however, students identified with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) display behaviors extend beyond typical challenging behaviors. They may exhibit externalizing (e.g., aggression, impulsivity, vandalism) and/or internalizing (e.g., anxiousness, withdrawal) behaviors impede navigating the school environment in a variety of ways, such as (a) attending to academic instruction, (b) complying with educator directions, or (c) feeling fearful of school” (McGuire, S. N., & Meadan, H., 2022).

These behaviors not only impede the learning of the student displaying them, but also for the remainder of the class; oftentimes making it extremely difficult for educators to teach. Studies suggest students with EBD should be subjected to effective inclusive environments including generally and socially. General inclusion refers to EBD students participating in classroom academic activities, social inclusion is pertaining to those students having an equal opportunity for engagement in social activities with their general education peers.

A study surrounding inclusion of students with EBD was conducted in Illinois with 13 participating elementary school teachers, “Educators reported challenging behavior was one

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of the biggest factors lead to students not having access to social inclusion. Eight of the educators reported incidents in which their student with EBD behaved in a way required the student to be removed from the class by another adult, (such as a special educator or an administrator), or the class to be evacuated from the classroom due to the severity of the student's behavior (McGuire, S. N., & Meadan, H., 2022). Participants cited difficulties in implementing social inclusion of EBD students due to lack of professional development, and limited support from other professionals such as special education teachers and social workers. Supporting general education teachers is imperative for student success and can be provided through proper EBD training and collaboration between educators, special education staff, administrators, counselors, and social workers.

Alongside emotional behavior disorders among elementary students, DBD (disruptive behavior disorders) are also a concern for general education teachers. Students with DBD, “exhibit inattention, hyperactivity, and difficulties with aggression and conduct, and display disruptive behaviors including defiance, impulsivity, disruptiveness, aggression, and overactivity” (Bronstein, B., Breeden, N., Glover, T. A., & Reddy, L. A., 2021).

Paraprofessionals are being hired at rapid rates, (in 2016 alone, 1,308,100 paraprofessionals were employed in the United States and this number is expected to grow 8% by 2026 (U.S.

Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Statistics of State School Systems, 2017). Although these positions are meant to provide support in a variety of ways including classroom academic support and material preparation, paraprofessionals report spending the majority of their day managing student behavior.

In a mixed method study conducted in the Northeast area of the U.S, 86 paraprofessionals in 36 schools in urban and suburban communities were given behavior logs designed to assess

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their perceptions of student behavior concerns in elementary classrooms (all paraprofessionals worked in kindergarten–fifth grade classrooms supporting students with or at risk of disruptive behavior disorders. Paraprofessionals were asked to log student behavior concerns across several weeks of school. Logs included an open-ended response option to report unique behaviors of concern per student, a total of 10 logs were reported. Findings indicated several other themes emerged including, disruptive academic behaviors (224 reported) with three subthemes: (a) off-task, (b) peer interactions/verbal interference, and (c) physical interference. Aggressive behaviors (107 reported) were also frequently reported with three sub themes emerging, (a) physical aggression toward others, (b) physical aggression toward objects, and (c) verbal aggression. Noncompliance (34 reported) was the least commonly reported behavior with two subthemes: (a) physical refusal and (b) verbal refusal” (Breedon, N., Glover, T. A., & Reddy, L. A., 2021). Paraprofessionals are severely lacking job specific training in behavior management in order to prepare them to work successfully with students who have disruptive behavior disorders.

Student behavior disorders require immediate attention in order to support those in need but also to maintain highly qualified educators in the profession. According to the Education Advisory Board, “1,400 elementary school teachers reported on average losing 2.5 hr. of instructional time per week due to students’ disruptive and aggressive behaviors (Walker et al., 2004). Loss of instruction in the classroom not only impacts the learning and development of students with or at risk of DBDs, but also their classroom peers. Likewise, disruptive behaviors can negatively affect the functioning of school personnel such as poor physical and mental health, job retention, and perceived school safety” (Burke et al., 2008; Reddy et al., 2018).

### **Providing Teacher and Administrative Supports**

Students who have emotional and behavioral disorders experience a variation of externalizing and internalizing behavior problems, loss of academic achievement, and increased rates of school dropout. Therefore, it is essential students who have EBD receive evidence-based academic and behavioral support from skilled and knowledgeable teachers to ensure student outcomes are improved. Unfortunately, limited professional development in classroom management practices and other supports targeting the unique needs of students with EBD are provided to teachers (State, T. M., Simonsen, B., Hirn, R. G., & Wills, H., 2019).

Researchers suggest an effective professional development surrounding behavior disorders is: “(a) is intensive and ongoing, (b) focuses on content knowledge and student learning, (c) aligns with other learning activities and school improvement goals, (d) provides opportunities for active learning on the part of teachers, (e) develops strong working relationships among teachers, (f) is job-embedded, and (g) includes coaching (i.e., follow-up technical assistance) and performance feedback” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2009; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss, & Shapley, 2007). This increasingly important professional development can be provided to teachers in a variety of methods including attending conferences and workshops, in-service training, online modules and instruction, professional learning communities, coaching, and self-management support.

In addition to providing teachers proper professional development regarding student emotional and behavioral needs, schools also need to ensure counselors are readily available. “School counselors provide a broad range of developmental support to elementary and middle schools, including coordinating socioemotional learning curricula and disciplinary systems and

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providing individualized support to students. Elementary and middle school counselors are thus a cornerstone to school-wide efforts to support whole-child learning and development” (Carrell & Carrell, 2006).

In an ongoing six year mixed method study in North Carolina, data was collected regarding days absent, suspensions, and academic achievement in reading and math. Analyses by economic status showed in elementary schools, students with and without economic disadvantage benefitted from increases in school counselor ratios. “Through a cycle of continuous evaluation, school counselors can determine the impact of mental health interventions and further refine their approaches to meet the evolving and unique needs in their school” (Dimmitt et al., 2007; McMahon et al., 2014). As emotional and behavioral students' needs rise, so should the support for them and their general education teachers in an effort to promote and sustain growth, maintaining available school counselors can have a direct positive contribution to this.

Administrators also play a vital role in promoting positive mental and behavioral health in their students. In a mixed-method study conducted in a mid-sized school district in Pennsylvania, the influence of Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE), a mindfulness-based professional development program, on the leadership and well-being of 13 school administrators was conducted. The study included 26 audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews were conducted pre and post program, each 45 minutes to 1 hour in length and transcribed verbatim; participatory observations of six 5 hour sessions of the program, captured in narrative notes; 21 shadowing observations of school administrators reflect their leadership and context of school recorded in field notes; and anonymous participant feedback surveys about the program completed at the end of the booster session.

The positive outcomes emerged from the data relate to improved leadership skills, such as increased self-reflection, better relationships, and attendance to self-care. These skills are tied to increased self-awareness, self-management, and self-compassion. Participants also reported an improved ability to recognize their emotional reactions, which enabled them to better understand their leadership roles in shaping their school climates (Mahfouz, J., 2018). Providing school principals with social emotional training such as this enables them to better assist teachers who are dealing with students portraying mental and behavioral disorders.

### **Emotional and Behavioral Student Supports**

Elementary school students all receive Tier I teacher support for emotional and behavioral needs through various social and emotional curriculum and classroom management systems. Oftentimes, students require additional assistance in order to be successful in the general education setting. Class wide interventions can be a useful means to provide this extra support.

In an 8 week quantitative study conducted in an urban elementary school, six children (five boys, one girl) between the ages of 6 and 9 years with the educational diagnosis of EBD (emotional behavior disorder) were observed. The teacher used rewards and praise when preferred behaviors were portrayed. Group on-task behavior was defined as all students appropriately working on the assigned/approved activity including (a) orienting to the material and the task; (b) making appropriate motor responses (writing, looking at the teacher, looking at another student who is addressing the teacher or class appropriately); (c) asking for assistance appropriately (e.g., raising hand); and (d) waiting appropriately for the teacher to begin or continue instruction (staying quiet and in seat) (Weeden, M., Wills, H. P., Kottwitz, E., & Kamps, D., 2016). Every 30 seconds for a 20 minute observation period at the beginning of class, the

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observer (teacher) recorded a plus for each team of students if all students were engaging in on-task behavior. If any one member of a team was off task, the observer scored a minus (Weeden, M., Wills, H. P., Kottwitz, E., & Kamps, D., 2016).

During the initial baseline phase, the mean percentage of intervals on-task was 54%. Upon implementation of the class wide intervention (using rewards and praise) the percentage of intervals on-task increased to 87%, validating the benefits of teachers using a classwide intervention to promote positive behavior.

Teaching students to “self-regulate” their feelings when they are dysregulated has also been shown to be an effective strategy in assisting students with emotional and behavioral deficits. A mixed method study was conducted at an elementary school in the Northwest with students in grades 3-5 to determine if self-regulation skills can be taught and are especially effective when introduced within the school setting. In the MTSS self-regulation framework, Tier II strategies include small group counseling techniques using a cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) approach to give students tools needed to self-regulate self-monitoring strategies, movement/breathing strategies, and connection strategies. Universal screening is conducted to identify students who may require more intensive support to develop self-regulation than can be provided in the classroom. The Student Risk Screening Scale–Internalizing and Externalizing (SRSS-IE; Lane et al., 2012), was completed by each teacher for their students.

Once the initial risk pool was identified with the SRSS-IE, teachers completed the Behavioral and Emotional Screening System (BESS; Kamphaus & Reynolds, 2007). The BESS is a standardized, norm-referenced tool designed to screen for externalizing, internalizing, school problem behaviors and adaptive skills in children and adolescents (Brady, W. M., Johnson, E. S., Meek, J., Herzog, B., & Clohessy, A. B. (2018). Findings indicated this model of



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implementation was consistent with the MTSS framework and presented a feasible and effective way for teachers and school staff to address the self-regulation needs of their students using evidence-based strategies and data-based decision making. The tools and resources were compiled allowed the school to continue its implementation of this self-regulation model to continue to serve the needs of their students.

In addition to classwide interventions and self-regulation strategies, teachers can also implement a check in/check out system with students who struggle with mental or behavioral challenges. In a mixed method study conducted in an urban elementary school located in the Western U.S., the SRSS-I5 (Student Risk Screening Scale with Internalizing Behaviors) was distributed electronically by email to fourth, fifth, and sixth-grade teachers to identify students who may be at risk for internalizing behavior problems. Researchers used this screener pre- and post-intervention to track any changes in levels of internalizing behaviors. The SRSS-E7 identified students at risk for externalizing behavior problems (Kladis, K., Hawken, L. S., O'Neill, R. E., Fischer, A. J., Fuoco, K. S., O'Keeffe, B. V., & Kiuahara, S. A. (2023).

Once students were identified, the teacher rated each student's performance of active engagement behaviors on a 3-point Likert-type scale: 0 = Poor (e.g., does not or rarely engages in the behavior, needs more than three reminders.), 1 = OK (e.g., engages in the behavior most of the time, needs two to three reminders), and 2 = Excellent (e.g., consistently engages in the behavior, needs one or fewer reminders). All participants demonstrated an increase in active engagement behaviors and a decrease in off-task behaviors during the intervention phase. Teachers rated the intervention positively, found the intervention was acceptable for the students' problem behaviors, and it was beneficial for the students (Kladis, K., Hawken, L.

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S., O'Neill, R. E., Fischer, A. J., Fuoco, K. S., O'Keeffe, B. V., & Kiuahara, S. A. (2023). This study contributes to the positive effects identifying and tracking student behaviors can provide.

Lastly, yoga has been implemented and proven to be a beneficial emotional and behavioral support tool with elementary school students. An 8 week mixed method study was conducted in New Orleans with 20 third grade students to determine the impact of a yoga curriculum on elementary school student's quality of life. Students randomized to the intervention group participated in small-group yoga/mindfulness activities for 8 weeks led by a local social enterprise organization, using the validated Yoga Ed curriculum and materials. The Pediatric Quality of Life Inventory (PedsQL) was also used to assess student quality of life at the baseline, midline, and endline surveys. This tool is a series of 23 questions, split into physical, emotional, social, and school domains.

“The intervention was associated with a significant improvement in emotional and psychosocial quality of life in the intervention group when compared to the control group, suggesting yoga/mindfulness interventions may improve symptoms of anxiety among students. Yoga/mindfulness activities may facilitate stress management among elementary school students and may be added as a complement to social and emotional learning activities” (Bazzano, A. N., Anderson, C. E., Hylton, C., & Gustat, J. (2018). Implementation of a whole class yoga curriculum does cost school districts extra funding, however as proven in this study, the benefits to student social and emotional well-being should be taken into strong consideration.

### **School Profile**

#### **School Performance**

Garfield Elementary is a mid-size Title I School located in Davenport, Iowa and served approximately 427 kindergartens through sixth grade students in the 2021-2022 school year. 174 students were white, 122 Black, 72 Hispanic, 58 Mixed Race, and one student was Asian. The

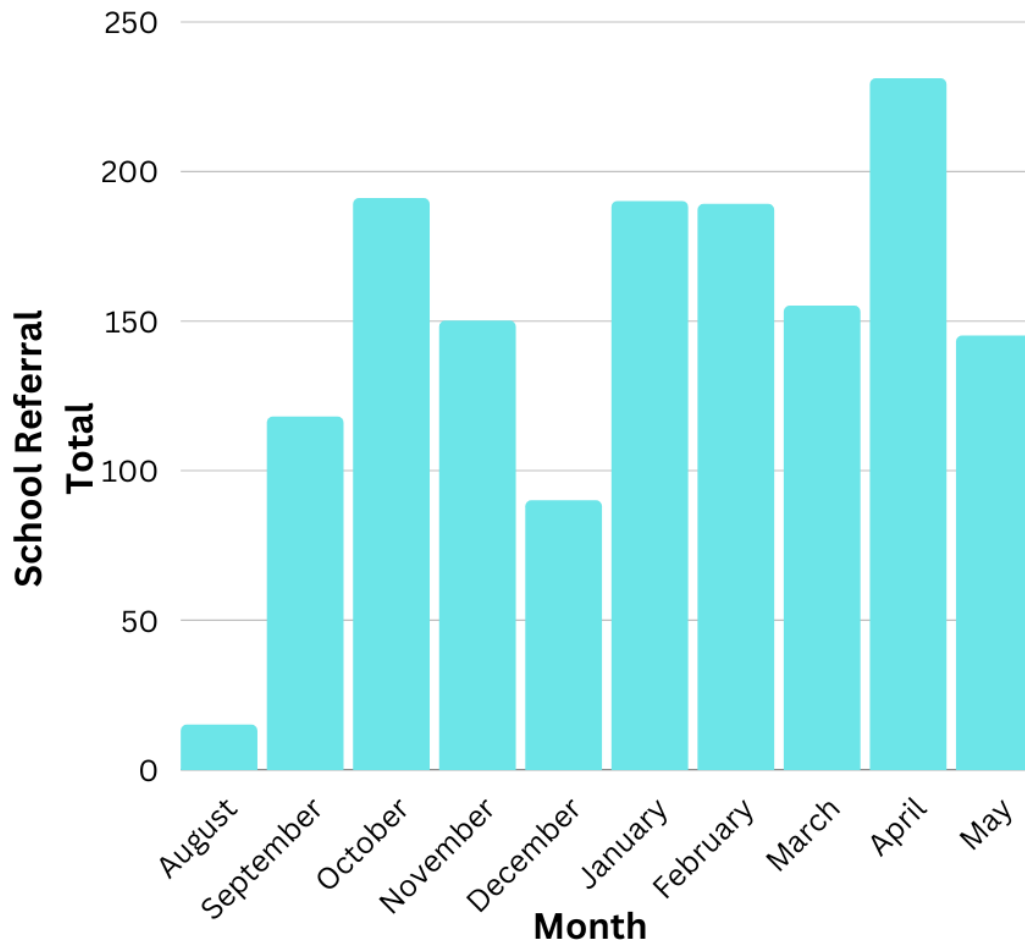
## Behavioral and Emotional Student Needs

male to female ratio was 215 to 212. All students receive free breakfast and lunch, regardless of family income. Students are offered a wide range of services beyond the general education classroom including TAG (Talented and Gifted) classes for students who achieve academically high scores on standardized testing, and Tier III small group instruction with certified reading and math teachers for students who are identified as persistently at risk academically. According to the Department of Education, in the 2021-2022 school year, the average school achievement in English and Language Arts was 45.4%, and the average school achievement in Mathematics was 45.29% with an overall proficient performance of 50.45%, (the state of Iowa average being 54.65%) (Iowa School Performance Profiles, 2022).

Social/emotional and behavioral issues are of great concern among teachers at Garfield. Local police officers were called several times in the 2022-2023 school year to diffuse physical altercations, runaway situations, and disputes between parents and school staff. Students are written 'referrals' to track behavior in the online portal, Campus. Referrals are earned for a number of reasons including physical aggression towards peers or staff, stealing, defiance/noncompliance, and disruptive behavior. The following graph depicts the number of referrals written in the 2022-2023 school year and portrays the great need Garfield has for social/emotional and behavioral resources:

Figure 1

*Behavior Referral Data per 427 students in 2022-2023*

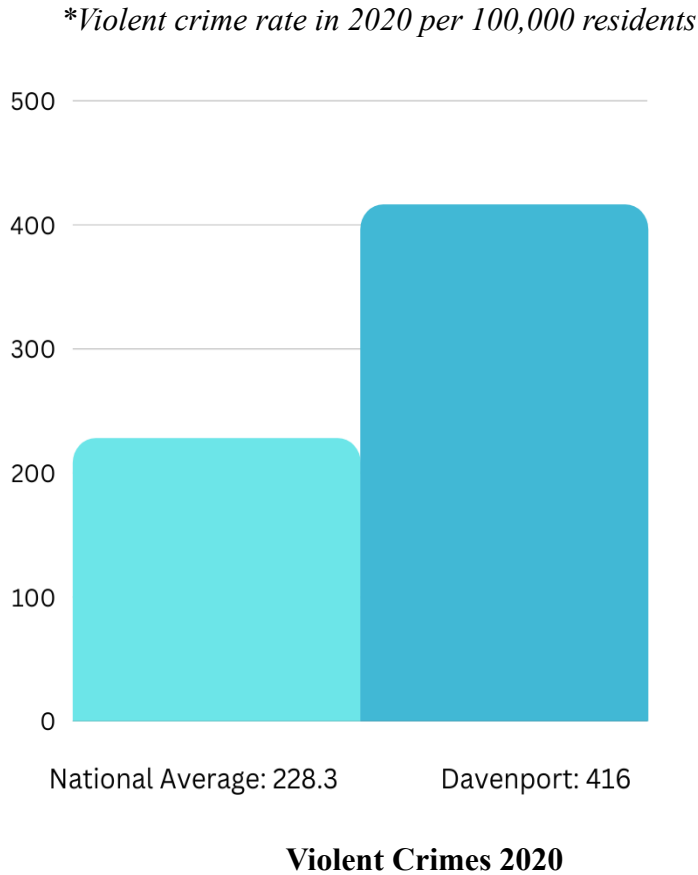


**Student and Community Characteristics**

Davenport, Iowa is the third largest city in the state and is one of the four ‘Quad Cities’ (along with Moline, Rock Island, and Bettendorf) with a population of 100,486 residents reported from the 2022 Census; 78.7% White, 10.9% Black, 8.9% Hispanic or Latino, 6.8% two or more races, 2.2% Asian, 0.3% American Indian, and 0.1% Native Hawaiian (U.S. Census Bureau quick facts: Davenport City, Iowa, 2022). Davenport Community School District has 4 High Schools, 4 Intermediate Schools, 1 K-8 School, 17 Elementary Schools, The Creative Arts Academy of the Quad Cities, A network of Early Childhood Learning Centers, 1 Athletic

Stadium, 1 Operations Center, and 1 Achievement Services Center (Profile of our community school district 2023); serving roughly 14,000 students in PreK through 12th grade. This community, although charmingly situated along the Mississippi river, has a poverty rate of 12.6% along with high crime rates surpass the national averages:

Figure 2



**School Characteristics**

Garfield Elementary is a beautiful neighborhood school built in 1923 and employs the building principal, a SAM (School Administrative Assistant), two office secretaries, one nurse, a family involvement liaison, three sections of kindergarten through sixth grade teachers, four special education teachers, one TAG (talented and gifted) teacher, two reading intervention specialists, one math special interventionist, one school counselor, one psychologist, a speech

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pathologist, librarian, technology innovator, classroom innovator, and several general education and special education para educators. Davenport has an open enrollment policy making it possible for students to bus in from other locations in the city to attend. The continued elevation of referral data suggests additional support staff be hired to manage student behaviors.

Garfield's principal is seeking a Teacher in Charge, and several para educators to provide assistance concerning behavior in the 2023-2024 school year.

## **Parent Involvement**

Parents belonging to Garfield Elementary are encouraged to participate in fall and spring conferences where they are given important information regarding their child's FastBridge state testing scores, student involvement in accelerated TAG placement or Tier III reading and math support services, and how their child is performing behaviorally. Families are invited to volunteer in their child's classroom, and to participate in various functions throughout the school year including family fun nights and PTA sponsored events. Parents are welcome on school field trips and holiday parties and are also free to observe in the classroom if their child is struggling behaviorally. Teachers keep in contact with parents and families about involvement opportunities through back to school night, Seesaw for Families, Class DoJo, email/phone calls, the school website, and our online portal called Campus. Parental involvement is highly encouraged by the principal and teachers as it has a positive impact on student learning and achievement.

## **School Mission and Vision**

Garfield Elementary School in Davenport provides a safe and caring environment for students, staff, and families to work together and prepare students to be confident learners and leaders. Garfield continues to build on the tradition of excellence and compassion our school stands for. Our teachers and staff do this by building relationships and trust with our students,

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families and community. At Garfield Elementary, we focus on the whole child, encouraging students to try new things, make every minute count, celebrate their achievements, and have a growth mindset! (Davenport Community Schools, 2022).

### **Current Student Learning Goals**

Kindergarten through second grade students is assessed using FastBridge Learning; “Research-based universal screening and progress monitoring for academics and social-emotional behavior (SEB) with intervention recommendations” (Fastbridge, 2022). Third through sixth graders are tested using ISASP (Iowa Statewide Assessment of Student Progress). FastBridge scores are shared with families at all benchmark testing times- fall, winter, and spring. If a student scores below benchmark at any time, parents are notified by letter explaining their child’s score and next steps which can include Tier III reading and/or math support and small group instruction in the classroom. Conferences are student led and allow for discussion of where the student is currently performing while also setting goals for improvement. Garfield has a high rate of referrals written for problematic behaviors, so social emotional/behavior goals are discussed at conferences alongside academics.

### **Teacher Work**

Teachers at Garfield work in CTT (collaborative teaching teams) with the other educators in the same grade. These teams meet twice per week during prep, one meeting covers reading content and the other covers math. During these meetings, CFA’s (common formative assessments) are created, backwards planning calendars are discussed, and Tier II intervention groups are formed based on FastBridge scores. Teachers cover their own classes recess duty, sub for teachers on their prep period, and take extra students from other classes if a teacher is absent without a guest teacher. General Education teachers collaborate with Special Education teachers,

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para educators and reading/math interventionists to provide a cohesive learning environment for all students.

### **Curriculum and Instructional Strategies**

Garfield's reading curriculum consists of two parts, 95% Group and Wonders. Both are taught whole group, 95% is a phonics based program provides explicit, systematic, and cumulative instruction is strategically designed to reduce or prevent intervention needs before they arise (Evidence-based Literacy Solutions, 2023). This curriculum also provides chip kits can be utilized in small groups for struggling readers.

“Wonders is designed to foster a love of reading in all children. Through exploration of texts and daily development of their skills as readers, writers, speakers, and active listeners, students experience the power of literacy. Our focus on teaching the whole child – and every child – prepares students to be lifelong learners and critical thinkers” (Wonders, 2020). Wonders provides opportunities for teachers to use read alouds which engage students in comprehension skills and vocabulary is lacking in the 95% curriculum. The school's math curriculum is called Envisions and is taught based on the district provided scope and sequence aligns with the priority standards. A social emotional curriculum called Second Step is also taught whole group and provides weekly lessons based on conflict resolution and managing feelings and emotions.

### **Assessment Practices**

Assessments are given in a variety of methods including state FastBridge, ISASP, district benchmarks, quarterly assessments, and common formative and summative assessments. Scores are transferred into our district online portal, Campus. Quarterly grades are composed of the information from these assessments, anecdotal reports, and individualized assessments when



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necessary. Some students require testing accommodations per their IEP are implemented when necessary and can include a smaller testing setting, extra time, and directions read aloud.

### **Professional Development**

Teachers at Garfield attend professional development meetings weekly on Wednesday early dismissal and various non instructional days. PD ranges from LETRS-Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (teaches fundamentals of reading instruction-phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, writing, and language), Yoga and Mindfulness, Trauma Informed Care, and Positive Behavior Supports. Limited professional development is offered for staff mental health awareness however is an area of concern to be addressed in the coming 2023-2024 school year.

### **Needs Assessment**

Garfield elementary school has an extreme need in the area of climate and culture. Currently, student behavior and social emotional needs are a major concern for the principal, teachers, and para educators. Due to the shortage of certified behavioral staff, students are often sent to the office when a major behavior arises, leaving the secretaries to manage them while still trying to complete the requirements of their job. Teachers are instructed to call the office for a ‘first responder’ if they are not able to de-escalate or manage a student’s behavior, the SAM (school administrative manager) is supposed to go to classroom and either remove the student or assist in diffusing the situation. Unfortunately, due to the high number of disruptive situations, the SAM has to prioritize physical altercation calls before any other; this leaves many teachers dealing with extreme disruptions and defiant students with no assistance.

Student misbehavior is often attributed to trauma and/or lack of social skills, leaving teachers responsible to teach curricular content while simultaneously managing behavior

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they haven't been professionally trained to handle. These behaviors have multiple repercussions, notably causing teachers to feel helpless. According to *A Multivariate Meta Analysis of Student Misbehavior and Teacher Burnout*, "Teacher's report spending a significant amount of time dealing with problem behaviors, and approximately one-third of teachers indicate misbehavior interferes with their teaching. Student misbehavior has been associated with reduced instructional time, job dissatisfaction, stress, lack of efficacy, and burnout" (Aloe et al., 2014).

In addition to the lack of behavior support at Garfield, a clear definition of what constitutes suspension and how suspensions are handled for student misbehavior is needed. Currently, when a student is suspended, they are often placed in a different classroom for the day. This could mean a 6th grade student is placed in a 1st grade classroom which has proven to cause additional problems and is not an appropriate solution. Not only does the suspended student miss an entire day of curricular content, they also do not see this as punishment and many times have caused issues within the classroom they attend for day, causing additional stress to teacher. Students are sent home for suspension on a case by case basis but again, there are no clearly defined parameters; one student may be sent home for physical aggression and another student is not, leaving too much gray area for misinterpretation among students and teachers.

Despite research suggesting "School counselors may be particularly helpful for students experiencing poverty and for students of color" (Thurston et al., 2022), Garfield had to share the counselor with another school in the 2022-2023 school year, leaving many students who were experiencing emotional stress without support. Due to the high number of referrals and lack of behavior support staff, the counselor was pulled from teaching important social skill lessons are supposed to be provided to every class K-6 in order to assist with first responder calls.

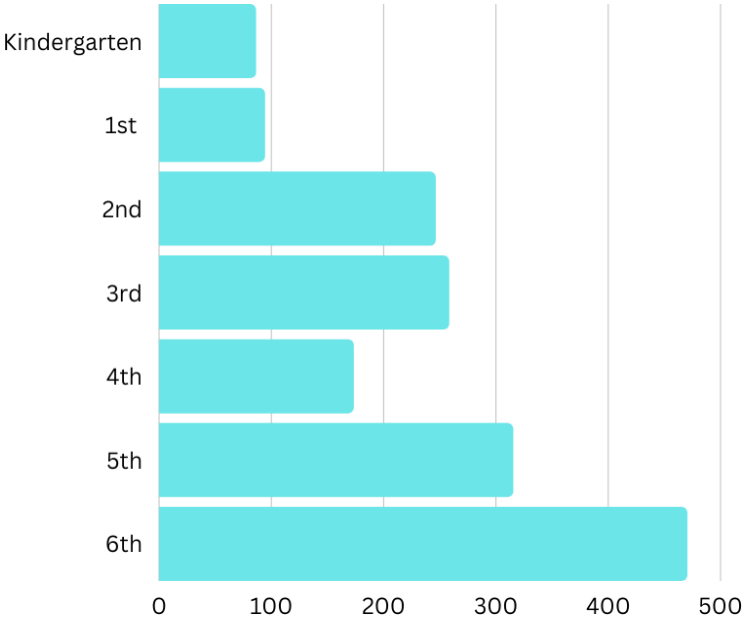
Behavior interventionists, school counselors, school psychologists, and school based therapists are all an integral part of supporting students with emotional and behavioral deficits. It is also imperative to train and educate teachers properly on how to manage extreme behaviors and disruptions, as many Tier I classroom management strategies fail to work with severe emotional and behavioral cases.

**School Data & Analysis**

**Data Collection**

Figure 3

*Behavior referral data by grade level from August 2022 to May 2023*



**Referral Totals 2022-2023**

## Behavioral and Emotional Student Needs

Referral data collection from the 2022-2023 school year suggests problem behaviors increase as students advance grades, with a noticeable decline from 3rd to 4th grade.

Kindergarten reported 86 events earned by 12 students, 1st grade: 94 events by 17 students, 2nd grade: 246 events by 31 students, 3rd grade: 258 events by 23 students, 4th grade: 173 events by 21 students, 5th grade: 315 events by 40 students, and 6th grade: 470 events by 42 students. The data implies more behavioral support be provided in grades 5 and 6, which is also where the most physical altercation events were reported resulting in police involvement. Offenses ranged in 5th and 6th grade from theft, physical violence, skipping class, abusive or inappropriate language, defiance/insubordination, communication of a threat, property damage/vandalism, and bullying, while offenses in the lower grades were primarily noncompliance. Data also indicates the number of offenders rises as students advance grades, suggesting the importance of behavior interventions for repeat offenders in the lower grades in an attempt to mitigate problem behaviors later in school.

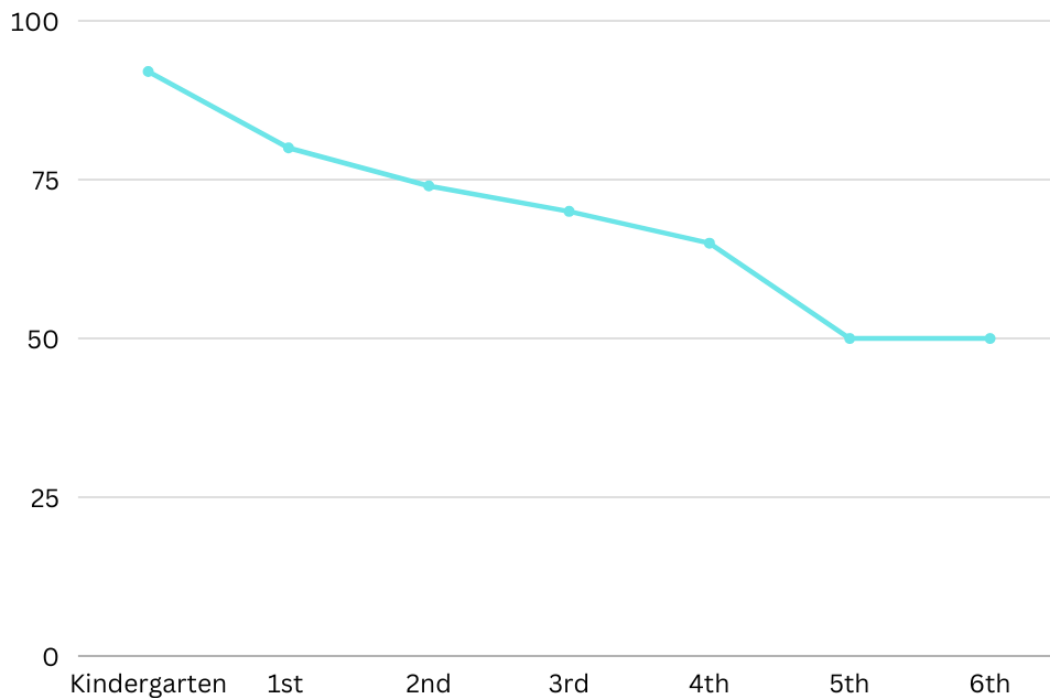
Strengths regarding the behavioral data collection are observed in the lower grades kindergarten and 1st grade with the least number of earned referrals and student offenders. Although it is difficult to conclude explicitly why this is the case, there are several factors likely contribute. Kindergarten and 1st grade teachers utilize a social emotional curriculum called Second Step “helps students build social-emotional skills like nurturing positive relationships, managing emotions, and setting goals so they can thrive in school and in life”(Second step® programs homepage, 2023). These lessons are taught weekly to the whole class, allowing for small group instruction when necessary. Additionally, the Social Studies curriculum used in the lower grades revolves around community and lends itself to learning

about the importance of relationships, allowing teachers to explicitly teach the fundamentals of sharing, being kind, and showing empathy.

Furthermore, parent support and engagement tend to be higher in the lower grades at Garfield. According to the Center for Disease Control, “Research shows parent engagement in schools is closely linked to better student behavior, higher academic achievement, and enhanced social skills” (Parent engagement in Schools, 2018).

Figure 4

*Parent attendance 2022 fall conferences*



Parent attendance at fall conferences indicates a high level of support in kindergarten at nearly 100%, declining with each grade level to only 50% in 5th and 6th grades, where

problematic behaviors occur most frequently. Due to the importance of information shared at conferences (current reading level, math knowledge, engagement, behavior, etc.), parent involvement is vital in communicating areas of strength and concern in order to bridge the gap between home and school life.

Additional data collection could be useful regarding student home life including socioeconomic status, two parent households, and education level of family members. Further data on behavior interventions implemented (or lack thereof) for students with high numbers of referrals would give insight into next steps in improving social emotional and behavioral supports.

**Action Plan**

**Strategies**

Multiple key components have been identified after reviewing relevant research in creating a successful school improvement plan based on the social/emotional and behavioral needs at Garfield Elementary School for the 2023-2024 school year. Implementation of the action steps in Table 1 will hopefully lower the number of earned referrals and promote a positive learning environment for all students.

**Table 1**

*Action Steps, Responsible Staff, Timelines*

Action Step	Responsible Staff	Timeline
1. Provide teachers, para educators, and principals with proper professional development training	Superintendent Principal	August 2023-prior to the beginning of the first day of school.

surrounding student mental and behavioral health.		
2. Provide adequate resource support through school counselors, school based therapists, and behavior management staff.	Principal	August 2023-prior to the beginning of the first day of school.
3. Provide a behavior regulation room/space separate from the office and school classrooms.	Principal Behavior support staff Counselor	August 2023-prior to the beginning of the first day of school.
4. Adopt a strong social emotional Tier I curriculum to be taught whole group in every grade K-6.	Superintendent Curriculum specialists Principal General education teachers' Special education teachers	August 2023-prior to the beginning of the first day of school to be implemented in classrooms weekly.
5. Adopt a school wide yoga and wellness program.	Superintendent Curriculum specialists Principal	August 2023-prior to the beginning of the first day of school to be implemented in classrooms monthly.
6. Teach self-regulation strategies and ensure each classroom has a "regulation station" where students can calm down.	General and special education teachers Principal	Within the first week of school with brush up lessons as needed throughout the year.
7. Outline specific behavioral action steps taken for in and out of school suspensions do not include sending suspended students to	Principal Teacher in charge	August 2023 in service day-prior to the first day of school.

<p>other classrooms for the day.</p>		
<p>8. Provide a check in/check out system for students with Tier II and Tier III behaviors-allowing them to earn tangible rewards for meeting behavioral expectations and goals.</p>	<p>General and special education teachers</p>	<p>Within the first month of school after behaviors are identified and put into Tier plans.</p>
<p>9. Provide Tier I positive praise statements.</p>	<p>General and special education teachers</p>	<p>Introduce the first week of school and continue throughout.</p>
<p>10. Implement school wide PBIS (positive behavior intervention and supports).</p>	<p>All Staff</p>	<p>Introduce at back to school assembly August 2023, all staff implements throughout the year using ticket system for positive behavior.</p>
<p>11. Promote strong parent/teacher relationships encouraging positive student behavior.</p>	<p>General and special education teachers  Principal</p>	<p>Back to school night 2023  Fall/winter/spring conferences  Family fun nights- fall and spring  Volunteer opportunities throughout the year  Strong communication through email/phone/Seesaw/Class Dojo</p>



## Implementation of School Improvement Plan

### Data Collection

Upon successful implementation of strategies proposed in Table 1 (above), general and special education teachers will complete a google survey following the 1st Quarter (end of October). The following questions will be asked and subsequently analyzed by the school principal and SAM (School Administrative Assistant) to gauge the effectiveness of the social/emotional and behavioral school improvement plan:

1. How many referrals did you write in Quarter 1?
2. What were the nature of the referrals (disruption, defiance, noncompliance, disrespect, physical violence, bullying, theft, etc.)?
3. Which students are receiving the highest number of referrals and are they on a Tier plan?
4. Do you have strategies to share have been successful in your classroom when dealing with behavior?
5. Rate the strategies below you found most helpful/effective when dealing with social/emotional and behavior situations:

0-not effective    1-somewhat effective    2-very effective

- Professional development training
- The presence of school based therapists, counselor, and behavior interventionist
- Utilization of a specified room with a behavior interventionist for students to visit and regulate emotions before returning to class
- The implementation of Social and Emotional curriculum weekly
- Yoga lessons once per month

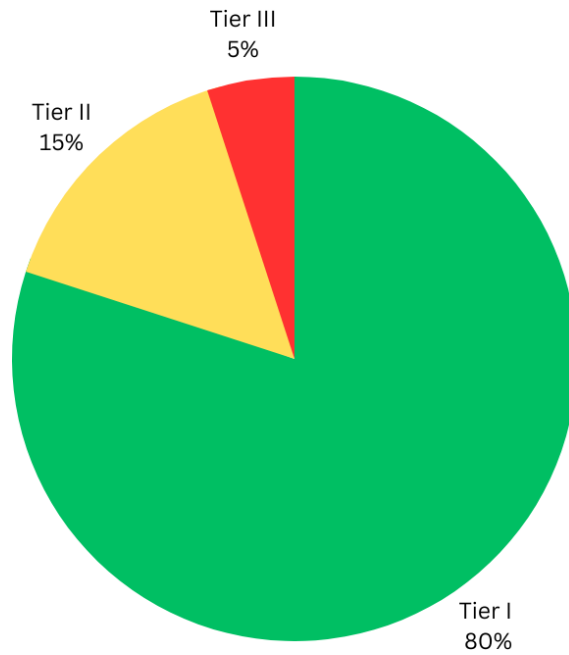
## Behavioral and Emotional Student Needs

- Providing your students with a calm down “regulation station” in your classroom
- Having clear knowledge of suspension procedures/not taking suspended students in your classroom for the day
- Check in/check out procedure tracking behavior throughout the day with Tier II and III behavior students
- Implementing PBIS
- Relationships build with parents/families

Analysis of results from the google survey will inform administration regarding what strategies are most effective and will allow for additional support to be put in place for the remainder of the school year if necessary. Results will also indicate which types of referrals are being written most frequently and in what grades, showing the need for possible reteaching of classwide expectations pertaining to certain behaviors.

Referral data will be compiled by grade level at the end of Quarter 1 and compared to the data collected last year during the same Quarter of 2022. According to Garfield’s Tiers of behavior expectations, 80% of all students should be successful with only exposure to whole class behavior expectations (class rules, occasional reminders, PBIS, positive praise), 15% of students may need Tier II support (small group reteaching of expectations, sticker chart, occasional consequence), and 5% of students may need Tier III behavior support (special education services, check in/check out, one on one counseling sessions, in/out of school suspensions).

Figure 5

*Garfield Behavior Expectations*

In Quarter 1 of 2022, a combined 324 referrals were earned from all grades, K-6. Upon successful completion of the school improvement plan, number should decrease significantly if all staff are implementing the strategies outlined in Table 1 with fidelity and will speak to the plan's effectiveness.

**Barriers and Challenges**

Several factors contribute to the fluctuation of social/emotional and behavioral concerns from year to year. Data from Quarter 1 of 2023 will include students joining Garfield from two surrounding schools closed at the end of spring, 2023, which could positively or negatively impact data. Students at Garfield are also very transient, so students who had severe behavioral

## Behavioral and Emotional Student Needs

issues last year may move before or during the 2023-2024 school year, possibly impacting future data collection. The school's budget also poses a challenge, with the need for additional counselors, a school based therapist, and at least one full time behavior interventionist; along with professional development training and the adoption of a strong social/emotional curriculum. Lastly, ensuring all teachers are on board with the implementation of the school improvement plan could present barriers to success, as the strategies presented could be seen as "one more thing" for them to manage.

### **Conclusion**

Research indicates "aggressive, disruptive, and defiant behavior wastes teaching time, disrupts the learning of all students, threatens safety, overwhelms teachers—and ruins their own chances for successful schooling and a successful life" (Aftunion, 2014). Due to the increasing number of children requiring social/emotional and behavioral assistance, action steps must be taken to provide teachers the support they need including professional development surrounding trauma informed care and student mental health awareness, staffing additional counselors, school based therapists, and behavior interventionists, implementing various social emotional curricula, and providing a designated de-escalation room. Additionally, ensuring teachers are utilizing various classroom management strategies promote positive behavior including the use of positive praise, check in/check out interventions with Tier II and Tier III students, peer behavioral supports, and classroom calm down areas will provide a positive learning environment for all students and will expectedly reduce the incidence of referrals due to problematic behaviors. Further research concerning student socioeconomic status, trauma history, and diagnosed disorders is needed to fully understand their implications on student behavior.

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