

POSITIVE BEHAVIOR INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORTS AT THE ILLINOIS YOUTH CENTER-HARRISBURG

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) has been a positive force at the Illinois Youth Center (IYC) in Harrisburg, Illinois, since December 2001. The program has dramatically changed the climate of the school housed within this boys' prison, creating a place where "teachers can teach and students can learn."

IYC, a part of the Illinois Department of Corrections, is a facility for adjudicated boys between the ages of 13 and 21 years. At the present time, about 400 boys are committed to IYC-Harrisburg. The average age is 17 years, the average length of stay is 11 months, and the average reading ability is just above sixth grade. Harrisburg is in rural southeastern Illinois; the boys are from all parts of the state. The school is an Illinois State Board of Education certified high school with departmentalized academic classes, vocational classes, and special education services. IYC-Harrisburg also has a college-level vocational program through a contract with Southeastern Illinois Community College.

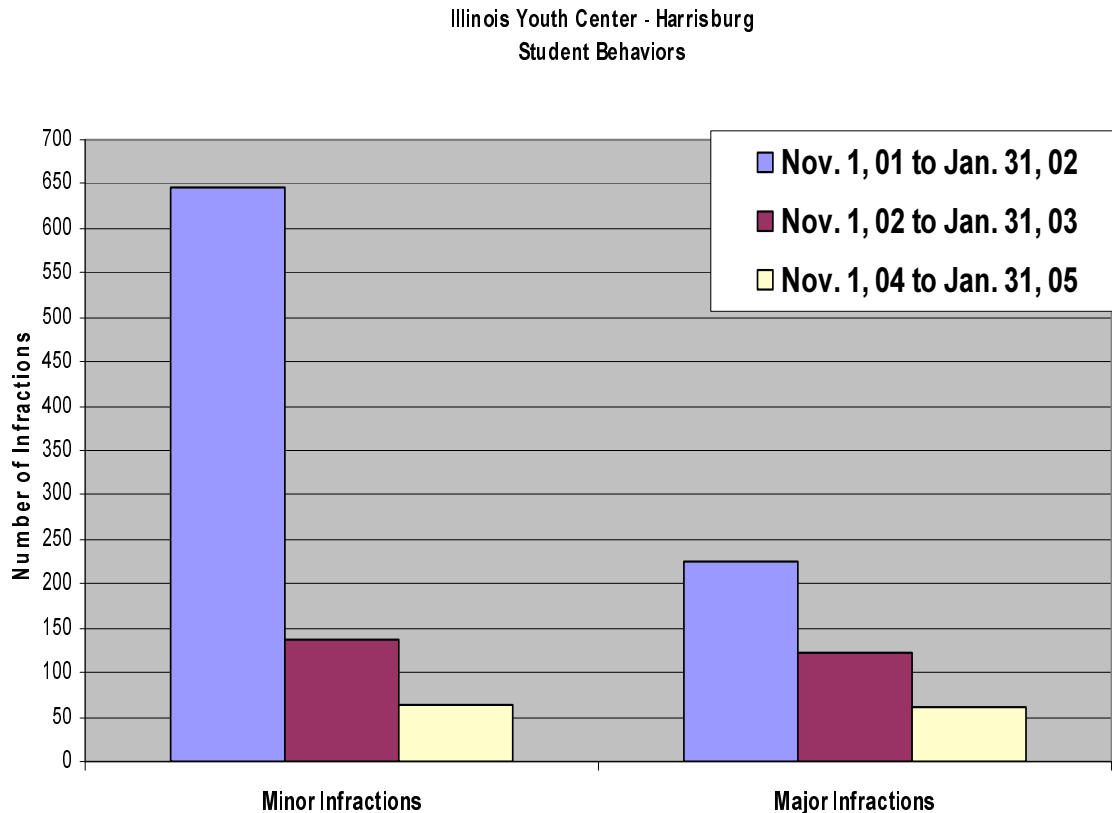
Before we started the PBIS program, every teacher was on their own for classroom management. There was no consistency between classes and no schoolwide program for areas outside the classroom. At every needs assessment and in-service, teachers were asking for classroom management techniques and practices. We researched several out-of-the-box, structured discipline programs, but nothing seemed to work or to fit our unique environment.

Then, in early 2001, we heard about the PBIS program. PBIS, as an evidenced-based, best practices model, seemed to be something with which we could work. PBIS research shows that if you have clear behavioral expectations, and teach those expectations, then about 80 per cent of your students will follow the rules. Between 10 and 15 percent of your students will need some extra help to follow the rules (targeted students). And, about five per cent of the students (the red or special students) will not follow the rules at all; the best you can do is manage their behavior. Our first thought was that, "We have every other school's five per cent!" But, then, after examining records, we discovered that about 20 per cent of the students caused 80 per cent of the problems. We decided to give PBIS a try.

In June 2001, Lucille Eber, the statewide PBIS coordinator for Illinois, and her assistants, Steve Romano and Candi Hayward, did a full-day introduction of PBIS for 90 educators, counselors, security staff, and administrators at IYC-Harrisburg. This generated even more interest among the staff. A PBIS team was appointed and began to draw up plans for implementing the program. Steve and Candi returned and worked with the PBIS committee. Permission was secured from both correctional and school district administrators. We worked for about five months to make sure that everything was just right before we introduced the program to the students. Some things were very hard to work out and required lots of teamwork and compromise: For example: How could we

set schoolwide behavioral expectations and still leave teachers autonomy in their classroom? What reward system could we use that would not be abused? What tangible rewards are appropriate inside a prison? These and many other issues were worked through.

In December 2001, we introduced the program to the students through discussion and role play with large groups. It was an instant success. Negative behaviors have steadily declined since implementation. (See graph.)



At IYC, one of the intrinsic problems is a large turnover in student population. Usually, we lose and gain between 50 and 60 students each month. We introduce schoolwide PBIS to new students through our week-long Orientation program. Each teacher is expected to teach their classroom rules and expectations. Each week a social skills lesson is taught by all teachers at the same time. Then, students are rewarded when observed using that particular skill.

We have tried teaching many different social skills and have used many formats to teach them. We finally have settled on a “core” of specific, simple skills that are repeated routinely. The delivery method is simple and usually centers on discussion and lecture.

Targeted and Special students are subject to many different management techniques outside the schoolwide program. Among our most favored practices are mentoring and student-teacher mediations. We now are trying peer-mediation and Peacekeeping Circles with initial positive results.

Over the years we have found that sustaining the program is just as hard as starting it. Sustaining the momentum and integrity of such an effort requires constant monitoring, review of data, and the tweaking of systems and practices. Our PBIS committee meets regularly to make suggestions for both schoolwide and targeted-specialized interventions. The entire staff participates in a “working” in-service at least semi-annually to discuss obstacles and implement improvements.

We do believe that the program is worth the effort. In November 2001, there were 32 fights in the school, putting both students and staff at risk. After we implemented PBIS in December 2001, there was not a fight in the school for over three years. We are ardent supporters of Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports. We know that it can work in a juvenile correctional setting.