How to Improve Students' Classroom Behavior through the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning

Pictured above: Students from Shaw Elementary School exhibiting improved student behaviors while engaged in student-led team learning.

By: Michael D. Toth

If it feels like it's getting harder to keep students engaged and cultivate positive behaviors across your school or district, you're not alone – it *is* getting harder. Yet, improving student behavior is a critical factor in increasing student achievement and closing achievement gaps. Research has found that students' ability to self-regulate is associated with improved student achievement (Blitz et al., 2020; Marantika, 2021; Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2014).

This article will examine the underlying causes of student behavior challenges and offer insights on how leaders can improve student behavior by going beyond the traditional approaches. By adopting the **Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning**, every student will flourish – even those who have struggled with behavior and achievement.

Why Are Schools and Teachers Facing More Student Behavior Issues?

Many schools and districts are grappling with an increase in student behavior issues. After the COVID pandemic, the National Center for Education Statistics (2022, 2023, 2024) reported:

- 87% of public schools had experienced increased incidents of student misconduct which interfered with teaching, including rowdiness, disrespect toward teachers and staff, prohibited use of electronic devices, class-cutting, and absenteeism.

- 26% of public school leaders reported that lack of focus or inattention from students had a "severe negative impact" on learning.

Is COVID to blame? While there may be an aspect of post-pandemic impacts, the problem runs deeper and likely signals a broader, more lasting shift in society. Today's students are different than students were even ten years ago – they are the first generation to grow up in a world of highly addictive technology.

According to a 2020 study (Qu et al., 2023), the average amount of time children and adolescents spend interacting with technology far exceeds the recommendations of the World Health Organization and has been linked to developmental and behavior issues such as:

- Poorer attention skills
- Lower cognitive skills
- Negative impact on working memory
- Lower empathy
- Less self-control
- Decrease in social coping skills and emotional regulation

Ages	Excessive Screen Time	Actual Screen Time
2 years old and younger	1 hour or more per day	3 hours per day
8-12 years old	2 hours or more per day	4-6 hours per day
Teens	2 hours or more per day	9 hours per day

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American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry (2024). Screen time and children. https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Children-And-Watching-TV-054.aspx
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Excessive screen time and the resulting maldevelopment effects have eroded students' ability to sit passively and listen to teachers for extended periods. The teacher-directed, 19th century model of instruction is no longer engaging for 21st century learners. In fact, as the next section explains, traditional Tier 1 instruction – and students' limited role in their learning – is often at the root of increasingly challenging student behavior.

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What Are the Root Causes of Challenging Student Behavior?

Although schools and districts often tackle student behavior and academic achievement challenges separately through different programs and interventions, these issues are highly interconnected. They share many of the same root causes stemming from the classroom learning environment.

Root Cause 1: A Classroom Culture of Low Rigor Surface Learning

High stakes accountability and testing has created a culture of surface learning driven by pacing guides. Teachers feel pressured to rapidly move through the content at a superficial level to "cover the standards," creating a highly controlled, low rigor learning environment.

Signs of a culture of low rigor surface learning:

- Overfocus on memorization and recall at low taxonomy levels, which most students do not find interesting and have difficulty retaining.

- Below grade-level, low rigor content that does not engage and challenge students or develop intrinsic motivation.

- Rigid behavior management strategies to keep students on task as they experience boredom and frustration with surface learning.

Root Cause 2: Overcontrolled Behavior Management

A classroom environment of overcontrol often results from a combination of low rigor surface learning and students' reduced ability to self-regulate. Teachers sense that they are losing students' attention and often feel compelled to tighten traditional classroom management to keep students on task.

Signs of overcontrolled behavior management:

- Students are only able to exercise two choices:
    1. Passively comply
    2. Resist and act out

- Teachers and students experience a control struggle. Students express their frustration over lacking voice and choice through disruptive behaviors.

- Even students who comply become disengaged and unmotivated, which prevents them from learning more deeply.

Root Cause 3: Lack of Peer Support for Students Who Are Struggling Academically

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"When a child feels like they just absolutely cannot do the work, the way to escape is through behavior."

***– Brandon Benford**, Assistant Principal, William D. Moseley Elementary School*

When students feel like they're behind and unable to participate confidently, behavior challenges often emerge. These students are bright and capable, but they may not feel that way. They would rather be labelled as disruptive than perceived as struggling academically.

Typical approaches students experience in these situations:

- Behavioral interventions that remove the student from the classroom or isolate them from their peers.
- Academic interventions that further limit the student's access to essential Tier 1 instruction.
- Increased control and discipline in response to the student not demonstrating responsibility for their own learning.

Root Cause 4: Limited Student Agency, Voice, and Choice

All humans are wired with the desire for agency – the ability to self-direct their actions and make meaningful choices. When students lack opportunities to exercise their agency in a highly controlled classroom environment, they may act out in frustration. In response, teachers often impose even tighter restrictions, which in turn creates even more resistance from students, creating a cycle of behavioral conflict.

Students can quickly become amotivated and disengaged from their learning when they experience a learning environment of low student agency. Recent studies indicate that challenging student behaviors and low engagement may be caused by student burnout, in which students experience exhaustion, cynicism and detachment from learning, and a sense of incompetence (Yang et al., 2023).

Low student agency and amotivation from the student's perspective:

- "Learning is a chore."
- "Why do I have to learn this?"
- "I don't feel smart."
- "I don't belong here."

How the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning Addresses the Root Causes of Challenging Student Behavior

All classrooms have a model of instruction, whether they realize it or not. For most, it is the traditional teacher-directed model where students are passive and compliant.

The **Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning**™ is designed to develop student agency and increase academic rigor through student-led team learning. As the model opens access to rigorous learning for *all* students to thrive academically, behavior also improves as a result.

At Walnut Middle School, students previously expressed challenging behaviors due to boredom. Once students began to engage in academically rigorous tasks in teams, they also began to exhibit positive behaviors.

The Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning addresses persistent root causes of challenging student behavior through four key outcomes:

1. High Rigor Deeper Learning

A powerful lever for improving student behavior is transitioning to a culture of high academic rigor. The **Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning** gives students the structures and resources to tackle challenging academic tasks in teams.

High rigor Tier 1 instruction is characterized by:

- Increased access to grade-level and above content through rigorous, team-based tasks
- Peer support to persist through productive struggle
- Student-to-student academic discourse with rich vocabulary use
- Increased student motivation to take on even more challenging tasks

An example of the impact of high rigor Tier 1 instruction comes from one of our partner schools, where the principal attributed the improvement in student behavior to higher student engagement in rigorous learning. Discipline referrals dropped by 288 compared to the previous school year, and positive student recognitions tripled (Walnut Middle School, Grand Island, NE: Transforming Student Behavior, 2019).

2. Student-Led Behavior Management

Often the solution to problematic behaviors, though seemingly counterintuitive, is to give students more autonomy – gradually, and within structures. The structures for student-led behavior management are embedded in the **Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning**. When students have meaningful roles and responsibilities in their learning, positive behaviors increase.

As teachers coach students into their new roles, tell them they are capable, and encourage them to become leaders in their learning, students will rise to that

expectation. This shift creates a powerful cycle: as the teacher releases more responsibility, students demonstrate that they can handle those responsibilities, and the teacher is able to continue releasing even more.

3. Student Teams That Support Behavior and Academics

In a student-led team learning environment, students who may have felt isolated by their behavioral and academic struggles begin to see themselves as valued members of their teams. They feel a shared responsibility, challenge one another to fulfill the team norms through positive behavior, and take ownership of their team culture. Though this shift takes time, it is one of the most powerful results of the **Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning**.

In this model, students rely less on the teacher for managing conflict, instead using:

- **Peer-led conflict resolution:** The model's protocols enable them to resolve issues independently within their teams.
- **Shared accountability through team roles and norms:** Team structures and resources in the model empower students to hold one another accountable, reinforcing positive behavior without constant teacher intervention.

As students learn these strategies through the model, even those who previously disengaged through behavior become active contributors in their teams.

4. High Student Agency

When students have roles and responsibilities for their learning and that of their peers, students become intrinsically motivated to take ownership of their own behavior, support their peers, and contribute to a positive learning environment. They develop high levels of student agency as a result.

A recent study indicated that student engagement increased and burnout decreased when students perceived their teachers as being autonomy supportive,

providing choices, showing interest and understanding, and allowing independent thinking (Yang et al., 2023).

How the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning develops student agency:

- **Meaningful roles and responsibilities:** Defined roles give every student a purpose and focus within their learning teams. Team protocols ensure equality of voice and participation as all students have accountability to engage in conversations.
- **Student voice and choice within rigorous tasks:** Resources and structures give students a real voice in their learning through the rigorous academic discourse in their teams. Students choose which strategies they will use to achieve their learning targets and demonstrate evidence of their learning.
- **Gradual release of structured autonomy:** Teachers learn strategies for stepping back and becoming facilitators rather than directors, allowing students to exercise increasingly greater autonomy as they show responsibility in their roles and lead their own learning.

Partner School Example: Arthur Elementary

Arthur Elementary School adopted the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning after struggling with academic and behavioral challenges, disengagement, and an overfocus on technology. They experienced the following results:

- ✓ Classrooms transformed from device-centric to student-led environments, resulting in students becoming more active participants in their learning.
- ✓ Student engagement and academic performance improved, with the school seeing student assessment growth across multiple areas.
- ✓ School leaders noted a decrease in behavioral challenges as students developed enhanced collaboration, problem-solving, and communication skills.
- ✓ Educators adopted more strategic lesson planning aligned with standards and reported increased teaching effectiveness.

Engagement increases, behavior improves, and achievement thrives when students experience the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning.

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Michael D. Toth is founder and CEO of Instructional Empowerment (IE) and leads IE's Applied Research Center. He is also the author of the multi-award-winning book *The Power of Student Teams* with David Sousa; author of *Who Moved My Standards*; and co-author with Robert Marzano of multiple books. Most recently, he co-authored peer-reviewed research articles published in academic journals in collaboration with researchers Dr. Basileo, Dr. Lyons, Dr. Otto, and Dr. Vannini.

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