

# Economics of Good Behavior

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A third-grade student sits in his reading class. He struggles to read a passage out loud. His teacher prompts him to read the paragraph correctly, but he fails to meet her expectations. The corrections follow in a punitive fashion, “You should know this by now,” she says. “If you don’t read this paragraph like I told you, there will be consequences.” If this response did not seem to fit the appropriate action of a teacher attempting to guide a student to a new understanding, that’s because it didn’t. However, the same techniques are often applied to students who struggle with behavior. A third-grade student struggles to stay focused and fidgets in class; a correction follows in a punitive fashion: “You should know this by now; if you don’t focus like I told you, there will be consequences.”

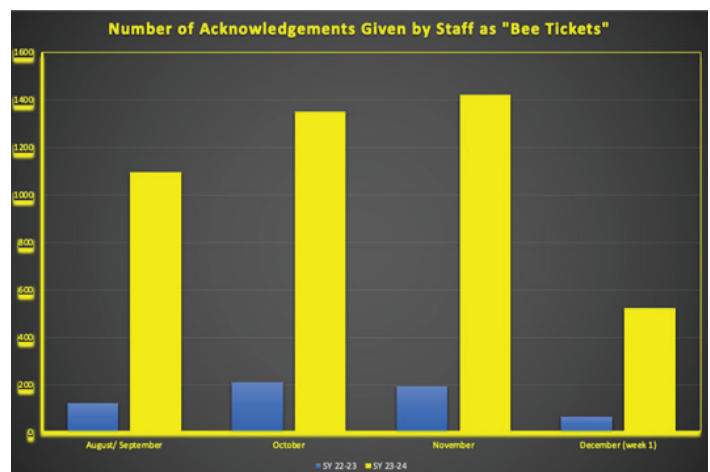
Standard behavior theory tells us that the behavior which receives the most attention is also most likely to be repeated.

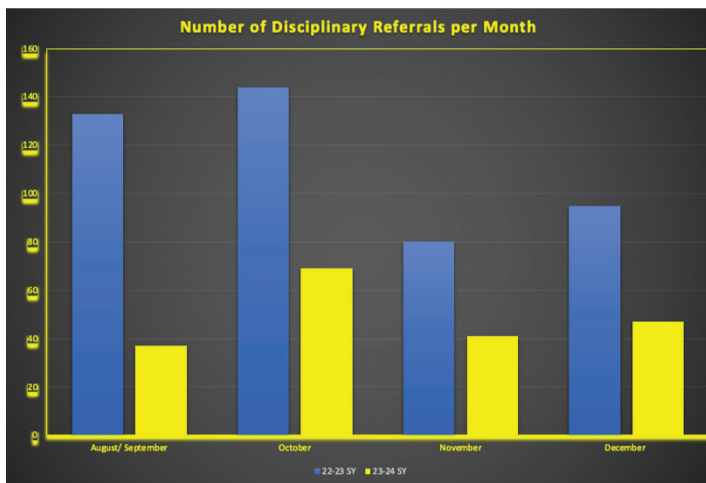
The Schoolwide Positive Behavior Intervention System (SWPBIS) is a program that utilizes these principles. When implemented with fidelity, SWPBIS has been shown to result in decreases in office discipline referrals and suspensions and improve academic outcomes, school climate and student engagement (George, Cox, Devon & Therese, 2018). Its aim is to develop positive student behaviors through direct instruction and reinforcement, much like the process of developing reading skills. The absence of appropriate behavior acknowledgment is often a lack of learned habit rather than malicious intent on behalf of adults interacting with students. Therefore, impacting the habits of staff will result in a direct change of student behavior. This can be achieved by establishing collective efficacy among staff. Deltour, Datchet, Monseur and Baye (2021) defined collective efficacy as teachers’ beliefs about the educational team’s ability to educate students constituting a norm that influences the actions and outcomes of schools. At Iroquois Elementary School, the use of a token economy as part of SWPBIS has supported not only a decrease in disciplinary referrals, but also an increase in staff’s attention to the occurrence of positive behavior by establishing a collective efficacy which can be predictive of students’ success.

One of the ways in which the SWPBIS model at Iroquois Elementary School produces expected behaviors is through the utilization of a token economy which distributes acknowledgements to students demonstrating those behaviors. The tokens are a tangible vehicle by which

staff can monitor their level of attention to expected behaviors. Monthly feedback is provided to staff by way of acknowledging the member who distributed the most acknowledgements to their students; he or she is bestowed with the “Golden Bee” title, a play on the token system that is used with the students. The ongoing expectations of “Bee Safe, Bee Kind, Bee Responsible” are promoted via “Bee Tickets” that staff hand out when they observe students engaging in desired behaviors. The token system allows students to trade in these acknowledgements for preferred tangible rewards. Simply put, teachers recognize good behavior, actively acknowledge it and students reap the benefits by trading their tickets for goods at the school store. Students also benefit in non-tangible ways by practicing and developing behaviors that will lead them toward school success.

The success of students in school is reflected in the evaluation of disciplinary referrals. Compared to the 2022-2023 school year, from August through the first week of December, Iroquois Elementary has observed a significant increase in the number of acknowledgements given by staff as “Bee Tickets.” Moreover, a 56% reduction in overall disciplinary referrals has resulted from the increase in acknowledgements. This reduction has rippled through other domains in the school setting. Peer relations have noticeably improved. Fewer incidents of reported bullying and peer conflict have risen to office level involvement. Administration has noted an increase in student determination, self-confidence, and grit fostered by the desire to meet the designated behavior expectations. Students are seeking ways to engage positively with others, understanding that this will lead to positive social recognition and praise. This leads us to believe that the consistent positive feedback, created through the collective efficacy of the staff, fosters a healthy self-image, that of a student who is willing to arrive at school ready to learn.





This has resulted in qualitative gains in classroom engagement, improved peer and staff relations and overall school climate. Mrs. Flagg, a recipient of the “Golden Bee,” summarizes it with this reflection:

*“The bee program has been an amazing way to highlight my students for their individual achievements and praise them for their positive behavioral, academic, and social choices. Each day, I choose certain behaviors to promote (without telling the students in advance). These behaviors include being prepared for class, sharing their writing pieces, working actively as a team, or participating in class. Students are more likely to take risks and engage with the curriculum during class by encouraging them with the bees. In addition, students can earn other bees for other positive behaviors I notice throughout the day. I find that by using this program, students are striving to earn as many bees as they can while contributing to the overall classroom environment in a positive way.”*

The “Bee Tickets” are not limited to the positive engagement of students at Iroquois Elementary School. Staff and administration have extended the system to their peers and actively acknowledge each other for their

contributions to the betterment of the school environment. Staff “Bee Tickets” are displayed on a “Staff Bee Board” in the main office. There is an opportunity to win gift cards and prizes. This comradery has promoted a culture centered around community, collaboration and acknowledgement. In parallel to the reasonable conclusions made about benefits to students, the positive feedback established by peer acknowledgement and distribution of “Bee Tickets,” has led to a subjective feel of improved staff morale and positive engagement in working toward supporting the student body and a healthier work culture.

The SWPBIS team at Iroquois Elementary School does not claim to have figured out the “economics of good behavior” in a vacuum. Through the use of data driven decision making, collaboration, and research, the Iroquois team has found a way to contribute positively to the overall climate of the building for both students and staff. This has been achieved through collective efficacy among staff to support student behavioral success. Making the right investments in appropriate behavior supports through the adoption of this system has demonstrated that the “economics of good behavior” have less to do with students and more to do with the actions taken on by the adults who guide them toward success.

For additional information, please contact Mrs. Will at [vwill@iroquois.iu5.org](mailto:vwill@iroquois.iu5.org) ■

#### REFERENCES:

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**Caitlin Kinnane** is the Community School Director (through the United Way of Erie County) at Iroquois Elementary School. She grew up in Mercer County, Pennsylvania, then moved to Erie to attend Mercyhurst University, where she graduated with her bachelor’s degree in psychology. Following graduation, she completed a year of service as an AmeriCorps VISTA and then went on to earn her master’s degree in public administration from the University of Pittsburgh. Mrs. Kinnane has spent her professional career working for nonprofits and universities in Pittsburgh and Erie.

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