Using Office Discipline Referrals as a Behavioral Screener: Considerations From NCII and the Center on PBIS

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Few schools use validated screening assessments to proactively identify students for behavioral supports. This lack of utilization could be due to the time and effort it takes teachers to complete them (McIntosh, Frank, & Spaulding, 2010), the monetary burdens on schools (Severson, Walker, Hope-Doolittle, Kratochwill, & Gresham, 2007), and concerns about identifying students for intervention when evidence-based practices are not yet in place at Tier 2 or 3 (McIntosh, Reinke, & Herman, 2009).

Instead, educators often use office discipline referrals (ODRs) to identify students for behavioral intervention. ODRs are defined as representing an event where “(a) a student engaged in behavior that violated a rule or social norm in the school, (b) the problem behavior was observed or identified by a member of the school staff, and (c) administrative staff delivered a consequence through a permanent (written) product that defined the whole event” (Sugai et al., 2000, p. 96). ODR data are cost-effective (Predy, McIntosh, & Frank, 2014), easily collected (Wright & Dusek, 1998; Irvin et al., 2006), and readily available (McIntosh, Fisher, Kennedy, Craft, & Morrison, 2012), and therefore appealing to schools as a way to identify students for behavioral intervention. In the research literature, however, ODRs have been critiqued for use as a behavioral screener for the following reasons:

- The marked differences between teacher tolerance of behavior and diverse classroom management styles create variability in which behaviors warrant discipline referrals (Girvan, Gion, McIntosh, & Smolkowski, 2017; Morrison, Peterson, O’Farrell, & Redding, 2004; Morrison & Skiba, 2001);
- ODRs do not identify students with internalizing challenges (e.g., anxiety, withdrawal) that need intervention (McIntosh, Campbell, Carter, & Zumbo, 2009; Walker, Cheney, Stage, & Blum, 2005); and
- Students from the following demographic groups are more likely to receive ODRs than their peers: Black/African American, students receiving free or reduced-price lunch, students with emotional or behavioral disorders (EBDs), and males (Aanyon et al., 2014; Skiba et al., 2011; Smolkowski Girvan, McIntosh, Nese, & Horner, 2016).

Because of the widespread use of ODRs as a behavioral screener, leaders from the National Center on Intensive Intervention (NCII), along with the Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), offer the following considerations for using ODRs to make data-based decisions:
- ODRs, in general, are a reliable measure of overall school health (e.g., school climate, school engagement, and effectiveness of schoolwide interventions; Morrison et al., 2004; McIntosh, Frank, & Spaulding, 2010).
- ODR data may be used to identify teachers and staff who may benefit from further classroom management training.
- ODRs may be an effective tool for individualized decision making within a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) if there is a systematic and consistent understanding among staff of ODR definitions (Wright & Dusek, 1998; Todd, Horner, & Tobin, 2010) and consistency in behavioral data collection (McIntosh et al., 2009).

In light of the limitations noted above, ODRs on their own are unlikely to be reliable for student-level decision making. However, they may be used in combination with other data sources to identify the needs of students. Consider using a multiple-gate screening system alongside ODR data to capture the behaviors of students with internalizing challenges (McIntosh, Ty, & Miller, 2014). In a multiple-gate screening system, schools could initially use ODRs to provide students with Tier 2 or Tier 3 behavior intervention, but then also administer a screener to identify students with internalizing challenges. Multiple-gate screening is designed to increase the accuracy of screening while focusing more intensive measurements on a smaller number of targeted individuals.

**Conclusion**

The use of ODR data may be a cost-effective means of identifying students who could benefit from extra behavior support. At the same time, using ODRs alone may provide insufficient information for decision making. With this in mind, we recommend using ODR data as part of a gated screening process where stakeholders have (a) clear schoolwide behavioral expectations, (b) consistent and operationalized definitions for behavioral infractions, and (c) systematic procedures for collecting and analyzing discipline data. As with any screening process, after a student is identified as “at-risk”—academically or behaviorally—educators should verify risk status before making any high-stakes educational decisions. Verification may be achieved by using other validated assessments or triangulation of other available data.
References


