

# **THE ALTERNATIVE EDUCATOR'S HANDBOOK**



# **THE ALTERNATIVE EDUCATOR'S HANDBOOK**

## **Tools for Managing Students with Emotional and Behavioral Issues**

Paul J. Pattavina, Ph.D.



BrownWalker Press  
Irvine • Boca Raton

*The Alternative Educator's Handbook:  
Tools for Managing Students with Emotional and Behavioral Issues*

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**Maggie Courter** is the Director of Special Education at Lisbon Central School in Lisbon, CT. She has worked for years at the secondary level in public and private schools in SE CT., advocating persistently and tirelessly for the needs of all students with disabilities.

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## INTRODUCTORY NOTES

The availability of effective, alternative programs for students with challenging emotional and behavior patterns continues to be an important issue for public schools nationwide. The concern is exacerbated by continued school shootings and violence. A grave sense of fear has been generated among students, parents and staff by the actions of kids with guns and other weapons in school. Legislators and public officials have repeatedly been called to take actions that will keep kids safer in school, focusing particularly on gun control. And although such measures are essential towards preventing some school violence, the kinds of programming and resources available for our public schools must also be closely examined. In effect, schools will need to find better ways to identify and provide programming options for students who may be disgruntled, alienated, unconnected, impulsive, and who may be looking to get recognized, seek revenge or put an end to bullying, perceived harassment, injustice or a life of ignominy—kids who feel they have nothing left to lose. Unfortunately, however, our nation may be suffering from what's been referred to as 'massacre fatigue' (Schwartz, 2018).

As professional service providers and policy makers continue to ponder solutions to a national dilemma, the idea of 'asylums' has resurfaced, suggesting that the scourge of shooting incidents could possibly have been prevented had there been more secure treatment facilities to manage dangerous individuals. Such a suggestion is, of course, replete

with issues about how to identify dangerous individuals preemptively, laws protecting people from being placed involuntarily, returning to institutionalization practices found to be ineffective and inhumane, as well as funding for improved community treatment options (Editorial Board, 2018).

The need to insure a school climate free of violence has also prompted calls for new legislation in some states. In CT, for example, the State Legislature proposed new regulations pertaining to keeping schools safe and effective (SB 453, PA 18-89), An Act Concerning Classroom Safety and Disruptive Behavior (CEA, 2018). In effect, schools would have been required to have a plan in place for implementing and enforcing daily classroom safety. Under these regulations, teachers would have been allowed to remove violent students from the classroom, and prevent them from returning until behavior issues had been resolved. Because the plan was replete with issues concerning the kinds of students who, in the past, have been disproportionately affected by these kinds of management practices, the plan was vetoed by CT's Governor at the time. Still, something must be done.

This handbook is intended simply to serve as a practical resource for teachers and staff who work with students whose progress in school is interrupted by social and emotional issues—kids who tend to, either intentionally or unintentionally, 'pluck your last nerve'. Core ideas presented in this handbook are the result of nearly 40 years of experience in public and nonpublic school settings. It contains information about different jobs in different settings. It reviews student characteristics and intervention procedures, as well as specific forms and procedures created or adapted over time and experience. It is meant to be a guide for educators who are responsible for difficult kids—in whatever setting they might be placed. Being an 'alternative educator' is not viewed in this text as an official job title, though in some cases it might mean you are actually a teacher in an alternative school. In my opinion, being an alternative educator means that you are one who always looks for different ways to work with difficult kids—because that's the only way to help such students learn. The ideas presented here are appropriate for teachers and other staff in alternative schools, clinical schools, intensive behavior support classrooms and flexible resource room classrooms. This idea is

consistent with the notion of a teacher-counselor presented by Nicholas Hobbes in *Project Re-Education* (Curtis, Galbreath and Curtis, 2005).

The information in this handbook is organized into 4 major sections.

**Section 1** presents an overview of important issues driving the need for school staff to be trained to work with students who exhibit social and emotional issues in school, along with an overview of a cognitive-behavioral model of programming and a range of competencies that staff will need in different roles, and at different times.

**Section 2** describes the wide range of characteristics exhibited by students who require special programming due to social and emotional issues. Such students may be ones classified as emotionally/behaviorally disturbed, or simply be seen as ‘at risk of failure’ due to challenging emotional and behavioral patterns, possibly along with other types of disabilities.

**Section 3** reviews Background Research, focusing especially on important principles of behavioral learning, positive behavior support and interventions (PBIS), Restorative Justice, affective teaching practices, as well as alternative, intensive behavior support and flexible resource classrooms in public and private schools.

**Section 4** covers Recommended Practices for working with students who exhibit social and emotional issues that interfere with school progress. In effect, these recommended practices are presented as a teacher’s four bags of tools needed to work with difficult students.

Finally, the forms that are frequently used by teachers and other staff in self-contained, substantially self-contained and flexible resource classroom settings can be accessed on the publisher’s website at <http://brownwalker.com/download/Pattavina-OnlineAppendix.pdf>—including a PowerPoint describing the Flexible Resource Room model at <http://BrownWalker.com/download/Pattavina-PowerPoint.zip>, and a record keeping form for tracking student behavior at <http://BrownWalker.com/download/Pattavina-Spreadsheet.zip> (Pattavina, 2019, May).

Overall, this model is based on the presumption that student learning needs are significantly related to feelings, beliefs and behaviors. As a result, it is important for educators in all settings to recognize how these (student characteristics) can be seen as social-emotional learning needs and acquired behavior patterns, rather than symptoms of some type of

psychopathology, mental illness or simply willful non-compliance. It is these social-emotional learning needs and ineffective behavior patterns that have been acquired over time that lie at the core of the various program strategies presented in **Section 4**.

The information in **Section 4** is divided into four subsections, representing different and necessary 'bags of tools.'

Part A, Structuring the Classroom, includes proactive strategies and procedures for structuring the environment for order, organization and predictability—including various ways to formally and informally assess student learning needs.

Part B, Climate Control, describes ways to build rapport with a range of individual and groups of students, cultivating a group climate that values success for all and mutual support—and to work collaboratively with families and other service providers—in effect, building a platform of trust and alliances for learning.

Part C, Teaching New Skills, focuses on academic and social skills programming and instruction—in effect, to help kids learn to replace ineffective and self-defeating patterns of behavior with effective thinking skills. The social skills ideas are presented here as a 'Responsibility Matrix', including four broad clusters of social skills and effective cognition. The four clusters of skills are: 1. Self-Management, 2. Self-Regard, 3. Social Connections, and 4. Self-Determination. Each of these clusters is further clarified by component subsets of related skills. The entire set of skills is intended as a required curricular program for students in grades five-twelve who have social, emotional and/or behavioral issues in school that require Tier Two or Tier Three programming—or who have already been expelled.

Part D, Managing Misbehavior, identifies different ways that staff can help kids to learn how to control and organize their behavior—primarily by responding effectively to inappropriate behavior using problem solving, behavior learning principles and therapeutic support rather than punishment—intended to build self-awareness, self-regulation and self-determination.

Please keep in mind that the Handbook is the product of working with many students and staff over a number of years, in a number of different settings, including juvenile correctional facilities, psychiatric hospitals,



clinical day schools, drug rehabilitation programs, alternative schools and special education programs in public schools. Feedback about the ideas presented in this handbook is always welcomed.

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## FOREWORD

We had the pleasure of first working with Dr. Paul Pattavina in the Groton Public Schools in Groton, Connecticut. Our experiences found that Dr. Pattavina has the right blend of scholarship, humanism, humor, and professionalism. As a Special Education Teacher, Supervisor and Director, Dr. Pattavina draws from a catalogue of public and non-public school experiences in a variety of states and settings.

As a colleague, Dr. Pattavina always comes to the table with a compassionate focus on students and the belief system that all educational professionals can join hands together to make informed, student-centered decisions that make sense. Dr. Pattavina's *The Alternative Educator's Handbook* is a comprehensive, practical resource that any special education or regular education teacher or administrator can utilize. This handbook provides guidance and researched practices for educators to implement with students who present social, emotional and behavioral challenges. Today's schools encounter student needs that are as diverse as the students themselves. Educators are tasked with selecting appropriate strategies that they can use to improve individual growth and development. Dr. Pattavina's handbook can serve as a toolkit from which educators can identify solutions to better serve the needs of their students.

We are grateful for Dr. Pattavina's scholarship and efforts to author *The Alternative Educator's Handbook*. As School Superintendents, we believe

that this handbook will cast a wide net on educators who are always looking for improved ways to maximize their experiences with students who exhibit social, emotional, and behavior issues.

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Superintendent of  
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Griswold, CT

## PREFACE

Life is full of little kinks. You know-those times when you need to take a step back from yourself and wonder what it's really all about. Oh, yeah, we all do it. You would think that somebody would have warned you though-before you got here. Yeah, sure. How could they warn you? It didn't look like this back then-back when you decided you were going to spend your days enriching the minds of children. One might even have hoped that by fortifying children's lives through education, things could be made better than they were. Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah-the children! Are adolescents still considered kids? I suppose they are. Why else would they act like kids?

There are some people who think they aren't kids at all. You know-the ones who think that "normal" is a word invented just for them. Really, they do. The ones who see the pendulum on the left, and maybe then again on the right. Mostly though, they fail to see it moving in-between. These are also the ones who think that kids don't belong in school at all until their problems get 'fixed'-somewhere, somehow. Yeah.

Oh, there certainly are problems with some adolescents (Gallagher and Harris, 1976). Some kids, in fact, have lots of problems. Others just move blindly through each day, more troubled than anyone, including themselves, would dare to even guess. Then again, there are those problems that show. Oh yeah, adolescents-and the ones who prey on adolescents. Yes, and those of us who are preyed upon by them. The ones who

don't until we ask. The ones who won't until we plead. The ones who wait till we explode. And then, the ones who *just plain won't*.

Well, what are you going to do? Life is full of little kinks. There are some who act out. There are some who act in. Then, there are the ones who just never learned to act at all. There are noisemakers and troublemakers. Yes, there are big shots, con artists and clowns. There are mealy mouths, whiners, clingers, dopers and slobs. There are the ones who think that nothing is ever right, and the ones who think that nothing is ever wrong. Life is full of kinks that come in all shapes and sizes. In public school we get them all.

In my first job as a special education (SPED) teacher for students in grades 6–12 who were drug dependent (Pattavina, 1973), I had a 15-year-old boy in one of my classes who could not read. In all other respects, he seemed to have normal intelligence, was very social, amiable, verbal and 'street wise'. School, however, was a struggle for him. It was my job to help him progress in school, and learn how to read. One morning he arrived to class and announced loudly and clearly that he was going to make this a challenging day for me, saying, "*Today Mr. PATT-a-vina, I am going to plllll-LUCK your last nerve.*" I advised him at the time that it was important to have goals, but that my goal for the day was to keep him in class and continue to help him learn to read. Unfortunately, as things turned out, I ended up having to ask him to leave my class for the day due to relentless interruptions and disruptive comments. Although he didn't pluck my last nerve, he served as a symbolic backdrop for the rest of my career—and what my job was really all about. It was my job to help difficult kids learn—in part, by helping them learn *how* to learn.

Recent school shootings that have resulted in multiple deaths of students and staff—in Parkland, FL (2-14-18), Santa Fe, TX. (5-18-18), and Newtown, CT (12-14-12),—have reminded me repeatedly about the importance of providing educational and clinical support for students of any age who exhibit social, emotional and behavioral issues, either in or out of school. These issues may reach standards requiring special education for some type of disability that interferes with school progress. These issues may require mental health intervention, with or without the need for special education. Such individuals may be disruptive, aggressive, threatening and dangerous, or reclusive, alienated, inappropriate, unpopular and ineffective. Such students might also be, or have been,

involved in bullying, either as an aggressor or a victim. These students have also been described as evil, sociopathic or psychopathic—all terms representing extremely concerning patterns of behavior (Stone, 2009).

Whether or not such students are interested in receiving services of any kind has always been an overriding issue of concern. Whether or not services exist for students with these kinds of issues has also been a longstanding concern. Related matters include funding, availability of trained personnel, space, interagency and interdisciplinary agreements for wrap-around services, and community support for providing supportive services for kids who may be hard to like and hard to get involved in programming, or even attend school (Jones and Carr, 2005).

In the case of the 19-year-old individual who admitted to the school shootings in Parkland, FL, for example, it seems he may have qualified for SPED, mental health counseling, repeated disciplinary interventions and placement in a special program or school of some kind, for some period of time. Here was a guy dealing with a ‘boatload’ of issues, for a very long period of time—perhaps for his entire school career. Whether or not he was provided or even offered the most appropriate services during the last one to two years of his time in public school is questionable (Mazzei, 2018). In fact, according to this report, Cruz appears to have lost special-needs help at school when he needed it most. In a different way, another article suggested that the school’s ‘culture of leniency’ may have been too easy on this student (Miles, 2018). According to this report, the student was suspended at least 67 days over less than a year and a half at a middle school, and his problems continued at high school, until he finally was forced to leave. An area newspaper obtained the student’s discipline records, reviewed discipline policies and found:

- Students can be considered first-time offenders even if they commit the same offenses year after year.
- The district’s claim of reforming bad behavior is exaggerated.
- Lenient discipline has an added PR benefit for the district: lower suspensions, expulsions and arrests along with rising graduation rates.

Apart from one special program in which he did not effectively participate, what kinds of services and programming were provided for this young man over his years in school? What kinds of evaluations were

done to assess educational and mental health issues and needs? Who, ultimately, should be considered to be responsible for the way this individual's life has turned out? What could have been done differently? How many other kids have similar kinds of programming needs (Greene, 2014)?

Since these are the types of individuals I have spent my career thinking about, I offer a rough outline in this document of the kinds of social skills curricula I'd recommend for kids who tend to, either intentionally or unintentionally, 'pluck your last nerve'. The ideas are neither novel nor new. They are drawn from a wide range of educational and psychological reports in the professional literature. Similarly, the related programming strategies and competencies described in this document are based on published research and years of experience with difficult kids, and staff who work in alternative ways to help difficult kids learn.

The recommended practices attempt to merge programming ideas from PBIS (Simonsen, Freeman, Goodman, Mitchell, Swain-Bradway, Flannery, Sugai, George and Putman, 2015), Restorative Justice (Amstutz and Mullet, 2015; Frey, Fisher and Smith, 2013), Discipline with Dignity (Curwin and Mendler, 1983), and research from behavioral (Bullock and Normand, 2006; Johns, 2005) and cognitive-behavioral (Benjamin, Puleo, Settapani, Brodman, Edmunds, Cummings and Kendall, 2011) programming—as well as social skills curriculum ideas such as Behavioral Objectives Sequence (Braaten, 1998), Social Thinking (Knoff, 2017) and Self-Regulation (Carter, Lane, Crnabori, Bruhn and Oakes, 2011), Preparing for Life (Baker, 2005) and Skillstreaming (Goldstein, Sprafkin, Gershaw and Klein 1980).

Providing optional programming for students with emotional and behavioral issues will require hard work, persistence and a belief that even kids who seem 'bad to the core' can, possibly, turn out better if you can help them learn how to learn—and help them decide to change the way their life has been happening (Greene, 2008; Hughes, Wood, Konrad and Test, 2006).



## SECTION I

# INTRODUCTION

### A. Summary of Issues

Teaching students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) has remained a daunting challenge for educators in both regular (RED) and special education (SPED) classroom settings for many years (Hehir, 2005). Such students have continued to be the most difficult to maintain in RED settings. Recognizing the kinds of teaching practices that will enable students with EBD to be more successful in educational settings with normal peers will be essential to inclusion initiatives. What are effective teaching practices for students with EBD? What kinds of competencies will teachers need to acquire in order to work effectively with this population? What is it about students with EBD that necessitate different sets of teaching skills from those needed by any teacher?

The current Handbook describes a model of affective teaching competencies based on published research, extensive professional experiences and surveys of educators nationwide. Even though the competencies and practices described in this report are likely used by all educators, teachers in specialized settings will most likely utilize more of the competencies described in the model, and more frequently. The model assumes that students with EBD present a complex maze of social and emotional adjustment patterns. These patterns manifest as discordant feelings, ineffective