CHAPTER 1

WHO AND WHY

This book is primarily focused on students whose difficulties meeting academic and social expectations at school is communicated through concerning behaviors. The ones who are flying frequently into the assistant principal's office. The ones who are on the receiving end of countless discipline referrals, detentions, suspensions, expulsions, restraints, seclusions, and (yes, in many places, still in the year 2021) paddlings. That these interventions aren't helping is made clear by the fact that they are being applied so frequently to the same students. In almost every school, 70 to 80 percent of discipline referrals are accounted for by the same fifteen to twenty students.

Those are the kids we are losing. We find them in our statistics on dropping out, teenage pregnancy, substance abuse, and incarceration. These are also very expensive kids. Placing a student in a program outside of the mainstream classroom is very costly: more than sixty-five thousand students are placed in alternative education settings every year in the United States, at a cost of an estimated $5 billion. The annual cost of incarcerating kids is even greater. So the stakes are high, both in human and financial terms.

But they're not the only ones we're losing when we don't effectively help these students. Their reasonably well-behaved classmates lose, too. There's lost learning. And there's the stress and anxiety of feeling unsafe in the presence of a peer who can be scary and may seem out of control. And these classmates also have the sense that the adults aren't exactly sure what to do or how to make things better. They may also sense that the ways in which peers with concerning behaviors are being treated are unnecessarily ostracizing and inhumane.

Classroom teachers lose as well (and we lose them, too). Those students—and their parents—are cited as a major contributing factor by many of the high number of teachers who leave the profession within the first four years. And the emphasis on high-stakes testing has caused many classroom teachers to feel like test-prep robots, which, many tell me, has taken a lot of the humanity out of the work. Legislators and school boards often aren't focused on humanity; they're focused on test scores and new initiatives and budgets and reducing referrals into special education.

We lose paraprofessionals and ed-techs as well. These staff members spend a good part of the day with kids with concerning behaviors, but frequently don't even get invited to the meetings in which those kids are being discussed. They are therefore relegated to the "winging-it" approach to intervention, along with the other people in the building—specialists such as the art, music, and physical education teachers—who work with lots of different students but often feel like they know very little about them.

> "Sometimes, due to time, specialists (music, art, and so forth) and paraprofessionals can get left out of the conversation in schools. Including them in meetings is so valuable. They have so much insight, and I think we forget about that sometimes because they have such a hard schedule. They have such an important voice because they see everybody in the whole school."
>
> —Nina, principal

Parents of students with concerning behaviors get lost, too. Those parents know a thing or two about feeling ostracized.

They often would welcome the opportunity to collaborate with school staff on making things better, but being blamed for their child's concerning behavior—despite the fact that they have other children in their families who are well behaved—makes them defensive and seldom seen. They want to trust that their child is being well treated at school, but there are many signs to the contrary. Whatever the school is doing isn't working, but the parents feel powerless to do anything about it.

We also risk losing our sense of community as a school when we don't effectively help students with concerning behaviors. Parents of the reasonably well-behaved students—the kids who are showing up ready to learn—may disparage ill-behaved classmates, often demand that those classmates are dealt with harshly and punitively, and may even ostracize the parents of those kids. They understandably want their children to learn and feel safe, but they often lose sight of what is being lost—a child who could be a valued member of the community—when those goals are pursued at the expense of that child.

Administrators, you're in the mix, too. You didn't sign up to be a police officer, but that doesn't mean you don't often feel like one. The classroom teachers who are sending kids to the office expect action and are frequently quite clear about what the action should be: powerful adult-imposed consequences, straight from the school's discipline handbook, that will finally get the message through and ensure that the well-behaved students (and their parents) know that the situation is being taken seriously. The only problem, of course, is that all those consequences aren't working. No one is more acutely aware of that than you. And there are much more effective, compassionate ways to demonstrate that the situation is being taken seriously.

> "I remember my first few years as assistant principal before implementing CPS in our school. Students were lined up outside my office for various behavioral issues on a frequent basis. Since I thought of myself as the 'fix-it' person, my goal was to resolve the situation as quickly as possible. I wanted to support the teacher and help the student become more successful, but

the same students, often sent from the same teachers, seemed to return over and over again. I always felt that there had to be a better way to do this. ”

—Ryan, principal

Also in the mix are school psychologists, counselors, and social workers, the people who are officially on the hook for “fixing” students with concerning behaviors. It’s often said that those students fall outside the expertise and responsibility of the general education classroom teacher, and therefore they fall (or are sent) into your caseload. And there are lots of ’em. And you may be covering several different buildings. And your testing load is intense. It’s hard not to become overwhelmed, jaded, and burned out.

Apparently, we’re talking about everyone. And that’s good, because it’s going to take everyone to turn things around. But when we do turn things around, everyone benefits.

So now, the question: Are the ways in which your school is assessing and dealing with students with concerning behaviors truly helping? If not, you need to find a different way.

That starts with taking a look at what you’ve been thinking about kids with concerning behaviors. The lenses through which you’re viewing these kids will have a major influence on the stance you take toward them and the strategies you employ in your efforts to help. It’s a classic case of *What you see is what you get.* What we’re thinking and seeing and doing should be a reflection of the mountain of research that has accumulated over the past forty to fifty years on kids with concerning behaviors.

Here’s what we’ve been *thinking*: kids with concerning behaviors are lacking *motivation.* Here’s what the research that’s accumulated over the past forty to fifty years tells us: they’re lacking *skills.* And that is a game-changer.

“ When I first learned that concerning behaviors were due to lagging skills, it was like a lightbulb went on. It’s what I’d been thinking; I just never really had words for it. ”

—Katie, learning center teacher

Here's what we've been *doing*: we've been carefully documenting a student's concerning *behaviors*—through behavior checklists, behavior observations, functional behavior assessments (FBAs)—and we've been trying to *modify* those behaviors through administration of consequences. Here's what we should be doing instead: identifying the *problems* that are causing those behaviors and *solving* them.

And those two seismic shifts are going to change the narrative and the outcomes for a lot of kids.

As you may already know, the Collaborative & Proactive Solutions (CPS) model described in this book operates on a very important key theme:

KIDS DO WELL IF THEY CAN

This is the belief that if the kid *could* respond to problems and frustrations adaptively, he *would*. If he's not responding adaptively, he must be lacking the skills to respond adaptively. That's why he's screaming, swearing, hitting, kicking, spitting, throwing, destroying, or running out of the building. But he's not exhibiting those concerning behaviors *all* the time; he only exhibits those behaviors when there are expectations he's having difficulty meeting. So the behavior is just the signal, just the means by which the student is communicating that there's an expectation he's having difficulty meeting. If caregivers are focused only on modifying behavior, then all they're modifying is the signal. But they're not solving any of the problems that are causing the signal. So one of the most important things you can do for a student with concerning behaviors is to figure out what *skills* he's lacking. The other important thing you can do is identify the *expectations* the student is having difficulty meeting. In the CPS model, those unmet expectations are referred to as *unsolved problems*.

❝ Working in a building where behavioral incentives have been a traditional part of the culture, I often have staff members question the

philosophy of extrinsic versus intrinsic motivation. Teachers would ask, 'Shouldn't students want to do well for the sake of doing well, not just to earn something?' The CPS model answers that question with a resounding *yes* with the fundamental beliefs that *kids do well if they can*, not *kids do well if they want to*. When you start with that shift in thinking, it leads you in different and more productive directions to help and support students in finding success. ❞

—Ryan, principal

Here's another key theme, and it's related to the first:

DOING WELL IS PREFERABLE

This is the belief that human beings—including kids with concerning behaviors—have a strong preference for doing well (as opposed to doing poorly). In other words, they aren't responding maladaptively to problems and frustrations because they're seeking attention, or manipulating, or coercing us into capitulating to their wishes, or because they're lazy or unmotivated. Yet, in many schools, these characterizations are alive and well, along with the belief that a student's concerning behaviors are *working* for him.

Working? How? According to conventional notions about the *function* of behavior, concerning behavior helps a student *get* something (for example, attention) and helps him *escape* and *avoid* tasks that are tedious, challenging, uncomfortable, or scary. If those are the lenses you're wearing, then it will be your mission to prove to the student that his concerning behavior *isn't* going to work and to model and reinforce replacement behaviors that you believe will work better, typically through use of rewards and punishments.

But wait. Don't *all* of us get, escape, and avoid? If so, then the question isn't *whether* the student is getting, escaping, and avoiding, but rather *why the student is going about getting, escaping, and avoiding in such a maladaptive manner*. And now you have the

answer, thanks to the mountain of research: *because he's lacking the skills to get, escape, and avoid in a more adaptive fashion.*

What skills does the research tell us kids with concerning behaviors are lacking? For the time being, we're going to sacrifice precision for efficiency: *flexibility/adaptability, frustration tolerance/emotion regulation*, and *problem solving*. Concerning behaviors typically occur when those skills are being demanded. And those skills are being demanded when (you now know this) kids (and the rest of us) are having difficulty meeting certain *expectations*. You'll be learning how to identify those lagging skills and unsolved problems in chapter 4.

You may not have known this, but educators are in one of the helping professions, right there alongside medical doctors, mental health professionals, and other helpers. Therefore, your role in the life of a student who is struggling can be summarized in one word: *helper*. There are two criteria for being an effective helper:

1. ***Helpers help.*** In other words, helpers—like medical doctors—abide by the Hippocratic Oath, which goes something like this: *don't make it worse.*
2. ***Helpers have thick skin.*** In other words, helpers don't take things personally. Although helpers are entitled to their feelings, helpers bend over backward to ensure that those feelings do not interfere with helping.

In many schools, the interventions that are still being applied to kids with concerning behaviors are making things worse. And in many schools, inaccurate beliefs about the difficulties of these students are interfering with helping.

If the lenses and interventions that are being applied to students with concerning behaviors aren't helping, then we will continue to lose those students and lots of other people in the process. Changing course—finding a different way—requires that

the helpers recognize that. And then start the hard work of doing things differently.

So now one more question before the chapter ends: if the ways in which your school is assessing and dealing with students with concerning behaviors aren't helping, are you ready to begin the journey?