

Statement of Michael George, Director  
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Before the Senate on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions  
“Beyond Seclusion and Restraint: Creating Positive Learning Environments for All  
Students”  
Thursday, June 28, 2012  
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Thank you for allowing me to be here today and share with you an account of my recent work and that of my colleagues at Centennial School of Lehigh University. My testimony today describes positive behavioral teaching approaches that led to a dramatic decrease and virtual elimination of the need for seclusion and physical restraint in a school for children and youth with the most significant emotional, social and behavioral needs; and shares lessons learned from the experience that may inform the current debate on the use and overuse of seclusion and physical restraint in our schools.

Centennial School of Lehigh University

Centennial School is an Approved Private School, funded by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and governed by Lehigh University that serves children and youth classified with emotional disturbance and autism as defined under the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act*.<sup>1</sup> As an alternative to public school education, it is one of over 10,000 alternative schools in the country.<sup>2</sup>

Centennial School is unique in that it provides a well-documented case study on how the use of positive behavioral approaches can decrease and virtually eliminate the need for the practices of seclusion and physical restraint in a school that serves students with some of the most challenging emotional and behavioral needs.

Students are commonly admitted to alternative schools, like Centennial, because their behaviors interfere with the learning of others; sometimes even after carefully planned interventions by well-intentioned educators have been designed, implemented and ultimately proven unsuccessful. For many students, placement in alternative schools represents one final chance for meaningful help. One would hope, therefore, that alternative school education would do a better job of educating youngsters at-risk of failure than traditional public school settings. But all too often that is not the case.

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<sup>1</sup> *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act*, Pub. L. No. 108-446 (2004).

<sup>2</sup> Carver, P.R. & Lewis, L. (2010). *Alternative schools and programs for public school students at risk for educational failure: 2007-08* (NCES 2010-026). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, D.C. Government Printing Office.

For nearly two decades researchers have raised concerns about the quality of education in self-contained settings: the paucity of academic curriculum, the over-reliance on behavior management, the lack of integrated mental health services, the poor connections with families and the lack of attention to transition services<sup>3</sup>. There is little evidence of widespread improvement over the years. Today there is growing concern about the use and possible abuse of seclusion and restraint for controlling students' behaviors.

The Centennial School stands as a testament to the benefits that accrue from the use of positive behavioral approaches as replacements for the practices of seclusion and restraint with children and youth with disabilities. There are many themes woven into the Centennial School story. It is a story about institutional change and the development of new arrangements for fulfilling the promises of a free appropriate public education for children and youth with behavioral and emotional disabilities; it is a story about changing the lives of young people and instilling in them hope for their futures. And finally Centennial is a story about the challenges facing educators today in meeting their responsibilities for implementing research based practices that can lead to the creation of nurturing and caring school environments for serving some of the nation's neediest youngsters.

### The Students

Students who attend Centennial School are referred from 40 surrounding local area school districts and range in ages from 6 through 21 years. Local school districts refer students to Centennial School after a determination is made that their needs have not been met in previous placements that include the local school districts, Intermediate Units, residential treatment facilities, and hospitals. Children and youth who enter Centennial School have a wide range of learning problems but share one trait in common: chronic challenging behavior and score in the first percentile on behavior rating scales, meaning their behavior is more severe than 99% of the population.

Some Centennial students enter directly from residential treatment facilities, like Trisha, a ten year-old child with seven failed foster placements in her brief life; others like Thomas, come by way of Intermediate Units (i.e., specially designed service options for low-incidence populations), and others, like Carlos, come from other alternative schools. Nearly every student who comes to Centennial School has been physically restrained and placed in seclusion time-out, often repeatedly, in their previous settings.

Centennial School serves about 100 students and their families during the course of the school year at an annual tuition rate of \$39,700. The ethnic profile of the

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<sup>3</sup> Knitzer, J., Steinberg, Z., & Fleisch, B. (1990). *At the schoolhouse door: An examination of programs and policies for children and youth with behavioral and emotional problems.*

student body reflects the surrounding community at large; the majority of students are Caucasian with about 13% African-American, and 11% Hispanic American. This year, about forty-two percent of the students receive free and reduced lunches, although in some past years the percentage has exceeded 80 percent. Upon entry to Centennial School, nearly all of the students when asked will indicate their hatred of school.

### Problem Defined

In 1997-1998 data show that Centennial School staff relied heavily on the use of seclusion and physical restraint as a response to violence within the school setting, a trend that can be traced back by word of mouth for the previous twenty years.<sup>4</sup> Not unlike practices at many other alternative schools for children and youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities, the seventy-six students in attendance that year were physically restrained 1,064 times, typically with basket holds, involving two to three adults. Afterwards, students were physically escorted to a time-out room. Time-out was conducted in one of two, locked time-out rooms that were occupied as soon as the schoolhouse doors were open in the mornings until the final bus pulled away in the afternoons. Such methods continue to be employed and in some cases routinely employed in alternative schools around the country today because many professionals in the field believe them to be helpful<sup>5</sup>.

One result of the nearly six physical restraints each day was that the noise level in the school setting was loud, punctuated with intense or screaming voices, pounding on the time-out room walls, slamming of doors, and frequent shouts of “crisis” from teachers and other support personnel. According to the data collected that year, the high usage of seclusion and physical restraints did not decrease the need for those practices in the future.

Accompanying the high levels of seclusion and restraint were high rates of police involvement, suspensions, and emergency hospitalizations. Vandalism to the building was commonplace as was destruction of classroom equipment and materials. Truancy was high as were staff absences from work.

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<sup>4</sup> These were not mean spirited people. They were dedicated individuals who believed they were implementing best practices and working with the best interests of students and families in mind while seeking to ensure a safe environment in the school. In fact, they had been trained to conduct restraints only when students’ behaviors were an imminent danger to themselves and others and there certainly was much violent student behavior to which they felt they needed to respond, including 31 assaults against teachers that year. As one administrator said, “This is the way you have to work with these children.”

<sup>5</sup> Those who believe seclusion and restraint to be helpful use the term therapeutic and would disagree with the term “punishment”. Although I’ve met many administrators who view seclusion and restraint as therapeutic, I’ve never met a student who did. See Fogt, J. B., George, M. P., Kern, L., White, G. P., & George, N. L. (2008). Physical restraint of students with behavioral disorders in day-treatment and residential settings, *Behavioral Disorders*, 34, 4-13.

The school was densely staffed with 71 adults, nearly 50% of them males, a hiring practice adopted in part because of the high frequency of seclusion and restraint.<sup>6</sup> Included in that number were six crisis staff, 11 one-to-one aides and five mental health workers hired to assist with particularly violent children. One elementary classroom, for example, was comprised of six children and six adults.

A token economy was in place but students seldom carried point sheets. Students didn't complete homework; nor were they much engaged in academic tasks at school.<sup>7</sup> Parents seldom entered the building and when they did, it was primarily for disciplinary meetings or for annual Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings.

The year I arrived at the school, 1998, began very much like the one before it. During the first 20 days of school, 112 physical restraints were conducted. By the end of the first 40 days, the number of physical restraints was up to 233. If left unabated the rate of restraints would have easily exceeded 1,000 for yet another school year.

### School-wide Change

Fundamental to the change process was creation of a new vision and goals for the school and the development of a team process for assessing the school environment, introducing research-based practices, evaluating implementation, and making adjustments for improving outcomes, when necessary, a process that remains in place to this day.

The team was encouraged to envision a welcoming and caring school environment that students would be eager to attend; where students would speak politely to teachers, encourage one another, make friends, complete schoolwork and even complete homework. Teachers were asked to envision the type of environment in which they would like to work and to describe how they would like to be treated by the students as well as by their colleagues. They were exhorted to examine current practices and how those practices might be inadvertently contributing to the very problems they came to work everyday to solve.

The team discussions eventually resulted in a new vision for the school, "to make Centennial School a place where students, parents and teachers want to be and where they can learn new skills that would benefit them now and into the future." Given the circumstances at the time, the vision was ambitious; but having a vision of the future helped to unify staff commitment to change and had other advantages as well.

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<sup>6</sup> A former Centennial teacher whom I recently met told me that he was hired to stand at the door to keep students in the room.

<sup>7</sup> Time on task data averaged approximately 11 to 13% across classrooms.

To make the achievement of the vision a reality, staff committed to the accomplishment of three goals (a) To develop an engaging and stimulating curriculum, (b) to create a safe, civil learning environment, and (c) to include parents as partners in their children's education.<sup>8</sup> Success in meeting the goals would be measured by a decrease in episodes of seclusion and physical restraint.

The next eight months witnessed the gradual introduction of a number of research-based behavioral strategies, data collection systems for monitoring the effectiveness of those strategies, and modifications to the organizational structure for supporting the new practices. Included below are brief descriptions of the major components of the new program, not all of which were implemented during the first year, by the way.

### Beliefs, Roles and Establishing a New Culture

We began by changing our beliefs about students. Rather than viewing the students as incapable or unwilling to behave in school, Centennial teachers now talk about students as learners who can meet the expectations set for them; who can think before they act, who can make positive changes in their lives, who can learn to manage themselves, and who can be held accountable, once they have been taught to do so. Perceiving students as capable learners who can make good choices in social situations is beneficial and productive from an educational perspective as it lends itself to the process of teaching.

Teachers strive to make Centennial School the most rewarding and enjoyable part of a student's day. School is to be a place where students experience success, build relationships and have fun.

Centennial teachers build on students' strengths, reinforcing the behaviors they wish to see occur more frequently in the future. So, for example, rather than focus on cursing and administer punishments in an attempt to eliminate it, teachers acknowledge polite statements students make in an effort to increase the likelihood the behavior will occur with greater frequency in the future.

Centennial teachers understand that behavioral change sometimes takes a long time and are encouraged to take the long view of the change process. Teachers are encouraged to think about students as the successes they will be in the future and not as the failures they have been in the past. Teachers refer to students who are experiencing behavioral difficulties as "works in progress" and treat misbehaviors as correctible errors. Teachers understand that the best approach is one of "gentle pressure, relentlessly applied".

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<sup>8</sup> U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley had recently proposed the three objectives as worthy pursuits for America's public schools at the First White House Conference on Mental Health in 1999.

Centennial teachers are mindful of the importance of language. Centennial teachers strive to use only positive or neutral statements when teaching lessons<sup>9</sup> and practice stating directives positively, telling students how to succeed.

Teachers praise students publically and prompt, correct, and warn students privately.

Centennial teachers avoid the use of sarcasm at all times and commit to never speak disparagingly about students and parents or even their co-workers.

Teachers shake hands with students when they meet them for the first time, just like they would do if introduced to them in the community.

Centennial teachers value teamwork and collegial support: they observe one another in class, share data on one another's classroom performances, and strive for consistency with one another in the implementation of school-wide, class-wide and individualized interventions.

Teachers understand that a good day is one when they faithfully follow the procedures that are in place because that is the one thing over which they have full control.

Centennial teachers know they make positive differences in the lives of children. They collect student performance data that tells them so.

### Engaging and Stimulating Curriculum

Teaching proper school and classroom behavior within the context of sound academic curricula is the most "sacred" thing Centennial teachers do in the day. The academic curriculum supplies the milieu for teaching proper school and classroom behavior and is designed to be accessible to the students, to stretch their skills, and to capture students' interest and cause them to be actively engaged.

Centennial School teachers ascribe to the belief that a rich and engaging academic curriculum helps prevent the occurrence of problem behaviors and also prepares students for reintegration to home school environments. Centennial teachers use research-based teaching practices that include matching curriculum to students' functioning levels, systematic analyses of student error patterns, positive error correction, frequent feedback, high rates of active engagement and praise, systematic progress monitoring and a tenacious pursuit of mastery learning.

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<sup>9</sup> An example of a neutral statement is, "Open your book to page 27." A positive statement is an affirmation or acknowledgement of something done well, for example, "Good job raising your hand to ask a question."

Because Centennial School is a special education program, the general education<sup>10</sup> curriculum and instruction are modified for every child. Common modifications include small group instruction, task-analysis of content, individual pacing, alterations to the length of assignments, extended deadlines for completion, pre-correction strategies, classroom agendas, clear expectations for performance, one-to-one assistance, peer tutoring, and cooperative learning. Students are provided frequent opportunities for practice until they reach mastery of their IEP goals. Students who experience difficulty in completing academic assignments are supplied with modified work schedules that may include additional breaks throughout the school day as well as the opportunity, at times, to make choices about how, what, and where they learn within the building.

Teachers plan daily lessons and use a direct instruction (di) format that allows for the systematic delivery of instruction with an emphasis on the active engagement of students.<sup>11</sup>

Academic progress is routinely tracked using curriculum-based monitoring. Students who “stall” or fail to make anticipated progress are provided additional supports and alternative strategies.

Because completion of academic assignments is crucial for school success, students are held accountable for their schoolwork. Centennial teachers understand that students sometimes engage in disruptive and otherwise inappropriate behavior to avoid academic tasks and that allowing students to escape work through inappropriate behavior serves to reinforce poor behavior. Centennial students are taught that unsatisfactory conduct in class does not release them of their responsibility for work completion.

Centennial teachers assign homework for academic classes, teach homework skills and provide assistance on homework assignments during study hall periods. Homework is an important element for school success, especially because it is expected in the home schools upon students’ return.

### Safe, and Civil Learning Environment

Centennial School uses a positive and proactive approach for teaching classroom and school behaviors, with an emphasis on teaching self-control and responsibility. The system is grounded on the assumption that all children and youth can learn courteous and respectful ways for meeting their needs and obtaining their goals. The key of course is teaching them.

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<sup>10</sup> Centennial adheres to Pennsylvania Curriculum Standards. The methods of teaching the Standards are what is modified, not the standards themselves.

<sup>11</sup> The lesson plan format is divided into nine components: (a) classroom management, (b) advanced organizer, (c) teaching objective, (d) teaching segment, (e) modeling, (f) guided practice, (g) independent practice (h) closure, and (i) formative and summative assessments.

## School-wide Interventions

Centennial School employs a school-wide behavior intervention system designed to prevent and thus reduce the likelihood of serious behavior problems in the school setting<sup>12</sup>. Expectations for student conduct are clearly defined and communicated and consequences for rule-violating behavior are likewise clearly defined, taught, and applied consistently. Problem solving and social skills instruction are integral aspects of the curriculum and are designed to teach students the proper strategies for succeeding in school and in life.

The Centennial school-wide intervention system is The Take Five Program, modeled after the nationally recognized High Five Program of Fern Ridge Middle School in Veneta, Oregon<sup>13</sup>. The Take Five Program consists of three tiers of interventions and offers a positive approach to school discipline. The “Take Fives” inform students of social behaviors in the following areas:

- Be There - Be Ready
- Be Responsible
- Be Respectful
- Keep Hands and Feet to Self/Maintain Personal Space
- Follow Directions

Each of the Take Five expectations is defined in accordance to the specific settings in which the student performs. The Take Five Program incorporates the use of a token economy as part of its reinforcement plan. Students are taught proper conduct and reinforced for following the expectations with praise and acknowledgements and the use of Take Five tickets that can be exchanged for privileges or items at the school store.

## Class-wide Interventions

Class-wide interventions are those elements that differ by program, that is, elementary, middle and high school programs. Point sheets are one example of a class-wide intervention. The Steps to Success system (a level system) is another, as is the format and presentation of social skills instruction.

Students at Centennial School carry point sheets<sup>14</sup> throughout the day. The point

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<sup>12</sup> Horner, R. H., & Sugai, G. (2000). School-wide behavior support: An emerging initiative. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 2(4), 231-232.

<sup>13</sup> Taylor-Greene, S. J., & Kartub, D. T. (2000). Durable implementation of school-wide behavior support: The high five program. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 2, 233-235.

<sup>14</sup> Dr. Nancy George, Behavior and Training Specialist at Bucks County Intermediate Unit, was instrumental in the design of the Centennial School token economy system.

sheet lists goals from the student's IEP along the left-hand column and spaces to the right of the goals for rating the child's performance across the school day. Feedback and points are provided at the end of every period, thereby providing quick, immediate, and private feedback on performance. As students progress through the program they eventually take responsibility for rating their own behavior and completing their point sheets.

Students earn points for meeting school and classroom expectations and start every class period with zero points. They do not lose points for misbehaviors rather they earn points for appropriate behaviors. Every activity at the school is tied in some manner to the point system, and because the point system structures teachers' as well as students' conduct, it may well represent the most powerful tool for modifying behavior in the school.

### Individualized Interventions

Positive Behavior Support Plans comprise the third component of the Centennial school-wide intervention system. Positive Behavior Support Plans are developed to address the individual needs of students with chronic and challenging behaviors. Positive Behavior Support Plans are grounded in Functional Behavior Assessments that identify the antecedents and consequences associated with the problem behavior. Program teams, that may include the parent, develop Positive Behavior Support Plans for students who fail to prosper under the school-wide and class-wide intervention systems and thus require more intensive supports to succeed in school. Positive Behavior Support Plans consist of (a) antecedent and prevention strategies, (b) behavior replacement strategies, (c) positive consequences, and (d) reduction-oriented procedures and are included as part of students' Individualized Education Programs. Teachers use performance data to monitor the effectiveness of the Positive Behavior Support Plans.

Centennial teachers manage low-level misbehaviors in the classroom so as to decrease the likelihood of behavior escalation, based on the notion that the best way to manage "crises" is to prevent them from occurring in the first place. Low-level misbehaviors are minor peer provocations, cursing, side talking, talk-outs, and other off-task behaviors that tend to disrupt a class (e.g., tapping pencils, out of seat, disrespectful verbalizations). When confronted with minor misbehavior, teachers employ a specific sequence for managing it that includes a review of expectations for success prior to every class period, and the use of the "good model" procedure.<sup>15</sup> Public praise for appropriate behavior and private reminders or prompts for correcting inappropriate behavior are also used as are prompts to "take time" for students who are showing signs of frustration. Persistently disruptive students are asked to report to the program coordinator's office for "problem solving".

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<sup>15</sup> The good model procedure allows teachers to remain positive when low-level misbehavior occurs during the lesson by ignoring the student who is engaging in the misbehavior and praising classmates who are behaving appropriately.

Taking time is a strategy for managing frustration. Taking time allows students to voluntarily remove themselves temporarily from instruction, regain composure, and try again. Students may take as much time as they require before returning to the assigned task. Teachers explain the rationale for “taking time” and teach students the “taking time” process prior to instruction and issue verbal praise when students use the taking time procedure appropriately.

A second strategy taught to Centennial School students for managing frustration and anger management is to raise their hand and ask for help. Students are taught that there is no reason to become angry at Centennial School, and that all they need to do is to “Raise your hand and a teacher will be there immediately to assist you.”

At Centennial School, problem solving is used in lieu of office discipline referrals. Students asked to leave class for persistent low-level misbehavior or episodes of more serious misbehavior are directed to problem solving, the purpose of which is to teach students to use polite words instead of aggressive or violent behaviors to resolve problems and to return students to instruction in the classroom as quickly as possible. When students return to the classroom, teachers welcome them back and enter them immediately into the curriculum.

Centennial teachers use a procedure for handling violent and aggressive behavior in a manner designed to ensure safety and preserve students’ dignity. The procedure is similar to many other crises prevention procedures. For example, when students are about to fight, teachers are taught to quickly assess the situation and attempt to make the situation safe by using a calm voice and giving a simple direction, (e.g., “Back away from one another,” or “Both of you, put your hands to your sides”). Teachers are instructed to not grab or touch the student as doing so likely adds emotional charge to the situation and usually results in greater violence. Instead, teachers are taught to give choices, (e.g., “Back away from one another or you will have to go to the office,” or “If you fight, you will be suspended.”) Teachers then give three part directions, telling the students (a) where to go, (b) for how long, and (c) what will happen afterwards. Students are reminded that if they follow the directions they will avoid serious consequences, such as suspension from school or in some cases referrals to law enforcement.

Teachers receive formal training annually in techniques for managing low-level misbehavior and preventing more serious misbehavior following the principles of Professional Assault Crisis Training (ProACT).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Fox, L.E., Johnson, L.M., Nihart, M.A., & Smiar, N. P. (2006). *Professional assault crisis training*. ProACT, Inc.

## Parents as Partners

Centennial teachers understand that cultivating parent support begins by recognizing that parents are the experts on their children and have gained that information over a longer period of time than school officials could ever hope to do. Centennial teachers show great respect for parent's opinions, privacy, background, and dignity and rely on them for support in working with their child.

Centennial's philosophy about parents' participation in their children's education is captured through procedures in a number of areas. Some of these areas include the following:

Strength-based intake procedures  
*Parent and Student Handbook*  
Parent Resource Library, and  
Parent contacts

**Strength-based Intake:** Intake meetings gather information about the child, including the Individualized Education Program, Re-evaluation Reports, performance data, if it exists, and the student's personal goals. Parents are a valuable source of this initial information. Teachers query the youngster and family members about the student's skills and strengths and discuss how those traits might benefit the student in the new setting. As important, detailed program information is provided the student and accompanying family members during the initial intake. Although the intake procedures have changed over the years, the criteria for entry into the program have not.

*Parent and Student Handbook:* The *Parent-Student Handbook* describes the expectations and procedures for working successfully together during the year and includes various resources available to parents for accessing additional support if it is needed, including contact information for local and regional advocacy groups. The handbook procedures are also posted on the Centennial School webpage.

**Parent Resource Library:** A parent resource library called the "Parent Corner" is located in the foyer of the school. Here parents can find a multitude of materials from different sources, including many that are published by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, Federal agencies, and advocacy groups.

**Parent Contacts:** Parents and guardians are contacted daily. The point sheet contains a space for teachers to write brief notes to parents and guardians and a space for a response and is sent home daily. Parents are encouraged to use the point sheet as a communication tool.

Centennial teachers contact parents by telephone a minimum of one time every week to share students' academic and behavioral progress and to provide reminders about homework assignments and upcoming school events.

Teachers respond within twenty-four hours if not sooner whenever a parent contacts the school by telephone or email.

Parents also receive telephone contacts whenever a physical restraint is conducted. A meeting is scheduled within 10-days for reviewing the student's IEP, including the Positive Behavior Support Plan, to determine whether the plan was followed and if the plan was followed whether the student needs a new functional behavioral assessment, a modified plan, or a change of placement to address the behavior of concern as specified in the Pennsylvania Public School Code.<sup>17</sup>

A Communication Log is maintained for every student in the program. Entries in the log include notes from telephone conferences with parents, Local Education Agency personnel, and representatives from other community agencies.

When communicating with parents about students' academic and behavioral progress, teachers focus on what *they* are doing to assist the child and describe the interventions employed on behalf of the child as well as the child's performance in relationship to those interventions. Discussions may center on interventions at the school-wide, classroom or individual levels.

Teachers are encouraged to refrain from focusing on a student's negative behaviors when contacting parents, as this type of communication is redundant. Parents are already aware of their children's challenging behaviors as those behaviors supply the reasons the child was referred to Centennial School in the first place.

Focusing on interventions designed to assist students sends the clear message that Centennial School is taking meaningful action to help improve the child's school performance.

### New Organizational Arrangements

New organizational configurations support the expectations and program procedures that were introduced to the school environment. To this day the school team examines everything done in the school; if an activity supports the vision of making Centennial a place where students want to be, the activity or procedure is retained, even though it may have been modified from its original form. If the activity does not support the vision and goals, it is eliminated.

Policy Handbook: The *Centennial School Policy and Procedure Handbook* provides teachers with specific procedures achieving the school's vision and goals. The handbook is revised annually with input from the teaching staff to ensure its alignment with current practice.

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<sup>17</sup> Chapter 14: Special education services and programs. (2001). Pennsylvania Bulletin, 31, 3021-3033.

Teacher Teams: Teacher teams<sup>18</sup> replace the traditional one-on-one teacher-aide model that was originally employed at the school. Teams consist of teachers<sup>19</sup> led by a program coordinator. Teacher teams meet weekly to discuss student progress and review data. Every member of the team is apprised of each student's individual Positive Behavior Support Plan.

The use of teams with members who are knowledgeable of students' programs eliminates the need for hiring substitutes<sup>20</sup> when staff absences occur and adds to consistency in the implementation of students' programs.

In addition to weekly team meetings, other meetings called staffings are convened for the specific purpose of conducting functional behavior assessments and revising Positive Behavior Support Plans for students who require additional assistance to succeed. Staffings may be held at anytime but are convened automatically under certain conditions: for example, point earnings fall below expectancy for three consecutive days, suspensions for 3 days over a two-week period of time, or anytime law enforcement is involved.

A major component for the adoption and sustainability of the practices employed at Centennial School is the professional development program. Professional development consists of collaborative, active learning opportunities that occur weekly.<sup>21</sup> Professional development at Centennial School emphasizes the school's guiding assumptions as well as the teaching and professional behaviors that comprise the school's culture. Most of the topics presented during professional development episodes are included within the *Centennial School Policy and Procedures Handbook*.

Career Ladder: A career ladder was instituted that permits teachers who have successfully acquired their Masters' Degree to continue with Centennial School in the role of Lead Teachers. There are now four levels of employment among Centennial teachers: teacher associate, teacher intern, lead teacher, and program coordinator. Lead teachers assist with the mentoring and training of interns<sup>22</sup> and associate teachers. Because they tend to remain with the school for a number of years, Lead teachers add greatly to program consistency and continuity. They

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<sup>18</sup> Mr. John Tommasini, Assistant Director at the time, now Director of the Bureau of Special Education of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania was familiar with the literature on the subject of one-on-one teacher aides and provided the fiscal support and encouragement for this innovation to occur. The only condition he asked for was data at year's end showing its advantages.

<sup>19</sup> At Centennial School most teachers are graduate students who attend classes at Lehigh University.

<sup>20</sup> Substitute teachers have not been used at Centennial School for the past 13 years.

<sup>21</sup> Once again, Mr. Tommasini was instrumental in helping Centennial achieve the necessary modifications to the school calendar that could allow for a half-day every week for professional development and yet remain within state regulations.

<sup>22</sup> Teacher interns hold Bachelor's Degrees along with Pennsylvania certification in special education and teacher associates hold Bachelor's Degrees but not certification in special education.

usually take coursework in the educational leadership program at Lehigh University.

**Mentors:** Every new teacher to the program has a mentor. Mentors serve multiple purposes, for example, transmission of the school culture, dissemination of technical information, and as models for teaching practices. Lead teachers mentor the teacher interns and associates; program coordinators mentor the lead teachers, and the Director mentors the program coordinators.

**School Committees:** School committees plan and conduct work in the school that otherwise might go unheeded. Presently, there are sixteen ongoing committees at the school that plan and conduct work in areas such as Middle States Accreditation, athletic events (e.g., field days, Hoops for Heart, Special Olympics), budget, special events (e.g., Open House, Honor Roll Breakfasts), spirit days, bullying prevention, transition and graduation, technology, hiring, and the annual talent show, carnival and 5K Race and Walk Fundraiser, as well as staff social events.

**Evaluation:** Centennial uses formative evaluation for improving the performance of its personnel that is ongoing and supplies corrective feedback as issues arise. Such feedback is referred to as “gifts” at Centennial School— gifts of competence given to help teachers reach success.

Centennial School also employs a 360 personnel evaluation system that allows teachers the opportunity to give performance feedback to supervisors. The evaluation instrument was developed by the program coordinators in conjunction with Lehigh professors<sup>23</sup> and solicits information about supervisors’ performances in the following areas: (a) organizational management, (b) supervision, (c) training, (d) communication, (e) leadership, and (f) student management. Personnel supervised by the director submit their evaluations to the Dean of the College of Education, the director’s supervisor.

### Celebrations and Ceremonies

**Awards Ceremonies:** Centennial School celebrates the success of students in a number of demonstrable ways. For example, each program conducts weekly Awards Ceremonies that are open to parents and other guests. During award ceremonies, students receive recognition for academic growth, behavioral competence and improved social development. Some of the awards granted are for Student of the Week, Most Improved, Parent Involvement, Community Participation, Academic Award, Above and Beyond, Homework, Perfect Attendance, Model Employee, Teamwork, and Athletic Awards.

**Honor Roll:** Students are also recognized for academic excellence and achieving the Honor Roll. The Honor Roll requires students to achieve a minimum of 3.2 (of 4.0)

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<sup>23</sup> Dr. George White of Lehigh University provided the guidance and leadership for this initiative.

and an overall grade point average with a letter grade of “B” in every subject (on work at the instructional level), with no truancies or suspensions from school during the entire quarter. Honor Roll is celebrated at a breakfast with teachers and families in the school library. The ceremony is well attended and it is not uncommon for every recipient to have a family member present.

Graduation Ceremony: Centennial School celebrates the annual graduation of its seniors with a formal ceremony in the gymnasium. Although students may also participate in the graduation ceremonies of the resident districts, if they choose, Centennial takes time to bring parents and the extended families together to celebrate students’ accomplishments and formally transition them to their futures.

Other events and ceremonies, such as the annual Talent Show, Carnival, 5K Race and Walk, and “Spirit Days” are interspersed throughout the year, help to “normalize” the students’ school experiences and bring parents and faculty together.

Re-integrations and Transitions: Centennial successfully reintegrates an average of about 14% of its student population to their home school districts. A student’s return to the less restrictive environment is a joint decision made between parents and district officials with a recommendation from the Centennial School team. In general students are quite successful upon their return and some go on to do some remarkable things. Jon, for example, who entered Centennial School from a residential facility, returned to his home school environment to pass all of his senior classes, participate on the wrestling team and attend the school’s prom. Alex, upon his return to his middle school enrolled in accelerated algebra and readily became indistinguishable from his non-disabled peers. Jose maintains his home school success after five years and in addition to passing all of his subjects, plays the violin in the high school orchestra, an instrument he learned to play during his elementary years at Centennial School. There are many more such success stories.

#### Outcomes: Year 1

By the end of 1998-1999, the first year of restructuring, episodes of seclusion and restraint had decreased dramatically. The number of minutes of seclusion time out for the 79 students in attendance decreased by approximately 77%, from a high of 15,774 minutes of seclusion time-out during the first 20-days of school to 3,627 during the final 20-day period.<sup>24</sup> The number of physical restraints decreased by 69% as compared to the previous year, (1064 to 327 physical restraints). There were no physical restraints during the final 20-days of the year, even though the student population was nearly the same as the year before.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> School-wide data graphs were compiled every 20 days because of Pennsylvania’s 180-day school year.

<sup>25</sup> Eighty-three percent of the student body was the same as the year before when there were 1,064 physical restraints.

Viewed another way, during the first forty-days of 1998-1999 there were 233 episodes of physical restraint. During the final forty days only one physical restraint was conducted. The student population was largely the same throughout the year.

One of the time-out rooms was closed at mid-year and converted to a supply closet; at year's end, the second time-out room was closed and converted to the school store and was filled with trinkets, notebooks, paper, pencils, snacks, and other items that students could purchase with points they earned for meeting school and classroom expectations. In a span of just over six months, a twenty-year pattern of seclusion and physical restraint was broken.

### Centennial School: A Place Students, Families and Teachers Want to Be

Subsequent years witnessed the tenacious pursuit of the school's vision and goals through steadfast implementation and refinement of positive behavioral strategies. To ensure continuity and maintenance of the school's mission, organizational structures as described previously were gradually modified to accommodate new procedures and practices. For more than a decade, Centennial School has indeed transformed into a school where students, parents and faculty are eager to come to learn new skills that can benefit them now and into the future.

Students new to the school enter an environment governed by a three-tier system of school-wide positive behavior supports where expectations for achieving success are clearly known to students and faculty alike. Parents and other visitors upon entering the building often remark on the orderly and calm atmosphere, especially visitors from other alternative schools, who come to learn about the educational practices at the school.

The school is brightly decorated with student work covering the walls. The twelve classrooms reflect a singular focus on academics and are well supplemented by technology: SMART boards, iPads, iPods, laptop and desktop computers.

Students are actively engaged in academics throughout the day. They complete homework. They talk about "making their days", meaning they have met the expectations held of them. They can identify the day and step they are on in the Steps to Success system (i.e., a level system) that helps inform them of their progress. They talk about their future goals. They appear genuinely proud of their academic achievements.

As important perhaps, students at Centennial School talk about their friends at the school, a topic of conversation that is atypical for children and youth with behavioral and emotional disabilities.

Centennial students speak politely to teachers and at times even praise them. Guests often comment on the polite discourse among those in the school. One State Education Agency official, for example, who visited the school, observing classes and

meeting students, asked repeatedly during his visit, “Are there any children with disabilities here?”

Last term thirty students earned Honor Roll and attended the Honor Roll Breakfast Celebration along with their parents and guardians. Earning the Honor Roll is a challenge, especially for students with histories of chronic behavior problems in schools. Nearly all of the parents attend this important event; they almost always do.

Parents and teachers communicate frequently, sometimes daily. Most of the contacts are positive in nature with teachers sharing stories of success. Parent support is judged to be quite strong; for example, fifty-two percent of Centennial families attended the Spring Open House despite long distances and economic stressors.

Teachers speak <sup>26</sup> of the support they receive from their colleagues, the positive environment, the dynamic teamwork, and the joy from teaching the students. Teachers often arrive early and often stay late. Staff absences are at an all time low.

### Lessons Learned

A number of lessons emerge from the Centennial School experience. Perhaps one of the most encouraging lessons is that as a field we have the technical information necessary to reform chaotic school environments and to decrease and perhaps eliminate the use of seclusion and physical restraint from our schools. The practices adopted at Centennial School are contained in the present body of literature and are no farther away than a few mouse clicks on the World Wide Web. Moreover, this past May, the U.S. Department of Education published an excellent overview of the practices as well as guidelines for school officials to follow so that seclusion and restraint are unnecessary; <sup>27</sup> and as chronicled in this report, the practices are not highly specialized nor arcane but well within reach of professionals. To use the words of Douglas Reeves, founder of the Leadership and Learning Center, <sup>28</sup> “the practices are mundane, inexpensive, and [most important] replicable.”

Physical restraints are messy, loud, and violent affairs that effectively shut down any instruction occurring in the vicinity. Physical restraints teach nothing in and of themselves and they interfere with the main business of schools— learning. Physical restraints not only disrupt the learning environment, they disrupt the learner, as well. The practices of seclusion and restraint like other forms of aversive consequences engender some rather nasty side effects for the learner: fear,

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<sup>26</sup> Annual “One Thing Survey” wherein teachers anonymously list the one thing they like best about their job at Centennial School, the one thing they like least about their job, and the one thing they would change about their job at the school.

<sup>27</sup> U.S. Department of Education, *Restraint and seclusion: Resource document*, Washington, D.C. 2012.

<sup>28</sup> Reeves, D. (2002). *The daily disciplines of leadership*, Jossey-Bass.

resentment, anger, resistance, and feelings of hatred<sup>29</sup>. Needless to say, such emotional predispositions are hardly conducive for the learning process to occur.

When seclusion and restraint are used excessively, it is likely because school personnel believe that students with emotional and behavioral disabilities are dangerous, unable to manage themselves and therefore require physical management by others. Yet, seclusion and restraint cause students to react more violently and thus exacerbate the very symptoms that led to their identification as emotionally and behaviorally disabled in the first place. This intensified emotional and behavior response reinforces the belief that students with emotional and behavioral disabilities are dangerous, unable to control themselves and need to be controlled by others. The students at Centennial School in 1998 certainly looked more disturbed and behaved more violently than students at Centennial School today, even though the entry criteria have remained unchanged over the years.

The frequent use of seclusion and physical restraints is relatively expensive. It usually requires additional personnel to conduct the restraints, often personnel who are fully unrelated to the instructional process. At least that is what we found at Centennial School. As preventive procedures based on positive behavior support proved successful at Centennial School, the need for personnel who were hired solely to conduct physical restraints diminished. In 1998, for example, Centennial School employed seventy-one people; today there are 51.<sup>30</sup> Monies saved through reductions in unnecessary personnel were reinvested for such things as renovations to the facility, curriculum materials, furniture, technology, and other items designed to improve the overall work environment.

Teachers are more at-risk for injury with the use of seclusion and restraint than without those practices. As a measure of staff safety, data were collected on the number of Workers Compensation Claims that were filed by injured employees at Centennial School. During the year of over 1000 physical restraints, injured staff filed 22 Workers Compensation Claims; eighty-two percent of those injuries occurred while staff was conducting physical restraints with students.

As the number of restraints decreased so did injuries to staff. The following year when 327 physical restraints were conducted, eighteen Workers' Compensation claims were filed with fifty-two percent of the injury claims directly related to restraint situations. The subsequent year, when no physical restraints were recorded, only four Workers Compensation Claims were filed, none of which, of course, were associated with physical restraint. Centennial faculty has not suffered an injury related to physical restraint for the past 12 years and Workers

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<sup>29</sup> Axelrod, S., & Apsche, J. (Eds.).(1983). *The effects of punishment on human behavior*. New York, Academic Press.

<sup>30</sup> It is likely that the mere presence of "crisis intervention" staff (i.e., staff employed solely to physically restrain students) will result in a greater number of physical restraints than in schools that without such staff.

Compensation Claims continue to remain at low levels. At this school, staff injuries were related positively to physical restraints with more frequent restraints resulting in a greater number of injuries to staff.

Perhaps the biggest barrier to success is the educators themselves, the inability of professionals to redefine the problem and implement innovations. There is too much emphasis on the consequences for behavior and too little attention to restructuring learning environments. Too many professionals continue to view the child as defective, dangerous and unpredictable and fail to see the connection between students' behaviors and the practices they have in place.

It wasn't the students at Centennial School who were restraining themselves to the floors or escorting themselves to time-out rooms—it was the adults. It is the adults and not the students who establish the culture in schools, define the professional behaviors, and erect the standards of conduct for students as well as themselves to follow.

Centennial School does business in vastly different ways than it did years ago; it has a much different culture today than it did then. But even amidst the relative chaos of those past days, Centennial had a culture: it had values, norms, and traditions that were faithfully followed by both faculty and students alike. Those were the “rules of the game” so to speak and those rules were hardly conducive for teaching academics and pro-social behavior and most likely allowed students to practice poor conduct in the presence of school officials. The message is quite clear and now well known. In order to change student behavior, we must first change our own behavior. We must change the rules of the game.

Yet, too many leaders find too many excuses for maintaining the status quo. Money, lack of training, violent students, psychiatric conditions, apathetic parents, teacher unions, poverty, drugs are but a few of the reasons given for the failure of school administrators to take action. Often, it is the students who end up getting the blame. “What you do at Centennial is nice, but would not work at our school—our students are much more difficult than yours”, is a common refrain I often hear.

Services for children and youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities are suppose to provide assistance for children who have had histories of difficulties in public schools. Yet, despite nearly 40 years of special education services, students with emotional and behavioral disabilities suffer some of the bleakest outcomes of all school-aged children and youth<sup>31</sup>. More than half of them drop out of school, a rate more than twice that of students in general education; three-fourths of them achieve below grade expectancy in reading, and 97% of them achieve below grade expectancy in mathematics. Two-thirds cannot pass competency exams at their

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<sup>31</sup> Bradley, R., Doolittle, J., & Bartolotta, R. (2008). Building on the data and adding to the discussion: The experiences and outcomes for students with emotional disturbance. *Journal of Behavioral Education*, 17, 4-23.

grade level. Such dismal outcomes certainly cause one to wonder whether in our attempts to help these youngsters, we use are not actually doing them more harm<sup>32</sup>.

Among the many lessons learned at Centennial School, there is good news for school administrators. The techniques and strategies for increasing pro-social behavior at Centennial School work equally well in public schools.<sup>33</sup> Administrators might wish to adopt practices that lead to the creation of favorable instructional environments especially the special education classrooms within their buildings, if not within the entire school altogether.

A final lesson is that students with emotional and behavioral disabilities wish to succeed in school just like their nondisabled peers. They work diligently on lessons that are engaging and challenging yet within their capabilities. When his probation officer asked Joe, a new Centennial student who came by way of a long-term placement in a juvenile detention facility why he was now doing so well in school, Joe responded, "Here they teach you something, in my other placements we just sat around and talked about our problems."

#### Centennial: 14 Years Later

Centennial has sustained its school-wide positive approach for the past 14 years. Each year heralds new improvements to the school setting. The vision established in 1998 is now "just the way we do things around here"; it is part of the school culture.<sup>34</sup> The physical interventions of today bear little resemblance to those conducted 13 years ago. This past year, there were three physical restraints, consisting of brief standing holds under a minute each in duration. Brief holds restricting movements like the ones at the school this year would not have been recorded as physical restraints 13 years ago when basket-holds and prone restraints were common.

Are there imaginable circumstances when Centennial teachers might someday need to use more intrusive physical restraints? Common sense would dictate yes.<sup>35</sup> But the preventive strategies Centennial School has in place greatly reduce the probabilities of having to employ more intrusive physical restraints as occurred in the past. In fact, the topography and intensity of overall behavioral episodes at Centennial School have changed markedly over time.

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<sup>32</sup> See Hayling, Cook, Gresham, State & Kern, and (2008); and Sutherland & Wehby, (2001).

<sup>33</sup> An administrator at a public middle school who recently hired one of Centennial's teachers called me to ask in mock astonishment, "What are you teaching your teachers? The classroom was totally different from the previous years even though the students were the same ones from last year. I have had a self-contained classroom for children with emotional and behavioral disabilities in my school for 13 years. All of that time I thought it was the students," she said.

<sup>34</sup> Deal, T.E., & Peterson, K.D. (1999). *Shaping school culture*. CA: Jossey-Bass.

<sup>35</sup> The number of restraints, defined as the application of force for the purpose of restraining the free movement of a student, varies each year with an overall average of about 10 per year.

Just seven years ago, for example, it was commonplace for angry and upset students to leave the classroom loudly, curse the teachers, wander the halls, tear artwork off the walls, flip furniture, bang walls, and slam doors. Today those behavioral patterns are nearly nonexistent. Students seem to understand that teachers are here to help them and that all they need do is to raise their hand or ask to Take Time when they become frustrated or upset. When students choose more disruptive behaviors to express their anger, teachers follow students' behavior plans, usually meaning, they remain silent and wait for the student to get calm.<sup>36</sup>

Visitors to the school often express astonishment when they discover that a particular student is "out of program", meaning he or she is not following expectations. Zack, a recent 17 year-old referral to the program said it quite well. One afternoon while sitting in the school library, visibly agitated and upset about something that happened in his classroom, muttered angrily, "I thought this was a school for bad kids. I don't see any bad kids here!"

Other measures confirm Zack's exasperation about the dearth of "bad kids" at the school. The rate of suspensions has decreased by 88% since 1998<sup>37</sup>; truancy is down an annual average of 50%; police visited the school only 3 times this past year with no student arrests (as compared to 39 visits during the year of 1064 physical restraints). Only three Workers Compensation Claims were filed this past year. In addition, in the absence of frequent seclusion and physical restraint, time-on-task at Centennial School has increased dramatically. Many Centennial students now demonstrate academic growth rates in reading fluency that closely approximate or exceed "typical students" as measured by AIMSweb reading probes.

Moving from a violent school climate to a positive educational climate is hard work. It is daunting to begin a change process in the midst of a violent student population. In fact, once the change process begins, things will likely get worse<sup>38</sup> in the short-term: more suspensions, more police, and possibly even more violence, as teachers and staff are called upon to change their beliefs and their behavior. Nonetheless, the results in terms of teacher satisfaction, student performance and parent support are well worth the effort.

The favorable outcomes associated with positive behavior supports are perhaps best understood from the mouths of the students themselves. When asked, "How is Centennial different than your previous school?" Tommy put it succinctly, "At Centennial School when I have a problem teachers try to help me. At my other

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<sup>36</sup> One of the most common mistakes teachers make to control inappropriate student behavior is the use of "escalating prompts" that take the form of negative reprimands, repeated warnings, sarcasm, criticism or other forms of disapproval. See Walker, H.M., Ramsey, E., & Gresham, F.M. (2004). *Antisocial behavior in school: Evidence-based practices*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

<sup>36</sup> Centennial suspends students for one day only at a time.

<sup>37</sup> Fullan, M. (2001). *Leading in culture of change*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

school when I had a problem, the teacher got mad and that made me mad. Then a big man would come and lay on me, and that made me madder.” As more and more evidence accumulates, it appears quite certain that the practices of routine seclusion and physical restraint will someday be placed on the shelves of the Glore Psychiatric Museum in St. Joseph Missouri, alongside other failed mental health practices for ameliorating the problems of individuals with emotional and behavioral disabilities.

Change is the often the result of a new vision for doing things differently than they have been done in the past. From that vision, we develop goals and procedures for eventually making the vision a reality. I believe the proposed federal legislation on seclusion and restraint sets forth the vision and harbors the promise for meaningful change in the future.

Thank you for receiving my report. I am happy to answer any questions you might have.

Incidents of Restraint Used at Centennial School  
by 20-day Reporting Periods  
1998-1999

