Celebrating 50 Years of Creating Inclusive and Supportive Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

In 1975, Public Law (PL) 94-142—the precursor to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004), set the stage for creating inclusive and supportive classrooms. Five decades since the initial law was passed, the field of education has made tremendous progress. This includes shifting away from restrictive, reactive, and exclusionary practices to implementing inclusive, proactive, and positive approaches. Other shifts include recognizing growth in social, emotional, and behavioral skills rather than managing behaviors, and valuing student and family partnerships. In this article, we highlight: (a) milestones related to IDEA and students with disabilities in the area of behavior; (b) advances in evidence-based practice to support behavior; (c) implications for practice; and (d) possibilities of an even more inclusive and supportive future for students in the next 50 years.

KEYWORDS

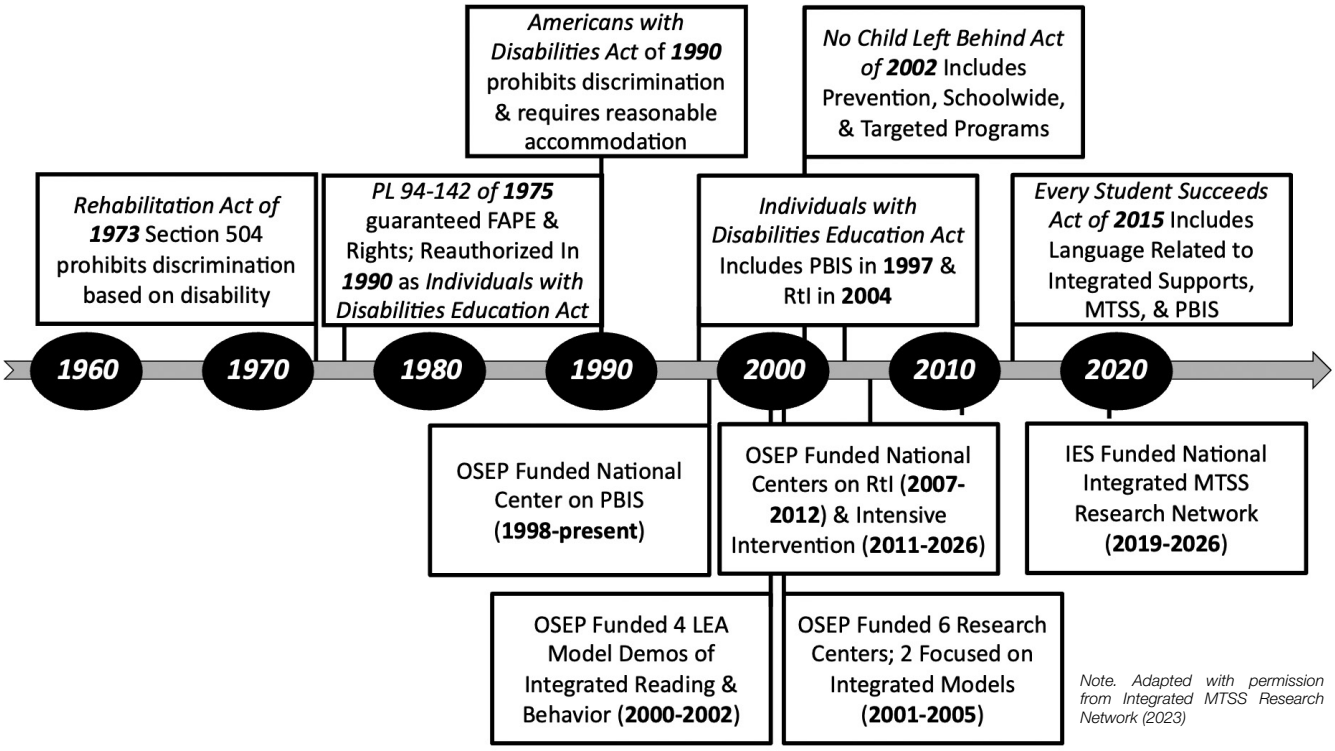
Classroom management, positive behavioral interventions and supports, positive behavior support, special education

Inclusive, proactive, and positive approaches to supporting students with disabilities' social, emotional, and behavioral growth have evolved significantly over the last 50 years. To understand the gravity of this evolution, it is important to pause and acknowledge what life was like for individuals with disabilities before the 1975 passage of Public Law (PL) 94-142—the precursor to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004). Before 1975, students with disabilities did not have guaranteed access to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). Available placements and supports were varied and often far from optimal. For example, students with disabilities exhibiting severe behavioral challenges or extensive support needs could be excluded entirely from the public education system (Wehmeyer, 2026). Fortunately, strong advocacy from the disability community—including self-advocates and family advocates—fought and achieved important milestones in federal legislation. In this article, we describe (a) two major federal milestones related to supporting students with disabilities in the area of behavior; (b) advances in evidence-based practice to support behavior; (c) implications for practice; and (d) possibilities for students and teachers in the next 50 years.

FOCUS ON THE FIRST 50 YEARS OF IDEA: FOUNDATIONAL FEDERAL MILESTONES

During the 50 years since the passage of PL 94-142 in 1975, the field has continued to evolve—driven by both a push to improve the experiences and outcomes of students, families, and educators and a pull of scientific advances in the fields of special education and behavior. PL-94-142, followed by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990; 20 U.S.C.§1400) guarantees that eligible students receive special education and related services to support their needs by providing FAPE (U.S. Department of Education, 2022b). Although summarizing 50 years of advocacy, practice, and scientific advances is beyond the scope of this article, we

FIGURE 1: Key Federal Legislation and Investment Milestones Toward PBIS & MTSS



Note. Adapted with permission from Integrated MTSS Research Network (2023)

identified a few milestones (see Figure 1) that have emerged from these decades in the area of supporting students with disabilities whose behavior interferes with their learning or the learning of others.

Inclusive, Proactive, and Positive Approaches in IDEA and Federal Supports

There has been a shift from (a) restrictive, reactive, and exclusionary to (b) inclusive, proactive, and positive approaches to social, emotional, and behavior support. Advocates, practitioners, and scholars argued for the importance of positive approaches to support students' social, emotional, and behavioral skill growth (Kincaid et al., 2015). The field of positive behavior support emerged from these efforts, with a combined emphasis on (a) inclusion and normalization from strong advocacy, (b) social validity and contextual relevance in practice, and (c) scientific advances in the field of applied behavior analysis (Kincaid et al., 2015).

Efforts to implement positive behavior support have largely been supported by the U.S. federal government. As shifts in practice occurred, we also saw an increased emphasis on understanding and addressing behavior as part of a student's individualized education program (IEP). For example, when a student receiving special education services exhibits behaviors that interfere with their learning or the learning of others, the student's IEP may also address their behavior in the student's annual goals (34 C.F.R. § 300.320(a)(2)(i)) and services (Hirsch et al., 2026; 34 C.F.R. § 300.320(a)(4)).

Under IDEA, IEP teams should consider the use of positive behavior interventions and supports (U.S. Department of Education, 2022b; 20 U.S.C. § 1414(d)(3)(B)(i); 34 C.F.R. § 300.324(a)(2)(i)). In 1998, the U.S. Department of Education funded the first National Technical Assistance and Dissemination Center on Positive Behavior Supports (PBIS). The Center was established to address the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students whose behavior interfered with learning (Center on PBIS, 2023a). PBIS is an evidence-based, school-wide framework that provides a continuum of support to meet students' academic, behavioral, social, and emotional needs. Six years later, in 2004 the U.S. Congress reauthorized IDEA (IDEA, 2004; 20 U.S.C. § 1400). As part of the reauthorization, the law retained an emphasis on PBIS, which is now the most widely implemented (implemented by > 28,000 schools; Center on PBIS, 2026) and extensively researched (Santiago-Rosario et al., 2023) Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework. Learn more about PBIS at the Center on PBIS website (www.pbis.org).

Students with Disabilities' Behavioral Needs and IDEA's Discipline Provision

IDEA affords additional protections for students with disabilities whose behavior impedes their learning. Under the law, students' behavioral needs are considered throughout the evaluation and reevaluation process, as well as during IEP development (U.S. Department of Education, 2022b). In addition, IDEA includes disciplinary safeguards related to suspensions, removals, and changes in a student's placement from their current educational setting. For instance, when a student is removed for more than 10 school days, or when a series of removals constitutes a pattern, the removal may be considered a change in placement and trigger a manifestation determination review. This review determines whether the student's behavior was a manifestation of the disability or was a result of the school, or local education agency's (LEA), failure to implement the IEP.

The U.S. Department of Education released a series of guidance documents to support the implementation of IDEA for students with disabilities, related to student behavior. For example, in 2022, the Department of Education released *Positive, Proactive Approaches to Supporting Children with Disabilities: A Guide for Stakeholders* (U.S. Department of Education, 2022a). This guide outlined evidence-based practices, strategies, and resources for states, schools, LEAs, and other entities. Topics include reducing exclusionary discipline, using evidence-based approaches to support and respond to student needs, and implementing positive behavior interventions and supports. That same year, the U.S. Department of Education also released *Questions and Answers: Addressing the Needs of Children with Disabilities and IDEA's Discipline Provision* (U.S. Department of Education 2022b).

MAJOR ADVANCES IN EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES TO SUPPORT BEHAVIOR

In addition to witnessing the evolution of behavior supports within the federal law, we have witnessed advances and innovations to support behavior in the classroom. Among them, we would like to highlight two noteworthy advancements: (a) evidence-based classroom or classwide practices for all students and (b) intensive behavioral supports for individual students.

Classwide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (CW-PBIS)

Although IDEA (2004) does not explicitly describe classroom behavior support, it does require IEP teams to consider "positive behavioral interventions, supports, and other strategies" when a student's behavior interferes with learning. This provision provides a foundation for the use of classroom-level practices, which complement individualized applications of PBIS for students with disabilities. Consistent with the shift to more positive approaches, advocates, practitioners, and scholars shifted language from "behavior modification" (Whitman & Whitman, 1971) to "classroom management" (Emmer & Stough, 2001) and, more recently, to "positive and proactive behavior support" or "Classwide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports" (CW-PBIS; Simonsen & Myers, 2025). These changes reflect more than just updated vocabulary; they represent a broader evolution from controlling student behavior to supporting skill growth and designing environments where all students can thrive (Center on PBIS, 2025). This conceptual shift also contributed to increased attention to classroom practices that are supported by empirical research and designed to promote positive student outcomes.

Over the last 5 decades, scholars have identified a range of practices with sufficient empirical research to be considered evidence based. Although educators can do their own research to identify specific evidence-based practices (see, for example, the What Works Clearinghouse at https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/WWC/), national centers and professional organizations offer curated lists and resources to support implementation of evidence-based practices, including high-leverage practices for supporting students with disabilities (Aceves & Kennedy, 2024). As indicated earlier, PBIS is the most widely used framework for supporting students' social, emotional, and behavioral needs (Center on PBIS, 2025).

The PBIS framework consists of universal, preventive practices, including school-wide and classroom-level strategies to support all students. Although PBIS is implemented at the school-wide level, there are specific classroom-level practices, often considered Tier 1 universal supports, which are critical to the overall success of student behavior (Center on PBIS, 2025). More specifically, these practices build the foundation of a positive classroom climate that maximizes student engagement, resulting in higher student academic achievement and reduced behavioral issues. Many of these student-level practices are also associated with positive teacher-level outcomes including higher levels of self-efficacy (i.e., the belief in one's ability to enact CW-PBIS and support student behavior; Tschannaen-Moran & Woolfork-Hoy, 2001). This matters because higher levels of CW-PBIS self-efficacy are associated with lower levels of teacher burnout (Aloe et al., 2014) and lower levels of school-related stress (Barouch Gilbert et al., 2014). Training in CW-PBIS can also reduce teachers' risk for attrition (Metlife Inc., 2013).

Examples of CW-PBIS practices include behavior-specific praise (BSP), opportunities to respond (OTR), and redirection. BSP is a brief statement recognizing a specific student or group of students immediately after they exhibit desired behaviors or engage in a desired task. This sort of positive feedback statement has been shown to increase on-task behavior for both students with and without disabilities (Waxman & Walberg, 1991). OTRs are academic questions, prompts, or statements directed to an individual student, group of students, or the whole class that require a response. Active engagement via OTRs has been shown to decrease disruptive behavior while increasing student understanding. Redirections are brief statements that describe behavior that does not meet expectations and remind students of the expected behavior. When delivered calmly and specifically, redirections can help students return to task while preserving instructional momentum. Together, these practices illustrate a shift from reactive behavior control to proactive instruction, engagement, and skill development.

Intensive Behavioral Support for Individual Students

Students with disabilities, including students whose behavior interferes with learning, often have complex needs. This includes social, behavioral, and mental health needs. Addressing these needs requires schools to use evidence-based assessments and to help identify the factors surrounding the behavior that will be used to develop appropriate supports. The functional behavioral assessment (FBA) process was incorporated into IDEA in 1997 as part of an evaluation and then under procedural safeguards. The U.S. Department of Education (2022b) provides the following definition:

> An FBA is used to understand the function or purpose of a child's specific, interfering behavior and factors that contribute to the behavior's occurrence and nonoccurrence for the purpose of developing effective positive behavioral interventions, supports, and other strategies to mitigate or eliminate the interfering behavior. (p. 52)

The same document defined a behavior intervention plan (BIP) as "a component of a child's educational program designed to address behaviors that interfere with the child's learning or that of others and behaviors that are inconsistent with school expectations" (U.S. Department of Education, 2022b, p. 51).

In cases involving a disciplinary change in placement, IDEA requires that an FBA be conducted and a BIP be reviewed and revised or developed (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. § 1415[k][1][F]). Although IDEA references the application of FBAs and BIPs in a reactive manner related to disciplinary procedures, recent federal guidance focuses on their use as a preventive tool. In 2024, the U.S. Department of Education released guidance on *Using Functional Behavioral Assessments to Create Supportive Learning Environments*, which describes FBAs as tools to support a student's access, participation, and engagement in the learning environment and to promote inclusive educational practices. The guidance also emphasizes that FBAs should be available for any student (with or without a disability) whose behavior interferes with learning. It also highlights FBAs as a tool to inform instruction and support planning. Together, FBAs and BIPs provide a framework for identifying the causes of interfering behavior and designing individualized, behavioral supports.

Effective implementation of both FBAs and BIPs depends on meaningful collaboration with families and students. Family and student engagement are also foundational principles of IDEA. Consistent with broader shifts toward authentic partnerships with students and families, the recent guidance emphasizes the importance of actively engaging students and families in behavior-related situations. For example, the U.S. Department of Education's (2024) guidance emphasizes that schools should "collaborate and actively engage parents and students in the process" (p. 6). They go on to use the term "parent" over 40 times, emphasizing the key role that parents and guardians play in supporting behavior.

These partnerships center students' strengths, preferences, and needs. For example, person-centered planning emerged as an approach to ensure the IEP process centered students and their family (e.g., Flannery et al., 2000), and practitioners talk about family and student "voice" (Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific, n.d.). Although we prefer a more inclusive term, like partnership, that recognizes people communicate in both vocal and non-vocal ways, we appreciate the focus of elevating partnerships with students and families. Regardless of terminology, the central idea remains the same: behavior support planning is strengthened when students and families are meaningfully included as partners in the process.

MOVING FROM PRACTICES ON PAPER INTO CLASSROOMS

Many educators and researchers have dedicated their careers to *identifying* positive and inclusive behavior support and *developing* systems of support that ensure all students are taught in positive classroom environments (Marzano & Marzano, 2003; Youngs et al., 2023). Fortunately, our field offers effective strategies for moving from paper-based practices into classrooms.

Strategies for Implementing CW-PBIS

Our field has embraced data-driven professional development models to strengthen CW-PBIS (Wilkinson et al., 2020). For instance, educators and researchers use data to differentiate professional development, match supports to individual or group needs, and include multiple components such as modeling, guided practice, independent practice with structured reflection (see Center on PBIS, 2023b).

Researchers have also leveraged technology to develop contextualized professional learning opportunities focused on CW-PBIS. Kennedy et al. (2020), for example, developed a multi-component intervention that provides teachers with explicit instruction and video models on each CW-PBIS practice. Next, teachers practice the skills in the classroom while recording themselves teaching. They review the videos using a structured self-reflection and receive feedback from a coach (via email) using Capturing Observations And Collaboratively sHaring Educational Data (COACHED; Kennedy & Kunemund, n.d.). COACHED is a web-based coaching platform that uses video analysis to identify key implementation markers and provide practice-based feedback. Nagro et al. (2020) combined COACHED with a systematic, self-led approach that includes learning about CW-PBIS practices by watching high-quality instructional videos, followed by a sequential video analysis process which involves recording a lesson using the classroom management practice, reviewing the video, reflecting using a structured rubric, and revising their instruction. Throughout the process, teachers can analyze the choices they make while creating an observable plan for improvement. All of the CW-PBIS materials along with access to COACHED are available for free online. Learn more about COACHED on the www.buildtheframe.com website.

Strategies for Implementing FBA-BIPs

Similar to CW-PBIS, there are a variety of resources to support FBA and BIPs. If you are not familiar with FBA and BIPs, we recommend reviewing resources available from the U.S. Department of Education, federally funded technical assistance centers (e.g., the Center on PBIS, the National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations, and the IRIS Center), and state or university technical assistance providers.

Several reputable online resources are available to support educators' understanding of the FBA-BIP process. Among these, The IRIS Center provides several free online modules related to FBA and BIPs, including *Behavior Principles: The Basics of Understanding Student Behavior* (Iris Center, n.d.-b), *Functional Behavioral Assessment: Elementary and Secondary* (Iris Center, n.d.-c). and *Behavior Intervention Plans: Elementary and Secondary* (Iris Center, n.d.-a).

The Basic FBA to BIP Training Series is a free online program designed to help educators create brief FBA-BIPs (Borgmeier et al., 2016). The website includes two comprehensive training series that are designed to help individuals conduct FBA-BIPs. Each module contains step-by-step directions, templates, data collection tools, and homework tasks which are designed to be completed with an actual student.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO INSPIRE THE NEXT FIFTY YEARS

Over the past 50 years, our field has developed new ways to support teachers and their students, and we expect it will continue to evolve. With that in mind, we offer the following recommendations.

Continue to Foster Social Emotional and Behavioral Skills

As we shared, many have recommended that we focus on supporting social, emotional, and behavioral skill development (see Center on PBIS, 2025; Stevenson et al., 2024). This is an important shift away from compliance and adult-centered classroom management. Rather, we encourage teachers to keep thinking about their role as an educator who teach social, emotional, and behavioral skills similar to teaching academic skills such as math and reading. We encourage you to teach these skills explicitly as part of CW-PBIS practices and FBA and BIPs (see Center on PBIS, 2025; Greenberg et al., 2016; McCarthy et al., 2023). Together, this helps create classrooms and supports where student well-being is centered, critical skills are explicitly taught and recognized, and students thrive.

Embed Teacher Well-Being into CW-PBIS and FBA-BIP Professional Development

We would be remiss if we neglected to address the potential stress associated with teaching and supporting students with behavioral concerns. Stress has long challenged our field (Eaton et al., 1990; Greenberg et al., 2016; Maslach et al., 2001), and teachers report student behavior as a top reason for leaving the classroom (Ingersoll, 2001; MetLife Inc., 2013). High levels of teacher stress and burnout are associated with lower levels of classroom practices and negative student outcomes (Aloe et al., 2014; Bottani et al., 2019; Herman et al., 2018). Scholars have emphasized teacher well-being as a resource for helping teachers regulate their emotions in relation to CW-PBIS skills (McCarthy et al., 2023) and for nurturing a healthy classroom environment (Greenberg et al., 2016).

Fortunately, our field has identified several interventions for improving teacher well-being in schools. Cann et al. (2023) suggested that teacher interventions fall into five categories: gratitude interventions; mindfulness-based interventions; physical environment interventions; multiple component interventions (which may include cognitive behavioral therapy and time management); and training teachers to deliver a wellbeing curriculum for students. Interventions that included multiple components (e.g., mindfulness, coping, and exercise) demonstrated the largest improvements in positive outcomes such as stress and anxiety. These findings are promising, however more work is necessary. Specifically, future research and professional development should integrate teacher well-being into CW-PBIS and FBA-BIP professional development. Doing so may help educators build their own coping skills (i.e., manage stress in the moment, increase their ability to respond with kindness) while also increasing their use of evidence-based and culturally sustaining practices (Greenberg et al., 2016; McCarthy et al., 2023). Additionally, improving CW-PBIS implementation is an important practice for reducing stress and burnout and improving self-efficacy (e.g., Reinke et al., 2013). So, taking care of yourself while supporting your students' social, emotional, and behavioral growth are key ingredients to success as an educator.

Integrate Technology with Care

Technology is a tremendous resource for educators. It enables us to have real-time communication, strengthen partnerships with other educators and families, engage in data-based decisions, and implement meaningful differentiation. In the areas of CW-PBIS and student behavior, technology helps us understand student behavior and provide data-driven interventions.

> Although we have seen major milestones and advances in practice, we still have work to do to improve educational experiences for students with disabilities in the area of behavior.

At the time we wrote this article, several research-based tools were widely accessible and free for educators to use in the classrooms. These include apps that promote teachers' use of Tier 1 evidence-based practices such as specific praise (acknowledgements), OTRs, and prompts or precorrections (reminders). Researchers at the University of Oregon designed *Be+* (PBISApps, 2019) to help educators and coaches collect and share data. Existing apps also directly support student behavior. For example, Researchers at the University of Iowa and Vanderbilt built *Monitoring Behavior on the Go* (MoBeGo; Bruhn et al., 2022) to help students self-monitor their behavior in the classroom and help their teachers make expert level decision rules to aid in data-based decision making. MoBeGo is fully customizable to meet an individual student's needs.

Building on current technologies, we anticipate that over the next 50 years, artificial intelligence (AI) will drive the refinement and emergence of new classroom applications, tools, and platforms (Waterfield et al., 2024). A byproduct of AI will likely be personalized behavior supports (i.e., Marino et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2025). For instance, researchers at the University of South Florida created *TeacherServer* (Unal, 2025), which is a free platform that uses AI to support a variety of concepts such as developing behavior plans. Unlike a commercial tool such as ChatGPT, *TeacherServer* processes data locally. Furthermore, they adhere to the U.S. Department of Education's Guidelines for ensuring safety and privacy. At this time, the platform includes several generic tools that educators can use.

We anticipate that AI tools will quickly gain the capability to analyze multiple data sources (e.g., observation videos, student rating scales, interventions) and develop customized classroom plans. This could lead to timely individualized behavior supports. However, as AI-based apps and programs become widely available, we caution you to integrate them with care. AI prompting sequences (decision logic) lack human knowledge. For example, AI may not understand important variables such as classroom context, cultural norms, or individual student needs. With that, researchers have raised concerns to whether AI may amplify biases and lead to harming historically underserved student groups. Further, individual student information must be stored in accordance with strict security measures, and various AI tools may not adhere to privacy measures.

Although technology will continue to evolve, we strongly encourage considering low-tech approaches that may be feasible and efficient. These approaches rely on meaningful human input and judgment. Perhaps you will find a way to blend the low-tech and high-tech. Regardless of your approach, it is important to spend time building relationships with your colleagues, students, and their families. At the end of the day, we hope the next fifty years of CW-PBIS and FBA-BIPs will continue to rely heavily on human connections.

CONCLUSION

In 1975, students with disabilities were guaranteed a free and appropriate public education with the passage of PL-94-142. Our current law, IDEA (2004), continues to ensure the rights of students with disabilities. The law also promotes the use of positive behavior interventions and supports to support students in behavior. In this article we describe two core practices: CW-PBIS and function-based supports, including FBAs and BIPs. Although we have seen major milestones and advances in practice, we still have work to do to improve educational experiences for students with disabilities in the area of behavior.

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