

Practicing What We Teach: Modeling Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports and High-Leverage Practices to Cultivate Professional Dispositions

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This article proposes that teacher educators can intentionally cultivate professional dispositions by having preservice teachers experience the same evidence-based instructional and behavioral practices they will later be expected to implement themselves. Drawing on PBIS and HLPs, practical examples are provided for embedding these approaches into everyday teacher preparation coursework.

ABSTRACT

This article describes how teacher educators can intentionally model and embed evidence-based instructional and behavioral practices to cultivate professional dispositions essential for effective teaching while supporting teacher preparation accreditation. It argues that faculty can intentionally foster professional dispositions by having preservice teachers experience the same practices they will later be expected to implement in their own classrooms (i.e., High-Leverage Practices and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports). Practical guidance is provided for defining and reinforcing clear expectations, delivering timely and descriptive feedback, and embedding varied opportunities to respond to increase engagement and reinforce professional behaviors throughout coursework. Additionally, group contingencies and token economies are presented as forms of experiential learning through which preservice teachers simultaneously participate in and learn to implement evidence-based behavioral systems that support collaboration, accountability, and professional dispositions.

KEYWORDS

High-leverage practice, positive behavior interventions and supports, preservice teacher dispositions

Modeling and teaching evidence-based practices in instructional design and delivery, as well as behavior support, are essential components of any teacher preparation program. Coursework and field experiences should introduce concepts and give preservice teachers opportunities to develop and apply the skills needed to become effective educators. Because a large portion of teacher preparation occurs within college classrooms, those environments should not only convey instructional content but also foster the professional behaviors expected of future educators. However, there is evidence that college students may engage in challenging behaviors that interfere with learning in higher education settings.

Higher education faculty encounter concerns related to student disengagement, professionalism, participation, and responsiveness to feedback within college classrooms (Al Qahtani, 2016; Murphy, 2010). Although these behaviors are concerns across higher education, they are particularly consequential in teacher preparation because they correspond directly to the professional dispositions expected of future educators (Almerico et al., 2011; Council for Exceptional Children, 2020; Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013). For example, consistent attendance demonstrates reliability, timely assignment completion reflects dependability, professional communication supports effective collaboration, and respectful classroom participation mirrors the interactions teachers are expected to have with students, families, and colleagues (Council for Exceptional Children, 2020; Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013; Darling-Hammond, 2006).

Professional Dispositions in Teacher Education

Professional dispositions, including responsibility, professional communication, responsiveness to feedback, exhibiting respect, and self-directed learning, are fundamental to effective teaching because they influence how educators collaborate

with colleagues, build relationships with students and families, engage in reflective practice, and implement evidence-based instruction (Almerico et al., 2011; Council for Exceptional Children, 2020; Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013; Darling-Hammond, 2006). These behaviors comprise a candidate's professional skillset and are behaviors that help create a positive and supportive environment for students. Therefore, dispositions are a vital component of a quality teacher preparation program.

Due to accreditation requirements, preparation programs may spend significant time assessing and evaluating professional dispositions through reflection, case studies, community experiences, surveys, and formal evaluation (Almerico et al., 2011; Bialka, 2016; Bradley et al., 2020; LaPaglia, 2021; Stephens, 2019). Recent research suggests that professional dispositions are not inherent traits but can be improved throughout a preservice teacher's program of study. Reflective journaling, professional engagement, and community-based experiences are associated with the development of dispositions such as compassion, critical thinking, and responsiveness to diverse student needs (LaBelle & Belknap, 2016; Meidl & Baumann, 2015). LaPaglia (2021) found that preservice teachers demonstrated improvement across dispositions-aligned accreditation standards as they progressed through their preparation program, despite the absence of systematic instruction specifically targeting such expectations. The author further suggested that intentional professional development and direct instruction in essential dispositional areas may result in even greater growth. Such findings reinforce the importance of explicitly teaching, modeling, re-teaching, and reinforcing professional behaviors within teacher preparation coursework, rather than viewing dispositions solely

as characteristics to be evaluated for accreditation purposes.

The literature summarized above suggests that dispositions are measurable, they require explicit instruction and feedback, and that they can develop over time. Despite this, there is limited guidance regarding the intentional development of professional dispositions through modeled instructional and behavioral practice embedded throughout coursework. To assist candidates in the development of professional dispositions, teacher preparation faculty may consider using practices common in other educational settings.

Conceptual Frameworks

Key evidence-based practices in P-12 settings promote appropriate student behavior, prevent challenging behavior, and support academic engagement and success. Effective educators must be able to identify, plan for, and implement these practices. Consequently, a similar conceptual framework may be applied within teacher preparation courses to explicitly define, teach, and reinforce expected teacher candidate behaviors (i.e., dispositions). Evidence-based instructional and behavioral practices associated with Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS; Center on PBIS, 2026) and the Council for Exceptional Children and CEEDAR Center's High-Leverage Practices (HLPs; Aceves & Kennedy, 2024) provide practical frameworks for addressing behavioral concerns while simultaneously strengthening professional dispositions expected of future educators.

PBIS promotes safe and effective learning environments through a framework that proactively teaches appropriate academic, social, emotional, and behavioral skills (Charles, 2019; Gonsier-Gerdin, 2021; Center on PBIS, 2026). PBIS strategies include explicitly teaching behavior expectations, adapt-

ing instruction to provide structure and engagement, reinforcing appropriate behaviors, and responding meaningfully to inappropriate behaviors (Center on PBIS, 2026). PBIS conceptualizes behavior as responsive to environmental and instructional conditions, emphasizing the role of such variables in promoting expected behavior (Gonsier-Gerdin). In higher education, implementing PBIS can help preservice teachers develop professional behaviors considered crucial for effective teaching while creating positive classroom cultures that foster success.

The High-Leverage Practices (HLPs) developed by the Council for Exceptional Children and CEEDAR Center (Aceves & Kennedy, 2024), provide four domains of essential instructional practices designed to support learners with diverse needs. The domain on behavioral and academic instruction includes two essential "pillar" practices: HLP 7, establishing a consistent, organized, and responsive learning environment and HLP 16, using explicit instruction. Definitions of these HLPs outline explicit expectations, active student engagement, purposeful practice opportunities, descriptive feedback, and reinforcement of appropriate behavior.

Although developed for different purposes, PBIS and HLPs are highly complementary frameworks. PBIS provides a behavioral framework for creating predictable, supportive learning environments through explicit expectations, active engagement, feedback, and reinforcement. HLPs identify the instructional behaviors effective teachers should consistently implement to establish and sustain those environments. Rather than viewing these frameworks as separate initiatives, teacher educators can use PBIS practices as concrete instructional routines through which HLPs are modeled, experienced, and practiced by preservice teachers.

Several of the instructional and behavioral practices described above mirror successful behavioral outcomes in broader college classroom research. Many faculty employ both preventive and reactive strategies, including establishing clear rules, treating students respectfully, and addressing undesirable behaviors promptly (Al Qahtani, 2016). A scoping review of college classroom-wide interventions identified 59 studies across 13 categories. Proactive strategies included guided notes, response cards, and peer-to-peer teaching (Curiel et al., 2022). These interventions, implemented with undergraduate and graduate students in various courses and modalities, generally produced positive results, indicating higher engagement and achievement, mostly measured by quiz and exam scores.

Collectively, this work suggests that instructional and behavioral practices implemented within coursework can meaningfully influence student engagement, participation, and professional behaviors. However, there is less emphasis in the literature on embedding evidence-based practices into the higher education environment to foster these skills in concrete and observable ways (Fonseca-Chacana, 2019; Schusler, 2006). Much teacher preparation occurs in campus-based coursework rather than field-based settings. Therefore, realistic simulations of positive behavior practice become important opportunities for faculty to both increase the relevance of what they are teaching while simultaneously improving college student behavior (specifically professional dispositions for preservice teachers).

This article proposes that teacher educators can intentionally cultivate professional dispositions by having preservice teachers experience the same evidence-based instructional and behavioral practices they will later be expected to implement themselves.

Drawing on PBIS and HLPs, practical examples are provided for embedding these approaches into everyday teacher preparation coursework.

Modeling Professional Dispositions Through Evidence-Based Faculty Practices

Dr. Martin is a teacher educator at a small, public university in New England. She loves preparing future teachers and is moved by how much her students care about children and their future profession. Many of her students balance coursework with employment, family responsibilities, and athletics.

Prior to her doctoral studies and transition to higher education, Dr. Martin spent many years teaching in K–12 classrooms. She observed that students were most successful when expectations were explicitly taught, learning activities were engaging and achievable, and effort was acknowledged through feedback and reinforcement. She came to view behavior as a skill set that could be taught, practiced, and strengthened through effective instruction and support.

Within her college courses, Dr. Martin noticed some recurring challenges. Students arrived late or missed class without communicating in advance. Assignment deadlines were often missed, accompanied by detailed explanations of competing demands. During class, some students were fully engaged while others became distracted by phones or unrelated tasks on their laptops. Yet many of these same students were thoughtful, kind, and genuinely committed to becoming teachers.

Reflecting on these experiences, Dr. Martin recognized that the professional behaviors expected of future educators were assessed as part of her institution's accreditation process but were not often taught explicitly. She also began to wonder why many of the instructional and behavioral

practices considered essential in P–12 classrooms were rarely applied by the instructor within teacher preparation coursework. If future teachers learned instructional practices through modeling and experience, could they also learn professional dispositions in the same way? She decided it was time to walk the walk.

Both established and anecdotal evidence indicate that preservice teachers may act in ways contrary to professional expectations. Faculty may wish that students behaved differently, but wishing is not a behavioral intervention. Therefore, faculty must prioritize and teach these skills with proportionate importance placed on content, pedagogy, and collaboration. It cannot be assumed a student inherently knows how to behave professionally, so faculty have some responsibility for directly teaching such expectations. This means adaptations to *instructor* practice and behavior within an environment where preservice teachers learn key dispositions to the profession. The integration of PBIS and HLPs may provide a framework for this practical application.

Such practices commonly associated with P–12 settings include timely feedback, descriptive praise, and frequent opportunities for students to respond (Barton et al., 2018; Center on PBIS, 2026; Demchak et al., 2020; Horner & Sugai, 2015; Lane et al., 2024; Moore et al., 2019). These techniques can be meaningfully and intentionally implemented within the college classroom through professional modeling by faculty through their own teaching, functioning as both instructional and dispositional supports. These practices are directly aligned with HLP 7, establishing a consistent, organized, and responsive learning environment, and HLP 16, explicit instruction through modeling, guided practice, and feedback.

TABLE 1: Professional Dispositions, Operationally Defined

Expectation	Looks like/sounds like
Regular Attendance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attend 90% or more of scheduled class meetings
Turning in Work Promptly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> By due date and time, 1 or fewer late assignments Late work accepted, BUT >1 late assignment affects professionalism score Email: Use greeting and professional title if applicable
Professional Communication in Person and Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brief and on topic Take turns talking Contribute Respond to email in a timely manner Accept/act on feedback Accept responsibility for choices Ask questions
Self-Directed Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Take risks with learning Time management and responsibility for consequences thereof Do the reading Bring your book to class Focus on this class Be on time
Exhibiting Respect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No online shopping, schedule-building, work for other classes Minimal phone use not related to class Camera on in online courses

Teaching Expectations

HLP 7 emphasizes establishing a consistent, organized, and responsive learning environment. One way faculty can model this practice within teacher preparation is by explicitly defining, teaching, and reinforcing professional expectations within coursework. When expectations are clearly defined as specific, observable behaviors, then explicitly taught, practiced, and reinforced, faculty do more than prevent classroom problems. They intentionally cultivate responsibility, professional communication, responsiveness to feedback, and self-directed learning. This approach

aligns with PBIS principles of proactive instruction and reinforcement, as well as HLP guidance emphasizing explicit instruction, structured learning environments, and frequent feedback. Further, teaching expectations in higher education reframes dispositions as skills that can be cultivated, rather than fixed traits. Consider Dr. Martin.

Beginning the following semester, Dr. Martin explicitly defines, teaches, and revisits expected behaviors throughout each course to strengthen student adherence to five professional dispositions identified within her accredited teacher education program. She breaks expect-

tations down into concrete, observable behaviors and provides students with opportunities to practice them, receive feedback, and experience reinforcement aligned with PBIS principles. Expectations are introduced on the first day of class, revisited during the second week, and then reviewed every three to four weeks throughout the semester. Students are also invited to contribute examples of what these expectations look and sound like in practice, including how professors can model professional communication and respect, thereby increasing student ownership and the relevance of the expectations. Table 1 provides Dr. Martin's operational definitions of professional dispositions. Once expectations for professional behavior are clearly defined and consistently reinforced, instructors can more intentionally structure ongoing opportunities for students to actively participate, receive feedback, and practice professional behaviors throughout the course.

Feedback and Opportunities to Respond

HLP 16 emphasizes explicit instruction through modeling, guided practice, opportunities to respond (OTR), and feedback. Faculty can model this practice by intentionally embedding varied OTRs and timely, descriptive feedback throughout coursework. When implemented intentionally, these practices reflect core principles of explicit instruction and positive behavioral support by making expectations transparent and learning active. The professor can model professional practice by delivering feedback that is timely, descriptive, and tied directly to observable behavior or performance, rather than vague evaluative statements. Take Dr. Martin, for example.

When a student tentatively raises his hand to attempt an answer to a prompt, Dr. Martin responds, "Aaron, thank you for taking a risk with your learning

by trying to answer. Good self-directed learning!” That same class period, when students give each other equal time to talk during a small group discussion, she says “Madisyn and Emma, thank you for making sure each person got a chance to express themselves, which is part of professional communication and respect.” The next class meeting, when all students come to class on time, Dr. Martin praises, “Thank you everyone for being punctual; it is professional AND respects my time.”

Regularly embedded OTRs sustain attention and engagement because they foster frequent participation. When students anticipate that at any moment, they will need to pause and reflect, respond, or apply skills, they are less likely to disengage or become off task and more likely to remain focused. Collectively, these practices increase involvement while making expectations for professional behavior clear. Consider again, Dr. Martin’s strategies.

Dr. Martin intentionally varies OTRs across modalities and levels of complexity while maintaining clear instructional purpose. Examples used regularly in her classes include:

- **Live-response tools** (e.g., Kahoot) to check understanding, prompt retrieval practice, and normalize participation from all students
- **Nonverbal response formats** (e.g., thumbs up / thumbs sideways / thumbs down, fingers held up corresponding to numbered choices) to quickly gauge comprehension and inform instructional pacing
- **Whole-group discussion** using structured prompts to support academic discourse and professional communication
- **Small-group discussion** to increase participation, peer

interaction, and collaborative problem solving

- **Brief written responses** completed during class to support reflection, accountability, and formative assessment
- **Guided notes** that require active completion during lectures or demonstrations
- **In-class readings** with embedded prompts that require annotation, response, or discussion

Consistent feedback and frequent OTRs create a learning environment in which student engagement, effort, and growth are explicitly reinforced. Through these experiences, preservice teachers repeatedly practice professional dispositions such as responsiveness to feedback, self-directed learning, and professional communication. Feedback becomes a tool for improvement rather than judgment, which supports persistence and willingness to take academic risks. Likewise, frequent OTRs normalize involvement, reduce reliance on a small number of highly participatory learners, and increase equitable engagement across the classroom.

Over time, students learn to interpret feedback as information about their own performance in such skills as considering constructive critiques, accepting responsibility, communicating effectively, and taking intellectual risks, even when responses are tentative or incorrect. Frequent participation and attending to feedback can be further strengthened when paired with class-wide systems that reinforce teamwork, accountability, and professional behavior across the community. In teacher preparation coursework, these systems also provide experiential learning through direct participation in evidence-based behavioral practices that preservice teachers may later implement in their own classrooms.

Group Contingencies and Token Economies

PBIS extends the instructional practices emphasized within HLPs by providing systems that reinforce engagement, accountability, and collaboration across an entire learning community. Group contingencies and token economies are one example of how these behavioral supports can simultaneously strengthen professional dispositions while modeling effective classroom practice (Chow & Gilmour, 2016; ibestt Project, 2017; Kim et al., 2022). Through participation in these systems, preservice teachers experience classroom-wide reinforcement structures which support motivation, accountability, and collective success while also strengthening their own professional dispositions (e.g., responsibility, professional communication, respect, and self-directed learning). The goal of this experiential learning is for preservice teachers to build skills in implementing positive behavioral systems, receive descriptive feedback, and experience reinforcement within those systems. Let’s check in with Dr. Martin.

In Dr. Martin’s courses on positive behavior supports, students directly participate in simulations of group contingencies and token economies as part of their preparation for future classroom implementation. Specifically, the class works as a whole group to earn points by practicing behaviors aligned with five professional dispositions identified within the teaching program at Dr. Martin’s institution. Once the points goal is achieved, students can select rewards from a menu aligned to the PALPATES (Privileges, Attention, Leadership, Praise, Assistance, Touch/Taste, Escape, Supplies) model of reinforcement (Riffel & Eggleston, 2016), adapted in age-appropriate ways for college students (see Table 2).

TABLE 2: College Course Rewards Menu Aligned to the PALPATES Model

Category	Aligned Reward Choices
Privileges	Choose a day for the class to listen to your choice of songs OR publicly interview Dr. M - any 10 questions that she HAS to answer
Attention	Slideshow of your pets and/or hobbies shown to the whole class OR one-on-one coffee with Dr. M
Leadership	Design and lead a 20 minute discussion for one week's topic
Praise	Positive email from Dr. M to your parents OR advisor and professors
Assistance	5 extra points on any assignment of your choosing
Touch/Taste	\$5 Dunkin card
Escape	24 hour extension on any assignment
Supplies	Fun pen, sticky notes, and eraser

CONCLUSION

Several months after making these changes, Dr. Martin notices a shift in her classroom. Students still face competing demands, occasionally turn in late work, or miss class, but expectations are discussed openly, participation is more consistent, and feedback conversations are more productive. Students increasingly communicate proactively, respond to feedback, and support one another in meeting shared expectations. Furthermore, class discussions about P-12 behavior supports have become more authentic, as the preservice teachers can draw on their own relevant experiences participating in systems of explicit instruction, reinforcement, and collective accountability. Professional dispositions are no longer viewed solely as characteristics to be assessed; they are intentionally taught, practiced, modeled, and reinforced throughout the teacher preparation experience.

Explicit instruction, a central feature of both PBIS and HLP 16, positions behavior as learned through direct teaching, with concrete examples, modeling, practice, and feedback. In schools, explicit instruction is used to teach expected behavior, much as children learn to write a sentence or add two-digit

numbers. Likewise, preservice teachers can learn professional behaviors with repeated exposure to faculty modeling of clear expectations, active engagement strategies, feedback, and reinforcement systems. Such experiences simultaneously support engagement, instructional prowess, and development of professional dispositions. Framing dispositions as essential competencies operationalized into observable and teachable behaviors reframes professionalism as dynamic and skills-based versus personality and traits-based.

It was stated earlier in this article that wishing is not a behavioral intervention. The frustrations that teacher preparation faculty experience are valid and substantiated. Faculty have an opportunity to engage in reflective practice, respond to student needs, and implement evidence-based instructional and behavioral practices. When preservice teachers repeatedly experience explicit expectations, active engagement, descriptive feedback, reinforcement, and collaborative accountability, they learn not only *about* evidence-based practice, but *through* evidence-based practice. Professional dispositions become skills that are intentionally cultivated rather than characteristics that are simply evaluated.

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