



PBIS Positive Behavioral
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DITCH THE CLIP! Why Clip Charts Are Not a PBIS Practice and What to Do Instead

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Introduction

Clip charts have been a common classroom strategy for many years. Once considered an effective tool for displaying behavioral progress and adherence to classroom rules, they may not be as helpful as once thought. In this practice brief, we describe how such strategies are inconsistent with a PBIS approach and, more importantly, can be harmful. We also provide alternative strategies that are evidence based and more likely to improve student behavior while promoting a safe, positive classroom.



What are Clip Charts?

Clip charts are visual cues (e.g., posters) that show feedback about the level of behavior performance for students in the classroom. In typical clip charts, each student has a clothespin with their name on it, and they can be “clipped” between green (acceptable), yellow (improvement needed), and red (unacceptable) zones on a poster. Similarly, a behavior pocket chart might show green, yellow, and red cards for each student. In any of these systems, each student’s level is displayed publicly, and changes are often announced to the whole class.

Why Do People Think Clip Charts are a PBIS Practice?

Clip charts may seem to be a PBIS practice because they have green, yellow, and red colors, which match the colors of the triangle. They also can allow for feedback to students and data collection to monitor progress. However, they are not a PBIS practice, and more effective practices can be used in their place.

Why are Clip Charts Not Recommended?

On the surface, clip charts seem like easy ways to signal when students are engaging in unwanted behavior, and they may initially appear effective, because changing a student’s level can be associated with an immediate decrease in unwanted behavior. However, in the long run, they have several negative side effects:



- **Ineffective in changing behavior class-wide.** Immediate reductions in unwanted behavior may occur for some students but typically not for students who need additional behavior support (and most often disrupt the classroom environment). We can ask ourselves (or our students), “who is always on red?” If we can easily list these students, then the chart is not effective in changing behavior.
- **Contribute to labeling and stigmatization.** Students who are regularly clipped can become labeled by their peers as troublemakers. Such stigma can increase the likelihood of future challenges and exclusionary discipline, particularly for students of color (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). If the majority of students who are clipped are students of color, students with disabilities, or students experiencing trauma, the use of clip charts may be contributing to inequities.

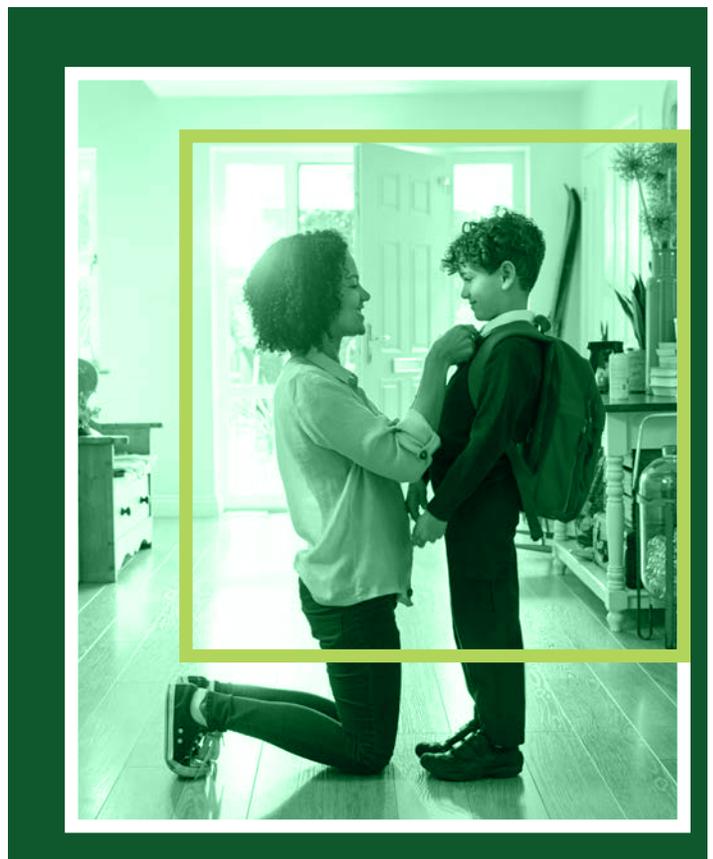


- **Focus on public corrections.** Teacher evaluations are not shared publicly with everyone at faculty meetings or displayed in staff rooms. For the same reasons, we should question whether student ratings should be shared openly. Clip charts are public evaluations of students that are continuously on display for everyone to see. If we don't want it for ourselves, it seems that we should avoid doing it to others. A system that ensures public corrections is essentially a system for shaming students.
- **Intensify anxious behavior and decrease engagement.** Clip charts often attract so much attention that students (even those who always stay on green) focus more on the chart than the lesson. One test is to observe the immediate reaction of students who are clipped, as well as the rest of the class: do students immediately become more actively engaged in instruction, or do they become withdrawn, further reducing their engagement?
- **Provide class-wide attention for unwanted behavior.** Clip charts may inadvertently increase rates of unwanted behavior instead of decreasing them. For example, if students act out to get attention, we might be reinforcing that behavior by calling them out in front of the class, leading to more acting out.
- **Don't teach the right way.** Clip charts merely communicate to the class that a student's behavior is unacceptable to the teacher and are otherwise uninformative. Being clipped does not signal what to do instead of the unwanted behavior. Most misbehavior comes from skill deficits, and clip charts do not address those missing skills. In many cases, students know that they are not behaving appropriately, so telling them what they already know may not help.

What are Some Better Alternatives to Clip Charts?

We understand the common-sense appeal of clip-chart systems. However, the negative side effects, lack of supporting evidence, and availability of more effective and appropriate strategies cause us to recommend the following alternatives to clip charts:

- **Establish positive expectations and routines.** Instead of assuming students know what to do, we can define, teach, and practice what we want to see, which is the most effective approach for improving behavior (Lee & Gage, 2020). See the Center's [Supporting and Responding to Behavior](#)¹ guide for implementing classroom PBIS systems.

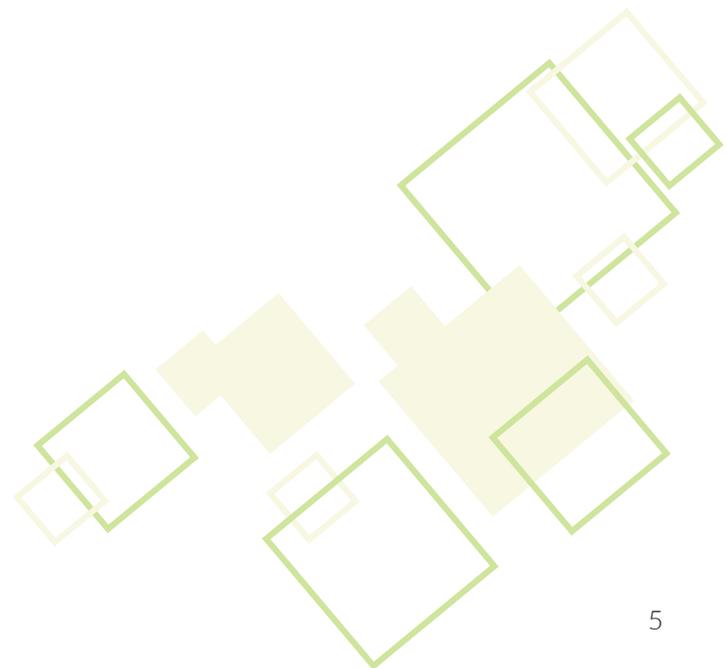




- **Start a positive reward system.** Create an interdependent group system, where prosocial behavior from any student moves the class one step closer to a social reward (e.g., marbles in a jar earns a free recess or movie when it's full). See how to set up the [Student/Teacher Game](#)² for a more effective way to improve behavior (Wahl, Hawkins, Haydon, Marsicano, & Morrison, 2016).
- **Use the "Praise Around" strategy.** When unwanted behavior is observed, look for and praise students who are nearby and doing what is expected. Then, be ready to quickly praise the student when they show expected behavior.
- **Point positive.** Instead of telling student what not to do, we can rephrase it as to be telling what to do. For example, instead of telling students to stop blurting out answers, we might remind them to raise their hands and wait to be called upon.
- **Intervene instructionally but privately.** Address unwanted behavior privately with the student to teach and practice the expected behavior. Assume they don't know what to do before assuming they are intentionally misbehaving. Most importantly, provide meaningful positive feedback immediately and frequently when the expected behavior is observed.
- **Teach emotional regulation skills.** Teach students to identify difficult situations (e.g., difficult work, being teased) and cues (e.g., anger, fear, distracted, sadness) that lead to unwanted behavior and replace it with effective coping behavior (e.g., taking three belly breaths, asking for a break, rehearsing a verbal statement). Practice when they are calm and receptive, then coach to recognize their emotions and use a calming routine (Renshaw, Bolognino, Fletcher, & Long, 2015).

Conclusion

Although clip charts might appear effective at the outset, we recommend more preventive and instructional approaches that teach students prosocial behavior and arrange the environment to encourage it, without deleterious side effects. We do better when we are wary of practices that rely on shaming. Instead, we recommend collaborating to build safe, predictable, and positive classrooms through [evidence based practices](#)¹. When challenges arise, seek support to create plans to respond instructionally.





References

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Embedded Hyperlinks

1. <https://www.pbis.org/resource/supporting-and-responding-to-behavior-evidence-based-classroom-strategies-for-teachers>
2. <https://www.pbis.org/resource/the-student-teacher-game>

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