

Rachael LaPolla

Case Study

BR is an African American student in 3rd grade at JB Elementary School in West Philadelphia. They live with their mother and two older sisters, 19 and 21, who occasionally stay at home and help with childcare responsibilities. BR transferred to JB in February of this school year. BR has had a challenging time adjusting to the new school and classmates. While their school work is at grade level, their behavior results in suspensions both in and out of school, leaving them at risk of declining grades because of low attendance in class.

During my regular check-ins with BR, they expressed feelings of isolation and a lack of acceptance in the new school. They shared that they felt they had no friends, a situation that was deeply affecting them emotionally. Recognizing the need for support, I initiated a small group intervention for the 8 new students who have joined the class in the 3rd semester. This intervention has proven crucial in providing a platform for the students to connect, share similar experiences, and feel more supported during a transition late in the school year. BR's ability to advocate for their needs has also been instrumental in helping the counselors gain insights into the emotional well-being of other new students and ways we can support them.

BR is regularly triggered by a fellow student who remarks about BR's father leaving them. In response, BR will chase the student around the room, attempting to hit them. Teachers report this occurring on almost a daily basis. To address this, I organized a restorative conversation with the students. This conversation proved to be a powerful tool in helping the students process the pain and frustration they were triggering in BR in an attempt to get their attention and have fun. I shared several ways the student can engage with BR, resulting in them having fun and not hurting their feelings. I facilitated games they could play during appropriate times so learning and the classroom environment would not be impacted. The other student is already receiving several Tier 2 and 3 interventions, and I communicated with their therapist about the recent struggles. The class has also received targeted lessons and interventions on bullying to raise awareness and increase peer support.

BR has a pattern of leaving the classroom without permission. In one instance, they came to my office and shared a student was making them angry, so they took some space and came to me to talk. I shared that I was proud they took the space they needed and got help, but reminded them they must tell their teacher to know they are safe. BR agreed to ask next time. This past week, BR left their classroom again, left the building, and was found at the corner of the school. When I spoke to BR, they said they were waiting for their sister to pick them up, so they went outside to wait for them. While this one occurrence of a student leaving the building has not been the only one, After speaking with BR about safety and our concern for their wellbeing, I also spoke to the leadership team about increasing the security at the school. One potential solution is to have all stairwell exits equipped with an alarm when they are activated. During events like fire drills or sanctioned use, the alarm can be turned off.

During a check-in, BR shared that they often do not have dinner at home and often miss breakfast, resulting in them being hungry and distracted throughout the day. BR stated their mother works late and sometimes forgets to prepare food for her. Because of a recent pest infestation, the mother is not keeping food in the house. I shared information about the free breakfast program at the school, which is available before arrival. I also shared the information with the classroom teacher so they could keep some snacks for them in the classroom if they miss breakfast. I contacted the mother and spoke with them about acknowledging her challenges and ensuring BR has access to food they can prepare independently when the mother is working.

Despite BR's behavioral challenges, they have strong grades, predominantly A's and some B's. They are very insightful and participate thoughtfully in discussions. When reviewing their report cards from previous schools, she has consistently demonstrated a strong work ethic and a high level of intelligence. This has been a source of pride for BR and something I remind them of when they are struggling. They are bright and highly capable, and working through some of the emotional struggles will give them more time to focus on their strengths.

BR has shown an increased positive regard for students in her small group and is demonstrating improved coping skills when dealing with students who are antagonizing them. BR's family has been connected with resources both within the school and with community organizations to

ensure they receive food and are not left hungry. After advocating for increased safety protocols in the school, the administration is developing methods to increase security.