

**The Positive Action System:
An Evidence-Based Whole-School Reform Strategy
for School Improvement Grants**

STRATEGY NARRATIVE

Carol Gerber Allred, Ph.D. (1983), public school teacher and administrator (1971-1982), founded the Positive Action Company more than 30 years ago to develop the Positive Action System, which she has expanded, updated, researched and evaluated continuously ever since. More than 15,000 schools and districts in every state, serving over 5 million students, have used this evidence-based, whole-school reform strategy. The Positive Action System meets the proposed strategy requirements, as this narrative will demonstrate.

1. Positive Action has evidence of effectiveness.

Positive Action has evidence of effectiveness that includes three studies that meet What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) evidence standards and found statistically significant favorable impacts. Positive Action has been WWC-listed since 2006. According to the WWC review, Positive Action **improved student achievement an average of 14 percentile points in reading and math** and improved student attainment by reducing retentions in grade and absenteeism.

Positive Action, Inc. is submitting three studies for consideration: one quasi-experimental matched-control study that, because it included demonstration of pretest comparability on academic outcome measures, meets WWC evidence standards with reservations ([Flay & Allred, 2003](#)), and two randomized controlled trials (RCTs) that meet WWC evidence standards without reservations ([Snyder et al., 2010](#); [Bavarian et al., 2013](#)). In both of the RCTs, schools were randomly assigned to conditions (Positive Action and Control) from matched pairs (10 pairs of urban, suburban and rural schools [primarily Pacific Island, Asian and White students] in Hawaii and 7 pairs of disadvantaged inner-city schools in Chicago [primarily African-American, Hispanic and White students] so that, despite the small numbers, schools in the two conditions were statistically equivalent at baseline. In each trial, a cohort of students was followed, from grades 2 and 3 to grade 5 in Hawaii and from grades 3 to 8 in Chicago.

For academic outcomes consistent with the WWC, we report below the Improvement Index (II, percentile gain for the average student; this means that some results appear to be different than the originally reported %RRs); for behavioral outcomes affecting academic outcomes, we report the percent relative improvement (%RR, the difference between groups at post-test minus any difference at pretest all divided by the control group pretest mean); for both kinds of outcomes, we also report (where available) the related standardized effect size (ES).

Achievement: The Quasi-Experimental study ([Flay & Allred, 2003](#)), which used archival, school-level data from a large urban southeastern school district (primarily White, African-American, Hispanic, Caribbean and Native American students), suggested that Positive Action produced effects on multiple student outcomes during elementary school. These included a **45% improvement in standardized reading scores** (with this effect being larger in schools with higher proportions of students receiving free/reduced price lunch).

This study also allowed for follow-up analysis of the performance of students in middle schools and high schools with different proportions of Positive Action graduates from elementary schools. Middle schools with higher proportions of Positive Action graduates reported a **21% increase in standardized reading scores and a 16% increase in standardized math scores**. High schools with higher proportions of Positive Action graduates also reported **improved scores on standardized tests: 11% for reading and 10% for math**. This study suggests that Positive Action improves the program schools of the elementary level as well as the schools they feed into for both middle school and high school.

The Hawaii RCT also produced effects at the end of 5th grade after three or four years of the program on indicators of school achievement, including **improvements of 22% (ES =.58) and 19% (ES=.50) on nationally-standardized reading and math test scores** (Terra Nova 2nd Edition), respectively, and

improvements of 26% (ES=.72) and 25% (ES=.69) for the state reading and math tests (Hawaii Content and Performance Standards), respectively (Snyder et al., 2010).

The Chicago RCT also produced effects on academic performance ([Bavarian et al., 2013](#)). One notable outcome was that the **value-added metric for improvement in reading during 8th grade was significantly better in PA schools compared with control schools (ES= .83, II=30%)**. Program effects for reading favored African-American students, particularly boys (ES=1.5, II=43%). Moderate effects were also obtained for all students' **math (ES=.38, II=15%)**, although these were only marginally significant because of the small N of schools (one-tailed $p=.07$).

Attainment: The Quasi-Experimental study found a 13% reduction in absenteeism and a 34% reduction in suspensions in elementary schools. Middle schools with higher proportions of PA graduates reported 69% fewer disciplinary referrals (with this effect being larger in schools with higher proportions of African-American students) and 75% less absenteeism. High schools with higher proportions of Positive Action graduates reported lower absenteeism (12%). Notably, speaking to long-term attainment, these schools also reported higher rates of high-school graduation (38%) and post-graduation job acquisition (18%) or enrollment in tertiary education (38%).

The Hawaii RCT also produced effects at the end of 5th grade after 3 or 4 years of the program on indicators of student attainment, including 24% less absenteeism, 60% lower retention in grade, and 69% fewer suspensions (Snyder et al., 2010). In the Chicago RCT, PA schools reported 28% lower absenteeism rates, and 24% fewer suspensions. In PA schools teachers rated students as more highly motivated (II=15%, ES=.39) and rated their academic ability higher (II=6%, ES=.14) (Bavarian, et al., 2013).

2. The Positive Action System is designed to meet the strategy requirements.

a. To improve student academic achievement and attainment.

Positive Action has multiple strategies to improve student academic achievement and attainment. They are:

i. To provide high-quality instruction and learning in English/Language arts and to provide extensive content on which to practice and apply the instruction so that deep learning takes place. In order to identify and confirm that Positive Action teaches the English/language core content appropriately, the system has been aligned with the English/Language Arts Common Core. Positive Action has also aligned to the current English/Language Arts Standards for states that have not adopted Common Core standards.

Positive Action has used standards alignment as a method of identifying and confirming its appropriateness, completeness and accuracy as a program for successfully teaching and learning in English/language arts. The alignment analysis shows that on average, Positive Action lessons align to approximately 11 standards and six expectations **per lesson**. This analysis indicates that students have continual opportunities to practice and be positively reinforced for achieving the standards correctly.

ii. To use ample, engaging content to motivate students to learn the English/language arts concepts and standards. All students are taught age-appropriate Positive Action lessons with engaging and inspiring English/language arts content. The large assortment of curriculum activities and materials includes stories, games, dramas, poetry, class discussion, manipulatives, age-appropriate puppets, art projects, songs, posters, journals and many others. The system is a year-long curriculum with 140 fifteen-minute lessons on each grade level that they enjoy learning and look forward to participating in.

iii. To teach directly the skills for higher-order thinking, which are priority goals of the Common Core State Standards and the other states' standards. Positive Action teaches higher-order and critical thinking by teaching students the whole process of thinking. Its Think-Act-Feel circle shows them that they have a thought that leads them to an action and the action leads to a feeling about themselves, which leads back to another thought. Comprehending and consciously applying this intuitive approach to the thinking process adds breadth and depth to their thinking and shows them the relationship of thinking to behavior and feelings of self-worth. This higher-order thinking benefits their learning ability and adjustment to life.

iv. To teach thinking skills directly. Of the six units taught at all grade levels, half of Unit 2 is devoted to teaching thinking skills—the positive actions of the intellectual area. In this unit, important thinking skills such as problem solving, decision-making, reasoning, thinking creatively, memorizing and forming good study habits are taught directly with useful tools and experiential practice to solidify the learning. When students learn these thinking skills, they are conscious of them and can use them intentionally to achieve more and feel better about themselves. Units 3 through 6 extend these skills. The Positive Action curriculum encourages students to work together in pairs, small groups and at the classroom level to use their newly learned intellectual and social-emotional skills through teamwork.

v. To intrinsically motivate students to achieve and attain in academics—language arts specifically. Positive Action teaches that you feel good about yourself when you do positive actions, and that learning to read, write, listen and obtain other English/language arts skills are positive actions important to building feelings of self-respect. This is important, because feeling good about oneself is a very powerful intrinsic motivator. Teaching this concept to students and then reinforcing it in the school, family and community when they use these skills/positive actions helps them internalize it and enjoy the intrinsic reward of feeling good about themselves. This behavioral change enhances their academic performance and helps students move from their alternative or special schools (or in Tier II or III) back in to regular (Tier I, universal) schools.

vi. To teach students prerequisite skills for learning. The system identifies and teaches the prerequisites successful learners must have: maintaining good health by eating nutritiously and exercising; problem-solving and decision-making; managing time, talents and feelings; getting along with others by being respectful and empathetic; being honest with themselves and others and not blaming others; and knowing their strengths and weaknesses and continuously improving themselves through setting and achieving goals.

By teaching these skills to all students, those without prior knowledge of them have an equal opportunity to learn, so they, too, can achieve academically and in life. Since these skills can never be totally mastered, *every* student benefits from knowing what the important learning skills are and how well they are employing them.

vii. To ensure more time on task. Research shows that one of the surest ways to improve academic achievement is with more “time on task,” which extends learning time because the time available for teaching is more productive. When students are taught directly how to think, behave and be motivated in a positive manner, their behavior improves. Less time is spent on problem behaviors and other distracting issues in the classroom, and more quality time is available to devote to academics.

b. To be implemented for all students in a school—all students in the school receive the system.

Positive Action provides curriculum kits for each grade level Pre-K–12 with 15- to 20-minute scoped and sequenced lessons designed to be taught by the classroom teacher to all students. The Positive Action System also includes

- a school climate program to be implemented school-wide, which coordinates and unifies the whole school community with a common language and shared vision.
- an Elementary Bullying Prevention Supplement Kit, Elementary and Secondary Drug Education Supplement Kits, a Counselor’s Kit and a Conflict Resolution Kit are supplements that can be used for all Tiers.
- a Family Kit offered to parents of every student that teaches them how to use Positive Action at home with the whole family.
- a Community Kit showing how Positive Action can be used to enhance community partnerships.

In addition to working for all students (Tier 1), Positive Action also works at Tier 2 and 3. Program elements can be combined and customized for individuals, small groups and classrooms, according to data, using any of the materials in specific ways to work at multiple levels: universal, intervention and/or treatment.

c. Positive Action addresses optimally and in a coordinated manner whole-school reform with a system that addresses school leadership, teaches an academic content area, provides student non-academic support, and includes family and community engagement.

The Positive Action System is integrated and unified by an overarching philosophy that applies to all materials for a whole-school community and the accompanying professional learning, all of which is of the highest quality in presentation, completeness and meaning. It is coordinated by a philosophy that forms the foundation for the whole system. The philosophy that you feel good about yourself when you do positive actions is applied practically through a Thoughts-Actions-Feelings about Self Circle, and the positive actions, or skills, that it teaches are for the whole self: the physical, the intellectual and the social and emotional.

The content is taught through the same six units at each grade level and in all other components. This content comes in completely prepared toolkits with manuals, posters, activity sheets, journals and manipulatives. It provides the basis for the Pre-K–12 curriculum. There are supplemental kits for substance abuse, bullying and violence prevention, for elementary and secondary principals for climate development, and for counselors. There's also a Family Kit and Family and Parents' Classes Kits, and a Community Engagement Kit.

i. School Leadership. Positive Action has a Principal's (Climate) Kit and complementary training options to develop school leadership. Its materials cultivate school-wide factors essential to successful school turnaround efforts:

- a committee with representatives from the whole school—the administration, a teacher from each grade level, support staff, students, parents and community members—to direct implementation and conduct regular meetings;
- activities and items for the whole school population, to coordinate all students' academic and other activities and to encourage and reinforce positive behaviors (i.e. assemblies, newsletters, Words of the Week cards, ICU Doing Something Positive boxes, stickers, tokens, music and more);
- Handbooks for parents and support staff explaining their roles in creating a positive, supportive school culture.

All are based on a single implementation schedule coordinating every participant with the activities for a successful and sustainable school turnaround effort.

ii. Teaching and learning in the English/Language Arts content area with professional learning, including but not limited to the following examples of Common Core and other states' English/Language Arts Standards:

- **Reading Standards for Literature**—Key Ideas and Details; Integration of Knowledge and Ideas; Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity.
- **Reading Standards: Foundational Skills**—Fluency: Read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension; Read on-level text with purpose and understanding.
- **Speaking and Listening Standards**—Comprehension and Collaboration: Participate in collaborative conversations with diverse partners about grade topics and texts with peers and adults in small and larger groups; Follow agreed-upon rules for discussions (e.g., gaining the floor in respectful ways, listening to other with care, speaking one at a time about the topics and texts under discussion); Summarize the points a speaker makes and explain how each claim is supported by reasons and evidence.
- **Writing Standards**—Research to Build and Present Knowledge: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research; Production and Distribution of Writing: produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.
- **Language Standards**—Vocabulary Acquisition and Use: Acquire and use accurately grade-appropriate general academic and domain-specific words and phrases, including those that signal contrast, addition and other logical relationships (e.g., however, although, nevertheless, similarly, moreover, in addition).

The alignment analysis indicates a high-level of alignment with each of these academic standards. Positive Action also emphasizes professional learning for educators, parents and community members and provides high-quality training and professional learning that can be designed to fit the school's specific needs and goals. Participants learn how to use the tools and develop their teaching methods and professionalism for maximum effectiveness, so students become engaged in deep learning, teachers improve the quality of their teaching,

leaders become more effective, and parents create positive, functioning families while community members engage in building more positive communities.

Orientation and Ongoing training and Professional Development proceed systematically, building the scope and the depth of understanding needed for optimal implementation of this coordinated system. Positive Action's Self-training Professional Development learning kits, face-to-face and/or online training, train the trainers, ongoing support and technical assistance have been highly praised and are effective at engaging the participants in an enthusiastic manner. These efforts will help schools sustain their adopted systems after the initial implementation period.

iii. Student non-academic support. Positive Action is an evidence-based program in many non-academic support areas and is on many widely-recognized lists or registries of non-academic resources.

Positive Action has been found to significantly mitigate the normal decline in positive behavior/character as students move from grade 2/3 to grade 8—ESs of .46 in the Hawaii trial and .58 in the Chicago trial ([Washburn et al., 2011](#)). The Hawaii RCT also produced effects at the end of 5th grade after 3 or 4 years of the program on substance use (44% reduction), violence (52% reduction) and unsafe sexual behavior (83% reduction) ([Beets et al., 2009](#)). The Chicago RCT produced similar effects on substance use (31% and 11% reductions at the end of 5th and 8th grades, respectively), violence (36-51% reduction, depending on the measure) at grade 5 ([Beets et al., 2009](#)) and grade 8 ([Lewis et al., 2012](#); [Lewis, Schure et al., 2013](#)). The Chicago RCT also produced results for emotional/mental health outcomes like anxiety (18% reduction) and depression (17%) ([Lewis, DuBois et al., 2013](#)), positive health behaviors (e.g., nutrition, physical activity and hygiene, (including a marginally significant 23% reduction in BMI) (Bavarian et al., under review), and teacher, students and parent reports of school climate/quality (effect sizes 1.26 to 1.61) ([Snyder et al., 2012](#)).

Because of these results, the Council of Administrators for Special Education (CASE) endorsed Positive Action for improving academics, behavior and character with special as well as regular students. It is also a 2013 SElect program for the Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL); one of only 11 model programs on the Blueprints for Health Youth Development (Annie E. Casey Foundation) list; on SAMSHA's National Registry for Prevention Programs (NREPP) for prevention of substance use; and on two of the Office of Juvenile Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) registries and the Office of Justice StopBullying.org list, as well as many other national and international accolades. It is also on the WWC Character Education list for reducing problem behavior, with a 19% reduction in suspensions and substance use. Positive Action is the only system on *all* of these lists.

iv. Family and community engagement. The Positive Action evidence-based Family Classes program has had two Randomized Controlled Trials ([Flay, 2010](#)). They show a 17.2% decrease in Family Conflict, 9.8% increase in Family Cohesion and 14.2 % increase in Child/Parent bonding. The Family Classes are based on the Family Kit, which parents use at home to teach their children the same skills that teachers are instructing in their school classrooms and school leaders are encouraging everyone to practice and reinforce school-wide.

The Positive Action Community Kit, with a manual and other materials (Family Kit, Conflict Resolution Kit and Media Kit), engages the community in supporting the school. These materials describe how community leaders and members can hold community-wide events and partner on other positive projects with business groups, health and welfare agencies, media, law enforcement and judicial entities, and others, thereby developing a positive community and linking it to positive schools (i.e. a school wants to encourage better health habits in students so it partners with community groups to hold a community-wide health fair displaying the groups' approaches to improving health). The Community Kit manual suggests positive projects that members of community groups could do to support the schools.

Conclusion

Requiring evidence-based strategies for School Improvement Grants is an excellent opportunity for districts and schools to adopt effective strategies. These efforts will certainly benefit schools and local communities. Positive Action, Inc. is proud to offer its proven system for consideration as an eligible strategy.