



JONAH: A Positive Behavior Strategy

By Dr. Kathleen VanTol

Module 1: Launching the JONAH Strategy



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Shalom

Shalom is a Hebrew word meaning peace, harmony, wholeness, completeness, and prosperity. There are three expectations of shalom that capture the essence of its definition:

- Shalom demands physical and material well-being and dignity for all things.
- Shalom insists that every relationship is just and right.
- Shalom requires that each person has spiritual integrity and uprightness of character ([Engbrecht, 2021](#)).

JONAH: A Positive Behavior Strategy

The JONAH strategy is a framework based on the biblical story of JONAH that calls educators to offer **Just Opportunities**, guide students toward **New Actions**, and never stop believing in the transforming power of **Hope**. These principles are grounded in grace, accountability, and the belief that every student is capable of growth.

- **Just Opportunities.** Providing equitable teaching, accountability, second chances, and supportive environments.
- **New Actions.** Teaching and reinforcing better behaviors through structure, coaching, and care.
- **Hope.** Trusting in the potential of every student to succeed through grace, persistence, and encouragement.

Module 1 will focus on the **Just Opportunities** portion of the JONAH strategy, aligning our teaching practices with the biblical principles of justice and shalom.

Creating a Positive Learning Atmosphere

Creating a space where students can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally, a place of shalom, means designing a classroom environment where students are encouraged to develop the pro-social behaviors and life skills needed for success both now and in the future. The concept of shalom in Scripture is deeply tied to justice, mercy, and peace in community. These values are echoed in verses like Micah 6:8 ([*Holy Bible, New International Version, 2011*](#)), which calls everyone to "act justly and love mercy," and James 3:18, which says that peace makers "reap a harvest of righteousness." A classroom that provides Just Opportunities using a **Positive Behavior Support (PBS)** plan seeks shalom through structure, mutual respect, and pro-social skill building. Adopting a PBS plan helps educators do just that because it creates a context for consistently teaching and reinforcing student actions that support learning and community. A PBS plan is a proactive and structured approach to promoting appropriate behavior and creating a supportive classroom environment, a place of shalom. Key components of a PBS plan include clearly

defined behavioral expectations, explicitly taught routines and procedures, and consistent positive reinforcement to encourage desirable behaviors.

This type of plan works well with a school's [Response to Intervention \(RTI\)](#) framework because collecting data on student behavior and then using that data to inform decisions is part of a typical PBS plan. Using data in this way allows those students who are struggling to meet expectations to be quickly identified and for targeted interventions to be put in place ([American Institutes for Research, 2025](#)). RTI is also referred to as a [Multi-Tiered System of Support \(MTSS\)](#) due to the tiered supports that make up the framework. At the whole class or Tier 1 level of the RTI/MTSS framework, in addition to receiving well-designed academic instruction based on educational best practices, all students are explicitly taught the rules and expectations for behavior (i.e., the PBS plan). These Tier 1 universal strategies are discussed in modules 1-3 of this text. While this is a very successful system, some students will still demonstrate a need for the more targeted Tier 2 interventions which are covered in modules 4-5. Finally, methods for developing Tier 3 individualized plans for those with more intensive needs are covered in modules 6-7 with module 8 serving to tie all the elements together ([IRIS Center, 2022](#)). At its core, a PBS plan, whether it is a stand-alone system or part of an RTI/MTSS framework, focuses on teaching and reinforcing positive behavior rather than punishing misbehavior and on helping students develop the skills they need for long-term success in school and beyond ([McLeskey, et al., 2022](#); [IRIS Center, 2012/2021](#)).

One opportunity for educators to enhance their PBS plan in a way that specifically looks to prepare students for success in future careers and community life is to align the behavioral expectations with the [Iowa 21st Century Employability Skills](#). The goal of *Iowa's 21st Century Employability Skills* is to equip students with the essential personal, interpersonal, and workplace skills they need to succeed in careers, lifelong learning, and civic life. These skills, which include communication, collaboration, responsibility, ethical behavior, self-direction, and problem-solving, prepare students to thrive in a rapidly changing world. Aligning the PBS plan with the *Iowa 21st Century Employability Skills* will give educators a

clear structure to guide behavior in a positive way and will give students a strong foundation for the future ([Department of Education, 2007](#)).

<i>Iowa 21st Century Employability Key Skill Areas</i>	
Communication	Expressing ideas clearly.
Collaboration	Working well with others.
Responsibility	Being dependable and accountable.
Ethical Behavior	Making honest, respectful choices.
Initiative	Taking action and showing self-directions

K VanTol's summary of the key skills areas identified in the *Iowa 21st Century Employability Skills*.

Establishing Expectations, Procedures, and Routines

Effective classroom behavior planning, like academic planning, is most successful when it begins with clear, intentional objectives. Using a [backward design](#) approach of first identifying the desired outcomes, then determining what evidence would show success, and finally devising the instructional elements and other supports that will guide students to meet the chosen outcomes, helps ensure that every behavior expectation is aligned with meaningful indicators of student growth. [Wiggins and McTighe \(2005\)](#) emphasize that backward design keeps educators focused on what matters most, allowing them to plan proactively rather than reactively. When it comes to behavior, this means identifying what teachers want students to *learn to do*, skills like responsibility, teamwork, communication, and self-management, rather than reactively addressing what they want students to *stop doing*.

If educators want to focus on what they want students to learn to do, then beginning their Positive Behavior Support (PBS) planning with the *Iowa 21st Century Employability Skills* makes sense. These standards clearly define the behaviors and attitudes students need to be successful in school, careers, and community life. By aligning student expectations and interventions with these skills, teachers create behavior systems that are not only consistent and supportive but also deeply purposeful. Instead of treating behavior as

separate from learning, this approach integrates it into the broader mission of education, which is to prepare students to thrive both now and in the future.

Step 1: Use the standards to identify student expectations

The *Iowa 21st Century Employability Skills* identify critical skill areas that connect to the student behaviors educators want to see now and that give purpose and long-term relevance to these classroom expectations. The website breaks the standards down into the following grade bands: K-2, 3-5, 6-8, and high school. The standards are then unpacked and specific, observable behaviors for each standard are identified. This is a helpful resource for identifying the evidence that would show students have successfully met the desired outcome ([Department of Education, 2007](#)). The following examples demonstrate the process of using the standard to identify the desired student expectation, including the reasoning for why this outcome aligns with this standard.

Sample Student Expectations (Elementary)

Grade K-2	
Standard	21.K–2.ES.1 – Communicate and work appropriately with others to complete tasks.
Student Expectation	I can take turns and listen when others are speaking.
Connection	This expectation fosters good listening skills and respectful communication, which is the foundation of effective collaboration.
Link to the K-2 Standards	https://educate.iowa.gov/pk-12/standards/academics/21st-century-skills/employability/grades-k-2

Grade 3-5	
Standard	21.3-5.ES.2 - Adjust to various roles and responsibilities and understand the need to be flexible to change.
Student Expectation	I can work cooperatively in a group by taking turns, sharing materials, and completing my part of the task.
Connection	In group work, students practice recognizing and respecting the different roles team members play. By taking responsibility for their part and adapting when those roles shift, students develop collaboration skills and flexibility, important traits for future employability and community involvement.
Link to the 3-5 Standards	https://educate.iowa.gov/pk-12/standards/academics/21st-century-skills/employability/grades-3-5

 *Sample Student Expectations (Middle School/High School)*

Grade 6-8	
Standard	21.6–8.ES.4 – Develop initiative and demonstrate self-direction in activities.
Student Expectation	I can use class time wisely and stay on task to finish my work.
Connection	When students stay focused and use their time well, they show self-direction and take ownership of their learning, which is important for success in school, work, and life.
Link to the 6-8 Standards	https://educate.iowa.gov/pk-12/standards/academics/21st-century-skills/employability/grades-6-8-employability-skills

High School	
Standard	21.9–12.ES.4 – Demonstrate initiative and self-direction through high achievement and lifelong learning.
Student Expectation	I can set personal academic goals and monitor my own progress.
Connection	Goal setting and self-monitoring exemplify lifelong learning habits and personal accountability.

Link to the 6-8 Standards	https://educate.iowa.gov/pk-12/standards/academics/21st-century-skills/employability/high-school
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Step 2: Identify the evidence that would demonstrate achievement of the outcome

Now that student expectations have been identified, the best way to work on the next step is to create a matrix that includes the student expectations in the row at the top and the various settings in the school in the first column down the side. If the PBS plan is linked to the *Iowa 21st Century Employability Skills*, it makes sense to include the relevant skill categories in the corresponding row across the top as well. Then, for each of the cells of the matrix, identify examples of appropriate, positively stated, observable behaviors in those settings in relation to the student expectations.



Student expectations for behavior should align to goals that promote employability.

Piacquadio, A. (2020, February 24). *Shallow focus photo of a woman smiling while holding a pen*. Pexels.com (CC free to use)

 <i>Sample PBS Matrix</i>					
Employability Skills	Communication	Collaboration	Responsibility	Ethical Behavior	Take Initiative
Student Expectations	I can express ideas clearly & listen actively.	I can work effectively with others.	I can take responsibility for my actions and finish what I start.	I can do what's right even when it's hard.	I can notice what needs to be done without waiting to be being told.
Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use respectful tone • Raise hand and wait turn to speak • Listen when others talk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take turns • Help others • Respect differing opinions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bring material to class • Complete assignments on time • Follow directions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be honest • Do your own work • Treat others fairly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start work right away • Ask questions when unsure • Look for ways to help
Hallways	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greet others politely • Use appropriate volume 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share the space • Walk with awareness of others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stay in line • Go directly to your destination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report unsafe behavior • Be kind to all students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow routines independently
Lunchroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use polite words • Talk quietly with others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include others • Wait your turn 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clean up after yourself • Use time wisely 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow rules even when not supervised 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer to help staff or peers
Playground	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use kind language • Resolve conflicts with words 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take turns • Share equipment • Encourage others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow game rules • Use equipment appropriately 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Play fair • Be gracious in both winning and losing • Apologize when needed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite others to join • Practice problem solving
Online/Tech Use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use respectful digital language • Think before posting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give credit to all group members • Use shared tools responsibly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stay on task • Submit your own work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use technology ethically • Protect personal information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify resources and how to access them • Seek help appropriately

Step 3: Teach it explicitly

When using a backward design approach, after educators have identified the outcomes they are looking for and have pinpointed the evidence that would demonstrate student success in meeting the outcomes, the next step is lesson design. Just as a teacher wouldn't leave it to chance that a student would learn the process of photosynthesis by simply putting up an inspiring poster on the classroom wall and adding some green plants to the windowsill, educators shouldn't leave it to chance that students will meet behavioral objectives without explicit instruction. This is where having aligned student expectations to the *Iowa 21st Century Employability Skills* is useful. Teachers are skilled at designing instruction based on academic standards and using classroom time to help students meet objectives that build a foundation for future employability and community involvement is a meaningful investment.

Sample Teaching Plan

Goal: Students will demonstrate responsible behavior by arriving prepared and starting tasks on time.

What does this look like in this classroom when students are successful?

- Students bring materials to class
- Students transition to “bell ringer” activities by the start of class
- Students begin work independently

Instructional Sequence:

- **Model the behavior (I Do).**

Show exactly what it looks and sounds like to meet the expectation. For example, physically demonstrate walking in quietly, opening materials, and beginning bell work. At the same time, incorporate a [think-aloud strategy](#). This is when the teacher audibly narrates their thoughts in order to make the thinking behind each decision clear to students. This makes the purpose behind the behavior visible. An example of a think-aloud might sound like this: "I'm grabbing my notebook now so I'm ready when the bell

rings. This is me being responsible. I'm sure future me will thank me for this." It's okay to have a little fun with this but be cautious about using too much humor. Your meaning might get lost if you use too much silliness or sarcasm.

- **Practice together (We Do).**

Practice the routine as a class. Narrate what's going well. Provide encouragement and corrective feedback.

- **Independent application (You Do).**

Give students a chance to practice during authentic classroom activities.

- **Reinforce success.**

Providing reinforcement and constructive feedback should happen not just when the educator is initially teaching the behavior, but also over time. In this way, the teacher ensures that the expected behavior continues to happen. Research shows that the use of [behavior specific praise](#) is an effective way to reinforce student success. Behavior specific praise is positive feedback that clearly describes the exact behavior the student demonstrated. Rather than general praise like "Good job," behavior specific praise identifies what the student did well, helping to reinforce expectations and encourage repeat behavior. This type of praise can be even more effective when it is tied to student priorities, school values, or employability skills ([Iris Center, 2018](#)).

Some examples of behavior specific praise are:

"Great job taking responsibility to get started on your own.

I like how you showed self-direction."

"Nice job raising your hand and waiting your turn to speak.

That shows great self-control."


- **Track progress**, both in the short term and over the course of the school year.


Are students showing the specific behaviors that indicate they're meeting the identified goals? If not, maybe it's time to reteach. However, educators should also consider taking data on their own behavior. Perhaps the students are no longer meeting the goal because the teacher is no longer noticing and providing feedback on appropriate

behavior. Educators should ask themselves, “How will I make sure that I am providing enough positive reinforcement?” Estimates on how much positive reinforcement is needed vary, but in general teachers should aim for 4-6 positives for every corrective comment made ([Missouri Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support, 2025](#)).


Classroom Organization


A well-organized classroom isn’t just about physical setup. It’s about teaching classroom rules, routines, and expectations and providing consistency for the students. In this way, educators make sure that they are providing **Just Opportunities** for all their students. To do this, educators need to plan ahead for all the ways their students will be engaged in learning together during the school year. Before expecting students to engage in group work, teachers need to identify and teach the group work expectations. If students are expected to demonstrate self-direction, educators need to make sure the students understand the expectations around goal setting and opportunities for choice-making. If teachers are using station teaching, they must ensure that their students can successfully meet the classroom behavior expectations for transitioning successfully from one station to the next. An organizational checklist is a tool educators can use to think through all these considerations ([McLeskey et al., 2022](#)).

 <i>Sample Classroom Organization Checklist</i>		
Focus Area	Considerations	Checklist
Physical Spaces	Provide Just Opportunities that support independence, collaboration, and communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning areas are clutter-free and physically accessible • Materials for student use are clearly labeled • Spaces for group work are accessible and promote interaction • Quiet areas are available for self-regulation
Student Behavior Expectations	Provide Just Opportunities that support students in meeting behavior expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behavior expectations are posted, positively worded, and explicitly taught • Feedback and positive reinforcement is provided on student demonstration of behavioral expectations • Student success in meeting expectations is monitored and reteaching is provided when needed

 <i>Sample Classroom Organization Checklist</i>		
Focus Area	Considerations	Checklist
Daily routines	Provide Just Opportunities that support promote student responsibility, ethical behavior, and initiative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schedules or visual cues are provided to support learners • Classroom procedures, including transition expectations, are modeled and taught. • Procedures for non-classroom spaces (e.g., buying hot lunch, checking out a game during indoor recess, etc.) are taught.
Instructional Practices	Provide Just Opportunities that keep students engaged and support learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behavior expectations are practiced during authentic classroom activities • Instructional strategies prioritize active student engagement • Student progress is monitored and reteaching is provided when needed • Feedback and reinforcement are proactive and skill specific • Student success is celebrated

Teachers can use this organizational planning tool as a starting point to think about their own classroom context, modifying the tool to meet the needs of their specific situation.

 <i>Classroom Organizational Planning Tool</i>		
Focus Area	Considerations	Planning Prompt
Physical Spaces	Provide Just Opportunities that support independence, collaboration, and communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have designed my classroom learning space to support opportunities for students to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Work independently ○ Work together in small groups ○ Work with the teacher or other support staff ○ Cool down and self-regulate • I have set up and labeled the spaces so students can independently access materials.
Student Behavior Expectations	Provide Just Opportunities that support students in meeting behavior expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My behavior expectations are positively worded and posted in my classroom. • I have designed lessons for explicitly teaching student behavior expectations. • I have a plan to ensure I am providing a sufficient amount of feedback and positive reinforcement on student demonstration of behavioral expectations. • I have a plan for monitoring student success in meeting expectations and for identifying when reteaching is needed.

 Classroom Organizational Planning Tool		
Focus Area	Considerations	Planning Prompt
Daily routines	Provide Just Opportunities that support promote student responsibility, ethical behavior, and initiative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The schedule is posted and visual cues are provided for learners who may need that additional support. • I have a plan for teaching classroom procedures and routines, including transition expectations. • I have a plan for teaching and practicing procedures and routines for non-classroom spaces.
Instructional Practices	Provide Just Opportunities that keep students engaged and support learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have identified opportunities for practicing and providing reinforcement and feedback on student demonstration of expected behaviors during authentic classroom activities. • I have prioritized active student engagement during instructional activities. • I have a plan for monitoring student progress and identifying when reteaching is needed. • I have a plan for ensuring that I am providing feedback and reinforcement in ways that are proactive and skill specific. • I have a plan for ways to celebrate student success.

Putting it All Together

A positive behavior support plan aligned with the *Iowa 21st Century Employability Skills* flows naturally out of the JONAH Strategy. Providing a consistent, meaningful way to guide behavior that supports both immediate classroom success and long-term life skills is exactly what **Just Opportunities** is all about. When educators take the time to model and teach behavioral expectations to their students, including reteaching when necessary, they foster dignity and equity, building up future-ready students.

Choose and Use Challenge

“Does every system, routine, and interaction in my classroom move students toward becoming more respectful, responsible, and ready for life?”

One idea I will implement next week is ...

Glossary

backward design. An educational approach based on first identifying the desired outcomes, then determining what evidence would show success, and finally devising the instructional elements and other supports that will guide students to meet the chosen outcomes.

behavior specific praise. Positive feedback that clearly describes the exact behavior the student demonstrated.

Iowa 21st Century Employability Skills. A set of essential interpersonal and intrapersonal skills from the Iowa Core that prepare students for success in college, careers, and civic life. These include communication, collaboration, responsibility, ethical behavior, self-direction, and problem-solving.

Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS). A tiered framework of academic and behavior supports with all students receiving Tier 1 supports, some students (10-15%) receiving Tier 2 supports, and a few students (0-5%) receiving Tier 3 supports. Also known as Response to Intervention (RTI).

Positive Behavior Support (PBS). A proactive and structured approach to promoting appropriate behavior and creating a supportive classroom environment. Key components of a PBS plan include clearly defined behavioral expectations, explicitly taught routines and procedures, and consistent positive reinforcement to encourage desirable behaviors.

Response to Intervention (RTI). A tiered framework of academic and behavior supports with all students receiving Tier 1 supports, some students (10-15%) receiving Tier 2 supports, and a few students (0-5%) receiving Tier 3 supports. Also known as a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS).

think-aloud strategy. When the teacher audibly narrates their thoughts in order to make the thinking behind each decision clear to students.

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Want to Learn More?

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About the Author

Dr. Kathleen VanTol has over 35 years of experience working in the field of education. She holds a doctorate in special education from Western Michigan University and is a professor of special education at Dordt University. She is also a Board Certified Behavior Analyst and a Board Certified Advocate in Special Education.

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