

# Building Self-Regulation Through Positive Behavioral Supports:

## What It Took to Move One Student from Crisis to a Return to District



### Our Student Profile

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A six-year-old student entered Alpha School during the summer of 2025 after experiencing significant difficulty functioning successfully within a traditional educational setting. Upon enrollment, the student displayed frequent behaviors that interfered with learning, including screaming, throwing objects, kicking, and hitting peers and staff. These behaviors occurred most consistently when academic or work-related demands were presented, suggesting that escape from task expectations was a primary function of the behavior.

### The Initial Observation of Our Student

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Recognizing the student's low frustration tolerance and limited ability to regulate emotions during instructional activities, the support services team in addition to the academic staff immediately focused on establishing trust while creating opportunities for success whether in the classroom, during support services sessions and out-of-classroom activities.

Despite these accommodations, disruptive behaviors initially continued, demonstrating that simply reducing task difficulty was insufficient. Through our experienced staff, the student required explicit instruction in emotional regulation, coping strategies, and communication skills before meaningful academic progress could occur. This is where our level of support services helps to transition a challenging student from the heightened behavioral episodes to small but meaningful steps along the way.

*As we have done for other similar students with these challenges, the academic expectations were intentionally modified to include tasks below the student's instructional level to ensure early success and reduce performance anxiety. Staff consistently paired work expectations with positive reinforcement, relationship building, and predictable routines.*

## Structuring the Behavioral Interventions

The multidisciplinary team implemented a comprehensive behavioral support plan centered on teaching replacement behaviors rather than simply reducing inappropriate behaviors.

### Key interventions included:



Rather than escaping work through challenging behavior, the student gradually learned to request breaks appropriately, ask for walks when feeling overwhelmed, and communicate personal needs such as fatigue. Our support services and academic staff consistently reinforced these replacement behaviors while maintaining appropriate academic expectations. We also wanted the student to “feel” they are making progress, from our experience when a special needs student is self-aware of their progress, it does contribute to their success over time.

#### **His Progress and Outcomes**

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Within six months, measurable improvements became evident across multiple developmental stages. The student demonstrated increased tolerance for academic demands and began consistently completing work before earning scheduled breaks. Episodes of disruptive behavior decreased significantly as emotional regulation and frustration tolerance improved.

Equally important were the student's gains in social functioning. With our experience helping students with special needs and challenges, the evidence of gaining social functioning is so crucial as it has a domino effect to other areas of their growth over time. During recess and classroom free-choice periods, the student independently initiated interactions with peers, participated in cooperative play, and required fewer adult prompts to engage appropriately. Although paraprofessional support remained an important component of the student's program, the level of prompting steadily decreased as independence increased.

After about the first year in our program, the student's growth extended beyond behavioral stability. Communication skills improved, resilience increased, and self-advocacy became a consistent strength. Instead of reacting impulsively when overwhelmed, the student independently requested appropriate coping strategies and reliably returned to complete assigned work following breaks.

## Transition Planning

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As time progressed, the student's progress continued, we initiated collaborative discussions with the student's family and sending school district regarding a potential return to the district educational program. District representatives observed the student within the classroom environment and noted remarkable improvements in the student's ability to tolerate instructional demands, classroom noise, and daily routines.

While ongoing support from a designated paraprofessional was recommended to ensure continued success, the student demonstrated the behavioral, emotional, and academic readiness necessary to begin transitioning back to a less restrictive educational environment.

*The integration of our **sensory** component to our support program has proven to address a variety of challenges a student may have. To read more please see the articles below.*

[How Sensory-Friendly Classrooms Support Learning for Special Needs Students](#)

[Inside Gateway's Sensory Room: A Calming Space Designed for Growth](#)

## A Student's Success, Back to District

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This case illustrates that significant behavioral challenges are often rooted in skill deficits rather than defiance. Through consistent behavioral supports, individualized instruction, explicit teaching of coping strategies, and strong collaboration among educators and families, students can develop the emotional regulation, communication, and resilience necessary to thrive in increasingly independent educational settings.

The student's journey reinforces an important principle of specialized education: when challenging behaviors are viewed as opportunities to teach new skills rather than simply behaviors to eliminate, meaningful and lasting growth becomes possible.

## About RKS Associates

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Since 1980, RKS Associates has been a leader in providing the needs of special education students here in New Jersey. Our focus has been to create schools that provide a safe and nurturing environment for children with a variety of disabilities.

RKS Associates prides itself on fostering a safe and welcoming environment for every student through our network of special education schools in New Jersey. We invite you to come and experience a wide variety of opportunities, including therapy services, nursing, counseling, psychiatric consultation and support on a variety of levels, BCBA support, ABA services, adaptive physical education, art, music, transition, community-based instruction, and job sampling. We also incorporate an extended year program with the full range of services which enables the students to experience continuity in their special needs.

Please visit any of our three schools listed below to see for yourself just how comprehensive our programs are for children with special needs across a range of learning, social, language and behavioral challenges. Our goals are to help each and every student reach their fullest potential.



[www.alphaschool.com](http://www.alphaschool.com)



[www.thegatewayschool.com](http://www.thegatewayschool.com)



[www.harborschool.com](http://www.harborschool.com)

## References

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