

The Penikese Island School

On Success and Improvement

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Q: What is your success rate?

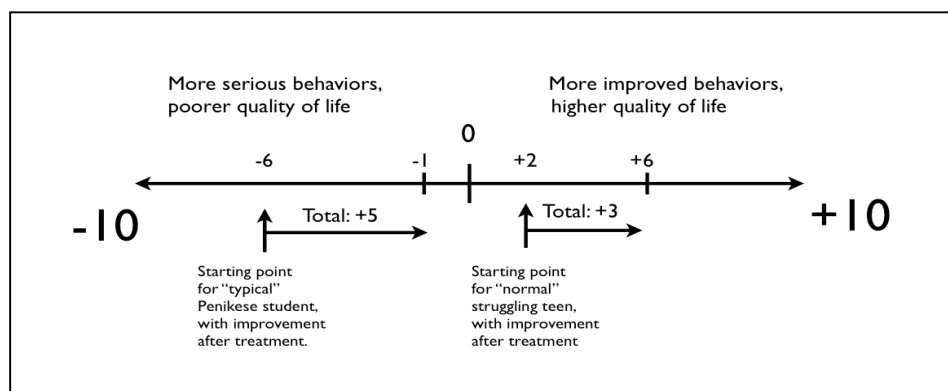
A: Before answering we usually try to reframe this question in some way other than as a "rate." The very expression *success rate* starts things off on the wrong foot by bringing to mind a group of boys all lined up at the same starting point and expecting them to run the same race against each other regardless of their individual needs, circumstances, advantages and disadvantages. Perhaps this isn't what people intend when they pose this important question, but it nevertheless tends to frame the discussion in narrower, either-or terms that fall short of telling the whole story.

This is why Penikese prefers to discuss success in terms of *improvement* and *percentage improvement*.

But let's back up a bit first: Penikese's goal is to help its students improve their behavior and ability to lead a fulfilling life to whatever degree possible given their circumstances. Any positive change represents some improvement in quality of life and a person that much less a burdensome or disruptive to their family, community and collectively, society. How much change occurs and how it manifests varies endlessly among individuals as much as the circumstances and challenges of the individuals themselves, yet we count and value them all.

Another thing to keep in mind is that generally, Penikese works with boys who have struggled in other settings and resisted earlier stage interventions and treatments. Although there can be many reasons for this, in general this is because these boys present with somewhat more complex and atypical combinations of life challenges. In other words, our boys tend to start "the race" at different points behind the starting line rather than all at the same place together.

To capture these individual differences and starting points more accurately, we envision a simple number line running from minus 10 to plus 10, with zero in the middle representing a threshold of normalcy. By assigning values to different factors (learning disability, mood disorder, family history, etc.), we can come up with a score that places them somewhere along the number line, thus creating a benchmark and starting point. Such a number line is presented below.<sup>1</sup>



Most Penikese students start treatment in the minus category whereas a so-called normal acting out and struggling teenager would place in the low positive numbers. As you can easily see in our imagined example, both boys made measurable improvements in their behavior, but what's not quite so easy to say is which is the greater success. One boy moved further along the line than the other in respect to his starting point, but they each started in different places with vastly different sets of circumstances and advantages and disadvantages.

Although one boy will likely never lead a completely trouble-free life even after substantial change in treatment, would it be fair or appropriate to call his case a failure? In fact, we would argue that the boy who started farther back is the greater success of the two. Even though the second boy finished at a higher level of functioning and is living a more conventionally normal life, the first boy went the farthest against steeper odds.

Using this number method of measuring success, we do not believe it a stretch to claim that Penikese's success rate is nearly 100% in that almost every boy spending meaningful time in our program comes away having changed for the better in some way greater or smaller. This is true even for those who for whatever reason never finished Penikese.

Of course we would like for all our boys, regardless of their circumstances and starting points, to go on to lead perfectly normal lives, but in some case this is simply not realistic. But do not discount relative success, even if imperfect or falls short of our standards and expectations.

Someday soon we hope to break success down into percentage improvement categories, perhaps a series of bar graphs showing for example that 98% of graduates show at least at least some measurable change in at least one domain, and that 75% show a 25% change (from using substances all the time to abstaining more often than not), and so forth. Stay tuned. Meanwhile, we welcome your comments and questions. These are difficult concepts, but worth the time and effort to wrestle with.

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<sup>1</sup> This number line was created for graphical and representative purposes in order to help people gain a different understanding of change and success, and makes no claim to scientific rigor. However, although the line and its numbers are somewhat arbitrary, it is far from meaningless in that the concepts of relative change and improvement it describes are quite real. Scientific validity, reliability and applicability are another ball of wax entirely. We are certain that this line will prove useful to measuring change and improvement from student to student and, for each student, from one domain or axis to another, as long as solid and defensible values can be agreed upon for the different risk factors tracked, and that these values are applied consistently among students sampled. We are aware of one major flaw in the number line concept, and that is that it lacks a logarithmic function. In other words, the further into the negative scale a student starts, the more difficult it is to progress towards positive (normal) territory. We are certain people who actually know what they are doing with this sort of thing would find other flaws as well!