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School Climate and Discipline: Going to Scale

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Introduction and Overview

Learning and teaching occur best in school climates that are positive, orderly, courteous, and safe. Defiant, disruptive, and violent behaviors decrease the effectiveness, efficiency, and relevance of teaching and learning for everyone. Schools are experiencing increasing difficulty in their effort to provide a full continuum of effective and positive learning and teaching environments for all students. Some of the challenges are

- General lack of discipline (e.g., disrespect, insubordination)
- Increasing school violence (e.g., assaults, fighting)
- Inefficient use or loss of instructional time (e.g., decreased achievement & teaching time)
- Over-reliance on punishment based, exclusionary programming (e.g., office discipline referrals, detention, suspensions, expulsions)
- Failed attempts to provide individualized and appropriate educational opportunities for students with disabilities and students from diverse backgrounds
- Lack of fluency with specialized behavioral practices (e.g., functional behavioral assessment, behavior intervention planning, teaching prosocial skills)
- Disenfranchisement of families and communities
- Fragmented, redundant, and inefficient multidisciplinary efforts

Multiple Perspectives

In response to these challenges, schools have increased their use of punishment-based and exclusionary policies and strategies. The assumption is that this “get-tough” approach will communicate to students that (a) deviant behavior will not be tolerated and (b) punishment will teach and promote more prosocial skills. Ironically, alone these responses have resulted in the creation of more negative, adversarial, and hostile school environments.

The issue isn't that schools don't care or that they don't have access to viable solutions. The real issue is that schools lack the capacity to adopt and sustain their use of effective solutions. If we are to make our investment in children meaningful and worthwhile, we must build cultures of social competence that support prosocial behavior and that maximize academic achievement for all students.

Professional concern has also emerged regarding the effectiveness and application of positive behavior supports with children with more intensive needs. There is a misperception that positive behavior supports are only effective with children that have mild and moderate behavioral needs. Positive behavior supports can effectively address a range of behavioral needs—from those who just need minor supports to those that require more intensive in-depth supports. In fact, the historical research base for positive behavior supports is largely based on applying this technology to children with significant behavioral needs.

Building positive cultures of social competence is not the result of inventing new solutions, increasing external controls, or asking teachers to do more. The answer focuses on enabling schools to “work smarter” by the enhancement of their organizational capacity to

- Adopt an agenda of primary prevention
- Be strategic about school improvement goals, results, and processes
- Accurately adopt and efficiently sustain their use of research-validated practices
- Establish local behavioral competence
- Provide a full continuum of behavior support for all students
- Use data to guide decision making and action planning
- Be part of a district wide system of behavior support

One way to achieve this enhancement is to apply a systemic and school-wide approach to Positive Behavior Support (PBS).

What Do We Know from Research about Positive Behavior Supports?

What is Positive Behavior Supports?

“PBS is a broad range of systemic and individualized strategies for achieving important social and learning results while preventing problem behavior” (Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support, 2001).

- The goal of PBS is to enhance the capacity of schools to educate all students, especially students with challenging social behaviors, by establishing an effective continuum of PBS systems and practices.
- PBS isn't another curriculum or program that is added to what is already occurring in schools. Schools can't afford to keep adding new initiatives whenever a new problem occurs, or implementing existing efforts with low fidelity/accuracy. Instead, PBS schools are asked to consider ways of “working smarter by doing less, but harder.”

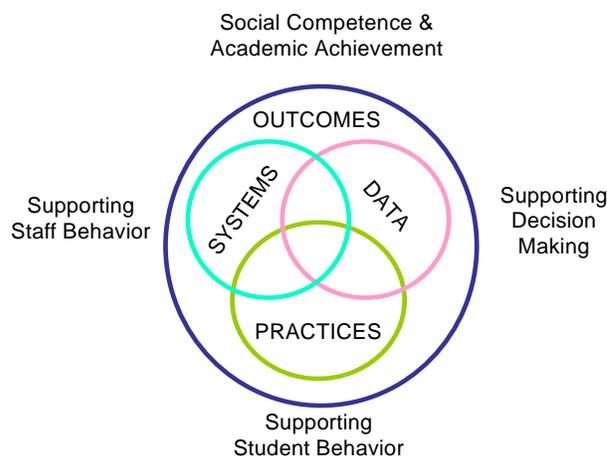
PBS is an integration of (a) valued results, (b) science of human behavior, (c) validated procedures, and (d) systems change.

What Do Schools that Adopt a School-wide PBS Approach Look Like?

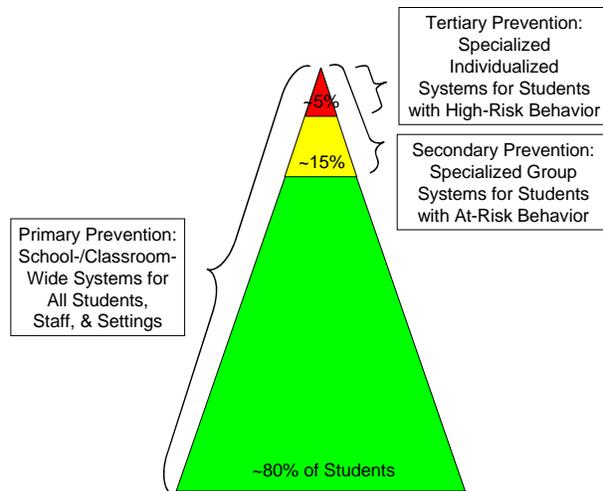
Schools that adopt a school-wide PBS approach have the following features:

- An agenda of primary prevention has priority and is visible school-wide.
- All students and staff members are taught the school-wide expectations and received regular and frequent opportunities to practice them and to be positively acknowledged when they use them.
- A majority (>80%) of students, staff, and families can state the school-wide positive expectations and give a specific behavioral example for each.
- Positive school-wide behavioral expectations are defined, taught, and encouraged for all students using a range of positive and negative examples.
- Most contacts between teachers and students are prosocial (positive and preventive) rather than corrective and punishing (i.e., 5-8 positives for every negative interaction).
- A full continuum of PBS is available for all students at the school and district levels.
- Behaviorally competent personnel are readily available.
- A function-based approach serves as the foundation for addressing problem behaviors.
- All staff members actively participate in the implementation of school-wide PBS approach.
- Accurate and consistent implementation of PBS practices by all staff members is emphasized.
- The school administrator is an active participant and leader in the PBS effort.
- A school-wide leadership team guides the systemic adoption and sustained use of research-validated practices.
- School data are reviewed at least monthly to guide decision making and planning.

Schools that adopt a school-wide PBS approach consider four distinct and necessary implementation elements: (a) specification of clearly defined and measurable results, (b) use of data for decision making, (c) adoption of evidence-based practices and processes, and (d) provision of supports for high fidelity implementation.



In addition, schools that adopt a school-wide PBS approach establish a full continuum of behavior supports. This continuum is characterized by (a) an emphasis on prevention, (b) an increasing intensity of intervention for increasing intensities of problem behavior, and (c) a provision of basic proactive programming (primary prevention) for all students by all staffing all settings.



Is School-wide PBS Effective?

Over 500 schools in the United States across 13 states actively implement school-wide PBS. Most of these are elementary and middle (junior high) schools; however, in the past five years an increasing number of high schools have adopted this approach. In addition, a 20 year history of research from model/demonstration projects and individual school efforts create an increasingly clear picture about the benefits of school-wide PBS:

- Implementation in school-wide PBS is feasible within a 1-2 year period.
- Office discipline referrals decrease (40-60% reduction), and the quality of the referrals improves by combining (a) proactive efforts to teach, monitor and acknowledge appropriate behavior and (b) predictable and consistent consequences for problem behavior.
- As the behavioral culture of the school improves, behavior improves, academic gains are experienced, and more time is directed toward academic instruction.
- Effects endure (5-7 years) when implementation includes systems change and adoption of validated practices.

Summary of Ongoing Challenges

How Do We Take PBS to Scale?

School-wide PBS can be done, is being done, and is associated with improved social and academic results. At this time, however, school-wide PBS is being used in a small proportion of the 110,000 schools in the United States. However, two related questions remain: (a) how do we enable individual schools to sustain their efforts efficiently and effectively and (b) how do we enable other schools to adopt a school-wide PBS approach to discipline? Asked in another way

“What core efforts and structures are needed to take school-wide PBS to scale?” To begin, schools, districts, states and federal agencies need a “blueprint” that can guide their systemic, efficient, effective, and relevant broad implementation of this approach to school climate and discipline.

School-wide PBS can be implemented by attending to the following seven guiding principles:

1. **Do less, but do it better and longer.** Because schools have finite resources, they must start by carefully examining local resources and existing capacity. Investments must (a) be made in a small number of school-wide initiatives, not eight, nine, or more; (b) redirected from reactive and to more preventive efforts; (c) directed toward increasing local behavioral competence; and (d) emphasize modification of practices and procedures so that the best results are achieved with maximum efficiency.
2. **Invest in what works.** Schools must focus on evidence-based and conceptually sound practices and processes. The literature is replete with effective positive behavioral interventions, and the highest priority should be directed toward their adoptions and sustained use.
3. **Invest in clear and durable results.** Schools must have a clear idea of what they want to achieve before identifying and selecting a specific practice or procedure, and these results must be long lasting, meaningful, and functional.
4. **Attend to individual and cultural differences.** The efficiency of every effective practice or procedure can be improved by accommodating those characteristics that make each student, teacher, family member, school community, etc. unique (e.g., disability, ethnicity/race, language, culture, neighborhood).
5. **Make informed decisions.** Schools can’t afford to make uninformed decisions about curriculum adoptions, intervention adjustments, problem features, etc. Efficient procedures and routines must be established to take advantage of naturally occurring data sources (e.g., office discipline referrals, attendance patterns, behavioral incidence reports).
6. **Work together.** Team-based efforts are useful means of problem solving, securing agreements, mustering supports, and enhancing implementation fidelity. More importantly, sustained implementation is more likely if initiatives are not linked to an individual person.
7. **Invest in enhancing local competence.** School-wide implementation efforts are vulnerable to short-term implementation if procedural and process expertise is not established within

To achieve broad and quality implementation of school-wide PBS, durable efforts are needed to build local expertise and capacity. The keys to scaling up for dissemination of any “skill-based” change are (a) empirical documentation, (b) ease of access, (c) support for change-over, and (d) embedding effective practices with change in the systems that nurture and support those practices. To achieve the goal of extending school-wide PBS throughout the U.S., specific actions must be directed beyond basic school-wide PBS implementation and include simultaneous building of capacity at the district, state, and federal levels in the following areas:

- Efficient team-based leadership, coordination, and accountability.
- On-going and focused professional development.

- Provision of adequate incentives for sustainability.
- Specialized behavioral supports.
- Efficient and relevant information management and dissemination.
- Cost effective budget and personnel management.
- Policy, budget, and resource management.
- Capacity building for localized training and coordination.
- Outcome-based accountability systems.
- Efficient and integrated management of multiple projects and initiatives with similar purposes and results
- Identification and dissemination of validated practices and procedures

How Can I Learn More about PBS?

For more information about PBS and the OSEP Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, go to www.pbis.org.

Other useful resources:

- www.cspv.org Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence
- www.ivdb.org Institute on Violence and Destructive Behavior
- www.oslc.org Oregon Social Learning Center
- www.ori.org Oregon Research Institute
- www.edjj.org National Center on Education, Disability and Juvenile Justice
- www.air.org/cecp Center for Effective Collaboration and Practices
- www.nichcy.org National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities
- www.ideapractices.org IDEA Local Implementation by Local Administrators and Associations of Service Providers Implementing IDEA Reforms in Education
- www.fape.org Families and Advocates Partnership for Education
- www.ideapolicy.org The Policymaker Partnership