Increasing Academic Achievement and Behavioral Expectations: PBIS

Tiffany Busch

For many years, it has been known that positive and negative reinforcement impacts an individual's likelihood to comply with a given directive or stimulus, through the works of B.F. Skinner. Reinforcement strengthens the likelihood of a behavior by providing a desirable reward or removing an undesirable stimulus (McLeod, 2015). However, even with this knowledge, the field of education relied heavily on punishment as a way of getting children to behave while in school. It was not until the late 1990s that educators and administrators began to focus on implementing positive behavioral initiatives for students. Positive behavioral interventions and supports, PBIS, was developed to enhance both academic and behavioral outcomes for students (The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2008).

While there is a generous of amount of information available regarding Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports and general guidelines to follow in order in implement PBIS, different schools and school divisions choose a variety of ways to execute the program. Due to the link between academic achievement and behavior, it is imperative that educators successfully implement elements of PBIS. If students can learn to be motivated to act in an acceptable way in school, they will be more likely to perform better academically as well (Nocera, Whitbread, & Nocera, 2014). Students must be in the classroom in order to learn. By continually inflicting punishments of suspension and time out of the classroom, students are being denied access to their education and learning. Also, if students are behaving acceptably, teachers are able to spend more time on teaching, and less time on redirection.

With high-stakes testing in Virginia, and throughout the country, it is imperative that educators find a way to help students want to behave and stay in the classroom setting without disruption. PBIS is an effective program designed to do just that.

The Consequences of Punishment

PBIS is designed to focus on positive behavioral strategies and rewards students for good behavior. It was designed to target and aid in lessening the documented negative effects of punishment on students. In school, students who cause disruptions, misbehave, or otherwise break school rules are often taken out of the classroom setting. Punishments vary from detention and time-out to in-school suspension and out-of-school suspension. Disciplinary policies that remove rule-violating students from the learning environment have become a norm of public education, and suspension rates have doubled since the 1970s (Perry & Morris, 2014). Research, however, indicates that these punishment measures are not productive. The US Department of Education (2014) suggests that students who are suspended or expelled are 10 times more likely to drop out of high school, experience academic failure, and face prison time. Expulsion or suspension early in a child's education is associated with expulsion or suspension in later school grades. School suspension is also correlated with poorer grades and performance on cognitive tests in science, math, and history (Perry & Morris, 2014).

Students who are suspended and/or expelled also suffer in the area of social/emotional development. Suspensions and other punishments remove students from the learning environment and interaction with other students and adults and prevent them from interacting in enriching activities that promote healthy growth and development (US Department of Education, 2014). These punishments also may delay or hinder the identification of possible underling issues and disabilities. Out-of-school suspension and expulsions often contribute to increased family stress and burden. Families of children who are expelled do not receive assistance in identifying an alternative educational placement, leaving the

responsibility of finding another program to the family (US Department of Education, 2014). Suspensions also tend to intensify anger, apathy, and disengagement—consequences that increase the likelihood of recidivism (Perry & Morris, 2014).

The adages "from school yard to prison yard" and "school to prison pipeline" illustrate another major problem with using punishments to alter behavior. When Monahan, VanDerhei, Bechtold, and Cauffman (2014), researched this phenomenon, they found that in months when a student was removed from school as punishment that child was more than twice as likely to get arrested that month compared to months when the student was not punished and removed from school. In addition, schools are now more likely to inform and request assistance from law enforcement for school matters (Perry & Mason, 2014). Many incidents of misbehavior that were once handled by school administration are now being referred to law enforcement (Wilson, 2014).

Suspension and expulsion also have collateral consequences. Not only are the students that are suspended negatively impacted, those students who act appropriately are also negatively impacted (Perry and Morris, 2014). High levels of out- of-school suspension in a school over time are associated with declining academic achievement among non-suspended students. An overreaching culture of control destabilizes school communities and fosters anxiety and distrust (US Department of Education, 2014). Schools with high levels of suspension heighten levels of anxiety, which leads to lower levels of academic achievement (Perry & Morris, 2014). Reading and math achievement are threatened in all schools with high levels of suspensions and expulsions, particularly in schools that are otherwise organized and nonviolent in nature. (Perry & Morris, 2014).

The Turn to Positive Behavioral Intervention

With these startling statistics, it is easy to understand why a new method for managing behavior is necessary. Positive Behavioral Supports and Interventions, PBIS, is one program that has

been developed to combat the negative effects of punitive discipline. PBIS is a school-wide, and often division-wide, initiative which supports a positive academic and behavior climate. According to the Virginia Department of Education (2008), effective discipline relies on increasing reliance on more positive intervention plans and decreasing punitive disciplinary practices. Instead of these punitive measures, schools should look for ways to positively alter social and instructional environments, explicitly teach students what is expected of them while in school, acknowledge appropriate behavior, and provide staff with professional development on behavioral interventions and strategies to address problem behaviors (Virginia Department of Education, 2008). PBIS reinforces student-teacher support, relationship skill building, and provides students with positive role models (Sailor, et al., 2006; Sailor, Stowe, Turnbull, & Kleinhammer-Tramill, 2007).

The most important objective of PBIS is to increase the capacity of schools to create safe, effective learning environments for students and staff (Virginia Department of Education, 2008). More specifically and measurable, the goals of PBIS are to decrease the incidence of problem behaviors, as measured by discipline referrals, which should in turn increase student achievement as measured by standardized assessments. Improved school climate and culture are also intended outcomes of the program. As students begin to see themselves and other classmates as a unified body a more positive climate will ensue.

In order for students to behave as teachers and other staff members expect, they must first be taught what is acceptable and what is not acceptable. They must be shown how to behave appropriately in the school setting. Reinforcement of positive behavior is an essential piece to PBIS (Warren, et al., 2006). Positive behavior can be rewarded with praise and recognition, as well as, tokens or tickets. These tokens can then be traded for desired tangibles. However, the key to solidifying and internalizing the behavior is in the social recognition of appropriate behaviors (Warren, et al., 2006).

PBIS in Action

Several schools and school systems have found success with the implementation of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, as outlined above. PBIS aids in the reduction of exclusionary discipline practices, increases prosocial behaviors, and positively impacts academic achievement (McIntosh, Bennett, & Price, 2011; McCrary, Lechtenberger, and Wang, 2012; Warren et al.; 2006; Leedy, Bates, & Safran, 2004; Todd, Campbell, Meyer, & Horner, 2008). PBIS has been effective in reducing externalizing behaviors and increasing access to support systems in school. Students spend more time in the classroom and less time in a restrictive environment (in or out of school). When disciplinary actions do occur, the consequences are generally less severe than before PBIS was implemented (McCrary, Lechtenberger, and Wang, 2012; Warren et al.; 2006).

The implementation of PBIS can aid in reducing problem behaviors and increasing students' perceptions of safety in school. McIntosh, Bennett, and Price (2011) conducted a study in an urban school district of 49 schools. Data regarding problem behavior, academic achievement, and student perceptions of school safety were gathered. Percentages of students who were rated as some risk or at risk for problem behaviors was reduced from 14 to 10 percent following the implementation of PBIS. Schools rated as implementing PBIS with moderate to high fidelity exceeded the district average on four of six academic assessments. Students in high fidelity implementation schools also felt safer, less bullied, and clearer on what was expected of them.

PBIS effectively lessens the incidence of office referral, in and out of school suspensions, and academic failure rates. McCrary, Lechtenberger, and Wang (2012), studied the first year effect of PBIS on four schools in two districts. After receiving training, teachers and staff began to implement PBIS. In district A, teachers instituted small changes such as teachers walking the hall and talking to students during class change. This intervention led to a 59 percent drop in office referrals requiring out-of-classroom discipline. As

a part of PBIS, an after school study hall was implemented to decrease failure rates as well. In a six week period, failure rates decreased by 54 percent. For the year, failures decreased by 71 percent. In district B, teachers and staff also implemented PBIS. As a result, multi-day in-school suspensions dropped from 331 to 11, and one day suspension dropped from 497 to 59. District B also noted a decline in the number of students referred to an alternative school setting due to problem behaviors by 38 percent in just the first six weeks of PBIS implementation.

Effective implementation of PBIS includes professional development for teachers and explicit instruction of school expectations for students, and leads to decreases in punitive measures. Warren et al. (2006) sought to evaluate the implementation of PBIS in an urban middle school located in a community characterized by poverty, crime, and limited social resources. In the year previous to PBIS implementation, 81 percent of the student body received at least one office discipline referral. Year one of implementation was spent offering professional development to teachers, building rapport among teachers and students, and understanding the unique challenges of the school. In year two, actually implementation of PBIS took place with students. They developed a list of expectations for students and developed lesson plans to teach students these expectations. Positive reward tickets were also given to students who demonstrated these expectations. Tickets could then be turned in for drawings for special prizes. As a result of these things, the total number of office discipline referrals decreased by 20%, in-school conferences with students decreased by 17%, time-outs decreased by 23%, in-school suspensions decreased by 5%, and short-term suspensions (1-5 day) decreased by 57%. Out of school suspensions as a disciplinary action dropped from the second most action taken to the fourth.

Positive student behavior is significantly increases with the effectively implementation and use of PBIS. In 2004, Leedy, Bates, and Safran studied PBIS implementation at a small elementary school. After a series of workshops designed to assist in the introduction and implementation of

PBIS, teachers came to a general consensus to target hallway behavior as the area in need of most intervention school wide. Grade level assemblies were held to teach and model hallway expectations and classroom teachers reinforced the information learned in the assembly. Overall finding suggest an increase of 134.9 percent from the baseline phase to the post-intervention phase. All grade levels demonstrated a significant increase in the percentage of positive hallways behavior from baseline to post-intervention, from 60 percent in third grade to over 200 percent increase in second grade.

Reductions in problem behaviors and office referrals have a positive effect on academic achievement. Nocera, Whitbread, and Nocera (2014), conducted a study on the effect of PBIS on academics and student behavior in a middle school. The implementation of PBIS was part of the school improvement process. Problem behaviors were reduced by an average of 40 percent over a two year period. Reductions were seen in all eight of the most frequently occurring infractions, including fighting, insubordination, class disruption, inappropriate behavior, skipping detention, cutting class, tardiness, and disrespect to staff. The researchers concluded that the decline in discipline referrals was not due to reluctance of the staff to refer a student by counting both number of infractions and number of office referrals. Teachers at the school noted that token awards, buy-in and administrative leadership, and consistency with discipline helped make the program successful. School scores on state mastery tests in both reading and math also improved by 25% and 11%, respectively.

While PBIS is a school based approach to help all students maintain positive behaviors in school, a key aspect of PBIS is intervention for students who consistently demonstrate that they have difficulty obeying school rules and following basic school norms. Todd, Campbell, Meyer, & Horner (2008) conducted a study of the check-in/check-out intervention commonly used in PBIS. While there were only four boys in the study, interventions such as this one are generally reserved for 5 to 10 percent of the population (VDOE, 2008). Through observation, six target behavior were

identified and defined. Then, each student was given a staff member to check in with each morning. The student received a card with point goal for the day and for teachers to tally points for positive behavior. The student checked back in with the same staff member five times throughout the day. Each day's report was also sent home. All four boys displayed decreases in the level and variability of problem behaviors upon implementation of the intervention. The problem behavior incidents dropped between 15 and 19 percent from baseline data. After implementation of the check-in/check-out intervention, only one of the four students received an office discipline referral.

Opposition to PBIS

There are many advocates for Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports; however, as with all programs in education there is also opposition. Some researchers, such as Vaughn (2006), and Carr (2010), suggest that in the push to provide a school wide positive support system, individual students are being ignored. Vaughn (2006), suggested that students with diverse cultural backgrounds and students with mental disabilities are being disadvantaged by PBIS. He suggested that individualized positive behavior systems may be more appropriate these students. In the haste to implement a school wide system, the individual aspects of PBIS were forgotten. Carr (2010), raised concern that the failure of a few to respond to PBIS may lead teachers and administrators to assume that they need a more restrictive environment. He also worried that due to the time and resources needed to implement tier three (major) interventions, schools may either be less likely to use these interventions or may find themselves fighting for the necessary resources.

Both researchers raise valid points; however, while PBIS is a whole school initiative, the program itself was originally developed to provide intervention to students with disabilities. It was established by the United States Office of Special Education Program to help educators provide positive interventions for students in need. McIntosh, Girvan, Horner, Smolkowski, & Sugai

(2014) even suggests that implementing PBIS can be effective in addressing disproportionality in discipline. PBIS maintains a focus on establishing a clear, consistent, and positive social culture, identifying and teaching clear expectations for behavior which can reduce ambiguity for both students and adults. Also, clear discipline definitions and procedures can reduce ambiguity in discipline decisions, decreasing the effects of implicit student bias.

According to Vaugh (2006) himself, little is known about the implications of PBIS or individualized supports on students with culturally diverse backgrounds or mental health issues so the assumption cannot be made that PBIS is not effective. Carr's (2010) assumptions that tier three interventions will not be implemented due to lack of resources is a possibility. However, this is when school climate and culture play a large role in the success of the program. Teachers and faculty must have full buy-in with the program to insure that students most in need, receive the interventions they deserve.

Several scholars have stated concerns that the token system of PBIS only focuses on providing extrinsic rewards for students. Therefore, students will be less likely to internalize aspects of PBIS and want to behave for the sake of being a good citizen. However, tokens and rewards are a key aspect of PBIS, used to help recognize and promote positive behaviors. It is important to also make sure to explicitly explain to the student why they are being praised. This also helps remind other students of acceptable behaviors (Warren, et al., 2006).

Conclusions Based on the Evidence

Unfortunately, student discipline has been a pressing issue in education for years. Since the late 1990s, educators have began to change the focus from punitive discipline practices to positive behavioral expectations and incentives. Reducing the instances of problem behaviors in school has many positive effects. Students will spend more time in the classroom, instead of being suspended and removed from the educational setting. The more time students spend in the classroom, the

better opportunity they have to learn. Less classroom disruption allows for more teaching and learning time. The teacher can focus on teaching and helping students succeed academically, instead of using valuable time to mitigate problem behaviors. All of these things can help lead to high levels of academic achievement.

Lower incidents of suspension and expulsion also have positive effects on students outside of school. Students are less likely to be arrested and therefore have repeated encounters with the juvenile justice system (Monahan, VanDerhei, Bechtold, and Cauffman, 2014). It is essential for educators to be conscientious when deciding to involve law enforcement in school discipline matters. Suspensions and encounters with law enforcement often lead to increased anger and ambivalence to school (Wilson, 2014).

Implementation of PBIS involves several key components. Significant time and effort must be made to effectively train educators in how to use PBIS. Trainings, workshops, and follow up are needed (Warren et al., 2006; McCrary, Lechtenberger, & Wang, 2012; Leedy, Bates, & Safran, 2004). Student and teacher rapport must be established if lacking (Warren et al., 2006). A positive climate with teacher and administrator buy-in is essential. Target behaviors should be established, defined, and modeled. Students should be explicitly taught the desired behaviors. Behaviors and consequences should be clear and consistent to help mitigate bias (McIntosh et al., 2014). Tokens or tickets may be used to reward students for following the behaviors as outlined and expected. Interventions should be developed for students who consistently display problem behaviors after expectations are relayed.

While more research needs to be completed, preliminary research suggests that PBIS, positive behavioral interventions and supports, can be effective in decreasing problem behaviors, and increasing desired behaviors as well as academic achievement (McIntosh, Bennett, & Price, 2011; McCrary, Lechtenberger, and Wang, 2012; Warren et al.; 2006; Leedy, Bates, & Safran, 2004; Todd, Campbell, Meyer, & Horner, 2008).

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