

## **Empowerment through PBIS**

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### **Introduction**

Virginia holds the dubious title of sending more students to law enforcement agencies than any other state. Even more startling is that some of the individual schools with the highest referral rates were middle schools, whose students are usually from 11 to 14 years old (Ferriss, 2015). Losen's (2015) research shows deep disparities by race, English Language Learner (ELL), disability status, and gender. In implementing exclusionary consequences, schools create barriers for student achievement. Students with Disabilities (SWD) and other historically over-represented students in discipline data suffer from exclusionary practices and perpetuate continued struggles. Minorities graduate at a 61.7 % rate, while white students have a 79.6% graduation rate. Separation of struggling students from their schools does not help build the relationships and academic background for academic success. The negative effects of school discipline do not end with suspension or expulsion. Society as a whole feels the outcomes with increased dropout rates and the economic costs of individuals not qualified to enter the job market. Fabelo et al. (2011) established that disciplined individuals are much more likely to move into the adult justice system. Without closing the discipline gap, schools will struggle to close achievement gaps with SWD and minorities (Losen, 2015). Terry McAullife, governor of Virginia, proposed the Classrooms Not Courtrooms initiative. McAullife challenged schools to find ways to shut the pipeline of students to the judicial system. Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) lies at the center of the governor's efforts to lower the use of Exclusionary Discipline Practices (EDP). The initiative strives to reduce student referrals to law enforcement, reduce suspensions, and address the disparate impact of school discipline on African-Americans and students with disabilities. Elementary and middle schools show success with lowering suspension rates and closing achievement

gaps by instituting PBIS. Secondary schools struggle to implement PBIS structures as well as primary schools. The complex organizational systems within a secondary school limit the ability to teach staff to collaboratively support achievement (Bohanon et al., 2009). Secondary schools accrue large amounts of academic and behavioral data, but, without efficient systems for integrating the information, the schools lack the cross-content collaboration for support. In such environments, schools treat academic success as an isolated variable, disconnected from the development of the whole student and school environment (Bohanon et al., 2009). However, successful implementation of PBIS at the secondary level needs to empower school stakeholders and create flexible systems.

### **PBIS Definition**

PBIS is a systematic way to prevent student behavior problems and promote a positive school environment. Instead of being a program, PBIS tasks schools with operating differently with the tools they already have. PBIS draws upon available resources using student data. The model aims to alter the school environment by creating these improved systems for discipline, reinforcement, and data management (Bradshaw et al., 2015). The three-tier model intensifies interventions and accommodations as students move through the system. The VTSS framework encompasses PBIS, the behavioral component of the structure. VTSS integrates academic, behavioral, and mental health services. The system has multiple levels of support for students with clearly defined processes of how students access the higher tiered interventions. PBIS's three tiers create a triangle with the base being tier one, school-wide expectations devised from parent, student, teacher, and school leader feedback. Tier two builds upon tier one by adding specific criteria for behaviors that need the more intense interventions at this level. Finally, tier three is reserved for behaviors that demand supports from

mental health officials and highly specialized services.

## **Secondary School Implementation of PBIS**

### **Challenges**

Much of the research regarding PBIS implementation has focused on elementary schools (Bradshaw et al., 2015). Determining the impact of PBIS on student performance hinges on assessing the fidelity of implementation (George & Childs, 2012). Because high schools are larger, more diverse, and have higher levels of disorder than elementary schools, school leaders should identify the contextual factors of their school before implementation. However, PBIS gained significant national attention as an efficient and effective framework for addressing problem behaviors in schools and is cited in discussions regarding seclusion and restraint (Freeman & Sugai, 2013) and the high school dropout rate (Cortez, 2006). The emphasis and organization of high schools presents unique challenges for PBIS implementation. Secondary schools focus on content and skill mastery. Successful high school implementation of PBIS acknowledges the existing structures and systems that challenge the connection of academic and social curriculum (Flannery & Sugai, 2009). Many of the same characteristics that mark successful implementation at elementary and middle schools indicate effective execution in high schools: efficient environments with positive norms, shared beliefs of implementation support by school stakeholders, highly qualified teachers, lack of school disorder (Glisson & Green, 2006). However, Flannery and Sugai (2009) acknowledged the increased importance of (a) positive teacher-student relationships, (b) designing classroom environments that promote prosocial behavior to reduce problem behavior that usually results in removal, and (c) implementation at the freshman grade level when establishing the expectations of the high school.

Some of the neediest students do not graduate. Alternative schools, long-term suspension/expulsion, and dropping out of high school await students disconnected to their schools. Less than half of students with Emotional/

Behavioral Disorders graduate from high school (Wagner et al., 2005). Truant students and those with a history of disciplinary referrals struggle to keep pace with credit accrual, the essential task that promotes students to the next grade level and graduation in high school. Schools typically place truant and students with behavioral issues in these alternative settings. Adding to the challenge, teachers and administrators face large classes with a wide array of student skill deficits and needs (Flannery & Sugai, 2009).

### **Goals**

PBIS seeks to lower the number of suspensions by building behavior supports, engaging school stakeholders with decision-making processes, focusing on appropriate school behaviors, and building strong relationships between the school and its stakeholders. Schools that implement PBIS with a high level of fidelity experienced 20 to 60 percent reductions in office disciplinary referrals (Hershfeldt et al. 2012). In addition, schools showed gains with student and teacher behaviors (special education use, need of advanced-tier supports, and teacher self-efficacy).

**Lower suspensions/EDP.** The use of suspensions and other EDP link to diminished academic and social development of students. Violent offenses necessitate the removal of students from school. However, exclusionary, zero-tolerance approaches to school discipline do not create safe climates (Skiba & Sprague, 2008). Higher suspension rates are closely correlated with higher dropout and delinquency rates (Marchbanks et al., 2015). U.S. public school students lost nearly 18 million days of instruction in just one school year due to EDP (Losen et al., 2015). Lowering the suspension rates does not mean changing expectations for student behavior, but understanding that adult behavior sets the tone and climate of the school. The main engines of the observed differences in suspension rates between schools are differences in school policies, practices and leadership, not necessarily differences in baseline student behavior. School officials have the power and capacity to eliminate excessive EDP and the large disparities associated with it (Losen et al.,

2015). Instead of simply advocating for the elimination of EDP, schools should support greater use of student-centered techniques such as PBIS (Bear, 2012).

EDP disproportionately affects minorities and SWD, exacerbating achievement gaps. In analyzing suspension rates of ninth grade students, Balfanz et al. (2015) found that African-American students accounted for 39% of the data. African-American students received twice as many suspensions as White students and almost twice as many as Hispanic students. Schools suspended SWD at a rate of 31%. However, African-American students with a disability had the highest suspension rates and were most likely to be suspended multiple times in the same year (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). These same populations lag in achievement and graduation from high school. PBIS results in increased instructional time based on the reduction of student removals due to problem behaviors (Bradshaw et al., 2015).

**Behavior supports.** Schools cannot ignore inappropriate conduct and language. Lack of procedures and combative relationships harm school climate. Instead of relying on EDP as a reactive measure to undesired behaviors, PBIS imbeds behavior supports in a proactive manner. PBIS establishes school-wide behavioral expectations at the tier one level. The expectations used parent, teacher, and student feedback to define and clarify protocols for situations and locations that school data identified as being problematic. Once a month a school-level team reviews the data regarding the identified behaviors and analyzes the effectiveness of the prior interventions. At the tier two level, individual and small group interventions support students: child study meetings, meetings with a school counselor, assignment of a mentor, etc.

### **Empowering Stakeholders**

Successful implementation of PBIS empowers students, teachers, and parents to make data-based decisions with school leaders. The contextual fit between intervention strategies and the values of families, teachers, schools, support

personnel, and community agency personnel may affect the quality and durability of support efforts (Sugai et al., 2010). The disproportionality and skill gaps in secondary schools require continuous collaboration and dialogue among school stakeholders to examine and develop solutions (Bal et al., 2014). However, students, families, and teachers need training and support to empower them to create solutions for school problems.

### **Students**

Student voice in the creation of the school-wide expectations helps define and solve problems. PBIS processes create clarity and consistency through engaging students, teachers, and parents. Inappropriate and unsafe behaviors often are associated with rules, expectations, and consequences that are unclear to students (Lewis & Sugai, 1999). Students are more likely to engage in learning and less apt to engage in negative behaviors when the school environment is predictable, consistent, positive, and safe (Horner et al., 2009). Schools will need to engage students with focus group discussions concerning school data and surveys.

Student support for PBIS should incorporate data analysis and problem-solving strategies. Students will need support and training to participate in data analysis. Additionally, schools need guidelines for the types of data students analyze. At the core of PBIS, strategic methods of analyzing data inform decisions. Groups of students need training to navigate these processes. Instead of training the entire student body in data analysis, schools can create specialized teams of students who consult with the school and district level PBIS teams. Somersworth High School created the “Chain Reaction Team” to address issues such as bullying and diversity within the context of school-wide expectations (Newcomer & Barrett, 2009). The team used school discipline data with student identifiers removed to learn more about the nature of bullying and discrimination in their school. In order to learn more from students, schools should survey students on a regular basis. However, students will need support in how to generate questions and analyze the survey data. PBIS

structures build upon partnerships with stakeholders. Without support, students will lack the skills to have rich discussions with teachers, administrators, and parents regarding the data.

### **Teachers**

Without empowering teachers to make change, PBIS cannot achieve its goals. Teachers account for about 30 percent of variance in student performance (Hattie, 2003). Without engaging teachers in the PBIS process, schools will not implement PBIS at a high enough level to sustain growth. PBIS focuses on changing adult behavior. Instead of being reactionary to inappropriate behaviors, PBIS supports teachers in developing clear expectations for situations that challenge students. Teacher support of implementation of PBIS dictates the success of the process. With high school teachers, the link between academic achievement and social behaviors needs to be emphasized (Swain-Bradway et al., 2015). PBIS practices should connect to outcomes associated with the mission of the school, such as dropout prevention, diploma achievement, and career planning (Flannery & Sugai, 2009).

The gathering, analysis, and publication of school data should include teachers. Sharing discipline data at faculty meetings gives teachers the information and a setting for intense scrutiny of the discipline practices. Devoting meeting time and resources for teachers to focus on data emphasizes the importance of the data and the idea that PBIS is a school-wide initiative to assess progress (Newcomer & Barrett, 2009). Systematic training and support for PBIS practices decrease the vulnerability of the PBIS falling victim to competing priorities and budgetary reductions (Swain-Bradway et al., 2015). Schools support PBIS through simplifying and making consistent the language of the school. In particular, strategies that promote a positive and consistent classroom and school climate, along with effective instruction, deter at-risk students from antisocial behavior (Reinke & Herman, 2002). Meeting protocols and problem-solving tools enable teachers to focus on the data. The use of protocols gives form to how teachers analyze data. Additionally, the tools give

insight into how the group solved a problem. In understanding the groups procedures, teachers address process fidelity.

### **Families**

Family support for PBIS will connect the school to the community. Empowering parents through PBIS Parental involvement is critical to the education of students (Lewis & Sugai, 1999). Parent surveys and conferences start a discussion with the school. However, families should work as a team with the school. Schools struggle to include the voices of a diverse group of parents (Mergler et al., 2014). Families from non-dominant groups often are marginalized within traditional school settings because the approaches to soliciting feedback from families reflect the dominant culture (Warikoo & Carter, 2009). Bal et al. (2014) finds that families from non-dominant racial, economic, linguistics, and ability groups are excluded and negatively positioned through deficit-oriented views. Active participation in the development, implementation and monitoring of interventions and supports engages families in a different way. Families are supported with the analysis of appropriate data and give feedback to the school.

### **Research Implications**

With states and localities being held increasingly accountable for disciplinary and academic disparities, PBIS and other interventions warrant focus from schools. Much of the extant randomized research on PBIS has been conducted in elementary school settings (Bradshaw et al., 2015). Further research should support implementation processes and quality at the secondary level.

### **Implementation Process**

PBIS processes seem prescriptive, however, the program molds itself to fit the needs of the organization. PBIS implementation evolves over time in a non-linear diffusion process (Domitrovich et al., 2008). The process begins with adoption or abandonment of already established interventions and supports in the school. Feedback from stakeholders during the process gives data to



support team decisions. Strong communication lines between stakeholders are indicative of high levels of organizational health (Bradshaw, Koth et al., 2008). Schools with lower levels of organizational health tend to take longer to implement PBIS, but benefited the most from the program. In communicating and sharing data, schools enable stakeholders to understand school processes. Participation in data analysis and decision making empowers the community to make connections to the school.

### **Implementation Quality**

Studying PBIS implementation quality challenges researchers. Because much of the work is school-based, maintaining a consistent research design and intervention protocol throughout a school district tests researchers. Additionally, widespread evaluation of implementation quality will require partnerships with multiple schools and school districts (Newcomer & Barrett, 2009). With more participation, researchers will need tightly constructed definitions of empowerment and processes to guide analysis and discussion (Bogler & Somech, 2004). In studying the implementation quality of PBIS in secondary schools, researchers will analyze the level of and type of communication between stakeholders. The University of Oregon houses tools to evaluate and measure implementation quality. Additionally, local colleges support schools with technical assistance for evaluation. However, these tools give schools only part of the picture. Used in conjunction with climate surveys, the PBIS implementation tools give schools feedback regarding the engagement and empowerment of school stakeholders.

### **Practice Implications**

PBIS helps schools create structures to analyze and act upon their data. As schools react to data, the stakeholders choose interventions to address concerns. PBIS asks schools to look at the systems that reside in the organization and coordinate their efforts with stakeholders. Purposeful use of school resources and increased stakeholder engagement should gird the adoption and implementation of PBIS. In adopting PBIS,

schools should use language without technical jargon that welcomes others. Also, schools need to invite stakeholders to analyze data and value their interpretations. Regular surveys and data collection throughout the school year create consistent channels of communication. These opportunities give feedback to schools regarding PBIS interventions.

Authoritarian discipline practices fail to support students and their schools. Traditional approaches that stress high-structure, control, and obedience without support for correcting behavior leaves secondary schools with achievement and discipline gaps (Bosworth & Judkins, 2014). Without connecting the school supports to a student's home and services, consistency with reinforcement of preferred behaviors becomes erratic. PBIS focuses on teaching appropriate behaviors in different settings. Just as teachers expect students to practice content and skills with homework, schools should connect with different stakeholders to ensure a tight connection between school and community interventions for students.

### **Conclusion**

As schools work to close achievement and discipline gaps, different programs and initiatives will emerge to meet the needs of students. However, PBIS supports schools through questioning the organization's processes and using data to support decisions. New programs fuse to PBIS structures. School leaders need to engage with stakeholders so that interventions connect with the reality of student lives. The process of empowering school stakeholders includes transparency and access to data, open communication lines, and a willingness to listen to different interpretations of school data. Through making connections to students, families, and the community, school leaders can use PBIS to forge strong relationships: the foundational building block to student success.

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