

What Every Administrator Needs to Know About School-wide Positive Behavior Supports

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Brief Overview

One of the largest challenges facing educators in the United States is addressing problem behavior within school. A recent study indicated that general education teachers reported on average, one in five of their students exhibited disruptive/off-task behavior and one in twenty exhibited aggressive behaviors to the point intervention was necessary (Myers & Holland, 2000). Unfortunately, educators continue to rely on traditional discipline practices that generally involve punishment and/or exclusionary options, especially for the most challenging students, students with Emotional/Behavioral Disorders. The assumption is that punishment-based discipline actions implemented in response to rule violations will (a) deter future occurrences and (b) somehow teach and promote more pro-social skills (Sugai & Horner, 2002). However, the current “zero tolerance” approach to discipline has proven ineffective in reducing problem behavior (Skiba, 2002). In fact, relying exclusively on reactive, consequent-based discipline policies are actually associated with increases in problem behavior (Mayer, 1995). Not surprising, students with Emotional or Behavioral Disorders (EBD), given their high rates of externalizing behavior, are often frequent recipients of “punishment-based” discipline practices (Skiba, 2002).

In an attempt to address problem behavior in school, researchers and educators have begun work in building School-wide systems of Positive Behavior Support (SW-PBS) (Lewis & Sugai, 1999; Sugai et al., 2000). School-wide PBS incorporates empirically validated practices into a system designed to support all students and all staff within schools. School-wide PBS is designed to a) prevent chronic behavioral challenges, b) provide early intervention for children

and youth displaying minor but repeated patterns of problem behavior which if left untreated may eventually manifest into EBD, and c) provide pro-active supports to children and youth at-risk and those with EBD to allow them to successfully remain in the general education environment with appropriate supports. SW-PBS rests on three interconnected essential features (see figure one). The first is using data to guide decision making with respect to what practices and support should be put in place to prevent problem behavior and support current students. The second is the adoption of empirically validated practices based on local need. Finally, providing support to the adults within the school environment through consistent systemic support. By engaging in each component in response to challenges within the school, educators implement a “process” that allows them to work more efficiently and effectively.

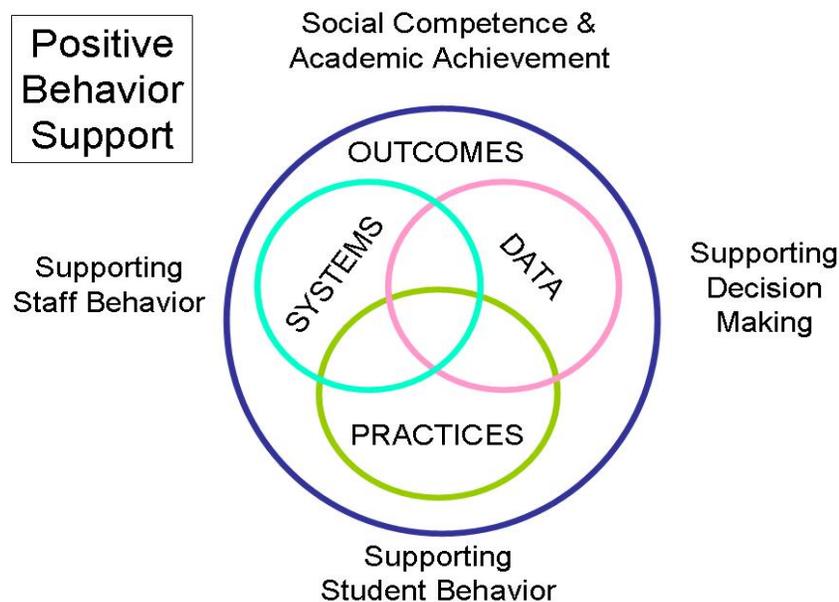


Figure 1. Essential features of the SW-PBS process

A second defining feature of SW-PBS is building a continuum of behavior supports within the school environment (see figure two). At the core of the process is building “universal” behavior supports defined as those that apply to all students, all staff, and all settings. Universals are defined as a clearly defined set of positively stated rules (e.g., “Respect yourself, “respect

others,” “respect property”) and an accompanying set of explicit positively stated behavior exemplars of each rule based on current behavior concerns across common school settings (e.g., hallways, cafeteria, playground). Each behavior exemplar is then taught to all students across the school year by all school staff and students are acknowledged for mastery of targeted skills. Research has shown that approximately 80% of the student body can be successful, as defined as one or fewer office discipline referrals, with universal supports in place (Horner, Sugai, Todd, & Lewis-Palmer, 2005).

The second level of the continuum focuses on at-risk students who will not be successful with universal supports alone. At this level the focus is on providing “small group” or “targeted” interventions for groups of students who are displaying similar behavior patterns. Common small group/targeted strategies include social skill instruction, self-management strategies, mentoring and academic supports. Research has shown that approximately 10-15% of the student body will require small group supports (Horner et al., 2005). Finally, the third level of support is individualized and intensive. The focal point at this level is conducting a functional behavior assessment and designing an individual PBS plan that may include other specialized resources such as mental health or special education. Research has shown that approximately 5% of the student body will require individualized interventions (Horner et al., 2005).

While many schools may recognize elements of the continuum and can identify current strategies in place to support students from universal to individual, most schools implement support strategies independent of each other. Within the SW-PBS process, every small group and individual plan is firmly connected to the universal supports by, at minimum, using the common language of the universals in the plans, tying outcomes into current school-wide reinforcement systems, and continually disseminating information to all staff to insure they understand the connections and their role in every child’s support plan. By building a true connected continuum of supports firmly grounded in a common base, schools are able to increase their effectiveness in supporting students with more challenging behavior (Horner et al., 2005).

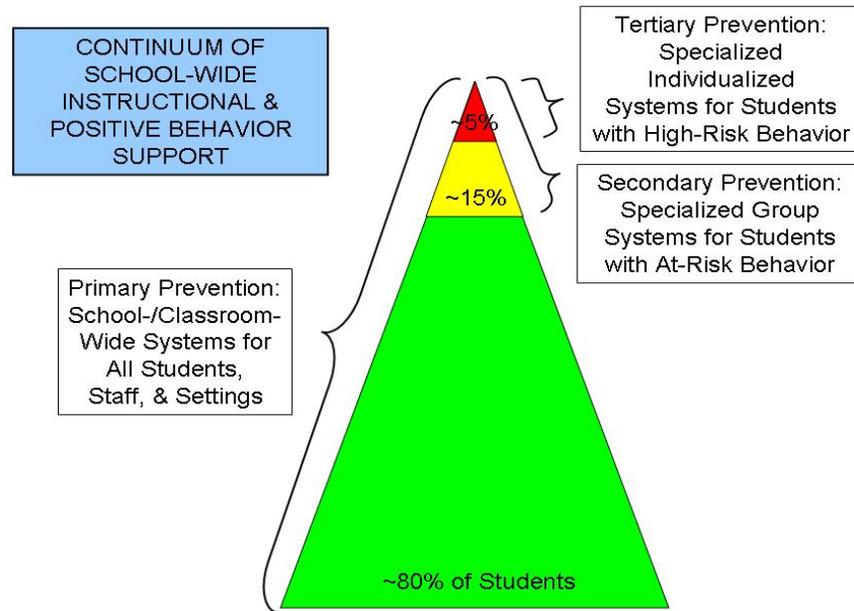


Figure 2. The continuum of SW-PBS

Research to Date

A body of research has provided evidence to support the component features of school-wide PBS (e.g., social skill instruction). In addition, an emerging data-base has shown that implementing universal systems of school-wide behavior support will impact overall rates of problem behavior in school. Findings from research at the elementary school level show improvements in behavior, academic gains, and increases in instructional time (Horner et al., 2005). Schools implementing universal system of school-wide PBS report reductions of 40 to 60% in discipline reports (Sugai et al., 2000). For example, over a 1-year period Taylor-Greene and her colleagues (1997) demonstrated a 42% reduction in behavioral offenses by clearly defining school-wide expectations and teaching students how to meet each expectation. More important, Taylor-Greene and her school team continue to report declines in behavioral problems (Taylor-Green & Kartub, 2000). Likewise, Nakasato (2000) demonstrated drops in daily office referrals across six elementary schools through the development of universal PBS strategies. Finally, Scott (2001) demonstrated 65% to 75% reductions in out-of-school suspensions and in-

school detentions, which allowed students to be more successful in class to the point of increased standardized test scores.

While the data show the efficacy of school-wide PBS systems on reducing overall rates of problem behavior displayed by the general school population, less is known about the impact school-wide PBS has on supporting at-risk and identified students. What is emerging from the field is that PBS may increase the capacity of schools to deliver more systematic and intensive targeted small group (Crone, Horner, & Hawken, 2001) and individual interventions (Horner et al., 2005). Preliminary data from pilot studies are showing that functional-based interventions are outperforming traditional behavioral interventions (Ingram, 2002; Newcomer, 2002) and that plans are of higher quality if linked to school-wide PBS systems (Newcomer & Powers, 2002). More research is needed to show what additional benefit school-wide systems of PBS “value add” to small group and individual student support plans.

Administrator Role in SW-PBS

Throughout the process, a team approach is emphasized to insure stake-holder input and ownerships. Administrative support and leadership is essential for the success of SW-PBS from the school building administrator through the Superintendent, all of whom should be active participants in the teaming process. At the district leadership level, administrators should be active participants in the leadership team, providing political and fiscal support for the initiative, and insuring resources are allocated (see the “Blueprint” at pbis.org for a complete list of leadership tasks). At the school level, administrator involvement is a “non-negotiable” to insure the success of the SW-PBS efforts. The building principal does not have to be the leader of the SW-PBS team, but they should be an active participant. Based on the literature regarding effective school administrators, Colvin and Sprick (1999) identified ten principal leadership strategies related to SW-PBS (see below).

1. Maintaining standards regarding which innovations their school would employ,
2. Making a public statement of support once the faculty selected an innovation,

3. Establishing a representative leadership team to lead the process of implementing the innovation,
4. Supporting the team members to have the time and resources to accomplish the task,
5. Guiding rather than dictating decision-making,
6. Taking a leadership role to model and reinforce implementing the innovation with fidelity,
7. Regularly attending and participating in team meetings,
8. Providing recognition to faculty and the team for their hard work,
9. Serving as the spokesperson to community stakeholders about the worth and importance of the innovations, and
10. Establishing objective means to monitor and provide feedback to all staff about the effect of the innovation.

Summary

Investing in SW-PBS has led to improvements in student learning and social behavior. By engaging in a process of data-based decision making to identify research-based practices and building the systemic supports for educators along a continuum, schools can create environments that prevent problem behavior and increase the likelihood that students will engage in appropriate behavior. Critical to success is the administrator's active role in supporting the school-based team process.

References and Resources

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Resources

- Association for Positive Behavior Support <www.apbs.org>
- OSEP Center for Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports <pbis.org>
- Maryland Positive Behavior Support <marylandpbis.org>
- Illinois Positive Behavior Support <ebdnetwork-il.org>
- Special School District of St. Louis County PBS <pbiscompendium.ssd.k12.mo.us>

