
Creating Classrooms with a Positive Environment

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Helping students demonstrate desired behaviors with positive measures

Congressman Phil Hare (D-IL), who serves on the Education and Labor Committee, commented on Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS) by saying, "The old formula of attempting to yield good behavior and academic performance by threatening students with detention or other punishment has run its course. The Positive Behavior Support (PBS) approach rewards students for doing the right thing while recognizing that success in school is contagious."

When many of us went to school, the classroom environment was one where if you misbehaved you were punished. You might have been sent to the principal's office, been given an after-school detention or perhaps ridiculed by the teacher in front of your classmates. Thankfully, things are beginning to change and school environments are becoming more positive.

Positive Behavior Support is used on a system-wide basis to help school administrators and teachers develop expectations for students' behavior in school, thoroughly instruct students on those expectations and then reward students for exhibiting the desired behaviors. Schools are finding this positive, proactive approach is more effective in reducing disruptive behaviors and improving school climate than traditional systems that rely on reactive and punitive measures. Research studies have shown that a positive school climate contributes to higher student achievement, reduced violence and fewer student dropouts. A good school climate is achieved when students feel confident in themselves, rather than belittled or bullied. This climate allows for trust and respect between teachers and students and students know how to behave individually and as a group.

School-wide Positive Behavior Support (SW-PBS), as it is called, works best when a comprehensive group of stakeholders is involved in the process, including school administrators, teachers, counselors, students, parents and the community.

The SW-PBS model is tailored to the individual needs of the school. Through this process, each participating school identifies a set of valued expectations (e.g. Be Safe, Be Responsible, Be Respectful) and focuses on teaching students what these expectations "look like" across the school. Examples may include 'stay in your seat in the lunchroom,' 'raise your hand to ask permis-

sion to go to the bathroom' and 'walk quietly in the hallway.'

Equally important is the emphasis that is placed on acknowledging students for following the school rules. Forms of acknowledgement can include verbal praise, a "caught being good" note from the principal or tickets toward a raffle drawing. Consistency in recognizing and rewarding desired behaviors is crucial. Teachers are also recognized for their efforts to praise the desired behaviors of students.

Maintaining an emphasis on positive and expected behaviors is an important aspect of SW-PBS, but used alone is unlikely to deter students from misbehaving. Traditionally, educators have taken a singularly reactive approach to misbehavior, resulting in schools with higher rates of office disciplinary referrals, detentions and suspensions. A better approach, the SW-PBS approach, considers misbehavior a learning "error" and encourages educators to develop a range of consequences to address misbehavior while simultaneously focusing on the use of positive approaches to re-teach

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and encourage “expected” behaviors.

School-wide Positive Behavior Support is a process schools adopt, not a curriculum. Therefore, each school is able to develop their own approach to SW-PBS to fit the unique needs of their students, staff and communities.

Recognizing that all children require a different level of support, the SW-PBS model takes a graduated approach, following the three-tiered (primary, secondary and tertiary) public health prevention model.

It is estimated that in any given school, approximately 80 percent of the students will fall within the first tier, known as the primary prevention tier. These children have few or no problem behaviors, and a universal support system is established to ensure that they do not develop problem behaviors. Universal supports include school-wide behavioral expectations, a plan for teaching the expectations to all students, a procedure for acknowledging those students who are following the expectations and a system for monitoring and revising the universal system based on data.

Once the universal support system is firmly in place, it is easier to identify those students who exhibit more frequent problem behaviors. These students may incur a higher number of disciplinary referrals for not completing work, fail to follow teacher directions or experience occasional difficulties in getting along with peers. The secondary tier, which in any given school may represent up to 15 percent of the student body, is designed to help educators “work smarter and not harder” by designing group-based, as opposed to individualized, interventions. Continuing to maintain a positive focus, targeted group interventions are designed to be more efficient in addressing students’ needs and include strategies such as the Homework Club, where students spend time during the day doing their homework under a teacher’s supervision a check-in/check-out program, designed to monitor student progress throughout the day, mentoring programs and even group-based social skills training programs. Again, the emphasis is on teaching and encouraging expected behaviors.

Students who exhibit more chronic problem behaviors are addressed at the tertiary tier. Fortunately, only about one to five percent of the student body is considered in need of more intense and individualized program planning. Successful intervention at this level relies on the planning efforts of a behavioral support team and is based on a thorough understanding, derived through a functional behavioral assessment, of the problem behavior. In many cases, a behavioral health professional may be involved. Interventions are school-based and often extend into the home and community. Greater success is achieved when parents are actively involved and supportive.

For students at this level of service delivery, the tertiary level, a system of care or “wraparound” process, may be used. The system of care is a community-level collaboration of services and supports, individualized

to meet the needs of the child and family. In many cases, multiple community agencies may be involved.

Intervention with children at the secondary and tertiary levels is critical. However, research shows that chronic and persistent problem behavior, evidenced as early as kindergarten or first grade, is one of the best early predictors of delinquency. Without intervention, many of these children develop serious patterns of antisocial behavior expressed through aggressive acts, hostility, defiance and rule-breaking. If not changed by the end of third grade, the condition may be considered chronic and require supportive intervention across the life span. It is estimated that about 70 percent of students with early and chronic antisocial behavior will be arrested at least once within three years of leaving school.

Expected Outcomes

Schools that adopt the SW-PBS model will need to be diligent in their data collection on students’ behavioral outcomes, including disciplinary referrals, suspensions and absences. Most schools collect some type of disciplinary data, but this data becomes more important in a SW-PBS environment where benchmarking is necessary to measure the success of the program and to problem-solve and course-correct as needed to improve outcomes.

Just as a school will develop an individualized set of expectations for students’ behavior, so will the school determine the desired outcomes they wish to achieve. These outcomes will be determined by the goals set by each school. Some examples of school goals might be a reduction of disruptive behavior in the classroom; students walking quietly through the hallways; or students staying in their seats in the lunchroom.

The overall success of the SW-PBS program will vary, depending on such factors as the full integration of the SW-PBS model, the quality of the data collection and the amount of time the program has been in place. Some of the expected improvements can include a reduction in disciplinary referrals to the office; a decrease in the amount of time administration and teachers spend on addressing problem behaviors; an increase in class instruction time; a decrease in classroom disruptions; an improvement in academic performance for standardized tests; and a decrease in student dropout rates. Once this model has been fully implemented, initial improvements that schools may experience include a 20 percent to 60 percent reduction in disciplinary incidents. It is expected that the rate of improvement increases each successive year.

Schools, Districts and Community Leaders Embracing SW-PBS

It is estimated that approximately 7000 schools throughout the country, in rural, suburban and urban areas are in some stage of implementing a Positive Behavior Support model. The PBS model is being introduced into elementary, middle and on a limited basis, high schools. Other educational settings such as Head Start, juvenile

justice facilities, alternative schools and residential treatment facilities are also implementing the PBS model.

Illinois has more than 700 schools in 179 school districts already using a PBS model. Illinois Senators Barack Obama (D) and Richard Durbin (D), along with Congressman Phil Hare (D-IL), late last year introduced the Positive Behavior for Effective Schools Act (H.R. 3407, S.2111), which would allocate funding streams to bring PBS programs to schools in an effort to improve school climate and make it easier for students to learn.

Senator Barack Obama has praised the Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) model by saying, "America's teachers deserve our long-term commitment so that they can provide students with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed. Positive Behavior Support programs have proven successful in Illinois and throughout the country. These programs would not only strengthen our schools, but would bolster our nation's competitiveness by providing the best possible learning environments for our next generation of leaders."

This Positive Behavior for Effective Schools Act would amend the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), to make PBS an allowable use of funds, and proposes an Office of Specialized Instructional Support Service. Some of the current funding used by school districts to fund PBS include money from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Part B discretionary funds, dropout prevention funds, literacy funds, safe and drug-free school funds, mental health integration grants and character education funds. Some schools have partnered with mental health or juvenile justice to share in the PBIS training and support.

In addition to Illinois, other states who have had widespread implementations of SW-PBS include Maryland, Florida, Oregon, North Carolina, New York, Louisiana, Colorado and Michigan.

Considerations for Implementing a SW-PBS Program

Schools interested in implementing SW-PBS must consider the following commitments to the success of the program:

1. Active administrative involvement. Leaders within the district, school administration and faculty must attend SW-PBS trainings and participate in on-going team meetings, which will help to determine and sustain positive outcomes.
2. Staff commitment to a SW-PBS model. It is recommended that a minimum of 80 percent of the school's staff express a commitment to adopt the model.
3. Commitment of staff time. A sufficient number of personnel must be allocated to the project and given adequate time to meet, plan, develop associated products and implement the system.
4. Financial support for SW-PBS. Monies must be allo-

cated to support training, technical assistance and supplies for a three to five year time span.

5. A system for collecting and reporting data must be used to assist the leadership team with decision making. Data collection is also crucial to determining the efficacy of the program.

Sustaining a SW-PBS Program

Early efforts in developing SW-PBS programs, funded mainly through private foundation and government grants, were effective in establishing demonstration sites in many school districts. Unfortunately, when funding ended, so did many, but not all, of the demonstrations. For SW-PBS to result in meaningful change on a practical level, it is important for schools to adopt formal strategies for sustaining the program from the start. Strategies to consider include:

1. Gaining organizational-level commitment. Individual SW-PBS programs are useful as model or demonstration sites, and will flourish with the full support of the building administrator. However, the key to sustainability is to obtain "buy in" at the organizational level. In school districts, buy-in is established at the district-level and a district-level leadership team, composed of directors from various disciplines, community representatives and parents, can serve to provide oversight and support for developing schools. Private schools that are part of a larger organization of schools may consider a similar arrangement. Stand-alone private schools, on the other hand, should consider inviting community representatives and parents to join an already committed school-based leadership team.
2. Using external coaches. An organizational-level commitment to SW-PBS also means finding the funds to support the hire of PBS coaches. In school districts, a PBS coach is a district employee, perhaps a counselor or school psychologist, whose time can be allocated to provide coaching and support to developing school leadership teams. One coach can support up to five schools and the district-level leadership team can deploy coaches according to their multi-year plan for a district-wide SW-PBS roll out. Like districts, private schools have the option of joining a statewide initiative. Statewide efforts to implement SW-PBS typically include training and technical assistance (coaching). Alternately, private schools may consider working with university partners or private organizations equipped to provide training and technical assistance to developing schools. Agencies can provide training in SW-PBS and deploy coaches to assist schools as they develop and refine their SW-PBS model.
3. Developing school-based training materials. SW-PBS is individualized by school and may appear slightly different from one school to the next. To the extent possible, schools are encouraged to develop "permanent product" training materials to facilitate implementation efforts from year to year.
4. Adopting a data-based approach. Organizations and

their developing schools are advised to incorporate a data-based approach to decision-making from the start. The data should be meaningful, sensitive to change and efficient to collect (e.g. office discipline referrals, number of suspensions). A system for gathering and summarizing the data in graphic form is recommended so that school- and organization-level teams can formatively evaluate and enhance their SWPBS programs.

The costs to implement SW-PBS vary depending on the size of the program and the organization with whom you partner to develop the model. For planning purposes, an annual budget, with a minimum three-year commitment, ranges from \$20,000 to \$25,000 per school. Larger districts implementing SW-PBS have the benefit of economies of scale. If you are interested in pursuing specific costs to implement SW-PBS, program partners from across the country can work with a school or district for a proposal with more specific costs.

For more information on who program partners are, visit the National Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports at www.PBIS.org or the Association for Positive Behavioral Support at www.apbs.org. Devereux's Center for Effective Schools also has information available at www.centerforeffectiveschools.org.

School-wide Positive Behavior Support is a proven method of helping students demonstrate desired behaviors with positive, not punitive measures. The program also offers targeted strategies for intervention with students who are at-risk for significant behavioral disorders in the future. While the program necessitates a commitment of resources, time and money, the outcomes and improvements can be significant. Creating a positive and structured environment for students to learn and grow should be paramount to any school.

