



# Behavioral Support

## Research-based program reduces discipline problems

Nakia Hall, with Hank Bohanon and Steve Goodman

I was in my district office one day speaking to our board secretary and I expressed a desire to learn the history of our district. She shared the school record keeping ledgers that had been kept over the years. Upon examining the ledgers, I discovered how the board authorized the purchases of such things as coal for heating the “schoolhouse,” their first telephone, and the hiring of five employees who did multiple jobs.

Fast forward 150 years. With nearly 5,000 students, and 10 schools, we are hardly a district of students meeting in the one little schoolhouse. Education currently is a world or two or three away from the issues that were being faced back then. A lot changes in over two centuries, let alone two years in the world of education.

Today’s school districts focus on standardized testing, budgets, and school discipline. School board members currently face challenges that require us to be informed, involved, and passionate about what is effective in the education of our children. We must make educated decisions on the board level that end in the implementation of what is best for our students.

We have all learned the balcony and dance floor concept, which implies that school board members are onlookers from the balcony, while administrators, teachers, and students do the two-step on the dance floor. We are told to observe from a distance and to refrain from micromanaging, as our role is to create policy, support our district, and hire the superintendent while holding him or her accountable. However, does this mean that we do not voice our support for those things that are beneficial to our students?

## Why districts need PBIS

In 2013, I was approached by my district’s coordinator about a program called Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). It provides a multi-tiered behavioral framework to improve pro-social interaction with promising effects on academic outcomes. I was invited to a PBIS conference as one of the family and community attendees. I had heard of PBIS, as our district had implemented the intervention and was gradually implementing the program in all of our buildings. I accepted the invitation because I wanted to know more about this program that was being embraced by our superintendent.

My attendance at this conference changed how I viewed student discipline and our discipline policies. Traditionally, districts have implemented student discipline policies that are punitive in nature. However, PBIS offered more than an alternative to typical student discipline. Instead, it's a proactive approach to prevent the likelihood of problem behavior occurring, while also incorporating interventions for students who engage in problem behavior -- all within a systems framework. I realized that though some students had issues with certain behaviors, they needed interventions that were more transforming and restorative than punitive and unforgiving.

I took this information back to my board members and expressed the need for us to support initiatives and policies that afforded our students the chance to succeed not only academically, but also behaviorally and emotionally. PBIS gives our students the opportunity to learn appropriate behavior through a system of accumulation, in contrast to one of depreciation. Our school first identified a few key behavior expectations for our students. Students were taught these behavior expectations, in the same manner as teaching math or vocabulary lessons. Our schools choose to reward students for good behavior (engaging in the behavior expectations), versus heavily disciplining students for inappropriate or unacceptable behaviors. Since implementing PBIS, our schools have seen a reduction in discipline infractions including occurrences of disrespect and fighting -- two types of incidents that have a history of frequent occurrence in our district. Our students earn school "bucks" for positive behavior, which can be used to purchase items from the PBIS school store. Teachers send positive notes home and maintain communications of expectations with parents.

We know that there are many pressures faced by school board members and superintendents today in the development of safe and effective schools that produce meaningful academic outcomes for all students. The educational setting must provide a school climate that is welcoming and conducive to student learning. All this must take place within limited district resources of staff time and funding.

Fortunately, PBIS has been demonstrated to effectively promote positive school climates to enhance social behavior outcomes while contributing to academic success. Our school board's support of PBIS sent a message to our entire district of its expectation that students will be taught acceptable behavior, and be held accountable for their actions, while receiving the support that they need in order to be successful.

There is growing concern around adequate access to effective instruction, especially since discipline issues lead to lost instructional time for students and staff. According to research by Terry Scott and Susan Barrett, each instance of a discipline referral costs teachers 20 instructional minutes and 45 minutes for administrators. States have documented the loss of one million instructional days due to discipline problems per year, according to Voices of Youth in Chicago Education.

## Laws impacting discipline of students

Illinois recently signed into legislation a bill that addresses preventative discipline practices as they relate to the school-to-prison pipeline. Illinois Senate Bill 100 focuses on addressing punitive schoolwide discipline plans. The bill endorses the creation of safe and orderly environments for all students. Under this law, students can only be expelled after all "appropriate and available" resources have been exhausted. In other words, suspension and expulsion must be the last resort. It also limits long-term out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and alternative placements. Furthermore, it encourages schools to adopt alternatives to suspension.

There may be long-term consequences for districts whose schools do not address issues of underachievement, as well. Along with the bill previously described concerning Illinois, another provision in existence provides the State Board of Education the ability to change the local leadership of districts that have been underperforming in key areas.

Public Act 098-1155 amends the Illinois School Code to hold school boards and school districts who have schools with severely underachieving students accountable. This accountability could result in districts being mandated to undergo an accreditation process from an independent body. If districts fail to complete accreditation due to reasons associated with school board governance, the state would have the option to remove the local school board and appoint an independent authority to operate the district.

Student discipline affects student achievement. PBIS provides educators with enhanced skills to improve social behavior, reducing potential disruptions to teaching, and recovering instructional time.

## Main features of PBIS

PBIS is a framework for assisting school personnel in adopting and organizing evidence-based behavioral interventions into an integrated continuum that enhances academic and social behavior outcomes for all students (PBIS.org). This process is being implemented in over 20,000 schools across the U.S.

Catherine Bradshaw and her fellow researchers describe PBIS as a multi-tiered behavioral framework that has demonstrated improved overall school climate and safety. Further, they share that when PBIS is implemented with fidelity, there is an increase in perceived school safety, overall reductions in problem behavior, and reductions in bullying behaviors. Effective implementation of PBIS leads to reductions in office discipline referrals and school suspensions. Not only can PBIS reduce problematic behavior, according to a paper by Susan Barrett and others, there is a correlation between the use of PBIS and improved social skills. A paper by Kent McIntosh and others also described emerging evidence linking PBIS to improved academic outcomes.

PBIS provides a cohesive framework of systems, practices, and data that can improve outcomes for all students. The practices of PBIS are organized around three tiers of support. Tier one supports are provided to all students, and can include the direct teaching of expected dispositional skills. Many of these skills are included in the Common Core State Standards for Literacy - speaking and listening (e.g., presenting ideas effectively). Tier two supports are for groups of students who cannot or will not perform a particular skill. Finally, tier three supports are for students with the most intense academic or behavioral needs.

According to a paper by George Sugai and others, these supports rely on information about the reasons for the students' behavior (e.g., to avoid frustration; to gain attention). Rob Horner, a leader in PBIS, suggests that through the implementation of the program, schools work to develop a culture of competence. This culture shares common language, expectations, experiences, and values. When positive behavior support is implemented well, we see a reduction in problem behavior, resulting in more time for instruction. Students, their families, and educators feel more positive and connected when positive behavior support is implemented within the schools.

Implementation takes effort and resources to do it well so it should be done within a systems approach. This work is embedded within the school improvement process and becomes a component of the overall school or district plan. Additionally, PBIS is led by a team of administrators, educational leaders, and those who provide direct educational programming to students. This team monitors implementation to manage opportunities, barriers, and risks.

PBIS focuses on evidence-based practices that have demonstrated effectiveness in real work settings with student populations similar to our schools. Practices involve identifying expectations that are positively stated to explain what students should be doing (rather than what they should not do). Students are then actually taught the subtleties of what these expectations mean in the various settings/contexts of the school environment.

Students are provided feedback on their behavior when they engage in the identified behavior expectations. When students misbehave, they are receive consequences appropriate to the misbehavior. All students are provided with the strategies identified above. The intensity of support increases based upon student needs by providing more frequent feedback and behavior support plans directly tailored to the student.

The implementation of PBIS relies on the use of data for decision-making. Educators and implementation teams look at data to describe the needs of students and link intervention to student need. The PBIS process involves collecting and acting on data to improve implementation efforts by making ongoing adjustments to the plan. Data are collected on student outcomes and the fidelity of implementation. The latter ensures that students are exposed to PBIS accurately and consistently.

## Connections between PBIS and school boards

School board members have a responsibility in helping to ensure that students do well academically, behaviorally, and emotionally. Behavior and emotional health directly impact academic achievement; the PBIS system helps school districts to address all three of these areas. The school board is in a unique position to support PBIS in a way that will enhance educator implementation efforts. School boards can provide policy alignment, visibility and dissemination, and political support to enhance implementation.

**Policy alignment.** It is important for boards to implement policies, procedures, and practices that ultimately make a positive impact on student outcomes. How often do boards assess school board policy in order to ensure that it is up-to-date and reflective of legislation and best practices? How often do boards monitor student handbooks and school procedures to make certain that they are aligned with board policy?

Many school boards neglect to complete these tasks. Outdated policies are not beneficial to schools and school districts. Outdated discipline policies have the same effect. With the emergence of changes to school codes regarding student discipline, as well as national initiatives urging schools to rethink student discipline procedures, board policies should reflect applicable changes. They also should be grounded in the vision and mission of the school district's academic and behavioral values.

Schools that implement PBIS make sure that their policies are reflective of this commitment to helping students thrive in a productive and positive school culture. There is a movement to move away from zero-tolerance policies and instead implement progressive discipline. Progressive measures allow administrators and principals to look at discipline on a case-by-case, rather than a one-size-fits-all basis. It is important that practiced actions are parallel to stated ones. School districts should assess school practices and procedures to align them with the positive interventions of PBIS. Having a procedure that goes in the opposite direction can cause confusion amongst staff, students, and parents.

**Visibility and dissemination.** School boards have an opportunity to provide visibility to the district implementation of PBIS through regular discussions at board meeting and communication with the school community. Reviewing implementation efforts such as the number of schools implementing, how well PBIS is implemented, and student outcomes associated with PBIS will help to communicate importance of this work.

**Political support.** When a school board goes on record to indicate support for PBIS within the district, it communicates a level of commitment to address the needs of all students. Providing political support helps to maintain motivation for PBIS implementation.

## Implementation outcomes

Our district is making careful decisions when it comes to out-of-school suspensions and expulsions. We have embraced alternatives to out-of-school suspensions and expulsions by enrolling students in our alternative school where they receive more structured lessons on positive behavior, as well as intensive support, in-depth learning and restorative guidance. We have also used PBIS to change the culture of the language that we use concerning our children. We have chosen to refrain from using language that is punitive and judicially systemic in nature, including removing the label of calling students with repetitive behaviors “repeat offenders.”

Our implementation of PBIS has brought about several positive student outcomes. Since our district’s implementation of PBIS in 2012-13, we have seen a 53 percent reduction in office referrals. A reduction in referrals equals an increase in instructional time, as well as a decrease in administrative time spent processing and investigating referrals. We have also celebrated a 39 percent reduction in out-of-school suspensions. This reduction led to 14,532 hours of regained instructional time. These results mean that our schools are safer, our students are in school, and they are learning.

With a decrease in out-of-school suspensions, we are seeing more students in school and higher average daily attendance (ADA). Schools receive state funds based on their ADA, so in general, the more days that students attend schools, the more money schools can potentially acquire to invest in students. Illinois School Code specifically states that out-of-school suspension days do not count as attendance days for students and do not qualify for ADA funds. When our district increased instructional time by 14,532 hours, this was the equivalent of 2,422 days of instruction gained, which lends to an increase in ADA funds.

In a day and age of school funding issues, school climate concerns, academic assessment changes, and issues with disproportionality, school boards are challenged more than ever to make sound decisions that produce success for their districts. The board member watching from afar on the balcony must now have a telescope, microscope, and a stethoscope with a 20-foot cord. States are holding board members accountable through the implementation of laws, as well as requirements of trainings. An effective board member is well-informed and familiar with the issues facing the district. Students and staff are counting on us to make solid decisions concerning policies and practices.

School boards that are committed to focusing on prevention should define their role in the processes. They can consider how to ensure all students and staff are prepared to implement PBIS with success. These efforts include providing guidance on funding streams for PBIS, such as the internal and external resources described above. They also can ensure school goals and accomplishments are visible to the community by sharing success stories and next steps. Further, they can gather the political will of their community to ensure that PBIS becomes part of business as usual. Finally, they can support the development of policies to ensure these changes are institutionalized for everyone.

Ultimately, many boards make decisions based on funding availability and budgets, which is an act of responsibility. As the school board president, I have a saying in my district, “If we are going to spend money, we are going to spend money on the best academic opportunities for our students.” PBIS helps to improve academics and so much more. I have heard some districts say that they can’t afford to implement programs like PBIS. I say that they can’t afford not to.

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