

School-wide Positive Behavior Support: Investing in Student Success

by Robert Horner, George Sugai and Claudia Vincent

Problem behaviors, such as aggression, defiance, truancy, property destruction, disruption, and self-injury remain a major challenge in schools and a dramatic barrier to academic achievement. Historically, schools have assumed that social skills should be learned at home, and that children who behave inappropriately at school should be identified and given a strong disciplinary message that such behavior will not be tolerated. When the “get tough” response does not result in an immediate elimination of the problem behavior, next steps are exclusionary (e.g., suspensions), in some cases moving children to “special” contexts. Students identified with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) are especially at risk of exclusion from general education settings, even though they are likely to benefit most from the typical social interactions occurring in general education classrooms (Panacek & Dunlap, 2003).

Exclusionary approaches have never been effective, and as the number of students with problem behavior has increased, schools face an overwhelming demand from teachers and families to respond. In a variety of ways policy-makers, school boards, administrators, and teachers are being asked to make schools safe, positive, predictable places of learning. Increasingly and ironically, schools that do not invest in building a positive social culture have difficulty achieving the academic standards that are now expected.

School-wide positive behavior support (SW-PBS) is an approach that begins with a school-wide prevention effort, and then adds intensive individualized support for those students with more extreme needs. SW-PBS has five core strategies:

- Focus on preventing the development and occurrence of problem behavior, which is more effective,

cost-efficient, and productive than responding after problem behavior patterns have become ingrained.

- Teach appropriate social behavior and skills. Because children come to school from many different backgrounds, schools must define the core social expectations (e.g., be respectful, be responsible, be safe), and overtly teach the behaviors and skills associated with these expectations. When all students in the school are taught the same social skills, a social culture is established where students not only have personal knowledge about social expectations, they know that everyone in the school knows those same social expectations.
- Acknowledge appropriate behavior. Students should receive regular recognition for appropriate behavior at rates that exceed rates of recognition for rule violations and problem behaviors. Negative consequences alone will not change problem behavior. Instead of ignoring problem behavior, a continuum of consequences (e.g., correction, warning, office discipline referral) for problem behavior should be maintained and used to prevent escalation and allow instruction to continue in class.
- Gather and use data about student behavior to guide behavior support decisions. Data on what problem behaviors are being observed and how often, where and what time of the day they are occurring, and who is engaging in these problem behaviors enable schools to develop the most effective, efficient, and relevant school-wide behavior support plan.
- Invest in the systems (e.g., teams, policies, funding, administrative support, data structures) that support adults in their implementation of effective practices.

Over the past six years, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) has invested in technical assistance to states and districts choosing to implement SW-PBS. Over 2900 schools across 34 states are now implementing or in the process of adopting SW-PBS. Implementation is occurring primarily in elementary and middle schools, but the approach is now being adapted, applied, and studied in over 200 high schools. A 90-school study using a randomized, wait-list, control group design is currently being funded by OSEP to assess the a) impact of technical support on the ability of schools to adopt SW-PBS practices with high fidelity, b) impact of SW-PBS practices on the social and academic outcomes for students, and c) sustainability of SW-PBS practices and outcomes over time. Evaluations that have accompanied implementation of SW-PBS efforts identify the following seven key “lessons learned” that have relevance for future policy and practice (Lewis & Sugai, 1999; Horner, Sugai, Todd & Lewis-Palmer, 2005; Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support, 2004):

- Most schools in the U.S. are not implementing the evidence-based practices associated with SW-PBS. As part of the technical assistance process, schools have been assessed prior to adopting SW-PBS practices. On average, schools are using less than half the basic features, and none of the schools evaluated have demonstrated effective implementation prior to receiving technical assistance.
- When technical support is provided, schools are successful in adopting the evidence-based practices associated with SW-PBS. Typically, school teams composed of five to seven individuals

receive three, one- to two-day training events each year for two years. Schools throughout the country have documented the ability to adopt SW-PBS practices with high fidelity when they receive this level of support.

- Once schools adopt SW-PBS practices to criterion they are likely to sustain those practices over long time periods. Longitudinal studies indicate that SW-PBS practices have sustained up to 10 years following implementation, even with turn-over in administrators and core team members. In a recent evaluation of schools in Illinois, 86% of schools adopting SW-PBS in 2002-03 sustained or improved their level of implementation in 2003-04.
- When SW-PBS is implemented to criterion, results indicate the following improvements in academic and social behavior outcomes: a) 20-60% reduction in office discipline referrals for students with and without Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), b) increases in the time students spend in instruction, c) decreases in the amount of time administrators and teachers spend addressing problem behaviors, and d) improvement in the perception of school safety and mental health through decreases in "risk factors" and increases in mental health "protective factors." In addition, preliminary results indicate that SW-PBS implementation is associated with a decrease in the number of students identified for tertiary interventions because of intense support needs (Eber, 2005).
- When investments are made in both behavior support and effective instruction, improvements in academic performance are experienced. During 2002-03, 52 elementary schools in Illinois using SW-PBS to criterion were compared with 69 schools that were just adopting SW-PBS and were not at criterion. On average, 62.19% of third graders in schools using

SW-PBS met or exceeded the state reading standard. By comparison, an average of 46.6% of third graders in schools not using SW-PBS met the same standard.

- Investing in development of local systems is an effective strategy for moving from small "demonstrations" to larger-scale applications. Implementation of SW-PBS involves not simply training for school teams, but training of a) local coaches or facilitators who work closely with teams to build and sustain evidence-based practices, and b) local trainers who are able to conduct team training on a distributed format within two years. By investing in building the capacity of local states/districts to train and evaluate SW-PBS, the cost of training the third and fourth generations of teams is reduced. External trainers and national technical assistance becomes less necessary. For example, in Illinois a state system of trainers and coaches now supports over 444 schools implementing SW-PBS. In Maryland, a state system of trainers and coaches supports over 321 schools implementing SW-PBS.
- Implementation of SW-PBS is cost effective. Schools are able to adopt SW-PBS and establish local coaching and training infrastructure within a two-year initiative process. The cost to schools to sustain SW-PBS requires no additional dollars. This approach is about using existing resources better, not adding new costs. The cost of problem behavior in schools is a hidden drain on school resources. For example, when Kennedy Middle School implemented SW-PBS they documented improved student behavior, with an annual reduction of 850 office discipline referrals and 25 student suspensions from the pre-implementation level. This change translated into a time savings of 30 administrator days and 121 student school days.

In summary, schools will not achieve the academic standards we now require

if they fail to build the positive social culture needed for sustained academic engagement. Traditional punishment and exclusionary strategies are not effective practices for improving student behavior. SW-PBS is an innovative combination of evidence-based practices that emphasize investing in a) prevention, b) teaching of basic social expectations, c) acknowledging appropriate behavior, d) preventing problem behavior from interrupting instruction, e) collecting and using data for active decision-making, and f) establishing the organizational and policy structures that improve the effectiveness, efficiency, and relevance of practice adoption, implementation, and durability. SW-PBS is being used on a significant scale across the country with strong evaluation outcomes in both behavioral and academic domains.

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