School-Wide Positive Behavior Support (SW-PBS)

Why Is This Strategy Useful?

School-wide Positive behavior support (SW-PBS) utilizes a broad range of systemic and individualized strategies for improving social and learning outcomes and reducing problem behavior. The value of this approach is in the use of research-proven strategies, the multi-system approach (classroom, school, and preferably also district), and the multi-tiered approach. The focus in primary schools is preventing new incidents of problem behaviors; in secondary – reducing the number of existing incidents, and in tertiary – focus on incidents that are resistant to primary and secondary intervention efforts.

Description of Strategy

SW-PBS includes intensive and individualized behavior interventions based on the assessment of needs of individual students. In the classroom, teachers communicate clear expectations, routines, and structures. At the school level, the administration clearly communicates and enforces behavioral expectations and supports for all students and staff, across all school settings. Under this approach, school principals are encouraged to implement the following strategies:

1. Establish a visible, effective, efficient, and functional leadership team.
2. Review existing information/data.
3. Analyze, describe, and prioritize issue within context.
4. Specify measurable outcome that is related directly to issue and context.
5. Select evidence-based practice to achieve specified outcome.
6. Provide supports for accurate sustained adoption and implementation of practice.
7. Monitor practice implementation and progress toward outcome.
8. Modify practice implementation based on analysis of progress data.

Research Evidence

A large number of quantitative and qualitative studies reported improvement in students’ outcomes and school climate following the implementation of this approach. The studies described here are examples only. Additional studies are cited in the additional resources section. One study which employed a multiple baseline design implemented a 4-weeks social training program and observed elementary school students’ problem behavior during recess on the playground and in the cafeteria during lunch. Results indicated that the social skill instruction and direct intervention combination produced modest reductions in the overall level of problem behavior observed during lunch, recess, and transition. Data also indicate that the observed changes in behavior maintained up to three months.

A second study, utilizing a quasi-experimental design, assessed the effectiveness of this approach as part of a larger project called Community Builders. A middle school in one community received the program and was compared to another community where the program...
was not implemented. The intervention consisted of one year intervention and one year maintenance. Results showed positive impact on students’ positive behavior and feelings of safety in the school and decline in number of discipline referrals and students’ reports of bullying and teasing. Improvement on these measures continued during the maintenance year.

Sample Studies Supporting this Strategy


Increases in the prevalence and incidence of problem behavior in public schools has been a concern among teachers, families, and community members. Attempts to respond to the increased intensity and frequency of these problem behaviors seem to result in the increased use of reactive and punitive strategies. Fortunately, effective, more proactive, interventions have been identified for reducing the problem behavior displayed by individual students. The purpose of this study was to explore the effects of a proactive school-wide discipline approach on the frequency of problem behavior exhibited by elementary students. Specifically, the study was designed to explore the impact of a social skill instruction program combined with direct intervention on problem behavior across three specific school settings; cafeteria, recess, and a hallway transition. Results indicate that educators reduced the rate of problem behavior across each targeted setting. Implications for school discipline programs and future research are discussed.


This paper describes the evaluation of a consultative approach to assisting middle schools in implementing empirically based school-wide behavior management practices. The Effective Behavior Support program involved working with school staff to clarify rules, teach appropriate social behavior, increase positive reinforcement for positive behavior, consistently provide mild consequences for rule violation, and monitor data on student behavior. The intervention was evaluated through records of rewards given, discipline referrals, and frequent surveys of students. Where possible, data from the target school were evaluated against data from comparison schools. Results show effects at the target school on increased positive reinforcement for appropriate social behavior and on decreased aggressive social behavior among students. Discipline referrals were significantly decreased for 7th graders and for harassment among males. Students’ perceptions of school safety improved at the target school but not at comparison schools. Students’ reports of being physically or verbally attacked the previous day were reduced at the target school as well, but these changes were also seen at the comparison school.

Additional Resources

Technical Assistance Websites

Additional Literature


