Creating a School-Wide System of Positive Behavior Support

By Brian C. McKevitt, PhD, NCSP
Heartland Area Education Agency 11 Johnston, IA

Student behavior in schools continues to be a major concern among teachers, administrators and parents. School discipline policies typically list punishments for behavioral infractions, often times including exclusion practices such as suspensions or expulsions. Such exclusion practices usually do not produce long-lasting behavior change, nor do they typically provide teaching opportunities to promote desired behavior (Skiba & Peterson, 2000).

Although schools need to have reactive discipline policies in place, schools are increasingly developing more proactive approaches to prevent problem behaviors from occurring in the first place. Such proactive approaches typically involve procedures that create a school climate and culture that support and promote positive student behavior. These procedures address behavior under a school-wide approach, meaning that all components of a school system, including physical locations (e.g., classroom, cafeteria, gym, playground) and personnel (e.g., teachers, administrators, paraprofessionals, support staff) are involved in the prevention efforts.

PRIMARY PREVENTION EFFORTS IN A SCHOOL-WIDE SYSTEM OF POSITIVE BEHAVIOR SUPPORT

At the first level of a school-wide system for developing and maintaining desired school behavior, procedures to address whole-school issues must be implemented. Researchers at the OSEP Center on Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (www.pbis.org) point to five core elements of a school-wide system:

Clear and consistent school-wide expectations must be established. School personnel identify behavioral expectations that are specific to the needs and culture of the local environment. These expectations should be positively stated (e.g., Be responsible, Be safe), brief, memorable and limited to three to five statements. The expectations are intended to be used in all school settings, including classrooms, lunchrooms, hallways, playgrounds, etc. Expectations should be posted all around the school environment.

Expectations must be taught. The broadly-stated behavioral expectations should be operationalized for each school location in which students should display behaviors. For example, "be responsible" in the cafeteria may include eating quietly and clearing the tray from the table. The same expectation for a classroom may include turning in assignments or keeping one's workspace tidy. Once the expectations have been operationalized for each setting, adults should teach students how the expectations look in each setting, using examples, nonexamples, modeling and practice.

Appropriate display of the expectations must be rewarded. To maintain desired behavior, a positive reinforcement system must be established to "catch" students behaving appropriately. The system may include tangible reinforcers, such as tickets that may be cashed in for prizes or privileges. Regardless of the reward, however, the system must be efficient and easy for adults to use to reward appropriate behavior when they see it.

Consequences must be given for behavioral infractions. Recognizing that students will still engage in undesired behavior, a system must be put in place that provides students with corrective consequences for their behavioral errors. Consequences may include time away from attention-maintaining settings, office referrals, or suspensions, for example. Regardless of the type of consequence, however, it is important that there be a teaching component to the consequence, in which students are reminded of expectations and, when necessary, retaught the expectations in the settings

where the infractions occurred. Like the system for rewarding desired behavior, the system for giving consequences for undesired behavior must be efficient for teachers to use, and must be universally recognized, accepted and followed so students know exactly what to expect from the adults in school.

Behavior data must be collected and used to monitor and change school-wide efforts. Ongoing use of data is a core component of a school-wide model for supporting behavior. An efficient and naturally occurring source of behavior data is office referral information. Office referral data can be analyzed regularly to observe patterns of behavior (e.g., locations of problem behavior, types of problem behavior, times when problems may be occurring). The analysis should be readily available and up-to-date so appropriate decisions about changes can be made. An example of an efficient program for recording and analyzing office discipline referral data is the School-Wide Information System (SWIS), available at www.swis.org.

When implemented with integrity, approximately 80% of the student population will respond positively to universal intervention efforts. The benefits of having these core features in place in a school include having an orderly and predictable environment, a school culture that supports and rewards appropriate behavior, a reduced number of office discipline referrals which in turn increases academic learning time, and possibly even improved academic achievement resulting from a behaviorally stable and supportive environment. In addition, school-wide efforts may positively impact students who have more behavior challenges than typical.

SECONDARY PREVENTION EFFORTS IN A SCHOOL-WIDE SYSTEM OF POSITIVE BEHAVIOR SUPPORT

Recognizing that not all students will respond to universal intervention efforts, targeted group interventions must be put into place for the small number of students who need more support than the general population. These students may be called "at risk" because they have a higher incidence of office referrals and engage in more problem behaviors than expected. These students may need small group reteaching of the expectations in various school

settings, or they may need small group instruction in social skills or social problem solving. To monitor the behavior of this targeted group, Crone, Horner and Hawken (2004) recommend the Behavior Education Plan (BEP), for which students are rated individually by teachers throughout the day on each behavioral expectation, and special incentives are provided for meeting expectations consistently.

TERTIARY PREVENTION EFFORTS IN A SCHOOL-WIDE SYSTEM OF POSITIVE BEHAVIOR SUPPORT

There is always a very small group of students in schools whose behavior is so severe or disruptive that they require intensive, individualized interventions. These students often have individualized education programs (IEPs) and/or individualized behavior support plans that are developed based on a functional behavioral assessment. A functional behavioral assessment is a set of procedures (e.g., observations, interviews, record reviews and, at times, planful manipulation of environmental stimuli) that are designed to understand the variables that maintain problem behavior. Once the maintaining variables are understood, then appropriate interventions can be developed that teach replacement behaviors and determine consequences based on the function of the behavior. Because these interventions are student-specific, there is not a specific intervention strategy for tertiary prevention efforts. However, any functional assessment and intervention plan must include (a) an operational definition of the behavior; (b) a description of the chain of behavior (i.e., possible antecedents and consequences); (c) hypotheses for why the problem behavior may be occurring; (d) a plan for teaching replacement behaviors; (e) a plan for providing consequences (usually matched to the identified function) for desired and undesired behavior; and (f) a goal and/or monitoring plan to evaluate effectiveness.

ESTABLISHING A SCHOOL-WIDE SYSTEM OF POSITIVE BEHAVIOR SUPPORT

Putting the components of school-wide behavior support in place takes commitment and teamwork. The following steps should be taken to implement positive behavior support strategies with maximum effectiveness:

Establish commitment and a leadership team.
According to Sugai and Horner (2002), at least 80% of staff must be supportive of school-wide efforts, supporting student behavior must be a priority or goal for the school, and an administrator must be committed to the procedures. Once this level of commitment has been established, the school should develop a leadership team to plan and coordinate the school-wide efforts. The leadership team should consist of an administrator and staff with interest in the school-wide program. There may already be a team in a school that addresses such issues; it is not necessary to form a new team if an existing team can function in this role.

Conduct needs assessment. Questionnaires, interviews, office referral data and observations of student behavior are some of the ways that schools can analyze what the needs are regarding school-wide behavior support. It is recommended that a needs assessment be conducted prior to implementing universal interventions. The needs assessment will help the team focus on issues that are important to the school climate and culture. In addition, a comprehensive needs assessment will help school teams evaluate the effectiveness of the plans and procedures they put into place. Several of the resources listed below have useful tools for conducting thorough needs assessments.

- *Hold regularly scheduled team meetings to analyze data and plan.* Once the needs assessment is complete, school teams should meet regularly to review how school-wide efforts are progressing. Having current data regarding school behavior should be an important element to these team meetings. Data can and should be used to make decisions about how things are going, what should be changed, who should be targeted, and how to celebrate successes.
- *Obtain funding.* Establishing effective school-wide behavior support programs can consume valuable school resources. Time is necessary to be able to plan and implement strategies effectively. Funding for substitutes to cover teacher planning time or expenses related to rewards and incentives may be needed. Schools are encouraged to find creative funding sources, such as grant money, assistance from community partners, or from parent organizations to support school-wide efforts.
- *Deal with resistance.* Inevitably, some staff members will be resistant to the plans and procedures set forth in school-wide behavior support efforts.

Osher, Dwyer, and Jackson (2004) offer several suggestions for dealing with resistance, such as setting goals, acknowledging change as an

ROLE OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS IN SCHOOL-WIDE BEHAVIOR SUPPORT

School psychologists can play a large role in all components of a school-wide positive behavior support system. For universal intervention efforts, school psychologists are well suited to be members of leadership teams; to assist with needs assessment data collection and analysis, to consult with teachers regarding procedures, and to analyze school-wide data for decision-making. At a targeted group intervention level, school psychologists could conduct social skills or problem solving instruction groups or serve as coordinators of other small group intervention or monitoring efforts. Finally, at an individual intervention level, school psychologists are skilled at completing functional behavioral assessments and designing intervention plans based on those assessments. School psychologists bring wide knowledge and skills in assessment and intervention techniques, behavioral principles and data analysis that can be very useful for developing and sustaining an effective school-wide behavior support program.

In summary, school-wide positive behavior support is a set of strategies and procedures that can be put in place to create a school that supports desired school behavior and effective learning environments. Having a core set of expectations that are taught and rewarded, a common procedure for correcting behavioral errors, ongoing data collection for decision-making, and methods established to support students who need more intensive interventions will create a school culture and climate that will lead to greater student success. School psychologists can play integral roles in all facets of planning, implementation and evaluation of school-wide efforts.

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

Several resources are available to assist schools with developing and sustaining school-wide behavior support:

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (2003). *Safe and sound: An educational leader's guide to evidence-based social and emotional (SEL) learning programs.* Chicago, IL:

Author. *This book contains guidelines for selecting and using SEL programs, as well as reviews of the effectiveness of multiple programs. Available at* www.casel.org

Crone, D. A., & Horner, R. H. (2003). *Building positive behavior support systems in schools: Functional behavioral assessment.* New York: Guilford. *This book contains strategies and procedures for conducting functional behavioral assessments and developing individualized behavior intervention plans for those students who have intensive behavioral needs.*

Horner, R.H. & Sugai, G. (2000). School-wide behavior support: An emerging initiative (special issue). *Journal of Positive Behavioral Interventions, 2,* 231-233.

Lewis, T. J., & Sugai, G. (1999). Effective behavior support: A systems approach to proactive schoolwide management. *Focus on Exceptional Children, 31(6),* 1-24.

OSEP Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (University of *Oregon (www.pbis.org). This research center and corresponding web site have numerous resources available to assist with implementation of school-wide behavior support efforts, including information, presentations, questionnaires, forms, and references.*

Osher, D., Dwyer, K, & Jackson, S. (2004). *Safe, supportive, and successful schools: Step by step.* Longmont, CO: Sopris West. *This book has useful tools and suggestions for establishing school teams, obtaining funding, conducting needs assessments, and selecting effective programs for teaching behavioral skills.*

Skiba, R. J., & Peterson, R. L. (2000). School discipline at a crossroads: From zero tolerance to early response. *Exceptional Children, 66,* 335-347.

Sugai, G. & Horner, R.H. (2002). The evolution of discipline practices: School-wide behavior supports. *Child and Family Behavior Therapy, 24,* 23-50.

Brian C. McKevitt, PhD, NCSP, is a school psychologist with Heartland Area Education Agency, Johnston, Iowa. NASP represents more than 22,000 School Psychologists who work in schools and other educational and health settings. If you would like to know more about school psychology or accountability in education, please visit the NASP website at www.nasponline.org.