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Implementing School-Wide Positive Behavior Supports in an Alternative Setting: Practical Implications for Success with Complex Students

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Abstract

Effective behavioral practices and school structures are critical to improving the outcomes of students served in an alternative education setting (AE). School-wide Positive Behavior Supports (SW-PBIS) offers a promising approach to improving student outcomes in an alternative setting (AE). The purpose of this article is three-fold: 1) examine the impact of SW-PBIS over three years in an alternative education setting, 2) review the features of SW-PBIS appropriate for implementation in an AE, and 3) demonstrate the impact of SW-PBIS with a special education only population. A Spring 2020 assessment conducted by an external evaluation team, indicated that Woods schools are implementing the Tier I framework with fidelity. Overall, initial results suggest that SW-PBIS can help restructure an alternative school environment to better serve students.

Introduction

Students who have severe behavior or emotional difficulties are often not responsive to practices and supports provided in the general education setting. Some of the common behaviors relating to placement include physical aggression, disruptive verbal behavior, chronic academic failure, and/or mental health needs. Unfortunately, these behaviors can impede a student's learning as well as affect the learning of other classmates. In some cases, problem behaviors can lead to placements in alternative education settings in hopes of providing meaningful support to improve student outcomes. Approximately 2% of students nationwide are being served in AE or alternative settings (Leher et al., 2009). Moreover, approximately 33 to 75 percent of students in AE settings have behavior consistent with emotional and behavioral disabilities. While AE settings are required to support students with a variety of behavioral emotional and behavioral needs, they do not always guarantee student success (Lane et al., 2005). Without effective support, students in AE settings will most likely continue on a path toward destructive school and life outcomes upon leaving these institutions. (Flower et al., 2011).

School wide-Positive Behavior Support (SW-PBIS) is one approach that has been used in school environments to support at-risk students. While most of the research has been conducted in

public school settings, there is growing evidence emerging which suggests SW- PBIS can be effective when implemented in alternative settings such as day treatment programs, approved private schools, and/or residential treatment facilities (Horner and Sugai, 2015).

SW-PBIS Multi-Tiered Framework Approaches to Student Behaviors

Before school-wide Positive Behavior Support, school administrators typically relied on punitive discipline as the preferred method for dealing with student problem behaviors. Unfortunately, these practices often do not help reduce problem behaviors over time, nor do these practices help students understand social expectations or help them acquire prosocial skills. Zero-tolerance policies, along with a variety of reactive and punitive procedures, tend to be the least effective for students experiencing emotional and behavioral difficulties (Simonsen and Sugai, 2013). As a result, students who are placed in an alternative setting often have experienced years of academic failure and punitive discipline methods in response to their undesirable behaviors (Lampron and Gonsoulin, 2013).

School-wide Positive Behavior Supports offers a multi-tiered system of support and a flexible framework for improving services to students with severe emotional and behavioral difficulties in an alternative setting (Lampron and Gonsoulin, 2013). The SW-PBIS framework is based on the belief that student behavior is a form of communication; hence all behavior serves a function. For example, a student may engage in problem behavior in order "to get something" that they desire or "avoid or escape" something aversive or unpleasant (Simonsen et al., 2019). Therefore, the goal of SW-PBIS is to identify and provide students with the amount of support needed for them to be successful as follows; a) Tier I or universal support which supports approximately 80% of students, c) Tier 2 or secondary support is for approximately 15% of the students that need additional support (e.g., small-group instruction), and c) Tier 3 or individual support is for approximately 5% of students in a school that need to the most intense one-on-one support plan. In schools, the goal of Tier I is to establish a school-wide positive social culture that includes the following: a) creating behavioral expectations (e.g., Be respectful, hands and feet to yourself), b) an acknowledgment system to reward students who demonstrate behavioral expectations, c) teaching student expectations, and d) a system to collect, summarize and make data-driven decisions (Horner and Sugai, 2015; Horner et al., 2010; Putnam et al., 2002). Tier I does not focus on a formal assessment protocol but rather focuses on primary preventions and requires the participation of all students. Since the focus of Tier I is on teaching and reviewing expectations the likelihood of initial problem behaviors is reduced.

Tier II or secondary prevention practices are designed for approximately 10-15% of students who require more support in school settings. Tier II supports typically include the use of packaged and/or standardized interventions (e.g., check-in/check-out) to provide additional student training for behavioral expectations and self-regulation skills (Hawken et al., 2007) Examples of Tier II supports can include frequent antecedent prompts and higher rates of positive recognition.

Lastly, Tier III or tertiary prevention practices focus on individualized assessments and support plans to meet the needs of individual students. Tier III supports have been implemented in schools since 1975. These highly individualized and intensive supports are intended for 5% or fewer students within a school (Horner and Sugai, 2015).

Collectively, SW-PBIS has been implemented in over 20,000 schools in the United States and research findings support the reduction of office discipline referrals (Bradshaw et al., 2010, 2012), improved academic outcomes (Horner et al., 2009), improved perception of safety (Horner et al., 2009) and reduction in bullying (Wassdorpe et al., 2012). When schools implement this program with fidelity (e.g., all the necessary and recommended components), schools can more effectively address academic and behavioral needs. Simonsen et al. (2011) suggest the critical features of SW-PBS in an alternative setting need to include the use of outcome, data, practices, and systems.

Outcomes refer to specific goals that the SW-PBIS core team develops based on the data to design and assess the effectiveness of possible interventions or practices that are put in place in a school setting. For example, school teams may focus on reducing high rates of problem behavior or increase interventions to enhance student prosocial behaviors. Data is critical to evaluating the outcomes of goals, interventions, or practices that are implemented. Typically, schools collect, review, and analyze Office Discipline Referral (ODR) data that is entered into the school-wide Information System (SWIS) a web-based data reporting system that allows teams to store, graph, and generate a variety of reports to assist with problem-solving (Todd et al., 2010). Similarly, individual student positive behavior support plans can also inform school-wide practices. It is also recommended that alternative settings adopt successful practices used in general education settings, such as, posting and teaching a small number of positively stated expectations, reinforcing expectations of behaviors, and establishing staff acknowledgment systems.

Lastly, SW-PBIS in an alternative setting should include the use of systemic practices that have proved to be successful in regular education settings. Examples of systemic practices include the use of a coach to support teams, SW-PBIS leadership team, data-driven decision making, action planning, program evaluation, and implementation of the program with fidelity.

Purpose and Rationale

To date over 20,000 schools have adopted SW-PBIS in their educational settings. Schools that implement SW-PBIS with fidelity observe decreases in problem behavior, increases in academic engaged time, and improved perceptions of school safety (Bradshaw et al., 2015; Horner et al., 2014; Simonsen et al., 2012; George et al., 2013) Longitudinal data showed that the rate of physical restraints declines by 99%, suspensions decrease by 88% over 15 years, truancy declines by 64% as well as the elimination of exclusionary timeouts. Therefore, SW-PBIS offers positive and preventive practices for dealing with student problem behaviors in an alternative setting.

While there is growing evidence demonstrating the benefits of SW-PBIS in an alternative school setting, there are relatively few examples of implementation (Swain-Bradway et al., 2013) and little is known about the impact on special education students (Tobin et al., 2012). Therefore, the purpose of this article is three-fold: 1) examine the impact of SW-PBIS over three years in an alternative education setting, 2) review the features of SW-PBIS appropriate for implementation in an AE, and 3) demonstrate the impact of SW-PBIS with a special education only population.

Description of Schools

Woods Schools, which is affiliated with Woods Services, is a private school, approved by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. On-site, Woods Schools offers three education schools where approximately 290 students ages 6-21 are educated from approximately 15 different states. Students receive instruction that is tied to state curriculum standards. They are taught behavioral expectations of SW-PBIS and receive social-emotional learning instruction. The average class size is approximately six students with a 2:1 staff to student ratio. All students are identified as special education including emotional disturbances, autism, or intellectual disability categories. Students are placed by school districts via the IEP process, the court system (e.g., ward of the state), managed care behavioral health agencies, or state or county-based mental health systems because they have been unsuccessful in other placement options. The student population consists of approximately 74% males and 26% females. All of the students at Woods Schools (median age =18) receive special education services for the following disabilities: Autism Spectrum Disorders, Intellectual Disability, Acquired Brain Injury, and a variety of other disabilities.

Features of Woods School SW-PBIS System

School Wide-Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SW-PBIS) is an evidence-based three-tiered framework for improving and integrating all of the data, systems, and practices affecting student outcomes daily. It is important to remember SW-PBIS is not a curriculum but a commitment to addressing student behavior through systems change. When this framework is implemented well, students achieve improved social and academic outcomes, and schools experience reduced exclusionary discipline practices (Algozzine et al., 2010).

To date, Woods schools have implemented SW-PBIS, a multi-tiered framework for three years. The first year was allocated for training, planning, and developing the Tier I framework. Similar to implementation recommendations by the Center on PBIS, the SW-PBIS program at Woods School is based on four pillars that guide implementation as follows: 1) systems, 2) practices, 3) data, and 4) outcomes. What follows is a description of critical elements in each area.

Systems: Teaming and coaching structures, professional development, and proactive and positive support to staff to increase implementation of Tier I: a) monthly SW-PBIS leadership team, b) SW-PBIS coach, c) monthly core teams for each center (e.g., building), d) staff recognition system to acknowledgment for implementation of Tier I, e) on-going professional development, and f) use of School-Wide Information System (SWIS) to analyze student behavior data (SWIS User's Manual 2019).

The Woods SW-PB/IS Leadership Team provides the overall direction for the program and is composed of program directors, program supervisors, and the SW-PBIS Coach for Woods Schools. This team creates the policies and the organizational structure that guides the professional development and subsequent implementation of SW-PBIS at Woods Schools. In year one, the leadership team established the long-term commitment to the implementation of SW-PBIS and communicated that commitment to the entire education community at Woods. The leadership team meets monthly and is an essential component of the implementation of SW-PBIS.

At the individual building level, SW-PBIS is implemented under the direction of the building core team. Each core team is composed of a representative group of staff that includes classroom teachers, school psychologists, behavior analysts, and para-educators. The principal leads each building level team and individual core team members act as the conduit to the rest of the faculty. Core team members communicate decisions to their colleagues as well as bring concerns from the faculty back to the team. Core teams meet monthly and work from a planned agenda to address implementation issues that include maximizing participation by all school personnel and the availability of necessary resources available for all staff. In addition, the core team also analyzes problem behavior data from SWIS to create specific problem statements, generate solutions and develop action plans to solve concerns.

Practices: All staff are expected to participate in the implementation of SW-PBIS at Woods Schools across all settings. Examples of practices used in Woods Schools include the following: a) lesson plans and scheduled teaching time for the behavioral matrix, b) student acknowledgment system (e.g., school store, tickets) and school store, c) operational definitions of inappropriate behavior, d) behavioral expectation matrix for different school domains posted throughout the school (e.g., classroom, hallway, community), e) review of ODR data at monthly faculty and core team meetings, 7) bi-annual review of program outcomes and 8) spirit days (booster sessions) to review and refresh SW-PBIS expectations.

With the direction of the Woods SW-PBIS Leadership Team, each building core team develops a set of SW-PBIS practices that are closely aligned to the needs of their school. Each school created a list of three to five positively stated expectations that would form the foundation of SW-PBIS. Critical prosocial skills such as respect, responsibility, and kindness became the cornerstone of each school's implementation. In addition, each school created lesson plans that defined and taught those expectations in both classroom and non-classroom settings. Woods provides services to students with severe behavioral and emotional disabilities and a significant number of students have severe communication difficulties so it was necessary to create lessons for both verbal and nonverbal students as well as students who are ambulatory and non-ambulatory. In this respect, SW-PBIS at Woods took on some unique characteristics. As teachers developed teaching strategies it became obvious that a 'one size fits all' would not be a viable strategy. Teachers were not only given permission but were actively supported in designing instruction uniquely matched to a student's instructional needs. This resulted in multiple formats for lessons but all fit into the framework of SW-PBIS.

After each core team established their prosocial behavior expectations and lesson plans, each school created a recognition program that would acknowledge each student as they demonstrate appropriate behaviors. Students were acknowledged using school tickets paired with verbal acknowledgment such as, "I saw you walking quietly down the hall" and "You worked very hard at finishing these difficult math problems." The tickets that students receive can be exchanged for items in a school store and this is a very popular activity for students at Woods.

Data-Driven Decision Making: The third feature of Woods SW-PBIS was the use of data to guide the continuous improvement of the program. Specifically, Woods SW-PBIS leadership and core team used different types of data collection to evaluate the fidelity of the program and analyze strategies that are implemented to address challenges. Evaluation tools for Tier I included the Self-Assessment Survey (SAS), Office Discipline Referrals (ODR), Team Implementation Checklist, and Tiered Fidelity Inventory (TFI). Additionally, Office Discipline Referrals are entered into the school-wide Information System (SWIS) which provided reports for core teams regarding the frequency, location, and function of student problem behaviors. Please see a brief description of each type of data used and how it informs our practice.

Self-Assessment Survey (SAS): The SAS was an annual assessment used by schools to identify the staff perception of the implementation status and improvement priority for schools.

Office Discipline Referrals (ODR). Woods schools tracked the number of major offices ODR that occurs daily across the year. An ODR was completed every time a student demonstrates a major problem behavior. This data was entered into the school-wide Information System (SWIS) which generated a variety of reports based on location, function, time of day as well as year-to-year comparison data (Tobin, 2006).

Benchmarks of Quality (BoQ): This was an assessment that helps core teams determine if they are implementing Tier I with fidelity, and identify strengths and weaknesses for action planning. A team score of 70% or higher suggested that the program was being implemented with high fidelity. **(**Cohen et al., 2007).

Tiered-Fidelity Inventory (TFI): The TFI provided a valid, reliable, and efficient measure of the extent to which school personnel is applying the core features of school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports (SWPBIS). Teams reviewed the survey annually and a score of 70% or above suggested the program is operating with fidelity. In addition, an outside team trained in SW-PBIS conducted this assessment to determine if the schools were implementing the Tier I framework with fidelity. The TFI assessment included a walkthrough at each school and interviews with the building principal, teachers, and students (Elfner et al., 2015).

Data Analysis: Woods Schools began the implementation of SW-PBIS in 2017. The first year was used to train and plan the Tier I Framework and in the two subsequent years, SW-PBIS was implemented in the schools. The effectiveness of the SW-PBIS program in

an alternative setting was measured in three primary ways: 1) staff perception data and improvement priorities; 2) the results of the Tiered Fidelity Inventory which was conducted by an external evaluator trained to determine if the SWPBIS components were implemented with fidelity, and 3) percentage of students with less than six office discipline referral (ODR) incidents a year.

The Self-Assessment Survey (SAS) data indicated that teachers and staff have an increased awareness of SW-PBIS implementation within each school. The assessment data also showed a higher percentage of staff awareness of SW-PBIS program components each year in two of the three schools. As staff awareness of the program increased, we saw the fidelity of implementation measures increase across all three schools over time. In year one, the average percentage of staff awareness across all three schools was 42%, compared to 61% in year two and 78% in year three. One of the school's staff awareness results were low compared to the other schools' suggesting that staff was not as aware of SW-PBIS components.

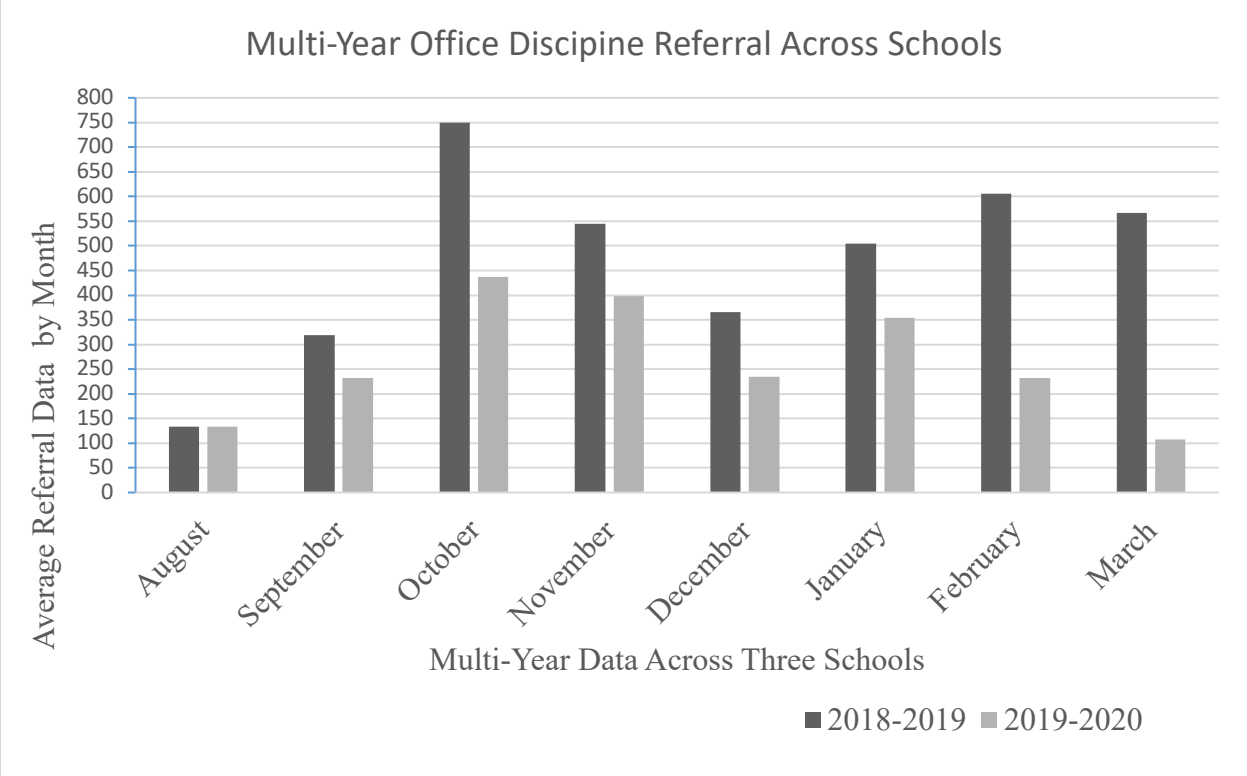
The data collected from the Benchmarks of Quality and Tiered Fidelity Inventory indicate that the program was being implemented with fidelity. According to the PBIS and assessment guidelines, any core team that scored a 70% or above is considered to be implementing a program with fidelity, meaning the program adheres to the SW-PBIS protocol or program implementations as recommended (See Table 2).

Table 2: Measures of Implementation Fidelity

	Benchmark of Quality (2019) (70 % required for fidelity)	Tiered Fidelity Inventory (2020) (70% required for fidelity)
Brookwood	85%	93%
Crestwood	77%	90%
Gardner	78%	93%

Frequency and rates of problem behaviors were used to assess and evaluate the impact of SW-PBIS on student behaviors. Using the SWIS Average Referrals per Day report as a measure, data collected over two academic years shows a reduction in problem behavior by month in the second year of implementation (see Figure-2). The multi-year data suggests that the average rate of problem behaviors referred per day declined over time. The figures populated from the SWIS data system indicate that Tier I of the SW-PBIS program appears to support more students over time in two of the three schools. While these data suggest SW-PBIS can reduce problem behaviors in an AE setting, it is important to note that the 2020 data was impacted by the COVID-19 virus outbreak. Given the school closures and switch to virtual instruction, program implementation and data collection were disrupted in April 2020.

Figure 2: *Average Referrals per Day Across Schools.*



These results indicate that implementing Tier I SW-PBIS had a positive impact on student behaviors. Also, an inverse relationship was indicated between staff awareness and office discipline referrals. Stated differently, when staff awareness improved over the years, office discipline referral rates decreased. While longitudinal data is needed to fully understand the impact of SW-PBIS in alternative settings, these findings suggest a positive outcome occurred with most students. Moreover, the data suggests that problem behavior in an AE setting can be reduced with Tier I supports which is contrary to the common misconception that all students require individualized or Tier 3 supports.

Conclusions

The implementation of School-wide Positive Behavior Support has achieved positive outcomes in general education settings along with growing evidence that it is effective in alternative settings as well. Research has demonstrated that SW-PBIS can reduce office discipline rates for major problem behaviors for students. However, most studies report overall student outcomes rather than disaggregate the findings for general education versus special education students. Although initial evidence supports the use of SW-PBIS implementation in alternative settings, it is important to systematically replicate the SW-PBIS framework in an alternative setting to determine which components lead to student success, organizational effectiveness, and efficiency (Simonsen and Sugai, 2013).

Overall, these findings are important in four primary ways. First, it shows that the self-assessment of SWPBS practices at Woods School appears to coincide with better student outcomes. At Woods, staff turnover rates are consistently and predictably high (e.g., 70-80% turnover 2018-2019) and the results of the Self-Assessment Survey provides a unique lens with which to assess the impact of a high turnover rate among staff on the awareness and understanding of SW-PBIS across the entire organization. The organizational strategies related to professional development for new employees have been highly successful in maintaining high levels of buy-in by the majority of employees. During the second year of implementation, all new hires received professional development and received an SW-PBIS overview summary before starting the job. The SW-PBIS blueprint suggests that organizations obtain a high percentage of staff buy-in before starting implementation to ensure fidelity. The data lends support to the recommendation that a high level of 'buy-in' by the majority of staff contributes to the fidelity of program implementation (e.g., results of the Benchmarks of Quality and Tiered Fidelity Inventory Tier 1 assessments). These data also provide initial support for the idea that both staff 'buy-in' and high-fidelity implementation are necessary to impact student behavior.

Second, the reduction in problems across schools at Woods provides strong evidence that SW-PBIS has achieved the result of reducing classroom problem behavior of special education students in an AE setting. The data also suggest that staff awareness and buy-in is a critical bridge to a high-fidelity implementation. Without a robust, ongoing system of staff development, it will be difficult to sustain the practices that make for a successful implementation of School-Wide Positive Behavior Support, especially in a setting that may experience high rates of staff turnover. The data further suggests that to impact student behavior by reducing problem behavior, staff awareness, buy-in along a high-fidelity implementation are necessary. The important work of school leaders to promote both staff awareness and support for SW-PBIS practices is necessary to have a truly effective system.

Third, the results also suggest that the SW-PBIS framework can be systematically replicated in an alternative setting. Similar to general education settings the organization's commitment and the use of data to support decision making along with establishing systems, (e.g., time for a core team meeting, data analysis tools, and a sufficient budget to support each building) was necessary for a successful implementation supported the fidelity of implementation.

Lastly, the findings support the impact of SW-PBIS on students identified as special education. Generally speaking, the implementation of the SW-PBIS framework at Woods Schools with special education students is identical to implementation in a general education setting with the following exceptions. Instruction of behavior expectations occurs at a higher rate of frequency than typically occurs in a general education setting. At Woods, review, and practice of prosocial expectation occurs daily in most classrooms. Teaching activities and instruction were differentiated to accommodate significate social, behavioral, intellectual, and communication disabilities. Also, the rates of reinforcement were matched to student needs to support consistent rates of prosocial behavior while reducing rates of problem behavior. Results indicate that levels of implementation fidelity can positively impact student behavior in a special education setting.

Future Areas of Research

Tier I SW-PBIS implementation appears to be effective in AE settings with students identified as special education. Results suggest that while implementing the SW-PBIS framework in AE settings is for the most part identical to other school settings, there are limitations to consider. It is important to examine the longitudinal impact of SW-PBIS over time. While the results over a three-year time frame suggest positive outcomes for students, certainly examining the impact over five to 10 years will provide more insights regarding the effectiveness of SW-PBIS in an AE setting. Also, future research should focus on the impact of SW-PBIS teacher lessons. While there is consensus that teacher instruction on SW-PBIS is necessary, we know little about the impact of increasing the frequency and intensity of instruction on student outcomes. Future research should also examine the impact of SW-PBIS on academic achievement in AE settings. While research has demonstrated that SW-PBIS programs can have a positive impact on the academic achievement of students in a regular education setting, there is little data to support these findings both with special education students in an AE setting. Lastly, it would be helpful to systematically examine the impact of professional development about SW-PBIS on teacher and/or staff training.

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