



NATIONAL  
ASSOCIATION OF  
SCHOOL  
PSYCHOLOGISTS

## PROMOTING POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATES IN TOUGH ECONOMIC TIMES THROUGH POSITIVE BEHAVIORAL SUPPORTS Information for educators

Across America, the effects of the current economic crisis are permeating our schools and classrooms. Students and teachers are experiencing increasing levels of anxiety, stress, and discontent as the realities of the financial crisis impact their lives. In times of high stress, a school's climate for learning can become seriously disrupted. School principals need to attend closely to the changes that may occur and implement strategies to help protect the school from potential negative effects and promote an orderly, safe, and civil experience for all. In an effort to monitor the climate of the school, principals can ask a few simple questions:

- Does the school provide a warm, friendly, and safe learning environment?
- Are there order and discipline?
- Are the interpersonal relationships between teachers and students respectful?
- Are there clear expectations for behavior as well as high expectations for learning?
- Are parents and families welcomed and included in decision making and school improvement planning?

A school with a positive school climate is a place where teachers, students, and parents feel welcomed and supported. It is a place where people come together not because they have to, but because they want to. One proactive strategy that principals can use to build a strong foundation for a positive school climate is through implementation of school-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), also known as Positive Behavioral Supports (PBS). Your school psychologist can help assess needs within your student population, establish a PBS team and guide PBS implementation and evaluation.

PBS is an empirically validated, functionally based approach used to eliminate challenging classroom behaviors and replace them with prosocial skills. Use of PBS decreases the need for more intrusive or aversive interventions (i.e., punishment or suspension) and can lead to both systemic as well as individualized change. PBS can target an individual student or an entire school, because it does not focus exclusively on the student but also focuses on changing environmental variables such as the physical setting, task demands, curriculum, instructional pace, and individualized reinforcement. It is successful with a wide range of students, in a wide range of contexts, with a wide range of behaviors.

### **Why We Need Positive Behavioral Supports**

PBS is important because problem behavior is the single most common reason why students are removed from regular classrooms. Even though students with extreme problem behavior represent only 20% of school enrollment, these students can account for more than 50% of behavioral incidents. At a time when stress for student and teachers is escalating, having a system of supports like PBS in place can help reduce disruptions and remove barriers to learning.

### **Implementing Positive Behavioral Supports in Schools**

PBS is based on *behavioral theory*. Problem behavior continues to occur because it is consistently followed by the child getting something positive or escaping something negative. By focusing on the *contexts* and *outcomes* of the behavior, it is possible to determine the *functions* of the behavior, make the problem behavior less effective and efficient, and make the *desired behavior* more functional. This often involves changing systems, altering environments, and teaching new skills, as well as focusing on

the problem behavior. Three of the key components of PBS are the use of functional behavioral assessments and the use of positive behavioral support plans.

***Functional behavioral assessment (FBA).*** The most crucial part of devising PBS plans is the FBA, which reveals information about the antecedents (triggers), frequency, intensity, duration, and consequences of challenging behavior. FBAs also help to identify any co-occurring variables. Conducting FBAs doubles the success rate of an intervention.

***Positive behavioral support plans.*** These plans are *individualized* and *data based* and include procedures for monitoring, evaluating, and reassessing the process. PBS should be a *collaborative* effort among parents, school psychologists, teachers, counselors, and administrators, and all partners should be committed to the plan and its implementation. It is more effective when it includes the target individual as well as other significant individuals (i.e., peers, teachers, and parents). High *fidelity* of implementation is required to maximize outcomes. Therefore, interventions should be applied by educators in the school and classroom. School psychologists and other specialists in student behavior are ideally qualified to conduct FBAs, implement PBS plans, and train other educators and parents in behavioral intervention techniques.

#### ***A Multitiered Approach Utilizing Increasing Levels of Intensity.***

PBS models are built on the concept that there are some systems and supports that are delivered to the whole school population, some to a targeted group of students with increasing needs, and some delivered at intense levels to individual students who are really struggling to succeed and stay in school. Schools that have implemented school-wide PBS typically have a clear set of behavioral and academic expectations that are communicated and consistently enforced. All students receive prosocial skill instruction. Teachers support positive student behavior through the delivery of positive feedback and tangible reinforcement. If students struggle to meet expectations, they are then evaluated using a functional assessment approach, and a behavioral support plan is crafted to assist them in learning the necessary skills. These supports would commonly be delivered by specialized instructional support personnel like school psychologists and other behavior specialists in a school. For those students who continue to struggle, individualized intense plans are developed and more support services are provided that commonly include comprehensive supports delivered in both the school and community.

#### **Benefits of Positive Behavioral Supports**

The benefits of school-wide PBS contribute significantly to the maintenance of a positive school climate. All students, both those with and without disabilities, can benefit from PBS. Some of the key benefits that are identified include:

- Research conducted over the past 15 years has shown that PBS is effective in promoting positive behavior in students and schools. Use of PBS as a strategy to maintain appropriate social behavior will make schools safer. Safer schools are more effective learning environments.
- Schools that implement system-wide interventions also report increased time engaged in academic activities and improved academic performance.
- Schools that employ system-wide interventions for problem behavior prevention indicate reductions in office discipline referrals of 20–60%.
- Appropriately implemented PBS plans can lead to dramatic improvements that have long-term effects on the lifestyle, functional communication skills, and problem behavior in individuals with disabilities.
- A review of research on PBS effectiveness showed that there was more than a 90% reduction in problem behavior in over half of the studies; the problem behavior stopped completely in more than 26% of the studies.

#### **SUMMARY**

A school's climate can be adversely affected by the stresses that students and teachers experience inside and outside of the school. The critical elements contributing to positive school climates include a sense of

order and discipline; caring relationships; staff dedication to student learning; high expectations for academic performance and behavior; respectful interactions between students, staff, parents, and community members; and effective parental involvement. School climate is associated with a variety of student outcomes including achievement, absenteeism, self-concept, and behavior. All educators, including principals, teachers, and specialized instructional support personnel, play critical roles in promoting a positive school climate. School-wide positive behavior interventions and supports help build positive, caring school communities that can withstand whatever challenges life brings.

## RESOURCES

Heumann, J., & Warlick, K. (2001). *Prevention research and the IDEA discipline provisions: A guide for school administrators*. Available: [www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/OSEP/adminbeh.web.pdf](http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/OSEP/adminbeh.web.pdf)

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Lehr, C. A., & Christenson, S. L. (2002). Promoting a positive school climate. In A. Thomas & J. Grimes (Eds.), *Best practices in school psychology IV* (pp. 929–947). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

Scherer, M. M. (Ed.). (1998). Realizing a positive school climate [Special issue]. *Educational Leadership*, 56(1).

## WEB RESOURCES

Florida's Positive Behavior Supports Project (University of South Florida): <http://www.fmhi.usf.edu/cfs/dares/flpbs>

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) Technical Assistance (University of Oregon): <http://www.pbis.org>

Positive Behavior Support Project (University of Delaware): <http://www.udel.edu/cds/pbs>

Safe and Responsive Schools Project (Indiana University): <http://www.indiana.edu/~safeschl>