

**Enhancing School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports  
Tier 1 Core Practices to Improve Disciplinary Equity**

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**Abstract**

Addressing racial disparities in school discipline is an urgent and widespread issue facing U.S. schools. One approach to improve racial equity in school discipline practice is to enhance the contextual fit of empirically validated school-wide practices. School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) is a widely implemented and research-validated approach shown to improve behavioral and academic outcomes, yet evidence suggests students of color remain disproportionately disciplined in schools implementing the SWPBIS framework to fidelity. Contextual fit is a core principle of SWPBIS, but in practice, schools may lack effective strategies to enhance equity using the framework's Tier 1 core practices. This article describes promising enhancements to universal school practices aimed at reducing school discipline disparities.

*Keywords:* School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports;  
Disciplinary equity; Culturally responsive practices

## **Enhancing School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports**

### **Tier 1 Core Practices to Improve Disciplinary Equity**

Addressing racial equity in school discipline practice is a formidable and enduring issue facing U.S. schools and educators. Decades of national, state, and school data have documented the persistence of racial disparities in school discipline outcomes (Children's Defense Fund, 1975; Losen, Sun, & Keith, 2017; Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008). Although overall rates of out-of-school suspensions are decreasing (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2016), students of color, as well as students experiencing disabilities, continue to be disciplined and excluded from educational settings at rates 2 to 4 times higher than White students (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2016). In response, efforts aimed at reducing racial disproportionality in school discipline practice have focused on improving the contextual fit of existing school-wide behavioral supports (Bradshaw et al., 2018; Fallon, O'Keeffe, & Sugai, 2012; Levenson, Smith, McIntosh, Rose, & Pinkelman, 2019).

Research has documented the adverse and long-term effects of exclusionary and discipline disproportionately affecting students, families and communities color (Balfanz, Byrnes, & Fox, 2015; Bottiani, Bradshaw, & Mendelson, 2017; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). Yet, there remain few empirically-validated approaches to guide educators on how to reduce racial discipline disparities (Bottiani, Larson, Debnam, Bischoff, & Bradshaw, 2015; Skiba, Arredondo, & Rausch, 2014). Educators can view themselves as ill-equipped or unsupported by school leaders or colleagues to address racial discipline disparities (Bastable, 2019). Lacking effective strategies, schools have

resorted to implementing practices or policies that can exacerbate disciplinary disparities (zero tolerance policies; McIntosh, Girvan, Horner, & Smolkowski, 2014; Skiba & Rausch, 2006).

One approach to addressing disciplinary equity is to implement culturally responsive practices. Ladson-Billings (1995) described culturally responsive practices as a foundation that should ground and inform every aspect of an educator's instructional practices. Culturally responsive practices aim to integrate students' cultural knowledge and experiences into school practice to make schools more relevant, engaging, and effective learning environments (Bode & Nieto, 2008). Equipping educators with culturally responsive strategies can bolster their ability and effectiveness to engage with students from diverse backgrounds (Siwatu, 2009). Emdin (2016) also described the benefits of having students provide input into shaping how practices and policies are implemented across classrooms or schools. An important step toward enhancing disciplinary equity in SWPBIS may be embedding strategies into the framework to further integrate the experiences, beliefs, and cultures of students and families from racially and culturally diverse backgrounds.

### **SWPBIS and Disciplinary Equity**

School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) is an evidence-based framework implemented in over 25,000 schools across the United States (Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2019). SWPBIS has a strong evidence base to support its effects on positive social and academic outcomes for students (Sugai & Horner, 2002). Additionally, emerging evidence suggests SWPBIS may serve

as a starting point for schools to address equity in school disciplinary practices (Bradshaw et al., 2018; McIntosh, Ellwood, McCall, & Girvan, 2018).

There are a number of potential mechanisms in the SWPBIS framework that could enhance disciplinary equity. First, the framework's focus on establishing a clear, consistent, and positive social culture within a school may contribute to building more equitable and inclusive supports for students (Horner et al., 2009). Second, defining and teaching behavioral expectations could help reduce implicit judgments by educators associated with subjective and unwanted student behaviors (e.g., defiance, disruption; Lai, Hoffman, Nosek, & Greenwald, 2013; Smolkowski, Girvan, McIntosh, Nese, & Horner, 2016; Tobin & Vincent, 2011). Third, use of a school-wide acknowledgment system could contribute to lower levels of discipline disproportionality by reducing reprimands and increasing rates of praise delivered to students of color (Barclay, 2017; Gion, McIntosh, & Falcon, 2019; Vincent, Swain-Bradway, Tobin, & May, 2011). Finally, school use of data for decision-making could help staff to identify and address discipline disparities by identifying and addressing root causes to help address discipline disparities (Bradshaw et al., 2018; Gion et al., 2019; McIntosh, Ellwood, et al., 2018).

### **Evaluating Effects of SWPBIS on Equity**

Given the widespread adoption of SWPBIS in U.S. schools, there is a need to examine how implementation of this framework is associated with narrowing racial discipline disparities. A nationwide study found that schools implementing SWPBIS to fidelity reported lower – rather than higher levels of discipline disproportionality as measured by percent of students per racial and ethnic group with one or more out of school suspensions (McIntosh, Gion, & Bastable, 2018). Yet, substantial gaps in

discipline disparities remained in schools implementing SWPBIS to fidelity (e.g., 11% Black compared to 3% White still received out of school suspensions in schools implementing SWPBIS).

Two case studies by Scott and colleagues (2010) and McIntosh and colleagues (2018) have reported positive effects of using school discipline data to address discipline disproportionality. Scott and colleagues (2012) associated reductions in disproportionality with training high school educators to use discipline data to identify “hot spots” (i.e., when educators were more likely to assign discipline to students throughout the school day) to develop interventions to guide school-wide interventions. Similarly, McIntosh and colleagues (2018) reported benefits with having educators regularly share disaggregated school discipline data to identify when and where teachers were likely to be assigned discipline referrals based on a student’s race and ethnicity. In both studies, discipline data allowed staff tailor behavioral school-wide supports (e.g., active supervision on playground) aimed at reducing discipline disproportionality.

Gion, McIntosh, and Falcon (2019) conducted a multiple-baseline single case study across 4 classroom teachers to measure rates of praise and reprimands delivered to students during classroom instruction. This study extended prior work (see Double-Check; Bradshaw et al., 2018; Reinke, Lewis-Palmer, & Merrell, 2008) by examining the effects of classroom coaching (i.e., using Motivational Interviewing techniques) to increase rates of praise across different race/ethnicities of students. Results indicated a functional relation between the coaching delivered to teacher and increased rates of praise and decreasing rates of reprimands delivered to African American students, compared to all other students (Gion et al., 2019).

### **How to Enhance Equity in SWPBIS Tier 1 Core Practices**

Enhancing contextual fit of SWPBIS involves matching strategies, procedures, or features of school-wide behavior supports with the values, needs, skills, and resources of those who experience school wide behavior supports (e.g., students, parents). Improving contextual fit of school practices also involves understanding both the needs of educators who will be implementing a practice and students or families targeted by an intervention (Damschroder et al., 2009; Fallon et al., 2012). Table 1 includes descriptions, purpose, and considerations for making enhancements to SWPBIS Tier 1 practices.

SWPBIS Tier 1 core practices include: (a) defining expectations, (b) teaching/practicing expectations, (c) monitoring/acknowledging (pro-social behaviors), (d) providing instructional consequences, and (e) using data for decision-making. We recommend review available school data sources (e.g., discipline referrals, academic records, climate surveys, interviews with representative school stakeholders) to identify the school-wide priorities for improving equity. The enhancements described are proposed to strengthen existing school-wide practices.

**Defining School-wide Expectations.** Defining school-wide behavioral expectations refers to establishing staff agreements around a small set of broad, positively stated expectations (e.g., be safe, be respectful, be responsible). Defining school-wide expectations can help build consensus across a school staff and can also make hidden or implicit values visible to students and staff (Portelli, 1993). Schools may consider the following strategies to improve how school-wide expectations are defined.

*Examine behavioral expectations.* Levenson and colleagues (2016) described a need to have educators reflect on how school norms, values, or agreements (described in

a school-wide behavior matrix) can be interpreted based on an individual's background and experiences. Schools can enhance how expectations are defined by soliciting feedback from a broader, more representative group of school stakeholders that can extend beyond a school leadership team (e.g., PBIS team). For example, Fallon and Mueller (2017) documented the benefits of integrating home and school behavioral expectations into a Latinx student's behavior support plan. The student's support plan was enhanced by using feedback from teachers and family members to inform how home and school expectations were defined to match the student's experiences.

*Use school events.* Educators can set up family-friendly events (e.g., doughnuts with Dads) or use parent-student conferences to recruit feedback on the culture responsiveness of school or class-wide behavioral expectations. Staff members can also ask families to describe which social competencies they most value and want students to learn in school (e.g., honesty, loyalty, respect) to shape how character education programs are selected and implemented.

*Use student and parent focus groups.* Family members can be invited to join focus groups in school or at meetings hosted within their local communities to discuss specific experiences or perspectives of a school's disciplinary approach or philosophy (see Sandomierski et al. 2019, this issue). Additionally, teachers can examine if school-wide expectations are inclusive and representative of all student groups (e.g., language, images; Levenson et al., 2019).

*Examine cultural norms.* Educators can use an activity called Elements of Culture (see appendix; Levenson et al., 2019) to help staff reflect on their own or colleagues' norms for social behavior. This whole-staff or grade-level activity is designed to help



educators reflect on norms for appropriate behaviors (e.g., voice level, dress, responding to insults). After generating a list of norms, staff can be asked to examine similarities and differences in school, home, and neighborhood expectations. It may also be helpful to regularly examine school-wide behavioral expectations to assess whether they integrate the values, cultures, languages, and experiences of new students and families enrolling at a school.

**Teach school-wide expectations.** Teaching students and staff school-wide expectations across all school settings (e.g., classroom, bathroom, cafeteria) is a Tier 1 core practice. In schools implementing SWPBIS, school-wide expectations are actively and explicitly taught to help students learn behaviors they need to be successful in school settings which may be different from home or neighborhood expectations. To enhance how and what expectations are taught to students, educators may benefit from embedding the following strategies into Tier 1 supports.

*Use the personal matrix.* One activity designed to explore how to teach expectations across school and home settings is called the Personal Matrix (see appendix; Levenson et al., 2019). The Personal Matrix is a blank school matrix that asks students to share what expectations they have been taught in their school, home, and neighborhood. The personal matrix is designed to gather information on students' prior knowledge and bridge home and school norms for expected behaviors (i.e., what are respectful, responsible, safe behaviors across different settings). Educators may use information gathered from the Personal Matrix to teach code-switching to students (i.e., helping students modify their behavior, appearance, language to adapt to school norms). Additionally, student input collected from the personal matrix may indicate a need to

update school expectations to align with home or community norms. For example, changing the school lunch rules from *no conversation* while eating to allowing some conversation, which more closely resembles mealtime expectations in students' homes.

*Involve students in teaching expectations.* Educators can enhance how school-wide expectations are taught by including students meaningfully in developing and delivering social skills lessons to their peers. A case study conducted by Good, McIntosh, and Gietz (2011) demonstrated the benefits of involving students in designing and implementing a bullying prevention program. In the study, middle school students were invited to provide input to a school's SWPBIS leadership team on the social acceptability of a school-wide bullying prevention program. Students requested that presentations introducing the bullying program needed to be delivered by students, otherwise the program could be perceived as staff-directed or "uncool". During implementation of the bullying program, office discipline referrals for verbal bullying decreased by 62% over two years. Inviting students to help develop and teach school-wide expectations may have increased the relevance, credibility and social validity of school-wide expectations leading to more students responding favorably to the bullying (Good, McIntosh, & Gietz, 2011).

*Use interactive instructional strategies.* There are several instructional practices designed to enhance equity within instruction delivered to students. For example, Opportunities to Respond (OTRs) is a classroom practice demonstrated to improve academic performance and student engagement (Partin, Robertson, Maggin, Oliver, & Wehby, 2009; Simonsen, Myers, & DeLuca, 2010). Use of OTRs have also been

associated with improving gender equity in classroom participation (Horgan & Archer, 1995).

Choral or collective responses can help engage students during classroom instruction. Choral responding refers to having all students in a classroom respond in unison to teacher-posed questions. This fast paced method maintains students' active engagement and increases the frequency of student responding (Kamps, Dugan, & Leonard, 1994). The procedure may also be used to support students identified as less engaged in classroom instruction due to behavioral or academic issues (Messenger et al., 2017).

Teachers can use whiteboards to have students write responses to prompts or questions during instruction to assess students' acquisition of new skills or concepts. Use of whiteboards offer a different modality for students to share learning that does not depend on hand-raising or verbal responses which could unintentionally favor groups of students. Similarly, response cards may improve student engagement. Response cards are typically pre-printed cards (e.g., yes/no) that can be provided to students during a lesson or activity to signal assess understanding of a topic, or to recruit teacher assistance if needed. Lambert, Cartledge, and Heward (2006) reported significant reductions in student disruptive behaviors and increases in academic responding when response cards were incorporated into student math lessons.

**Monitor and acknowledge prosocial behaviors.** Acknowledging and monitoring students for desired school-behaviors is a Tier 1 SWPBIS core practice. Schools use tickets, tokens, or may organize awards assemblies to reinforce students for demonstrating expected school-wide behaviors. Despite use of school acknowledgement

systems, teachers can deliver positive acknowledgments less frequently to students of color compared to other students (Gion et al., 2019; Van den Bergh, Denessen, Hornstra, Voeten, & Holland, 2010). Educators may consider using the following strategies to enhance equity through classroom or school-wide acknowledgement systems.

*Assess equity in use of praise.* Schools implementing SWPBIS Tier 1 can evaluate how staff deliver praise to students (since it is possible specific subgroups of students may be acknowledged more frequently than others). The Modified Tiered Fidelity Inventory can be completed by staff as part of the SWPBIS Tiered Fidelity Inventory's Tier 1 subscale to assess equity in school-wide acknowledgement systems (TFI; Algozzine et al., 2014). The modified TFI (see appendix; Levenson et al., 2019) can help educators understand how students' perspectives (e.g., how often the past 2 months have you received a star ticket?). Interviewing students on their perceptions of adult-delivered acknowledgments may indicate a need to re-train staff on how to monitor or increase rates of praise to all students or students belonging to specific racial or ethnic groups (e.g., see Stakeholder Input and Satisfaction Survey; McIntosh, Pinkelman, Girvan, & Sugai, 2017).

*Use Praise Preference Assessments.* Praise preference assessments can be used to understand what type of positive reinforcement is most motivating for students (e.g., verbal acknowledgment, receiving a school-wide reward, edibles). Praise preference assessments may also indicate the type of praise students do not like to receive (e.g., public vs private praise). In addition, praise preference assessments can be used during teacher-parent conferences or included as brief surveys to gather input from families or

caregivers on how they like to receive acknowledgments from school (e.g., in person, email).

*Develop home-school connections.* Schools may also extend acknowledgment systems to inform parents or caregivers of positive student behaviors observed at school. Educators can send home positive notes, make phone calls, or send an email to positively reinforce an aspect of a student's behavior witnessed during the day that aligns with the language of the school-wide expectations. This strategy can help to enhance home-school communication, model use of praise for parents or caregivers, and ensure all families receive positive news from their school during the year.

*Greet students at the door.* Recent studies have demonstrated how greeting students at the door is associated with reducing the likelihood of office discipline referrals, increasing on-task behaviors, and can improve students' self-reported connections to school, particularly for Black, male students (Allday & Pakurar, 2007; Cook et al., 2018). Schools may consider using this low-cost, high-yield strategy to increasing positive, daily contact with all students entering the school each day.

**Provide instructional consequences.** Instructional consequences refer to educators responding with non-punitive strategies to help prevent mild or moderate unwanted behaviors from requiring formal disciplinary action (i.e., removing students from instruction). There are a few strategies that can help educators address unwanted behaviors and strengthen students' connections and trust with adults at their school.

*Use Wise Feedback.* Wise Feedback is an instructional strategy developed to support students by offering more opportunities to respond proactively to constructive feedback, instead of reacting negatively to a poor grade or critical comments delivered by

teachers. Yeager and colleagues (2014) examined how Wise Feedback could be used effectively to help teachers deliver critical, instructional feedback to African American adolescent students to improve academic engagement. Results of multiple studies evaluating the effects of Wise Feedback have indicated that teachers communicating (a) high standards and (b) providing students with time and supportive feedback can increase students' trust in their school and improve academic behaviors.

*Use VABB.* VABB strategies include: listening non-judgmentally (Validate), stating a positive intention (Affirm), making a connection between home and school (Build), and finding opportunities to acknowledge appropriate code-switching (Hollie, 2011). VABB strategies can be used by educators to honor aspects of students' cultures that play a prominent role in a students' experience outside of school. For example, highlighting positive aspects of students' experiences outside schools which mainstream media outlets may interpret pejoratively (e.g., rap, hip hop culture).

Educators may also use VABB to help students to "code-switch" if they are in situations in which they are more susceptible to receiving disciplinary referrals (e.g., transitioning back from recess into the classroom). Students may not yet have developed the skills or lack motivation to modify their behaviors when moving between home and school environments. For example, a teacher could explain to a student that "home rules" are not wrong, but just different than "school rules" (validate/affirm), then explain that "school expectations" are in place to keep all students safe (build).

*Teach neutralizing routines.* McIntosh and colleagues (2014) have recommended the use of neutralizing routines as a strategy to enhance equity in disciplinary decisions (McIntosh, Girvan, et al., 2014). A neutralizing routine is an instructional response to

unwanted behavior used in place of a harsh or punitive response toward a student.

Neutralizing routines are especially helpful for educators to use when faced with unclear or ambiguous disciplinary decisions which can be more susceptible to the effects of implicit bias (i.e., Vulnerable Decision Points; Smolkowski et al., 2016).

Neutralizing routines can include if-then statements (e.g., if a student ignores my request, I will count to 10 and check-in), taking two deep breaths, or reframing unwanted behaviors (e.g., student is avoiding academic tasks). Along with educators, students may be trained to identify “stuck points” — specific situations (e.g., classrooms, hallways) or feelings (e.g., frustration, embarrassment) in which a student is more likely to be off-task or exhibit unwanted behaviors. Administrators can also use instructional or restorative alternatives instead of suspending or expelling students (Nese, Massar, & McIntosh, 2015).

**Use disaggregated data for decision making.** Disaggregating student data by race and ethnicity can reveal concerns, identify root causes, and determine appropriate actions to address disproportionality (McIntosh, Barnes, Morris, & Eliason, 2014). Use of school discipline disproportionality metrics (e.g., index, risk ratios) can allow schools to monitor equitable or inequitable patterns in disciplinary referrals by race and ethnicity (McIntosh, Barnes, et al., 2014; Nishioka, 2017). For example, schools can calculate metrics to monitor rates of suspensions for African American students compared to all others students. Or, compare office discipline referral (ODRs) rates assigned to Latinx students by time of day (e.g., after lunch) or by school settings (e.g., bus). Data can help to also help quantify or make discipline disproportionality more actionable to staff (e.g., Latinx students are assigned ODRs 3.2 times higher compared to other students).

Providing educators with data to monitor progress and establish goals related to equity can help raise staff commitment and motivate wider actions (Bastable, 2019).

*Use multiple data sources to assess disciplinary equity.* Evaluating multiple data sources can help to more precisely define problems to enhance equity across the SWPBIS framework. Inequitable disciplinary patterns may not always be detected using school discipline data (e.g., staff not reporting all disciplinary incidents). Therefore, it is useful to evaluate a combination of data sources to ensure practices adopted for school-wide use match the needs of students and families. For example, academic data, attendance reports, student and parent surveys (see SISS survey; McIntosh et al., 2017), or school-wide assessments (e.g., Modified Tiered Fidelity Inventory) can all help to identify potential causes and solutions to address discipline disparities.

Schools may also analyze interview data gathered from students or parent/caregivers to understand the impact of current school disciplinary practices, particularly for student groups most affected (see Sandomierski et al. 2019, this issue). Finally, regular data review can hold school teams and staff accountable for the outcomes for all of their students, regardless their background or circumstances (Levenson et al., 2019).

### **Conclusion**

Although educators may view SWPBIS as culturally or racially neutral, the framework's Tier 1 core practices are shaped by implementers' (i.e., educators) experiences, norms, and values (Fallon et al., 2012). Therefore, it is important to regularly assess how implementation of SWPBIS is responsive the values and needs of all school stakeholders, particularly students and families of color shown to be disproportionately impacted by school disciplinary practices. One approach to enhancing



disciplinary equity is to improve the contextual fit of Tier 1 SWPBIS core practices. The strategies described in this article are offered as a suggested menu to help educators take actionable steps toward enhancing Tier 1 SWPBIS core practice as a foundation to improve equity. The proposed strategies are intended to be embedded into existing school-wide supports rather than viewed as separate strategies. Given the urgent need to address disciplinary disparities in schools, we view these strategies as a promising starting point to help equip educators with practical and actionable steps to improve equity using SWPBIS, a widely adopted school-wide approach used in schools today.

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