# Positive Behavior Support in Schools (PBSIS): An Administrative Perspective on the Implementation of a Comprehensive School-Wide Intervention in an Urban Charter School

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.


**Remi Dabney Christofferson**
*Middlesex Borough Public Schools*
**Kathe Callahan**
*Kean University*

*This research explores the implementation of a school-wide intervention program that was designed to foster and instill intrinsic values based on an external reward system. The Positive Behavior Support in Schools (PBSIS) is an intervention intended to improve the climate of schools using system-wide positive behavioral interventions to discourage disruptive behaviors. The charter school that was the focus of this research experienced high staff turnover, negative school climate and student suspension rates that exceeded the state average. A mixed methods research design included de-identified data that were retrieved from 200 students in grades kindergarten through two, 205 parents and 54 staff members. The data sources included data from the School-wide Evaluation Tool (SET), Climate Survey and Office Discipline Referrals (ODR). Results indicated the implementation of Positive Behavior Support in Schools had a positive and significant impact on improving student behaviors and school climate. Results indicated that the implementation of the program significantly reduced the number of office discipline referrals and in-school suspension rates, and improved perceptions of students, staff and parents regarding the school climate. However, the results also indicated that there was no significant difference in the out-of-school suspension rates during the two-year implementation of PBSIS. This study provided administrators and staff with a comprehensive understanding of the implementation challenges associated with a school-wide intervention, as well as evidence to support practices that were effective.*

**NCPEA Education Leadership Review of Doctoral Research, Vol. 2, No. 2 – October 2015**
**ISSN: 1532-0723** 

## Introduction

Managing student behaviors has always been an area of concern for school teachers and administrators. Classroom disruptions have been proven to lower student achievement, not only for the offending student, but also for his or her classmates (Lannie & McCurdy, 2007). Students with behavior problems are at risk academically and socially. They are more often suspended, expelled, placed in an alternative setting, and are more likely to drop out of school before completing high school than students not at risk (Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008). Higher rates of student exclusion from school often lead to disengagement, loss of instructional time, and academic failure. Because challenging behaviors plague inner-city classrooms across the nation, teachers and administrators should develop innovative strategies to minimize negative behaviors. Positive behavior interventions provide an affirmative alternative to punitive interventions that contribute to the school to prison pipeline (Losen, 2015).

Research suggests the implementation of a school-wide discipline plan similar to Positive Behavior Support in Schools (PBSIS) would help administrators, teachers, and ultimately students, employ consistent discipline strategies in both the classroom and in non-instructional areas, such as the cafeteria, playground and gymnasium. Key elements of PBSIS include (a) active teaching and reinforcement of a small number of clearly defined social-behavioral expectations, (b) implementation of consistent consequences for violations of school expectations, and (c) use of data to drive intervention planning (Feuerborn & Tyre, 2012).

## Focus of the Investigation

The urban charter school, which was the focus of this analysis, experienced an excessive number of office discipline referrals, high staff turnover and negative school climate. The school administrators recognized that there were several systems that existed within the school: Non-classroom Specific Systems (e.g., hallways, cafeteria, playground, bathroom, etc.); Classroom Systems; and Individual Student Support Systems (e.g., students with challenging behaviors are placed on the Check In/Check Out System, or CICO). Each system overlaps and impacts the others. The administrative team identified the behavioral challenges that existed within their school at each level. They knew and understood that there were concerns with the office discipline referral process, school climate, and excessive number of discipline referrals in non-classroom specific areas throughout the school. Once these concerns were identified, they were able to move forward in the process of developing, implementing and maintaining a school-wide intervention.

During year one of PBSIS training, the administrators received on-going training and technical assistance from an appointed PBSIS liaison who helped formulate the tenets of the program. Through the training, the administrators and teachers received professional development in the following areas: assessing the school climate, using office discipline referrals (ODR) to drive school-wide decisions, developing a school-wide recognition system, modeling desired behaviors to students, and defining school-wide behavioral expectations. The administrator was responsible for ensuring that PBSIS was implemented with fidelity. Through weekly articulation sessions with the teachers, the administrator was able to collect data and monitor the implementation process.

Through the Electronic Violence and Vandalism Report System (EVVRS), all public schools within the state of New Jersey are required to upload data regarding student incidents.

Within the reporting system, incidents are categorized as Violence, Vandalism, Weapons and Substance Abuse (New Jersey Department of Education, 2014b).

Districts that exceed the number of student incidents in a given year may be placed on the Persistently Dangerous Schools List. The Persistently Dangerous Schools List is comprised of public elementary, middle, secondary or charter schools that have met two of the following criteria for three consecutive years: the school reported seven or more Category A offenses that are classified as involving a firearm or aggravated assault. According to the 2012-13 NJDOE Public Fact Sheet, there are 2,492 public schools in the state of New Jersey; and during the 2004-2011 school years, 17 schools were placed on the Persistently Dangerous Schools List (New Jersey Department of Education, 2014a).

Based on the data from grades kindergarten through grade four during the 2008-2011 school years, this school exceeded the number of office discipline referrals and the annual State suspensions rate of 4%. The table below depicts the annual suspension rates for the case study school within this study (Table 1).

Table 1
*Annual Student Suspension Rates at Case Study School*

| **Annual Student Suspension Rates** | |
|---|---|
| 2008-2009 | 18% |
| 2009-2010 | 4% |
| 2010-2011 | 9% |

Source: New Jersey Department of Education (2014b)

Over the three-year period, the suspension rate of the case study school fluctuated due to the increase in student enrollment, staff turnover, and the lack of consistency and clarity of the office discipline referral process. Due to the need for corrective action, the administrative team applied for a grant that would allow the case study school to participate in a two-year training of PBSIS. The grant was sponsored by New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE), New Jersey Office of Special Education (NJOSE), The Elizabeth Boggs Center for Developmental Disabilities, and UMDNJ-Robert Wood Johnson Medical School. In August of 2011, the case study school received confirmation that the school would be included in the 2011 cohort of schools which would receive ongoing training and technical assistance.

**Significance of the Study**

This study sought to measure the impact PBSIS had on school climate, office discipline referrals and student suspension rates. Discipline concerns are issues that continue to plague administrators, teachers and parents. The significance of this study was to provide administrators and staff with a comprehensive intervention program that focuses on a proactive

approach to school-wide discipline concerns. Teaching and learning opportunities were often interrupted by discipline problems within the classroom. To help correct the problem, students needed to learn and observe appropriate behaviors through modeling. Teachers had to learn how to identify, acknowledge and reward desired behaviors and expectations. When schools effectively implement PBSIS, they typically experience a decrease in inappropriate behaviors and often find that academic performance improves because teachers are able to return to teaching after stabilizing social behaviors (Simonsen, Sugai, & Negron, 2008, p. 33).

**School Climate**

There has been an increased concern about the importance of linking school climate to student and teacher outcomes through measures that are psychometrically sound and of practical utility (Bear, Yang, Pell, & Gaskins, 2012). Research suggests that student outcomes are often related to students' perceptions of school climate but also to teachers' perceptions of school climate and job satisfaction (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009).

Educators have suggested for decades that the group dynamics of a classroom should focus on the way teachers and students interact with one another. Classrooms are complex societies where teachers and students interact with each other on a daily basis. Within these societies, the teachers are the leaders and the way they demonstrate their leadership abilities affects the interactions that take place within their classrooms. The interactions, both social and instructional, have a great impact on the academic and social growth of students (Ratcliff, Jones, Costner, Savage-Davis, & Hunt, 2010).

Creating an environment where students experience a sense of belonging, including feeling safe and accepted, is integral in maintaining and fostering school connectedness. School connectedness has been associated with a positive school climate and enhanced academic motivation. School connectedness can be defined as feeling connected to peers, teachers, and staff at school; a sense of enjoyment and liking of school; a belief that school is important; active engagement in school activities; and a perceived sense of belonging, closeness, and commitment to school (Daly, Buchanan, Dasch, Eichen, & Lenhart, 2010).

Since the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, two aspects of school climate--achievement and safety--have become central in school improvement initiatives that aim to enhance achievement and reduce discipline problems. Positive school climate is an important aspect of successful schools. It defines the shared beliefs, values and attitudes that shape the interactions between students, teachers and administrators and set the parameters of acceptable behavior and norms of the school (Koth, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2008).

**School Safety**

Safety is a basic need to every human being, and should include but is not limited to emotional and physical safety. According to Devine and Cohen (2007), feeling secure while at school greatly promotes the performance and learning of students. This in return ensures good relationships and promotes students' physical and mental health. Unfortunately, many students do not feel safe at school, either physically or emotionally. Students are at risk of bullying, peer victimization, violence and punitive disciplinary actions if supportive norms, healthy relationships and structures are lacking in a learning institution. A negative climate can

contribute to high absenteeism, academic underperformance and high dropout rates (Attar-Schwartz, 2009).

Bandyopadhyay, Cornell, and Konold (2009) provide evidence for the validity of three school climate factors that are important to overall school safety: (1) the perception that teachers and staff members are responsive to bullying and threats of violence, (2) the perception that peers regard aggressive behavior as a serious problem, and (3) the perception that teasing and bullying can be safely reported to teachers and administrators. The three factors were predictive of a series of measures when identifying school safety conditions (Shirley & Cornell, 2011).

Since the early 1990s, the national discourse on school discipline has been dominated by the philosophy of zero tolerance (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). Zero Tolerance was originally developed as an approach to drug enforcement and then became widely adopted by schools in the early 1990s as a philosophy or policy that mandates the application of predetermined consequences, most often punitive in nature, that are intended to be applied regardless of the gravity of behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). Supporters have credited zero tolerance policies with helping students feel safer in schools. Administrators, educators and policy makers are encouraged to establish positive school climates and environments by developing and enacting discipline policies that are applied fairly and equally to all students (Daly et al., 2010).

More recently, Zero Tolerance Policies have been identified as significant contributors to the school to prison pipeline. Behavioral and disciplinary infractions, particularly in urban schools, are addressed with punitive sanctions such as out of school suspension instead of positive modeling such as PBSIS (Losen, 2015).

Teachers in urban schools often experience structural (e.g., large classrooms), contextual (e.g., limited resources), and administrative (e.g., zero tolerance policies) obstacles that serve to negatively impact their ability to maintain proper classroom management (Daly et al., 2010). When teachers are provided with adequate training in behavior management, broad-ranging positive effects can be expected including fewer disciplinary and special education referrals, increased student achievement, improved teacher retention, and an enhanced climate of respect within the school (Daly et al., 2010).

**Research Design**

A mixed methods research design included survey research from climate surveys and the School-Wide Evaluation Tool (SET), student and staff interviews, and descriptive statistics on the number of student disciplinary incidences and suspensions. The data that were extracted and analyzed from multiple data sources were used to determine the impact of PBSIS on student behaviors and school climate over a two-year period. Table 2 provides information regarding the related research question, data sources used, data collected and the data analysis.

Table 2
*Research Questions and Methodology*

| *Related research question* | *Data Source* | *Data Collected* | *Analysis* |
|---|---|---|---|
| What is the impact on student discipline as evidenced by:<br>(a) office discipline referrals and<br>(b) the number of suspensions | Office Discipline Referrals (ODR) | ▪ Discipline referral data: The total number of ODR<br>▪ Number of Out-of-School suspensions<br>▪ Number of In-School suspensions | ▪ SPSS, descriptive analysis to compare pre-implementation year one to implementation year two. |
| What is the impact of PBSIS on school climate? | Climate Survey | ▪ A climate survey was administered to parents, staff and students during Year 1 and Year 2 of the program. | ▪ Climate Survey: descriptive statistics to compare frequency counts and percentages for parent, student and teacher responses. |
| | School-wide Evaluation Tool (SET) | ▪ The School-wide Evaluation Tool was administered to staff, students and administration in December 2011 and December 2012. | ▪ The School-wide Evaluation Tool (SET): Using qualitative data content analysis techniques to sort responses by themes. |

In order to assess the efficacy of PBSIS, de-identified archival data were collected from office discipline referrals, climate surveys and the School-Wide Evaluation Tool (SET). The de-identified archival data were extracted from office discipline referrals included the total number of office discipline referrals by month, the total number of suspensions, type of discipline offense and offense location.

The climate survey was developed by the New Jersey Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, in collaboration with the Elizabeth M. Boggs Center on Developmental Disabilities, UMDNJ- Robert Wood Johnson Medical School. The SET was developed by Sugai, Lewis-Palmer, Todd and Horner (2005).

**Research Setting**

The charter school is located in northern New Jersey with an enrollment of 505 students. In the 2008-2009 school year, the average percentage of student suspensions in this district's charter schools was 11%, almost double the district average of 6%, and almost three times the state average of 3%. The school offers grades kindergarten through four. There are four classes at each grade level. There are twenty-five students in each class. The ratio of students to teachers in grades kindergarten through four is 2:25.

**Sample**

During the 2010-2012 school years, de-identified data were retrieved from 200 students in kindergarten through second grade, 205 parents and 54 staff members. The 200 students were in kindergarten and first grade during the 2010-2011 school year, and during the implementation year of 2011-2012 the same cohort of students was in first and second grade. Student demographics were 94% African American and 6% Hispanic, 52% female, 48% male, 92% free and reduced lunch, 11% special education. The teaching staff was 78% African American and the administrative staff was 99% African American, combined staff was 87% female with 22% holding advanced degrees. The parents were 80% African American, 5% Caribbean/West Indian, 4% Hispanic, 4% African, 6% other. Two-parent households, with both parents working, comprised 43% of the sample, two parent households with one parent working 14%, two parents with neither working 3%. One-parent households comprised 38% of the sample, with 32% of the single parents working. The remaining 2 percent were classified as "other" reflecting grandparents or other relatives as primary caregiver.

**Analysis of Data**

Utilizing SPSS, paired t-tests were conducted to determine the impact that PBSIS had student behaviors. Frequency counts and percentages were calculated for each survey response during 2010-11 and 2011-2012 school years. Data from the SET was also analyzed to determine the fidelity of the overall procedures and practices of PBSIS.

A paired t-test was conducted to explore the differences in office discipline referrals during Year 1 and Year 2 (Table 3 and Table 4). Table 5 provides descriptive statistics regarding the average number of office discipline referrals per month. Table 6 provides data regarding the total number of office disciplinary referrals per month.

Table 3

*Means and Standard Deviation for the Number of ODRs in Year 1 and Year 2*

| Variable | Mean | N | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total Yr. 1 | 5.45 | 183 | 5.789 | .428 |
| Total Yr. 2 | 3.22 | 183 | 3.157 | .233 |

Table 4

*Paired t-test for the Total Number of ODRs in Year 1 and Year 2*

| Year | Mean Difference | Std. Deviation | T | df | Sig. | Std. Error |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total Incidences Yr.1-Yr.2 | 2.230 | 2.965 | 10.171 | 182 | .000 | .219 |

The paired t-test results were significant at the 0.001 alpha value, p value = 0.00. In Year 1, the mean was at a rate of 5.45, and in Year 2 the mean was 3.22 with a mean difference of 2.23. We observed a statistically significant decrease in the number of incidents in Year 2 compared to Year 1. The data suggest that PBSIS contributed to the decrease in office discipline referrals between the pre and post years. There is enough evidence to suggest that the implementation of PBSIS in Year 2 had a significant impact on student behaviors by decreasing the number of office discipline referrals.

To determine if the implementation of PBSIS will show a significant decrease in the number of suspensions between Year 1 (pre) and Year 2 (post), a paired t-test was conducted on in-school and out-of-school suspension data. (Table 5 and Table 6).

The paired t-test results for OSS rates were not significant at the 0.05 alpha level, $p>0.05$ indicating the decrease in the mean was not statistically significant and PBSIS did not have an impact on decreasing OSS.

However, the results for ISS were significant at the 0.01 significant alpha level, $p<0.001$. The results suggest that there is strong evidence that the implementation of PBSIS in Year 2 contributed to a decrease in ISS rates.

Data from the climate survey and School-wide Evaluation Tool were used to determine the impact of PBSIS on improving the school's climate. We identified the number of respondents who agreed or disagreed with each question under the following categories: Behavior and Conduct Priorities, Prevalence of Behaviors, Staff Priorities, Respect, and School Climate. Descriptive statistics were used for comparing frequency counts and percentages of each response during Year 1 and Year 2.

Table 5
*Means and Standard Deviations for the Number of Suspensions in Year 1 and Year 2*

| Variable | Mean | N | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Full Day Suspension Yr. 1 | .91 | 183 | 1.400 | .103 |
| Full Day Suspension Yr. 2 | .77 | 183 | 1.310 | .097 |
| In-school suspension Yr. 1 | 1.75 | 183 | 2.335 | .173 |
| In-school suspension Yr. 2 | 1.16 | 183 | 1.278 | .094 |

Table 6
*Paired t-test for Suspension Rates in Year 1 to Year 2*

| Variable | T | df | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|
| OSS | 1.463 | 182 | .145 |
| ISS | 4.009 | 182 | .000 |

**Respect and School Climate**

The following questions were analyzed from the Respect and School Climate section of the survey:

Q1-Overall my school is a positive place
Q2- I feel welcomed at this school/The school has a welcoming atmosphere
Q3-Adults ask students their opinions about issues important to them/Staff and/or Parents are regularly asked to give input
Q4-Staff care about me and my success
Q5-Adults help me with my problems/Staff take time to help students

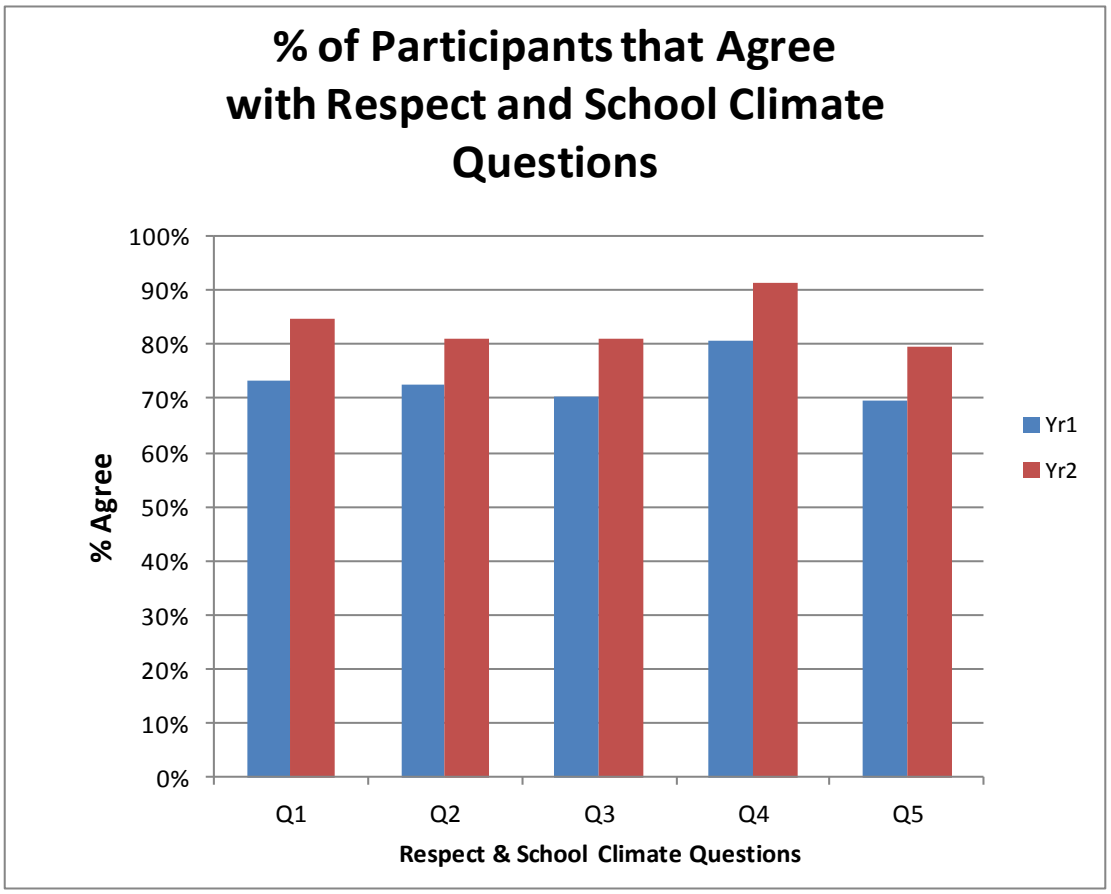


*Figure 1* Percentage of Participants that Agree with Respect and School Climate Questions

The overall perception of the students, staff and parents showed a positive increase between Year 1 and Year 2. The data suggest that PBSIS had an impact on improving the perceptions of staff, students and parents, thus improving the overall school climate.

**Prevalence of Behaviors**

The following questions were analyzed from the Prevalence of Behaviors portion of the survey:

Q1-Students gossip about one another
Q2- Students bullying or intimidating one another at school
Q3- Students bullying or intimidating one another before or after school
Q4- Students bullying or intimidating one another over the Internet
Q5-Students fighting with one another

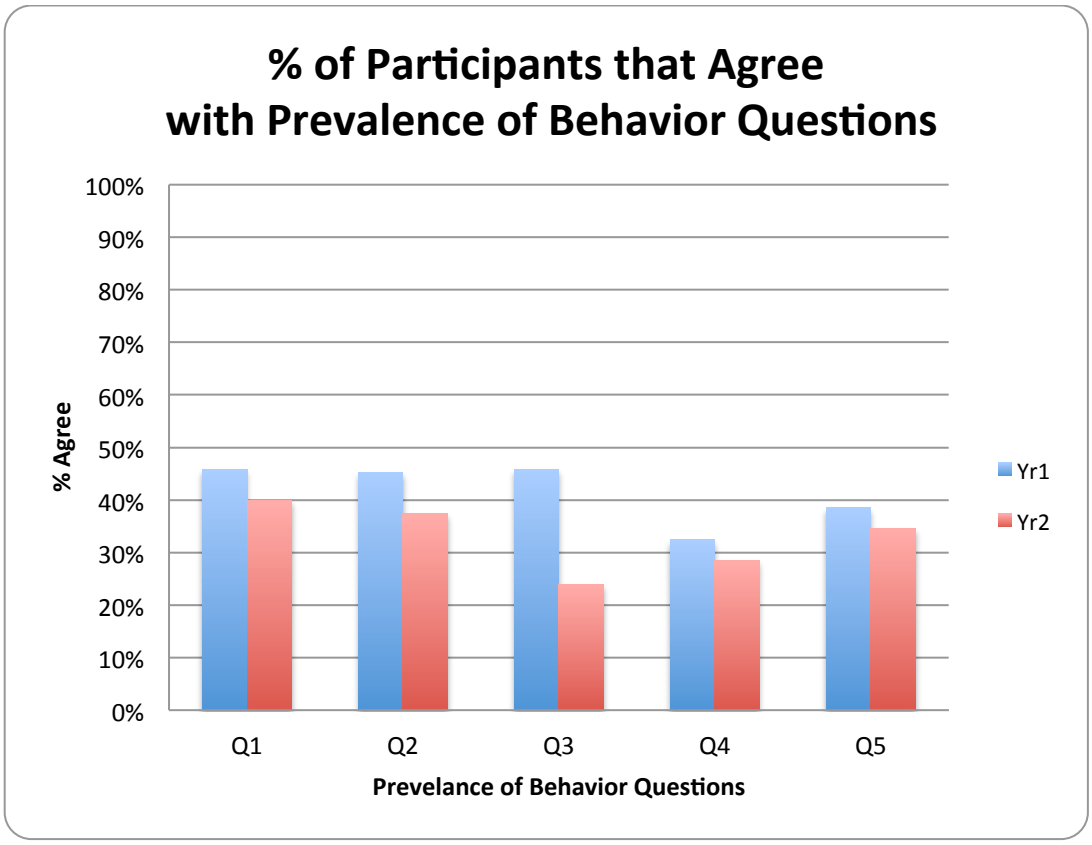


*Figure 2* Percentage of Participants that Agree with Prevalence of Behavior Questions

Based on the findings from the survey, the overall perception of the students, staff and parents is that reoccurring behaviors of students have shown improvement. The data suggest that PBSIS had an impact on improving the overall school climate.

In addition to the Climate Survey, data were extracted from the School-Wide Evaluation Tool (SET). The SET was administered to determine the fidelity of the overall procedures and practices during the pre and post years. Data from the surveys were analyzed and reported according to the following subscales: Expectations Defined; Behavioral Expectations Taught; On-going System for Rewarding Behavioral Expectations; System for Responding to Behavioral Violations; Monitoring and Decision-Making; Management; and District-Level Support.

The school showed an increase in SET overall score pre- and post-intervention. From Year 1 to Year 2, the SET results from the subscales showed an average increase of 5.7. In Year 1, the overall score was 89.9 and in Year 2, the score was 95.6. The data demonstrate that the school was implementing school-wide positive behavior support at the universal level with fidelity and the climate within the school showed an improvement during Year 1 and Year 2.

## SUMMARY

The results in this study provided data that were statistically significant with regard to improving student behavior. The data extracted from the office discipline referrals provided a context with regard to the impact that PBSIS had on decreasing the number of office discipline referrals and in-school suspension rates. However, the rate of out-of-school suspensions did not decrease as a result of PBSIS being implemented within the school. Data obtained from the climate surveys

and the School-wide Evaluation Tool suggest that the perceptions of the students, parents and staff improved. Based on their responses during Year 1 (pre) and Year 2 (post), the overall perception was that the climate within the school improved as a result of the implementation of PBSIS.

The findings in this study support the implementation of PBSIS to manage student behaviors and improve school climate. PBSIS provided administrators, staff and students with a proactive measure to address student behaviors and classroom disruptions. It provided the school with a set of non-curricular expectations that were modeled and monitored on a daily basis.

Although there were positive findings regarding the implementation of PBSIS, the rate of out-of-school suspensions did not show a significant decrease. The data suggest that the management of minor student infractions was not properly handled at the classroom level (minor), thus causing the incident to be referred to the administrative level (major). Major incidents that were referred to the administrator were subjected to the Student Discipline Code. Therefore, if a student committed a behavior infraction such as physical altercations, physical aggression, profanity, harassments and/or bullying, the administrator had to assign a consequence. The consequence for students who committed these infractions was out of school suspension. The only difference between the consequence for committing a major infraction would be the number of days out of school that an administrator assigned to a student.

**Administrative Level Recommendations**

Based on the findings, the following administrative recommendations were made:

- Review the protocol and procedures for office discipline referrals. Provide professional development to staff to ensure that they understand school procedures.
- Extract office discipline referrals and discuss the underlying issues. The administrators should identify patterns and trends regarding the data. Once they have identified the underlying issues, they should develop a proactive plan, execute it and continuously monitor its progress.
- Provide ongoing professional development to teaching staff on positive interventions to disruptive behaviors.
- Provide ongoing professional development regarding the implementation of Behavior Intervention Plans and the CI/CO system.
- Identify teachers with the highest number of student discipline referrals. Review the data and develop individualized action plans to assist with classroom management.
- Identify students with the highest number of discipline referrals to understand underlying causes of disruptive behavior.
- Review the ODRs to ascertain if there is a pattern of referrals in reference to race, gender and age.

The recommendations, if appropriately implemented, will assist the school in identifying the underlying cause for their out-of-school suspension rates. In addition, the school should

identify the students who have persistent and recurring behavior problems so that targeted intervention plans can be developed.

**Classroom Level Recommendations**

Students who demonstrate recurring behaviors should receive Behavior Intervention Plans (BIP) and be placed on the Check In/Check Out (CICO) system. At the time of this study, the BIP and the CICO system were not fully implemented. Prior to student infractions reaching the administrative level, teachers should be able to identify such behaviors and create a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) for the offending student. Through the BIP, short and long term goals can be created to help the student learn how to make good decisions and demonstrate pro-social behaviors. The BIP provides the teacher and the student with a framework that provides measureable goals and outcomes. As the student achieves his/her goals, the teacher provides incentives and reinforces desirable behaviors with positive praise. The implementation of a BIP must be enforced with fidelity and consistency. In order to help change and correct unacceptable behaviors, the student must be aware of the behavioral expectations and the consequences for his/her actions. The CICO system would provide students with accountability for their behavior. The system connects students with adults within the building who will help to keep the child's behavior from becoming misdirected. The goal is to teach students how to become responsible for their actions and to make good choices at all times. The behavior intervention plan is created to teach students how to change their behavior by providing them with weekly goals. The goals are created and discussed with the student and parent. The plans are monitored on a frequent basis throughout the day. Most behavior plans are incentivized to help students meet their goals by demonstrating the desired behaviors.

Based on the findings, the areas of focus for the school are centered on the need to decrease the rate of out-of-school suspensions. However, the school must also ensure that they continue to follow the PBSIS program with fidelity to ensure that the school will continue on a positive trajectory regarding student behaviors and school climate. In order to maintain the program with fidelity, the administrators should disseminate the climate and SET surveys twice a year. The PBSIS committee should review the survey results and discuss them with the teaching staff to develop a plan of action. And finally, model PBSIS expectations at the beginning of the school year and after holidays and continue to reinforce desired behaviors throughout the school day.

**Future Research**

Although PBSIS has been implemented in over 7,500 schools across 44 states, there is limited research on PBSIS implementation in urban elementary settings. Further research should be conducted to examine the effects of PBSIS within urban schools since the majority of research tends to focus on rural and suburban schools. More specifically, research should explore the relationship between socio-economic status and student infractions. In addition, research that explores the relationship between gender and student infractions as well as the level of discipline applied based on gender should be conducted. Finally, research on the role of the school leader in sustaining positive behavior interventions and reducing the number of exclusionary discipline practices is recommended.

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