

School-Wide PBIS: Extending the Impact of Applied Behavior Analysis. Why is This Important to Behavior Analysts?

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Abstract Horner and Sugai (2015) recently wrote a manuscript providing an overview of school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) and why it is an example of applied behavior analysis at the scale of social importance. This paper will describe why school-wide PBIS is important to behavior analysts, how it helps promote applied behavior analysis in schools and other organizations, and how behavior analysts can use this framework to assist them in the promotion and implementation of applied behavior analysis at both at the school and organizational level, as well as, the classroom and individual level.

Keywords School-wide PBIS · Behavior analysts · Applied behavior analysis

Utility of the Work for Clinicians

- Provides an overview of why school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) is important to behavior analysts
- Documents the regulations and support for School-wide PBIS across federal, state, and other organizations

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- Suggest ways that behavior analysts can be involved in school-wide PBIS
- Suggest ways behavior analysts should be involved in school-wide PBIS

Horner and Sugai (2015) provide an overview of school-wide PBIS, suggesting the clear influence of applied behavior analysis in its development, foundations, practices, and emphasis on observable behaviors and data. Applied behavior analysis as a field was well articulated in the Baer, Wolf, and Risley (1968) seminal manuscript. Horner and Sugai (2015) suggest that PBIS is infused with the basic tenants of applied behavior analysis, in that it is applied, behavioral, analytic, technological, conceptual, effective, and capable of appropriately generalized outcomes. They suggest that there is a growing empirical set of studies that report the implementation of PBIS is associated with reduction of office discipline referrals, reduction in suspensions and expulsions, improved social emotional competence, and improved academic outcomes. They report that over 21,000 schools are in the implementation stages of PBIS.

Why it is This Important to Behavior Analysts?

Behavior analysts have lamented for years the lack of influence and adoption of applied behavior analysis (ABA) practices in both schools and other organizations, as well as, those providers of services for individuals with challenging behavior and learning issues. The first suggested adoption of our practices in federal regulations was in the amended Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Individual with Disabilities Act, 1997). It was suggested that a functional behavior assessment (Dragow and Yell 2001) be the basis of a positive behavior support plan for individuals with disabilities. In addition,

Congress provided funds to states to provide professional development to “provide training in methods... of positive behavior interventions and supports to improve student behavior in the classroom” (20 U.S.C. §1454(a)(3)(B)(iii)(I)). (Drasgow et al. 1999). On the school-wide level, the Office of Special Education Programs has funded a technical assistance center (Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports 2015)(pbis.org) to support implementation and research of the school-wide PBIS framework, also called a multi-tiered system of behavior support, for over 15 years. The U.S. Department of Education has made a school-wide PBIS one of their priorities and has funded through its State Personnel Development Grant (SPDG) Program (State Personnel Development Grant Program n.d.) the implementation of school-wide PBIS. Recently, the U.S. Department of Justice has funded through its Youth Forum Cities’ grant program the implementation of school-wide PBIS. Recently, the U.S. Department of Education through its Office of Safe and Healthy Students provided a grant competition for state education agencies (SEA) and local educational agencies (LEA) to implement a multi-tiered system of behavior supports. Over 19 SEAs and 70 LEAs were awarded these grants. The U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that leads public health efforts to advance the behavioral health of the nation and has the mission to reduce the impact of substance abuse and mental illness on America’s communities has found the school-wide PBIS to be an evidenced-based framework. They describe on their website (School Climate Transformation Grant n.d.)(<http://www.nrepp.samhsa.gov/ViewIntervention.aspx?id=242>) that “...Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) Model is a multicomponent, multitiered, comprehensive approach to school-wide improvement. Integrating *applied behavior analysis*, research on effective schools, and systems change management theory, the intervention is an application of positive behavior support (PBS), a set of strategies or procedures designed to improve behavior by employing positive and systematic techniques.” (In italics by author). The National Educators Association (NEA), the largest teacher union in the country, has developed a policy statement entitled “Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports: A Multi-tiered Framework that Works for Every Student” (Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports n.d.)(http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/PB41A-Positive_Behavioral_Interventions-Final.pdf). They suggest that “the NEA views PBIS as a multi-tiered system of support that works for all students and believes adding language in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to “consider” the use of PBIS would be beneficial”. The ESEA, which is up for reauthorization, is the nation’s set of regulations governing state and local school districts’ provision of education for all students, including students with disabilities.

This framework is beginning to be adopted in other areas including services for adults with intellectual disabilities. In Massachusetts, the Department of Developmental Services (DDS), who funds and regulates services primarily for adults with intellectual disabilities, has recently developed guidelines (<http://ddslearning.com/dds-pbs-initiative>) for the implementation of a multi-tiered behavior support system across its services with emphasis on preventing problem behavior (antecedent interventions) and function-based interventions.

While a groundswell of support for any approach is not necessarily indicative of an effective and efficient framework, this momentum across a number of federal and state agencies to support and fund the framework suggested by Horner and Sugai should cause the field to better understand how PBIS embraces the principles of applied behavior analysis. This PBIS momentum also provides an opportunity for behavior analysts to apply their skills and competencies to improve the implementation of behavior support practices for individuals, with or without disabilities.

Currently, there are over 10,000 board-certified behavior analysts (BCBAs) in the USA who primarily provide direct or consultation to individuals primarily with disabilities. This has paralleled the increase in the number of individuals who have joined the ABAI as well as companion organizations such as APBA. Much of this growth in the field of ABA was due to parents and professionals advocating for applied behavior analysis services for their children. Similarly, thousands of educators including state administrators, district administrator, principals, pupil personnel, teachers, and other staff have requested school-wide PBIS services delivered within a multi-tiered framework. Again, consumers of behavioral support services, in this case educational personnel, are requesting an evidenced-based practice—school-wide PBIS. This expansion of the PBIS framework into educational and other systems provides unique opportunities for the field of behavior analysis. For more information about the process (a multi-year undertaking) of implementing school-wide PBIS, we would suggest pbis.org or Florida’s PBIS website <http://flpbs.fmhi.usf.edu>.

What is the Role for Behavior Analysts in School-Wide PBIS?

As Horner and Sugai (2015) suggest, school-wide PBIS has both its conceptual and theoretical underpinnings in applied behavior analysis. We suggest that behavior analysts should be interested in school-wide PBIS for a number of reasons. First, BCBAs often work in systems where the behavioral concerns outstrip their capacity and ability to provide services to all individuals who need them. In most cases, the focus is on the primarily individual services (tier 3), rather than universal

practices and systems (tier 1 and tier 2) that might impact all students and improve the effectiveness of the services of those students who need intensive supports. We have seen many instances where BCBA's thrive in a multi-tiered PBIS framework, because they have the capacity to deliver intensive supports with higher fidelity, producing better outcomes, by supporting a school to implement more effective tier 1 and tier 2 supports. Additional information/resources about tier 1 and tier 2 interventions can be accessed at the National Technical Assistance Center for PBIS (pbis.org). The Prevent-Teach-Reinforce model by Dunlap, Iovannone, English, et al. (2010) has been shown to be an effective tier 3 intervention at the individual level for students with challenging behavior.

School-wide PBIS's foundation in applied behavior analysis (Dunlap et al. 2008) supports a view of the critical role that function plays in designing interventions. Behavior analysts are the only educational and human services professionals that are explicitly trained on determining the function of the behavior before selecting an intervention. Their role in applying that knowledge of function within a multi-tiered PBIS system is critical.

School-wide PBIS suggests the use of single-case designs and the visual presentation of data at each tier to determine whether there are changes in frequency and/or intensity of the problem behavior. The National Technical Assistance Center for PBIS has developed a data analysis system (SWIS Suite [n.d.](http://swis.org)) (swis.org) for schools to enter data at the tier 1 level (office discipline referrals), tier 2 (partial interval data), and tier 3 (frequency data) and have it presented in a visual graphical format. Behavior analysts are specifically trained in the presentation and interpretation of data in a graphical visual format (O'Neill, McDonnell, Billingsley, and Jenson 2011), (McDonnell, O'Keeffe, and O'Neill [in press](#)).

School-wide PBIS has a focus on the development of school-wide behavior support plans that emphasize the use of antecedent interventions, active teaching of desired behaviors and functionally equivalent replacement behaviors, as well as, increasing the overall reinforcement for these behaviors. Behavior analysts are specifically trained in antecedent interventions, effective teaching and conducting preference assessments and building effective reinforcement systems (Cooper, Heron, and Heward 2007).

School-wide PBIS has a strong emphasis on conducting treatment integrity assessments at each tier. The National Technical Assistance Center for PBIS (pbis.org) has developed empirically validated treatment integrity tools at each tier and has built an electronic data system for the input of this information (PBIS Assessment [n.d.](http://pbisapps.org)) (pbisapps.org) and a resulting graphical presentation. Behavior analysts understand the relationship between treatment integrity and the effectiveness of evidenced-based practices.

As part of the implementation framework, each school or organization involved in school-wide PBIS needs to select a

coach to facilitate implementation. It is recommended that the coach (Horner 2012) have competencies in data analysis and behavioral theory. A behavior analyst should evidence those competencies from their training and practice.

Finally, as part of each tier, it is suggested that teams meet on a regular basis (monthly) and review data both on treatment integrity and student/individual outcomes and make data-based decisions to improve/sustain treatment integrity, as well as, measurable, meaningful student/individual outcomes using evidenced-based interventions. Behavior analysts are trained to review data and to use evidenced-based interventions.

Why Should Behavior Analysts be Interested in School-Wide PBIS?

In almost all of the critical PBIS implementation areas, behavior analysts have the experience and training that prepare them to contribute to supporting this PBIS framework across multiple tiers of implementation.

In many organizations, the sole person committed to data-based decision-making focusing on treatment integrity and meaningful social emotional outcomes and the use of evidenced-based practices is the behavior analyst. The framework of school-wide PBIS is not just being implemented in schools. It is being adapted and used across juvenile justice facilities (Sprague et al. 2013), behavior health organizations, services for adults with developmental disabilities, schools for students with autism, and in home and community services. Behavior analysts have opportunities to further contribute to the empirical research around the implementation of this framework, as well as, improving on the effectiveness and efficiency of evidenced-based interventions that have been developed to date and to the creation of potentially new interventions to improve the meaningful outcomes of individuals served in our schools, homes, and communities. School-wide PBIS provides the opportunity for behavior analysts to realize one of their major goals—to have individuals with or without disabilities access evidenced-based practices that are implemented with good integrity to achieve meaningful outcomes for all/individuals. As B.F. Skinner said in his book *Walden Two* (1976) “It is not a question of starting. The start has been made. It's a question of what's to be done from now on.”

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