

WAY TO GO School Success for Children with Mental Health Needs



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* The drawings in these Fact Sheets were produced for Way to Go by students in two programs operated by Washington Very Special Arts: the School for Arts in Learning (SAIL), a public charter school serving children K-12, and the ARTICulate employment training program.

FACT SHEET #6

Making Strides at the Local Level: Policies for Implementation of School-Wide PBS Integrated with Mental Health

Evidence of Effectiveness	Combining school-wide positive behavior support (PBS) and the provision of mental health services with strong evidence of effectiveness (and based on mental health system of care values, see Fact Sheet # 3) can have a dramatic effect on the lives of children.
Moving Away from Usual Practice	While the results can be impressive, implementation is not simple. It requires both the education and mental health systems to pursue approaches that are very different from usual practice. While these approaches are best implemented through a state-level initiative, they require a commitment to change policy and practice at the local level. Some costs are involved, along with considerable training and technical assistance.
School-Wide PBS	<p>School-wide PBS relies on effective strategies to teach and reinforce behavioral expectations and create a more positive school environment. It systematically changes how schools approach problem behavior. It is based on decades of behavioral and biomedical research demonstrating that teachers and schools can proactively reduce the incidence of problem behavior and successfully use alternatives to punishment using PBS.¹ Rather than relying on punitive discipline policies, which have been shown ineffective, PBS teaches and reinforces desired behaviors, eliminates environmental triggers of problem behavior and uses supportive strategies to engage students.</p> <p>PBS is also embedded in the federal special education law, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Federal regulations require behavioral assessments and appropriate interventions prior to disciplining children with disabilities whose behavior is a manifestation of that disability.</p> <p>Schools, mental health agencies and families appreciate the benefits of school-wide PBS integrated with mental health. For information about successful initiatives, see Chapter 3 of the Bazelon Center report, <i>Way to Go</i>.</p>
Benefits for Schools	<p>Successful PBS initiatives can help schools reduce discipline problems, meet the academic requirements of No Child Left Behind and promote student social/emotional learning. Some of the benefits reported by PBS schools are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • more time for classroom teaching as behavior problems are prevented when dealt with early, before they become habitual; • improved academic and social outcomes, greater family and student satisfaction and improved school climate;

- increased job satisfaction among staff. Educators appreciate having a team for consultation and support and feel collaboration leads to new insight and skills; and
- fewer problems for school boards, superintendents and principals and increased community support for schools as suspensions, expulsions and dropouts diminish and school, family and community collaborate to bring about positive change.

PBS can also be an effective base for other school-improvement initiatives (such as character education, dropout prevention, literacy programs, No Child Left Behind, and drug- and violence-prevention programs). It can become a thread woven into the fabric of the school and the daily curriculum.

Benefits for Mental Health

Benefits cited by mental health agencies that collaborate with PBS schools:

- PBS focuses on prevention and early intervention. When school-wide PBS strategies are effective and reduce problem behavior among the majority of students, then the mental health system resources can be targeted to high-need students. Resources are better utilized when there is a system to address the spectrum of needs.
- Communication improves among stakeholders—schools, families, mental health and other community service providers—resulting in increased support to children and families. A unified plan, understood by all stakeholders, is more likely to be effective.
- A less disruptive and more supportive school climate increases the likelihood that students with mental health problems can stay in school and succeed.
- Teachers have more time to focus on the academic strengths and needs of students with serious mental disorders because behavior problems no longer divert their attention. This can lead to greater school success and improved functioning for children with serious mental disorders.
- Mental health staff feel they develop a better understanding of a student’s behavioral motivations and psychosocial needs when they are co-located in the school and can observe the student in school.

Benefits for Families

Families are also appreciative of these initiatives, provided that PBS is implemented in ways that emphasize a strengths-based approach, full family engagement and social-emotional learning. Taking an approach that builds on student and family strengths and on strategies that foster greater behavioral competency, instead of focusing on problems and failures, helps families feel comfortable working with the school to improve outcomes for their child.

Local Program and Policy Changes

While school-wide PBS integrated with mental health requires a state-level commitment to be most effective, some important program and policies are needed at the local level for the initiative to succeed.

Adopting an Initiative

School districts and schools should discuss adoption of a school-wide PBS initiative integrated with mental health. All staff in the relevant schools should be educated about PBS and a poll should be conducted to determine whether there is significant staff support.

- ☆ With state support, local education and mental health systems must lay the groundwork for a successful initiative by exploring how to work together. School districts (and individual schools) that plan to adopt school-wide PBS should approach their local mental health system to initiate discussions.

**Leadership
Teams Formed**

- ☆ Education and mental health agencies should identify common goals for children and discuss how to meet the needs of children in each of the PBS tiers (see Fact Sheet #1). Mental health should focus particularly on children in Tiers Two and Three.
- ☆ A district leadership team should be formed, composed of education administrators, teachers and other staff and mental health agency leaders and clinicians, along with families. Representation from other child-serving systems is also advisable.
- ☆ School PBS teams should also be formed, composed of a cross-section of school personnel, families and youth, and local mental health staff.

**Building
Expertise and
Capacity**

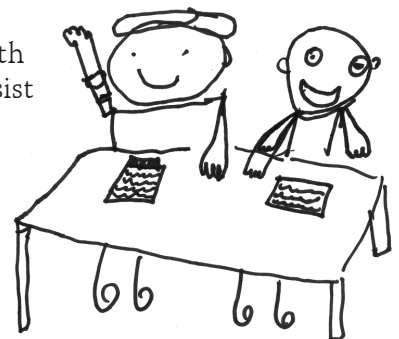
- ☆ Local education personnel and mental health agency staff should take advantage of training and technical assistance furnished through the state and national PBS resources. Leadership teams should adapt national or state materials, when necessary, to fit local needs.
- ☆ Families and students should be trained in school-wide PBS and family-organization leaders should be part of the planning group that designs training.
- ☆ Local mental health leaders should assess their capacity to furnish the most effective services to children with mental disorders, as well as consultation and education for school personnel and school-based early intervention services.
- ☆ If expanded capacity is needed, leadership teams should reach out to other providers, such as community health centers or private practitioners, to supplement services of the local community mental health agency.
- ☆ Local mental health agencies should adopt, if they have not already, an approach to community mental health that is based on a strengths-based, family-driven, culturally competent system of care.
- ☆ Local mental health agencies should develop a plan for training providers to ensure that children receive effective services and that they are diverted from services with the least evidence of effectiveness, particularly group residential placements.

Family Liaisons

- ☆ Family liaisons—family members hired to support other families and to serve on PBS teams—should be trained. Often the training, which is sponsored by the district, is by trainers from a family organization. Funds to employ family liaisons may come from the state initiative, through local mental health or education resources or through redirection of federal IDEA or other funds.

**Launching the
Initiative**

- ☆ Schools should launch the school-wide PBS initiative, focusing primarily on Tier One students but including at least some services for children in Tiers Two and Three.
- ☆ Schools should encourage local community mental health agencies to place mental health staff in the school to assist children in Tiers Two and Three.
- ☆ Mental health agencies should begin to offer PBS schools consultation and education.
- ☆ Schools or districts should hire (or assign) an individual to act as boundary spanner, connecting the schools



and mental health agencies, identifying any problems early and facilitating their resolution.

- ☆ Once the initiative is launched, schools should focus on how to implement effective programming for students in Tiers Two and Three. For example, coaches and special education teachers can be a resource to general education teachers. Mental health professionals can provide training on effective behavioral techniques for the classroom.
 - ☆ Districts (and schools) should reach out to juvenile justice agencies to encourage their collaboration in the initiative and facilitate the training of probation officers in PBS.
 - ☆ Schools and districts should explore sources of state, federal and local funding to improve, expand and sustain their initiatives. (See *Way to Go*, Chapter 5.)
 - ☆ District (and school) leadership teams should link with social service agencies to ensure that children and their families receive services for which they are eligible.
 - ☆ Schools should encourage youth to engage in community activities and encourage communities to offer students opportunities for civic engagement.
 - ☆ Schools and mental health agencies should ensure that they reach out to educate the community about the initiative and present hard data on improvements in student behavior in order to garner local support.
- Assessing Progress**
- ☆ Schools must report to the state the outcomes and other data required by the state for its report card.
 - ☆ Schools should make use of self-assessment tools in order to engage in continuous quality improvement. Assessments of family engagement and family and youth satisfaction should also be made.

Working with the Community

An initiative for school-wide PBS integrated with mental health requires changes from usual practice in both education and mental health. However, once these changes are made, the outcomes for children and families can be dramatic and positive. Staff, too, will find increased job satisfaction.

In the long run, an investment in these strengths-based practices helps children, including many who have serious mental disorders, to stay in school, improve their academic outcomes and graduate.



1. Sugai, G. & Horner, R. (2002). The evaluation of discipline practices: school-wide positive behavior supports. *Behavioral Psychology in Schools*. The Haworth Press, Inc. p. 23-50.