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## Schools Link Assessment to Behavior Intervention

by Elizabeth Schaughency, Ph.D., and Steve Goodman, Ph.D.

### Data-Based Decision Making Makes Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support (PBS) More Effective

Every educator knows the value of appropriate social behavior within the instructional setting. Disruptive behavior interferes with the learning of both the student having difficulty and those around him or her. If it takes 15 minutes to process an office discipline referral (ODR), a school with 550 ODRs per year spends approximately 23 six-hour days processing referrals yearly. By reducing the number of referrals, staff can better use the time to address academic progress. In other words, teachers can teach, and students can learn.

Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support (PBS) focuses on ways to support appropriate social behavior for all students within a school. Using PBS, school personnel can improve school climate, social-behavioral functioning, and the learning environment for all students, despite tight budgets, competing demands, and limited time. Teachers learn to “work smarter, not harder” (Kameenui & Carnine, 2002).

Schoolwide PBS allows teachers and administrators to become more effective and efficient by helping them collect and use data to make decisions about intervention at the individual, classroom, or schoolwide level. The selected interventions help students learn.

### Why Bother with Data?

As is evident in the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB), educators are called to be accountable—for what they do and for the achievement of ALL students. Many in education point to a research-to-practice gap in special education (e.g., see *Remedial and Special Education 20; Exceptional Children*, 1999, Vol. 65). One factor contributing to this gap is the perception that “research findings won’t generalize to my situation (student, classroom, school, community).”

People, organizations, and situations are unique. That’s why schoolwide PBS takes an individualized approach,

### Is Your School Ready for Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support?

To be effective and sustained, schoolwide PBS needs to be embedded in school processes and systems rather than viewed as an “add-on” program. Many times, it is the school improvement team that sets the direction for schoolwide PBS efforts. If you are interested in taking a look at your school’s capacity to implement PBS, two broad system-capacity measures are available:

- **The Systemwide Evaluation Tool (SET)**—evaluates systems in the school before and after implementing schoolwide PBS.
- **The Effective Behavior Support (EBS) Self Assessment Survey**—identifies strengths and weaknesses of current systems on positive behavior support within the school.

Both tools are available online at the the Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) Web site (see Resources on page 6).

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using data to inform each stage of the problem-solving process. For example, information helps decision-makers identify problems within a school. Schools become more effective when they can accurately identify those situations or students in need of additional support or intervention. Schools become more efficient when they identify which current practices work and therefore do not need attention or resources (i.e., “If it ain't broke, don't fix it”). Moreover, since it's hard to predict how unique persons, schools, or situations will respond to any intervention, evidenced-based practices serve as a best guess of which interventions are most likely to be effective; systematically evaluating how the interventions are working helps schools adapt them to meet the unique needs of the student and the school more effectively.

### **Finding and Supporting Key Personnel Leads to Success in Schoolwide PBS**

Many stakeholders within the school setting want to make informed decisions regarding PBS. Administrators want to know how their leadership is guiding the

social climate. Teachers want to know if classroom interventions are effective. Student assistance teams evaluate intervention plans for individual students. And parents want confirmation their children are attending safe schools.

When setting up information systems, school leaders need to take several steps:

- Identify key decision-makers and the data that will inform decisions.
- Assign staff who will collect information, compile it in some usable form, and then report results to various stakeholders.
- Provide staff with the knowledge and skills to make data-driven decisions. These skills include: accurately and consistently collecting, recording, and interpreting information; using technology to store and retrieve information; and linking assessment results to intervention decisions.

### **Many Types of Behavior Data Inform PBS Decisions**

Many types of information are useful in schoolwide PBS. In fact, schools make better decisions when they draw informa-

#### **About This PBS Research Project**

*A Universal and Individually-Referenced K-3 Behavior and Reading Intervention Model* is a federally-funded four-year model demonstration project that partners county intermediate school district consultants and university researchers with schools. The goal of this partnership is to build capacity to implement evidence-based practice and decisions at the universal (schoolwide), targeted (selected groups of students and/or settings), and individually-referenced (i.e., individual student) levels to promote academic and behavioral competence.

The project involves four elementary schools across four school districts in west Michigan, representing different communities with differing demographic characteristics. Participating schools include:

- South Elementary School, Hudsonville Public Schools.
- Ferrysburg and Lake Hills Elementary Schools, Grand Haven Public Schools.
- Holland Heights Elementary School, Holland Public Schools.
- Northeastern Elementary School, Kalamazoo Public Schools.

Over the course of the project, each school works toward these ends via development of site-specific action plans based on local performance data and formative evaluation. These site-specific action plans serve as the basis for evolving capacity building, professional development, and technical assistance activities. This work is being extended throughout the State of Michigan via Michigan's Integrated Behavior and Learning Support Initiative (MiBLSi, pronounced mi-blis-e).



This project is supported by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). Opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the position of the U.S. Department of Education.



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tion from multiple sources, referred to as triangulation (see Glossary page 4). Moreover, different questions require different information. Keeping in mind the goal—to develop interventions that more effectively and efficiently solve problems—there are some common characteristics of information useful for linking assessment to intervention:

- **Assessment should reflect the behavior in the natural environment.** The aim is to develop interventions that more effectively support behavior within the natural environment (e.g., classroom, other school setting), so schools need to assess behavior within these contexts. Assessing students in their natural environment also helps identify contextual factors that can

influence a student's behavior.

For example, sometimes students have difficulties because they lack the skills to meet behavioral expectations. However, in other situations, their difficulties may be performance difficulties (i.e., the student has the right skills but the context influences his performance of those skills). Once a problem has been identified, a look at the contextual factors (in the student's natural environment) can help guide staff as they work to solve the problem.

- **Assessment should provide ongoing evaluation of progress.** Assessment should not be a one-time procedure—something that happens before an intervention is developed. Instead, it should be an on-going process.▼  
Before intervention, assessment helps

▼ When selecting measurement tools for ongoing evaluation of progress, it's important to keep in mind two principles:

- 1) Tools must be appropriate for repeated measures. Some measures in psychology and education are designed to be administered only once, or again only after an extended period of time. These tools are less suited to providing information for evaluating progress.
- 2) Measures must be sensitive to growth and change in behavior. Many measures in psychology and education have been designed to provide consistent results over time, such as published norm-reference achievement tests. These tests provide relatively consistent information about a student's standing within a group, but they may be less able to reflect an individual student's growth.

Source: Elizabeth Schaughency, Ph.D. and Steve Goodman, Ph.D.

**Figure 1**

### The Schoolwide Information System (SWIS)

The Schoolwide Information System (SWIS) is a subscription database program available via Internet. Information is password-protected to maintain confidentiality. In adopting SWIS for use within a particular school, staff develop a referral form that records information about behavior incidents occurring in the school setting:

- Student's name
- Date of incident
- Time of incident
- Student's grade level
- Referring staff
- Location of incident
- Problem behavior
- Others involved
- Consequence provided
- Possible motivation for the incident

This information is used to identify patterns of problem behavior. With SWIS, information can be quickly and easily compiled in charts depicting these data in various ways (e.g., types of behavior leading to referral, time or setting of referrals). SWIS can address questions at a range of levels: whole school; specific settings or situations within the school (e.g., playground, classroom); or the individual student level. Staff use data differently based on their roles within the school. The principal and school improvement team look at whole-school data, such as office discipline referrals (ODR), in order to make

program modifications. For example, when more than 20 percent of students receive one or more ODRs per year, educators can look at ODR patterns to design appropriate schoolwide interventions (Sugai, Sprague, Horner, & Walker, 2000). One team examined the pattern of their ODRs and discovered that a large number of referrals came from the hallways. As a result, they taught students appropriate hallway behavior and provided more monitoring and support in hallways, rather than intervening with students on a case-by-case basis.

SWIS can also provide clues about behavioral needs of individual students or groups of students. Again, ODR data provide an example. Most students within a school experience very few ODRs (0 to 1). The next most frequent group receives a few ODRs (3 to 5). Using the SWIS database, educators can easily identify this group and target selected interventions or risk reduction strategies. Further assessment of the students and/or the settings from which referrals are made can then guide appropriate problem-solving efforts. Finally, the typically small group of students who receive a significantly higher number of ODRs may need individualized interventions by student assistance teams. SWIS can easily identify each of these groups of students.



## Glossary

**Contextual factors**—the circumstances or events that form the environment within which something exists or takes place.

Source: *Encarta® World English Dictionary* © 1999 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.

**Multiple-gating**—the process by which less time-consuming and less expensive assessments are administered first, followed by more time-consuming methods

Source: Charmaine K. Higa, Eric L. Daleiden, and Bruce F. Chorpita. *Multiple Gating for Child Diagnosis: Clinical Judgments Based on Computer Assessments, Questionnaires, and Structured Interviews* (abstract). Retrieved November 1, 2003 from University of Tulsa, College of Arts & Sciences Web site: <http://www.personal.utulsa.edu/~eric-daleiden/recent%20projects.htm#Multiple%20Gating>.

**Triangulation**—a technical term used in surveying and navigation to describe a technique whereby two known or visible points are used to plot the location of a third point. Triangulation in education decision-making means using multiple sources of data, three or more, to get a more complete understanding of a student's behavior and achievement. This tool can also be used to analyze behavior or achievement at the classroom, school, and district levels.

Source: *Quality Assurance Review Mentoring Guide* 2003-04. Michigan Department of Education.



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Figure 2

### Functional Assessment (FA)

**Functional Assessment (FA)** is a process that examines potential environmental influences on the problem behavior, identifying the events preceding and following the problem behavior. This information is then used to develop behavior intervention plans. If certain situations consistently trigger behavioral difficulties, a PBS plan may aim to reduce those triggers. Similarly, if problem behaviors consistently reward the student (give attention, release student from a disliked activity), staff might teach the student alternative ways to have that need met. For example, PBS might show the student positive ways to get attention or cope with a disliked activity.

There is no single, best method to conduct a functional assessment, and educators should not do the same thing every time one does the functional assessment. Instead, educators should develop their functional assessment based on what they know about the student and the difficulties that the student is displaying. A team meeting using a tool such as the 25-Minute Problem-Solving Framework (Sprick, 1999) might be sufficient in some cases, whereas others may require more systematic collection of additional information using behavioral observations and other techniques.

identify and describe problems (and the contextual factors that influence them) in order to develop an appropriate behavior support strategy. During the intervention, assessment helps us determine whether the behavior is changing in the desired direction. Later, assessment tells us whether change is being maintained over time or whether there is a need for additional support.

- **Measures should be efficient and serve a range of uses, e.g., screening, eligibility determination, goal setting, intervention planning, program evaluation.** Data must provide useful information while not being time-consuming to collect. If possible, data collection should be embedded within ongoing activities in the school. In this way, educators save time and resources that can be better spent on behavior support.

To help educators collect data efficiently, PBS leaders at the University of Oregon developed the Schoolwide Information System (SWIS). Using SWIS, educators can easily record information about student behavior and record it in a form that can be used later to solve problems (see Figure 1 previous page). For example, a student who breaks a school rule typically is sent to the principal's

office. Unfortunately, too often these behavioral difficulties are not documented. If they are recorded, the records are not made available to others who work with the child. This means that potentially valuable information is unavailable for future problem solving. By using SWIS, school staff can record, retrieve, and analyze information about such behavior incidents to provide school personnel with behavioral data for decision-making.

- **Use a multiple-gating approach to assessment.** One way to increase efficiency of data gathering is to use a multiple-gating approach to assessment. In this approach, schools start with less costly and time-consuming strategies, such as office discipline referrals (ODRs), moving to more intensive strategies only when indicated.

For example, planning behavior interventions using functional assessment (FA) is a promising strategy for developing effective behavior support plans (Repp, Felce, & Barton, 1988). However, some methods for conducting FAs require more work than others (See Figure 2). When staff members enter into the SWIS database information about setting and possible motivation, a SWIS data report provides a potential starting point for a FA-based behavior support plan. After looking at

the SWIS data, if the student assistance team agrees about possible function, it may be ready to plan effective behavior intervention (Gersten, 2001). However, when team members do not agree, they may need to pursue more formal FA.

### **Final Comments: Data Are Important, But Data Aren't It.**

Within the PBS framework, data are simply tools educators use to inform their practice. The process of collecting data is not the same as educating children and implementing behavior intervention plans. These important tasks remain to be done; but the careful collection and consideration of data in educational problem solving can improve these tasks.

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### **For More Information on Data-Based Decision Making and Evaluation in the Problem-Solving Process**

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## WEB LINKS

### Positive Behavior Support Web Sites

#### Association for Positive Behavior Support

<http://apbsinternational.org>

#### Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Positive Behavior Support

<http://rrtcpbs.fmhi.usf.edu/>

#### Schoolwide Information System (SWIS)

[www.swis.org](http://www.swis.org)

#### Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education

[www.pbis.org](http://www.pbis.org)

### National Special Education Web Sites with PBS Information

#### The Journal of Pediatrics Online

<http://www.mosby.com/jpeds>

(Look for Frohna, J. G., & Park, S. M. (2002). "Promoting the use of evidence-based medicine in pediatrics," *Journal of Pediatrics* 141 (2002): 599-600.

#### Technical Assistance Alliance for Parent Centers (The Alliance)

[www.taalliance.org](http://www.taalliance.org)

#### U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP)

<http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/osep/index.html>

### Michigan Special Education Web Sites

#### Citizens Alliance to Uphold Special Education (CAUSE) Michigan's designated parent training and information center

[www.causeonline.org/](http://www.causeonline.org/)

#### Center for Educational Networking (CEN)

[www.cenmi.org](http://www.cenmi.org)

#### Michigan Department of Education

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