PBIS Forum 18 Practice Brief:
Preventing & Responding to Violent Behavior in Schools

PBIS Leadership Forum- *Roundtable Dialogue*   March 2019

This practice brief is intended to be a practical tool and brief overview resource for educators interested in leveraging the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) framework to support school and district-level prevention and recovery efforts related to school violence and other trauma-inducing critical incidents. Updates to lessons learned, core features, evaluation measures, the evaluation process, and needs were drawn from sessions and presentations focused on preventing and responding to critical incidents within PBIS implementation at the 2018 PBIS Leadership Forum in Chicago. In addition, we draw upon our technical assistance experiences in locations that have been directly and indirectly affected by serious traumatic events (e.g., gun violence, mental health crisis incidents, environmental and natural disasters).

The contents of this brief should be considered a starting point. Full implementation requires careful assessment, planning, and implementation by school and district leadership teams with additional support from experienced trainers, implementation coaches, and specialists with critical incident and prevention expertise.

Rationale and Purpose

Following recent school shooting incidents, in particular, the call for action has been higher than ever. Collective voices have advocated for (a) creating and promoting positive school climate, (b) banning assault-style weapons, (c) providing school-based mental health, (d) reforming reactive discipline practices, (e) establishing universal background checks and standardized threat assessment teams, (f) increasing safety related information exchange, and (g) putting in place gun violence protection orders.

Schools are one of our most structured, predictable, continuous social support systems where most of our children spend more than 12 years in their early life. Thus, schools could be an essential provider of effective protective factors and actions for preventing development and occurance of violent behavior and improving the efficiency and impact of recovery activities following significant events. In particular, prevention begins with student success which is linked to predictable learning and teaching environments that are safe, respectful, constructive, and considerate of all.

The **purpose** of the brief is to describe the functions and values of tiered systems of support in preventing and responding to critical incidents (i.e., emergency and crisis situations) in schools. Preventing violent behavior and successfully addressing critical incidents (i.e., any natural, social or behavioral event associated with major injury, disruption, distress, trauma, or damage to an individual group or community) or crisis situation requires an integrated, multi-tiered approach.
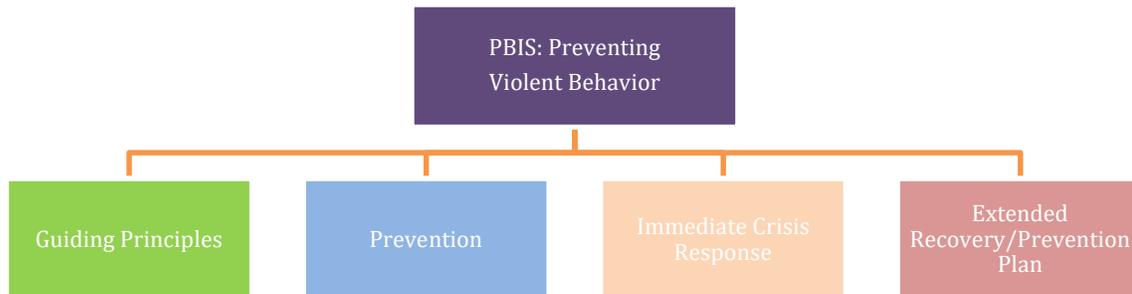
Using tiered systems of support, like PBIS, to effectively prevent and efficiently respond to critical incidents, we describe four main consideration areas: (a) guiding principles, (b) prevention, (c) immediate crisis response, and (d) extended recovery/prevention plan.

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| Guiding Principles | Prevention | Immediate Crisis Response | Extended Recovery/Prevention Plan |

Guiding Principles

When developing systems to prevent and respond to violent behavior, we consider the following guiding principles:
1. Align all practices and systems with student outcome and benefit.
2. Develop the most efficient, effective and relevant practices and systems
3. Decide with data and within a tiered framework logic
4. Develop capacity for and invest in long-term high-fidelity implementation.
5. Work as a team
6. Secure active and engaged administrator participation

Two additional guiding principles should be considered. First, Colvin (2006) suggests that when a crisis incident occurs, safety becomes the primary concern, that is, for example, seek safe locations, protect from harm, secure entries and exits, account for everyone, and seek help. Prevention, reteaching, and other intervention strategies should occur before the next incident and after an incident as debriefing, reteaching, and recovery responses.

The purpose of prevention is to decrease the development of new problem behaviors and/or prevent the worsening of existing problem behaviors. Comprehensive plans for prevention should include strategies for
1. Eliminating prompts and reinforcers of problem behaviors.
2. Adding prompts and reinforcers of prosocial behavior.
3. Teaching relevant, effective, and efficient prosocial behavior.
4. Organizing the environment and providing supports to achieve high implementation fidelity

Prevention

The PBIS framework is designed to assist school teams in their efforts to establish and sustain safe, predictable, and positive school and classroom climates, and increase the system's capacity to prevent and respond to critical incidents. PBIS is organized around four core elements: (a) outcomes, (b) data, (c)

practices, and (d) systems. By intentionally focusing on prevention within each element, schools implementing PBIS can increase their capacity to prevent and respond to critical incidents.

Outcomes

Clearly defining goals and criteria for success allows a school or district to prioritize actions and initiatives appropriately. With respect to crisis prevention and response, schools and districts should consider clearly defining outcomes related to (a) ensuring that all staff and students have access to effective and efficient proactive supports (across tiers) to meet their behavioral and mental health needs, and (b) systems are in place with fidelity to monitor and respond to threats or crisis events.

Data

In addition to data typically used by schools implementing PBIS (e.g., ODRs, attendance, academic performance, and mental health screeners), schools and districts should develop clear procedures and criteria for conducting threat assessments. Threat assessments should be conducted by a team that includes mental health personnel, law enforcement, and designated school staff members. The team must also develop procedures for monitoring and following up on recommended actions to ensure effectiveness, as well as communicating plans with all involved.

Practices

All practices across the tiered continuum should be evidence-based and supported to maximize implementation fidelity. High implementation fidelity is essential for students with needs that are unresponsive Tier I supports. Directly and systematically teaching prosocial skills, such as, self-management, help seeking, problem solving, and emotional regulation, is needed as a base so students, staff, and family members develop a common language, skills, and routines to support prevention and response efforts.

In addition, mental health supports should be systematically integrated into a PBIS continuum of support to prevent and address precursors of violent behaviors at school. Person-centered approaches are needed to maximize student and family voices and ensure contextually and culturally relevant implementation.

Systems

Systems are what school staff members require to choose, implement, and evaluate prevention and responding practices and procedures. Central to the system is a school leadership team that anticipates, prepares for, facilitates responses, and oversees follow-up activities.

The team must develop crisis response procedures and provide frequent practice opportunities. Students, staff, and families should know what to expect in the event of a critical incident and be given opportunities to practice (e.g., fire drills, evacuation procedures, lock-downs, emergency pick up and reunification procedures).

Because communication systems can become quickly stressed during crisis incidents, clear procedures must be developed for handling incoming and outgoing information for students, staff, and family members. School personnel must work closely with mental health agencies, law enforcement, government, and public health organizations. All involved agencies must have a clear understanding of their role and the communication plan in the event of a critical incident. District level leadership will be required to facilitate a

coordinated response. Finally, clear vetting criteria and a process for adopting new programs or practices, accepting volunteers and additional community supports, and managing implementation must be in place to function efficiently during a critical incident.

Immediate crisis response

The primary objectives during the immediate response to a critical incidents in schools are to prevent immediate harm and injury, reduce and remove the threat, assess the extent of the harm or injury, provide emergency assistance, verify the whereabouts of students and staff members, ultimately stabilize and secure the physical environment, and establish communications. The team, procedures, and practices for emergency situations should be developed and practiced long before a critical incident is experienced, and ready so that those responsible for providing responses can rapidly take action when necessary. Coordination and communication with district and outside agencies (e.g., law enforcement, bus companies, media, and families) should be quickly established to ensure support for security needs that may arise.

A number of resources provide detailed information about preparing for and responding to immediate critical incidents, for example, the Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) technical assistance center provides topic specific resources (here), and a virtual tool kit (here) designed to assist schools with planning an immediate crisis response.

Extended recovery/prevention plan

After a crisis incident, an extended recovery plan is needed to (a) continue supports for individuals who are severely impacted by the incident, (b) develop plans to transition back to pre-incident routines, and made adjustments that would establish the practices and systems of a "new" normal. School and district leadership teams should use and adapt their established PBIS framework to support this process. Districts should consider four essential elements: (a) district coordination team, (b) intermediate and long-term practices, (c) vetting procedures, and (d) information management and dissemination.

For efficiency, the existing district PBIS leadership team should serve as the foundation of this district recovery team and may be expanded to include leadership from schools, and community emergency responders (e.g., fire, law enforcement, medical, public workers, mental health providers, and local government). This team has the responsibility of developing and the implementing the recovery plan.

An immediate first step following a critical incident is to determine the intensity, impact, and scope of the event. Existing data and screening procedures can be used to quickly assess the number and location (school) of impacted students and staff and family members. The team must ensure immediate and full access to needed services and that supports are available to the most affected students and staff and family members.

Clear, previously established vetting procedures for the adoption and/or adaptation of practices and systems for new staff members facilitates this process and ease the work of the leadership team in the immediate aftermath of a crisis incident. New practices and interventions should not be adopted if similar outcomes are indicated with existing programs.

Once the immediate needs of the most impacted staff and students are addressed the district must take advantage of their tiered system of support to assess need and align and integrate practices and supports to existing practices that share a common outcome objective. In general, teams should plan to intensify trauma

informed supports across all tiers (e.g., more frequent screening or monitoring of data, more intensive teaching of prosocial and coping skills, more reinforcement of staff and students) to help stabilize and reestablish a safe, predictable, and positive school and classroom climate for all students and staff and family members. In addition, teams should anticipate the possibility of an increased need for Tier II and III behavioral and mental health supports.

Finally, the team should consider ongoing communication systems and strategies. Information related to response efforts and establishing the "new" normal should be disseminated internally (i.e., within district) and externally (i.e., to the community). When disseminating information, the team may rely on previously established privacy and confidentiality procedures.

Concluding Comments

Thankfully, schools are one of our most preventive, protective, and safe institutions for children and educators. Unfortunately, since schools cannot guarantee total prevention or elimination of all critical incidents, they must be prepared to provide their best supports during a critical incident and have the capacity to respond effectively and efficiently immediately after an incident, as well, as in planning and implementing the long term recovery.

In summary, school and district leadership teams should
1. Use their data to inform their decision making
2. Invest in early and positive prevention to maximize efficient preparedness and responsiveness
3. Establish an expert and well-practice critical incidents procedure that minimizes harm and injury and shortens the incident itself and maximizes the immediate and long-term recovery
4. Organize their decision making, planning, and implementation within and across a continuum of support systems logic
5. Invest in strengthening protective factors as a means of minimizing impact and influence of risk factors
6. Consider the differential needs of all students and staff and family members in preparedness action planning and responsiveness implementation.

References

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