PBIS in Rural America: Addressing Barriers and Building on Strengths

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Introduction

Rural schools are uniquely positioned with high levels of need and low access to resources. These school districts frequently serve a larger percentage of students who live below the poverty line, are eligible for special education services, or frequently change residences (Showalter, Hartman, Johnson, & Klein, 2019). These factors, coupled with limited financial resources, present rural districts with a variety of challenges in serving their community; however, with increased community collaboration, rural schools can influence the success of efficacious practices. The purpose of this practice brief is to provide an overview of the barriers and strengths in rural and rural low-income communities and how these characteristics impact the implementation of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Additionally, this brief will introduce unique applications of strategies that leverage the strengths and resources commonly found in rural communities to support PBIS implementation in these schools.

Rationale

Rurality Incidence

One fifth of all Americans live in a rural locale (Children's Welfare, 2018). Out of almost 18,000 districts across the country, 4,674 (26%) meet Small Rural School Achievement (SRSA) criteria based on locale code and population density of 10 people per square mile (https://www2.ed.gov/programs/reaprlisp/eligibility.html). Of those, 3,733 (80%) meet both rural and low income criteria based on the percentage of families living below the poverty line.

Rural and PBIS Literature

Much of the PBIS foundation is based on city and suburban communities and districts. With more than 26,000 schools across the country implementing PBIS (pbis.org), rural regions are underrepresented. This brief focuses on common barriers and strengths found in rural settings with strategies to improve PBIS effectiveness in these unique settings.

Rural PBIS Components

Rural Definition and Characteristics

- Distance from city center, locale code; can also include population density and culture (Children's Welfare, 2018)
- Varying types of rural: Native American, Black Belt, Agricultural, Southwest, Migrant farming, Northeast, factory and manufacturing

Barriers: Rural settings can present multiple and varied barriers

- Distance from PBIS training and coaching
- Lack of access to professional development (which can lead to inaccurate views around discipline and prevention)
- Lack of funding for PBIS infrastructure, and personnel to improve fidelity and effectiveness
- Common attendance issues in rural school settings (can be related to lack of stable transportation)
- Co-occurring poverty issues

Strengths: Personal and community characteristics common in rural settings can lead to well-implemented, effective PBIS frameworks

- Resourcefulness: Common personal or character traits in rural settings include persistence, grit, ingenuity, and innovation or problem solving
- Pride: Small, rural communities generally benefit from hometown and generational pride (family farms and land management)
- Social capital: Given the tight-knit nature of rural communities, the communities as a whole (and individuals within) benefit from family, closeness, collectivism, and collaboration

- Community: Rural communities with minimal population density, far from urban resources, promote a general sense of familiarity with the community and cooperation, including cooperative farming and processing industries
- Synergy: Across rural school settings, it is common for educators to work together as community partners, often sharing resources and solving problems with communal efforts

Unique Application Strategies: Leverage strengths and address barriers

- Encourage and foster caregiver and community collaboration
- Use technology for training, coaching (e.g., telecoaching; McDaniel & Bloomfield, 2019) and professional development. This can include recorded webinars, internet-based resources, and live video conferencing, amongst other technologies
- Consider poverty related issues when presented with social and emotional responses that may be indicative of housing instability or trauma at home rather than defiance. Identify students in need and address these concerns by:
    - engaging families of students living in poverty
    - providing free school meals or take-home meals for students/families that are hungry
    - pairing alternative education placement with a counseling referral or direct services
    - increasing access to mental health supports and substance abuse assistance at school
- Leverage hometown pride in school-wide PBIS culture and recognition by holding hometown celebrations such as parades and school assemblies, and posting school-wide expectations throughout the community
- Address attendance issues by integrating into school-wide PBIS expectations, providing a tardy bus, and limiting detention to school hours (not after school or Saturday)
- Design recognition system without items that cost money (e.g., privileges and positive home contacts), and secure donations from community partners
- Involve and communicate with the community, including local business owners, faith-based organizations, afterschool programs, and out-of-school-time programs
- Conduct caregiver, educator, and community needs assessments to individualize and match components to needs and resources

Summary

Rural regions are often underrepresented in research and practice information related to implementing PBIS in schools. Although rural regions are diverse, unifying barriers include difficulties with accessing resources due to limited funding, distance from training supports, and community challenges related to public health and poverty concerns. However, these communities can capitalize on some of their strengths (i.e., hometown pride, unique applications of technology and community resources) to support implementation with high efficacy.

Resources

- https://www.pbis.org
- https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/issue-briefs/rural/
- https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org
- https://www2.ed.gov/programs/reaprlisp/eligibility.html

References

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Showalter, D., Hartman, S. L., Johnson, J., & Klein, B. (2019). *Why rural matters 2018-2019: The time is now.* Rural School and Community Trust. Retrieved from http://www.ruraledu.org/WhyRuralMatters.pdf