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# ADJUSTING PBIS FOR STUDENTS NEW TO SCHOOL: STARTING THE YEAR WITH INCREASED SUPPORT

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# Adjusting PBIS for Students New to School: Starting the Year with Increased Support

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## Introduction

**Y**oung students starting school for the first time (e.g., kindergarteners) often benefit from more than typical intensity of behavioral support. Learning new social expectations, routines, and interaction patterns can be daunting. This is an important concern for schools implementing positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS). Learning a small set of school-wide expectations during the first two weeks of the school year is a core feature of PBIS (Horner & Sugai, 2015). For a kindergarten or first grade student new to school, this process may be either an easy transition or a shift from their typical environment.



It is common for elementary schools to adopt a strategy for teaching school-wide behavioral expectations that involves whole-class or large group instruction with brief practice (Scott, Park, Swain-Bradway, & Landers, 2007). This approach has proven very effective with children in early educational settings (e.g., preschool, organized childcare). For other young students, the typical approach used by PBIS teams and faculty to introduce school-wide expectations may be too limited. The result is that school teams are often surprised to review their office discipline or classroom exclusion data after the first three months of the school year and find that kindergarten and first grade students have higher rates of discipline referrals than students in the later grades.

The basic message of this brief is that elementary schools using PBIS and committed to success for the full range of students in their school will want to consider allocating extra personnel and support during the first month of the school year to young students new to the school. This approach is based on regularly monitoring office discipline referrals, or class exclusion patterns by grade level, and then (a) using data for on-going problem solving and support, (b) shifting the start-of-the-year instruction of behavioral expectations and behavioral routines for kindergarten and first grade students to smaller groups (5-7) where shorter training sessions with increased opportunities for student response and immediate adult feedback are easier, and (c) identify and prioritize students who may need even more support to be successful.



### **Strategy 1: Disaggregate Discipline Data by Grade Level for Problem Solving**

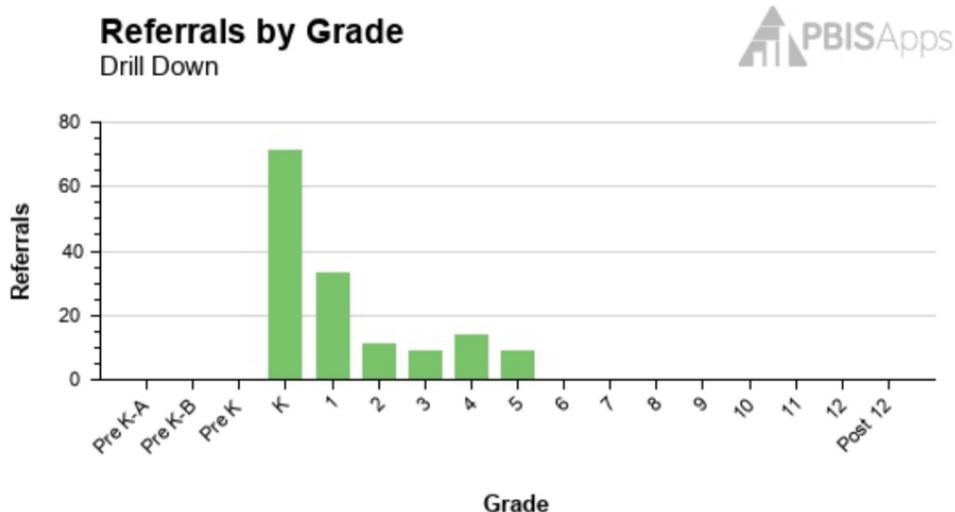
A cornerstone of PBIS is the collection and use of data to guide behavior support and identify behavior problems that arise. Our first recommendation is that all elementary schools collect, summarize, and use discipline data to examine how well they are meeting the behavior needs of young students. Specifically, elementary schools may want to consider disaggregating their student discipline data by grade level to see what patterns of discipline referrals emerge in the first few months of the school year.

One example of a data management system that is widely used for managing discipline patterns is the School-wide Information System (SWIS; May et al., 2019; [www.pbisapps.org](http://www.pbisapps.org)). Using graphs generated in

SWIS, school PBIS teams can “drill down” in the data to identify patterns of student problem behaviors and develop action plans to support students. To determine if enhanced efforts are needed for young students entering an elementary school, it is helpful to examine a graph of office discipline referrals (or suspensions) by grade level. Consider the hypothetical data in Figure 1, which shows patterns of office discipline referrals per school day organized by grade level from September, October and November of a recent school year. The data indicate that students in kindergarten and first grade received over 67% of all office discipline referrals from this hypothetical elementary school. Efforts to teach and support positive behavior were effective for students in grades 2-5 but were insufficient for students new to the school in kindergarten and first grade as continuing students.

The PBIS team from this school could use this information to consider new strategies for supporting students starting school in kindergarten and first grade. The team could also use their data to more precisely guide the delivery of supportive practices. Consider the data in the drill down graphs in Figures 2 and 3. The data in Figure 2 document that most office discipline referrals for students in kindergarten and first grade are coming from classrooms, and that although many young students were struggling behaviorally, there were two students who stand out as needing individualized attention. The key message from this example is the importance of gathering data systematically, then summarizing and using data to assess discipline problems by grade level, by location, and by student. Any elementary school that does not have access to this level of information is at risk of missing important messages needed to guide behavior support.

**Figure 1. Graph of hypothetical data showing that the majority of office discipline referrals occurred for students in kindergarten and first grade during the months of September, October, and November of the 2018-19 school year.**







## Strategy 2: Increase the Intensity of Tier 1 Classroom Practices

Typical Tier 1 classroom management practices include defining and teaching classroom expectations, providing opportunities for young students to practice new skills, and acknowledging students for their attempts. One adaptation to consider in kindergarten and first grade is to change the classroom environment as a preventative strategy for decrease the length of time students are seated in whole group instruction (e.g., carpet time) to a developmentally appropriate duration and include movement breaks.

Increasing the intensity and frequency of preventive practices at the onset of a new school year helps to provide young students with the tools they need to be successful throughout the school year (Stormont, Beckner, Mitchell, & Richter, 2005). Specifically, class-wide expectations are most effective when explicitly and actively taught in observable and measurable ways that are developmentally appropriate for young students (Fallon, O’Keeffe, & Sugai, 2012). To promote social-emotional skills in the early years, teachers are encouraged to model desired expectations, provide multiple opportunities for students to practice new skills, and reinforce students engaging in positive behaviors.

Due to students’ social-emotional development, there is a need to focus on these teaching opportunities early on in the school year with an emphasis on: (a) short lessons (e.g., 5 to 10 min) that are delivered

frequently (e.g., daily over the first few weeks of school, (b) teaching in smaller groups (e.g., 5 to 7 students) that allow students to practice “doing things right” and receive immediate feedback, (c) teach within common routines (e.g., classroom entry and exit, getting student attention, asking for help) at the start of every school day for the first two weeks of school, then every Monday for the first term, then intensify again after long breaks from school or as needed based on classroom-wide data, and (d) practice within common routines such as classroom entry and lining up repeatedly (overlearning), not only when they occur naturally (e.g., once at the start of the day; [www.challengingbehavior.org](http://www.challengingbehavior.org)).





### **Strategy 3: Identify and Respond Early to Young Students with More Intensive Needs**

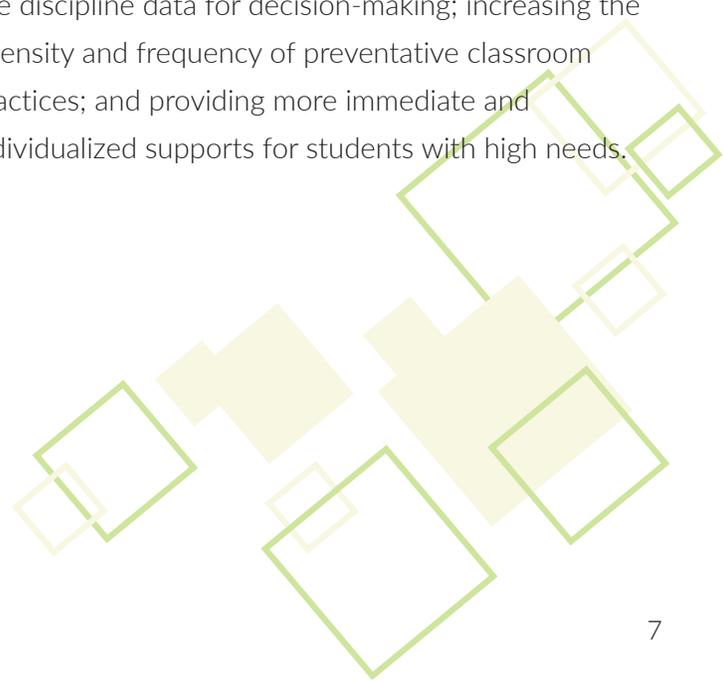
In addition to using discipline data systems, such as SWIS, school PBIS teams can also collaborate with EI (Early Intervention) service providers to identify young students who will likely need more intensive support at the beginning of the school year. For example, EI providers may have already screened and have been providing services to these young students in early educational environments. By identifying these students, school PBIS teams can provide early intensive supports to help them transition successfully into kindergarten and first grade.

For young students engaging in more reoccurring and serious problem behaviors (e.g., six or more referrals in a short amount of time [Figure 3]), intensifying Tier 1 classroom practices may not be sufficient to address their behavioral challenges. Additional supports may include conducting a brief functional behavioral assessment and developing a behavior support plan to address the problem behaviors and teach more acceptable replacement behaviors. As an example, for a student in kindergarten who frequently cries and hits their teacher and teaching assistants to avoid participating in early language activities, a behavior support plan may include adjusting the

length of the activities (i.e., preventing future problem behaviors) and teaching the student to ask for help during difficult activities (i.e., teaching a behavior to replace the problem behaviors). The school PBIS team may assist the teacher and teaching assistants to implement the support plan by providing the materials and training to the teaching staff on: (a) how to implement preventative strategy (e.g., adjusting lesson activity length), (b) when or how to reinforce the appropriate replacement behavior (i.e., asking for help), and (c) how to collect data to evaluate whether the support plan is effective (e.g., how frequently problem behaviors continue to occur, how often the student independently asks for help).

### **Summary**

Many young students struggle to successfully transition into early academic environments for the first time and, as a result, experience high rates of negative disciplinary consequences. School PBIS teams can better support these young students by investing in data systems to collect, summarize, and use discipline data for decision-making; increasing the intensity and frequency of preventative classroom practices; and providing more immediate and individualized supports for students with high needs.





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## Embedded Hyperlinks

1. <https://www.pbis.org>

## Resources

- SWIS: [www.pbisapps.org](http://www.pbisapps.org)
- What is PBIS: [www.pbis.org](http://www.pbis.org)
- The National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations: [www.challengingbehavior.org](http://www.challengingbehavior.org)

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