BUILDING MOMENTUM FOR PBIS IMPLEMENTATION IN HIGH NEED DISTRICTS

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Introduction

Building district capacity for implementing PBIS in high need school districts is challenging. To better understand the level of support needed to successfully implement district-wide PBIS under challenging conditions, the National PBIS Center is conducting several model demonstrations of district-wide PBIS implementation in high need Local Education Agencies (LEAs). This practice brief summarizes the lessons learned one year into an intensive 5-year partnership with Southbridge Public Schools, a district identified as high need. The intent of the brief is to provide district leaders, trainers, and state leaders with lessons learned and suggestions they may consider when supporting high need LEAs.
Definition of High Need

LEAs or districts are considered “high need” by the federal government if “not less than 20 percent of children served by the agency are from low income families or that serve not fewer than 10,000 children from low income families (United States, 2010). Districts that qualify for funding under the Small, Rural School Achievement Program (SRSAP) or the Rural and Low-Income School Program (RLISP) may also meet this definition. In addition to demonstrating need with respect to poverty and/or rural areas, districts must demonstrate teacher need as defined by “a high percentage of teachers not teaching in the academic subject area or grade levels in which the teachers were trained to teach or a high teacher turnover rate or a high percentage of teachers with emergency, provisional, or temporary certification or licensure (United States, 2010).” Many states have additional criteria that they use to identify high need LEAs.

Challenges in High Need Districts

Districts considered high need experience a variety of challenges, including:

- High turnover rates of district and school administrators and teachers
- Lack of decision-making authority at the school level
- Lack of adequate, ongoing professional development for teachers
- Failure to focus on the (under)achievement of particular student subgroups
- Inadequate opportunities for parent involvement

Model Demonstration Demographics

Southbridge Public Schools (SPS) is located in rural South-western Massachusetts and serves 2000 students in six schools (three Elementary, one Middle, one High, and one Alternative Academy). District demographic data indicate:

- 69.7% of student are classified as economically disadvantaged,
- 79.3% of students are considered high needs according to the definition outlined by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, and
- 57.3% of students are Latinx and 37.3% are white.

The state deemed SPS to be an underperforming district in 2004. Consider the following data:

- Suspension rate 3 times the state average in 2014-2015,
Graduation rate 23 points lower than the state average, and

29% of students deemed chronically absent (compared to 12.9 state average).

Given these challenges, SPS has been under state receivership since 2016 and has been led by three different receivers in 3 years.

**Implementation Supports**

The Center for Behavioral Education and Research (CBER), a partner of the National TA Center on PBIS, established a 5-year intensive partnership with SPS, defined in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), with the goal of building district capacity to implement and sustain PBIS in all schools. Together, CBER and SPS invested in the following implementation supports:

- Established a District Leadership team and a District-wide PBIS coaching position.
- Identified leadership teams and two to three coaches in all buildings.
- Conducted monthly meetings with district leadership team and regular virtual (e.g., phone or web) consultation.
- Delivered PBIS team and coaches training in district (rather than state-wide cohort) after school hours to accommodate a lack of substitutes.
- Delivered professional development on culturally responsive practices imbedded within the PBIS framework to administrative team, PBIS coaches, and PBIS team members.

Lessons Learned about Building Momentum: Getting started and Building District Capacity

During the first year of the partnership, we have learned four broad lessons.

1. **Invest in Relationships**

Trust between teachers and administration can be damaged due to a challenging work environment as well as frequent turnover. Initial planning from the beginning of implementation efforts aimed at investing in and developing trusting and supportive relationships is essential to support teacher buy-in and to facilitate proactive problem-solving. We implemented the following practices to build and maintain relationships:

- Publicly commit to a long-term investment in implementation and a partnership between the LEA and outside (e.g., community organizations, colleges and universities) providers.
- Publicly acknowledge and reinforce that a “quick fix” is not possible and change will take time and significant effort. Improvement will not always be linear or fit a “one size fits all” approach.
- Develop systems to provide high rates of reinforcement for district and school-based leadership that recognized both effort and process as well as outcomes. Providing intentionally positive and strength focused feedback will support building trust and buy-in.
- Openly and honestly acknowledge challenges and barriers without allowing them to become the focus.
Follow through and communicate clearly to school staff, families, community and state leaders on all action steps. Continuously revisit action steps to maintain a clear vision and progress toward identified goals and objectives.

Success (and failure) is inevitable and is always owned by the team rather than any individual.

2. Invest in Leadership Capacity Building

Building capacity for district-led implementation in an environment with high rates of teacher and leader turnover is difficult. We took the following action steps to help address this issue.

- Plan for turnover by over recruiting for leadership team membership and coaching positions. Consider three or more coaches per building and leadership teams that include multiple representatives from each stakeholder group (e.g., grade level or department).
- Regularly revisit team membership at the building and district level and re-recruit as needed.
- Provide orientation training on PBIS and classroom essentials for all new hires throughout the school year.
- Provide training and coaching for all district and building leaders on proactive, distributed, and strength-based leadership approaches; and support moves away from a reactive or punitive leadership structure.
- Support internal capacity by investing in capacity-building training (e.g., training of trainers) for multiple key district leaders.

3. Invest in Data and Communication Systems

The pressure to change practices and outcomes quickly is increased in high need LEAs due to the more extreme nature of the problems faced in each building. However, investing in “behind the scenes” systems such as data collection and review, regular meeting schedules, and communication routines will build internal capacity and give leadership teams the information and systems they need to accurately identify and support new practices. Additionally, these systems allow the leadership team to differentiate support as needed across and within buildings. We invested in the following data and communication systems.

- Establish data collection systems and planned, systematic review for:
  - Student outcomes for all relevant data sources (e.g., office referrals, attendance, academics)
  - Teacher implementation for school-wide and classroom practices (e.g., regular implementation fidelity monitoring, classroom walkthroughs)
- Establish a clear schedule of communication between building leadership teams and district leadership team.
- Support effective team meetings by:
  - Assigning roles (e.g., minute taker, timekeeper)
  - Send agenda, meeting minutes, and action plan before and after each meeting
- Establish internal systems to support coaches (e.g., monthly district-wide coaches’ meetings)
4. Continuously Reevaluate

Initial investment in systems for teaming, communication, as well as data collection and sharing enabled initial implementation efforts to be effectively evaluated for intended impact. Ongoing evaluation is essential to ensure that timely and often small but meaningful course corrections can be made. Specifically, we found the following to be helpful:

- Repeatedly revisit and re-evaluate data
- Recognize that progress will be slow
- Celebrate small successes
- Provide frequent reminders of the big picture and length of time for meaningful change
- Emphasize decision making systems and clarity of process
- Ensure clear and consistent outcomes are regularly evaluated and communicated to all stakeholders

Measures

To monitor and evaluate implementation, we examined the following data:

- **District Systems Fidelity Inventory (DSFI)**—administered annually
- **Tiered Fidelity Inventory (TFI)**—administered annually
- **Team Implementation Checklist (TIC)**—administered quarterly
- **School Wide Information System (SWIS)**—regularly monitored office discipline referrals

- Student attendance/teacher attendance and retention
- **School Climate Surveys**—administered to teachers, students, and families 3 times yearly

Initial Outcomes

The points summarize our key outcomes during the first year of implementation (Nov 2018- Dec 2019).

- 3 of 6 schools scored 70% or higher on the Tiered Fidelity Inventory, meeting the criterion for implementation fidelity
- Approximately 27% reduction in Principal turnover district-wide
• Approximately 10% reduction in teaching staff turnover district-wide
• Approximately 50% of PBIS coaches retained across school years
• Steady positive trend in overall TIC score from 53% in Fall 2019 to 69% in Fall 2019
• DSFI overall score of 64%

The Bottom Line
When implementing in high needs districts, building strong systems is critical. Specifically, investing in district and school leadership teams and supporting their use of a data-driven problem-solving process is as important if not more important than initially identifying and implementing the “right” practices to fit the contextual needs of the LEA. When leadership teams use an iterative, data-driven problem-solving process within a PBIS framework, they have the opportunity to adapt, improve, and fix implementation errors and establish on-going buy in and trusting relationships with all stakeholders.

Resources
Perceptions of Implementing Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports in High-Need School Contexts Through the Voice of Local Stakeholders
PBIS Cultural Responsiveness Field Guide: Resources for Trainers and Coaches
Embedded Hyperlinks

2. https://www.pbis.org/resource/tfi
3. https://www.pbis.org/resource/pbis-team-implementation-checklist-tic-3-1

Reference


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