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OSEP TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER

Teaching Social-Emotional Competencies within a PBIS Framework

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Increasingly, researchers have recommended teaching social-emotional competencies within a prevention-focused, multi-tiered public health model, because simply adopting a curriculum does not lead to adequate implementation or improved outcomes (Greenberg, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Durlak, 2017; Merrell & Gueldner, 2010). Positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) provides an ideal framework for promoting social-emotional competencies to improve outcomes for the whole child. The purpose of this brief is to describe how school personnel can teach social-emotional competencies within a PBIS framework to support systematic, school-wide implementation through one system, rather than trying to improve student outcomes through separate, competing initiatives. Recommendations for how to adjust the PBIS framework to support instruction of social-emotional competencies are included.

Context

PBIS is a multi-tiered framework for implementing evidence-based practices informed by implementation science (Horner, Sugai, & Fixsen, 2016). Rather than being a packaged program or single intervention, the prevention framework is focused on meeting the needs of all students through a continuum (i.e., tiers) of supports.

In this continuous improvement model, teams develop a strategic plan that is anchored to core features or guiding principles, including: (a) a prevention-focused continuum of supports, (b) data-based decision-making, (c) regular universal screening and progress monitoring, (d) systems change through ongoing professional development and

coaching, (e) team-based leadership, and (f) evidence-based practices for improving learning (Horner, Sugai, & Anderson, 2010). Research has documented the effects of PBIS implementation on important student outcomes (e.g., decreased problem behavior and bullying and increased emotional regulation and perceived school climate), as well as adult outcomes (e.g., decreased burnout and improved staff cohesiveness; Bradshaw, Waasdorp, & Leaf, 2012; Horner, Sugai, & Anderson, 2010; Kelm & McIntosh, 2012; Waasdorp, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2012).

Once teaming, data, and training/coaching systems are installed, PBIS is introduced to students through explicit teaching of positively-stated behavior expectations across school settings. In recent years, PBIS teaching has been expanded to a broader range of desired student behaviors, including social skills, emotional regulation, problem solving, and coping strategies, which are selected based on student need (Barrett, Eber, & Weist, 2013). Implementers have also utilized PBIS systems to prevent internalizing mental health concerns (e.g., anxiety, depression; McIntosh, Ty, & Miller, 2014; Weist et al., in press). Despite these advances, school teams implementing PBIS sometimes overlook teaching important social-emotional competencies or view this domain as separate from their PBIS framework. Instead of integrating social-emotional competency instruction within their PBIS framework, they may implement a packaged social and emotional learning curriculum that is not connected to other behavior support systems in the school.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Leaning defines social and emotional learning as "the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2018). Teaching social-emotional competencies is most commonly addressed

in schools through the adoption or implementation of social-emotional curricula, either freely or commercially available. Durlak et al. (2011) found four features that make social-emotional curricula more effective: Sequenced (i.e., uses a coordinated set of structured activities), Active (i.e., students are actively learning targeted skills), Focused (i.e., the intervention concentrates on developing personal or social skills), and Explicit (i.e., skills are explicitly taught). Like PBIS, implementing social-emotional curricula has also been shown to improve student behavior outcomes, such as decreasing emotional distress and conduct problems, and increasing academic scores (Durlak et al., 2011; Payton et al., 2008). In addition, they contribute to teacher confidence and wellbeing, including perceived stress, self-efficacy, and job satisfaction (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Recommendations for Teaching Social-Emotional Competencies Through PBIS

As school teams adopt social-emotional competency programs to target the needs of their students, a PBIS framework can provide the necessary structures to teach social-emotional competencies effectively, including the use of teams examining data to identify needs, monitor fidelity of implementation, and measure effects. District and school teams can benefit from considering a few modifications to their PBIS frameworks as they begin to expand their systems to support social-emotional competencies. The following recommendations describe how school personnel can teach social-emotional competencies within a PBIS framework to support systematic, school-wide implementation through one system, rather than trying to improve student outcomes through separate, competing initiatives.

1. Implement Social-Emotional and Behavior Support through a Single Team

Instead of implementing support through separate teams, school and district leaders can re-purpose their

existing leadership teams and provide those teams with the authority and support to implement a comprehensive approach to improve social-emotional and behavior competencies (Center on PBIS, 2017). District and school administrators can ensure teams have sufficient resources to coordinate and implement an expanded approach by providing time, training, and support for ALL staff to model, teach, and reinforce social-emotional competencies. It is also helpful to provide explicit statements that teaching social-emotional and behavior competencies is central to the school's instructional mission and embedded in all aspects of the curriculum. District teams can use the PBIS Implementation Blueprint (Center on PBIS, 2015) to guide their integrated effort.

2. Expand the Data that Teams Use to Identify Which Skills to Teach

To determine which social-emotional skills need to be prioritized for instruction, district leadership teams can begin with a thorough review of school, family, and community data. By including broader sources of data, teams are better positioned to teach social-emotional competencies, deliver instruction at sufficient intensities, and continuously monitor factors affecting their students. Examples of data that district teams might consider include attendance data, school climate survey results, student visits to school specialists (e.g., counselors, nurses, social workers), calls to community crisis centers, and proportion of families in the community affected by substance abuse, incarceration, or domestic abuse. To inform which social-emotional competencies to teach, teams might also survey or conduct focus groups with families, students, and educators. The information can inform implementation by ensuring supports are relevant and valued, while building relationships that maximize strengths and increase commitment to PBIS and teaching social-emotional competencies.

At the building level, school teams can apply a problem-solving approach to social-emotional screening data, other universal student data (e.g., school climate surveys), or

visits to school specialists. The goal is to uncover patterns of social-emotional challenges that may occur frequently across the day for large numbers of students. This process will help them make decisions about what skills or strategies to teach to replace common error patterns.

In one school district, the district team identified an increase in the prevalence of students who were experiencing adverse childhood experiences (ACES; Felitti et al., 1998). When the team examined community data from their local behavioral health center, they found many students in their school had family members who were incarcerated, addicted to substances, and were either victims or perpetrators of domestic violence. After careful review of available social-emotional programs, the team, including youth and families, selected one to use with elementary students that emphasized coping skills, emotional literacy, self-control, and interpersonal problem solving. For secondary students, they selected a curriculum with evidence of effectiveness to prevent substance use, cope with anxiety, and improve self-regulation and social awareness. After the district team selected curricula, the school teams reviewed their school data to select specific lessons that taught emotional literacy, self-control, coping skills, and social awareness.

Lastly, fidelity of implementation data is essential for teams to monitor implementation of social-emotional skill instruction and continuously improve their systems to teach social-emotional competencies within a PBIS framework.

3. Teach Social-Emotional Competencies Using PBIS Instructional Systems

Once teams have prioritized the social-emotional competencies to be taught, they can develop a plan for teaching lessons in which the targeted skills are connected to the PBIS curriculum. This process includes mapping the social-emotional competencies onto the school-wide PBIS expectations by adding behaviors associated with social-emotional competencies to a teaching matrix (see Figure 1). A teaching matrix helps all staff connect to the prioritized social-emotional competencies by providing increased opportunities for students to practice across content areas and settings. Using the teaching matrix is a way to prompt teachers to use common language to support students use of new skills explicitly. It is important for the teaching matrix not to be just a set of positively stated rules to post around the school, but rather a living document that guides instruction and is informed by data to identify replacement skills for common error patterns. For these skills to be used regularly, all staff will need to model, teach, re-teach, prompt, and acknowledge across settings in the school. Hence, it will be necessary to embed social-emotional competencies not only in the systems for teaching (i.e., expectations, matrix, lesson plans), but also in the systems for acknowledgement and responding instructionally to errors. Additionally, embedding the social-emotional skills into the teaching matrix allows teams to monitor progress of specific skills, thus ensuring that there is a process for measuring if the skills being taught are actually being used.

In another example district, the school teams modified their teaching matrices to include the targeted social-emotional competencies, providing a prompt for teachers and students to use them throughout the day. In one elementary school, a student survey and classroom meeting discussions revealed that students felt increased stress and anxiety in large social settings, particularly during lunch, due to cyberbullying and embarrassing moments on social media. Students also expressed concerns about sitting alone or not being able to join friends due to overcrowding. The number of students expressing similar concerns was large enough to warrant a school-wide approach. The team decided to initiate a "flexible lunch period" to offer students quiet spaces to have lunch with their friends. They also selected lessons from their social-emotional curriculum to teach coping skills and emotional regulation strategies, identified times for initial instruction, and followed up with daily pre-corrections and prompts to use those skills across the day. The team modified the teaching matrix to become the script for ALL teachers to use before lunch and other times when students expressed feeling stressed and anxious (see Lunch column of Figure 1).

The teaching matrix became a critically important alignment tool because it provided common language, was posted in all areas, and served as a prompt for adults and students to model, teach, and reinforce using skills to manage stress. The team then used data (e.g., focus groups, surveys, discipline referrals, teacher/staff reports) to identify other areas of need and embed more social-emotional competencies into the teaching matrix. Because many students were using texting applications (e.g., Snapchat) throughout the day, which magnified stressors, the team decided to teach explicit skills for texting with respect and well-being in mind when using technology. They added an "online" setting with specific examples tied to the existing expectations (see Online column of Figure 1). Because they used existing lessons on empathy and embedded them into their PBIS systems, they did not need to purchase a new curriculum.

Figure 1
*Incorporating Social-Emotional Competency Instruction
into a School-wide Teaching Matrix*

School-wide Expectations	Incorporate Social-emotional Competencies				
	All Settings	**Hallways**	**Lunch**	**Bus**	**Online**
Respect	Be on time. Assume positive intent.	Walk to the right. Use level 2 voice volume.	*Invite those sitting alone to join.*	Stay in my seat.	*Consider feelings of others before I post.* *Be an upstander —speak up when I see unsafe behavior.*
Achieving and Organized	Hands and feet to self. Help/share with others.	Walk directly to my designated area.	*Have a lunch plan.* *Choose quiet or social lunch area.* *Invite friends to join.*	Have a plan. Use headphones to listen to music.	*Check my feelings before I post.* *Re-read message before I post.*
Responsible	Recycle. Be prepared.	Pick up litter. Maintain physical space.	*Use my breathing technique.* *Listen to my signals.*	Watch for my stop. Use level 1 voice.	*Double check sources before I post.* *Think before I forward.*

When students are identified as needing additional support (i.e., tiers 2 and 3), teams can teach social-emotional competencies through these systems as well. If a student is participating in Check-In/Check-Out (CICO; Crone, Hawken, & Horner, 2010) and would benefit from small group instruction for social skills, lessons within the social-emotional competencies curriculum can be used to provide a higher dosage of teaching and practice of the skills. These specific skills can be embedded into the student's CICO "daily progress report" so that the student, teacher, and parent can increase prompts, opportunities to learn, and feedback to the student on their use of the specific skills. The daily progress report also allows teams to monitor the effectiveness of CICO for acquisition of specific social-emotional competencies.

4. Promote Adult Wellness by Creating a Nurturing Staff Environment

For any school initiative to be successful, it is important to attend to context for the adults in the building. Part of creating a nurturing environment is providing the support needed to do the work well, such as appropriate training, technical assistance, and coaching. With social-emotional competencies embedded into PBIS (e.g., social-emotional

competencies directly connected to school-wide expectations and the teaching matrix), staff may be less likely to view them as an extra burden or as a separate initiative.

However, roles may change through the implementation process; thus, teams should be prepared to provide additional support as staff learn the skills needed to be successful in their new responsibilities. For example, if teachers have previously relied on the school counseling team to teach a social-emotional curriculum, they may initially feel overwhelmed or uncomfortable teaching emotional regulation or coping skills. Similarly, counselors may not feel as competent in their new coaching roles. Professional development efforts may also help personnel increase their own social-emotional competencies, so they can model, teach, and reinforce those competencies for students. In this regard, many school districts offer wellness programs through their human resources department and employee assistance programs (EAPs), such as yoga classes, counseling sessions, and nutrition courses.

Conclusion

Social-emotional competencies are a critical part of student academic and life success (Jones & Kahn, 2017). However, simply adopting and providing training for a packaged social-emotional curriculum is unlikely to improve student competencies (Fixsen, Blase, & Fixsen, 2017). What is needed is to teach social-emotional competencies within a framework of teaming, technical assistance, and use of data to monitor implementation and outcomes. The implementation and instruction systems of PBIS are an ideal service delivery model for embedding social-emotional competencies into the school social curriculum. PBIS can help all staff, students and families identify what competencies are most needed, teach skills so they are used across settings, and ensure that instruction is intensive and comprehensive enough to improve student outcomes.

In another example district, the leadership team discovered that across their schools, social-emotional lessons were taught by the school social worker and PBIS lessons were taught by classroom teachers. The team developed a plan to align all lessons so that students and teachers understood how the social-emotional skills were useful in all settings. Instead of teaching the lessons in each classroom herself, the school social workers supported all teachers in implementing the social-emotional lessons, using co-teaching as needed to promote effective social-emotional instruction for teachers still acquiring skills. Each school then used their data to determine additional specific learning targets matched to need.

In one school, the team, with assistance from their PTO, created a staff resiliency room. This room was like a teacher's lounge that was continuously available to any staff, but there was a rule that no schoolwork or work talk happened there. It was repainted like a day spa with inspirational quotes, comfortable furniture, and hot drinks.

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Additional Resources to Guide Teaching Social-Emotional Competencies within PBIS

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