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Implementation of SWPBIS in high school: Why is it different?

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ABSTRACT
Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (SWPBIS) is a framework for establishing a schoolwide positive social culture with a continuum of behavior supports and an effective learning environment for all students. This framework was initially implemented in elementary and middle schools and more recently in high schools. Coaches for high schools implementing SWPBIS often comment on how implementation looks different in high schools and takes longer. This article explores how the high school context (i.e., size of school and organizational culture, developmental age of students) impacts the foundational systems of the SWPBIS framework (i.e., leadership system, communication system, data system) and how coaches and others can take this into consideration when supporting high schools in implementation.

Implementation of SWPBIS in high school: Why is it different?

Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (SWPBIS) is a framework for establishing a schoolwide positive social culture with a continuum of behavior supports that makes schools more effective learning environments for all students. SWPBIS was developed initially in elementary and middle schools (Sugai & Horner, 2009), and currently is being implemented in over 25,000 schools across the United States (Horner, Sugai, & Lewis, 2015). It was developed in response to calls for more preventative and less reactive approaches to discipline in the schools (Colvin, Kame’enui, & Sugai, 1993).

The SWPBIS multiti ered framework is a schoolwide, prevention-oriented approach that supports the development of appropriate behaviors for all students in the school. The implementation results in a systematic organization of all available or new supports to prevent problems from occurring and to respond quickly to new problems. This continuum of supports begins with the whole school and becomes more intensive and individualized (e.g., wraparound support) based on need. The multiti ered continuum was built from the public health prevention model by Walker and colleagues (1996). The primary tier of support emphasizes prevention (e.g., defining, teaching, and acknowledging appropriate behavior) and is designed for all students, adults, and school contexts. The secondary tier consists of targeted interventions offered to groups of students who need additional support beyond the universal, primary-tier supports. These may include study skills groups, check in/check out, social skills groups, and dropout prevention programs. Finally, the third tier targets students with intensive individualized support needs (see http://www.pbis.org). The key components of SWPBIS include a representative school leadership team that works with the staff, students, and administrators to:

(a) identify and monitor schoolwide outcomes; (b) develop systems to support implementation and sustainability; (c) implement evidence-based practices to increase a positive social climate and learning environment; and (d) develop data management systems to monitor progress and make effective data-based decisions based on the school context (Horner, Sugai, Todd, & Lewis-Palmer, 2000).

A growing body of research indicates that elementary and middle schools can implement SWPBIS with fidelity and obtain positive student outcomes such as reduction in office discipline referrals (ODRs), reduction in out-of-school suspensions, and increase in academic performance (e.g., Bradshaw, Koth, Thorton, & Leaf, 2009; Horner et al., 2009; Lassen, Steele, & Sailor, 2006; Luiselli, Putnam, & Sunderland, 2002; McIntosh, Chard, Boland, & Horner, 2006; Muscott, Mann, & LeBrun, 2008). In the 2014–15 school year 2,664 high schools in the United States were engaged in implementing SWPBIS (Horner et al., 2015), and the published research on high school implementation of these same features is emerging (e.g., Bohanon et al., 2006; Bohanon et al., 2012; Flannery, Fenning, Kato, & McIntosh, 2014; Flannery, Frank, Doren, Kato, & Fenning, 2013; Morrissey, Bohanon, & Fenning, 2010; Swain-Bradway, Pinkney, & Flannery, 2015).

Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, and Wallace (2005) have identified that understanding and attending to the key features of the initiative is critical to the implementation of the initiative. Yet, they also indicate the importance of attending and taking into consideration the context in which the initiative is implemented (e.g., people, environment, culture) to increase the success of implementation. A variety of contextual variables unique to high schools have influenced the implementation in high schools. For example, Bohanon, Fenning, Borgmeier, Flannery, and Malloy (2009) and Swain-Bradway, Pinkney, &
Flannery (2015) discussed that due to the large number of students in high schools, even a small number of referrals per student will result in a much larger amount of data for the teams to manage. In a survey by Flannery, Sugai, and Anderson (2009), high school coaches commented about the number of students in the high school having an impact on implementation and that it was more difficult to bring older students on board with SWPBIS than younger students. A number of authors also have recommended that these adolescents need to be more involved in the implementation of the initiative (Bohanon et al., 2009; Flannery, Sugai, & Anderson, 2009; Flannery et al., 2014; Putnam et al., 2009). The influence of high school teachers’ beliefs and values about school, including their expectations for students, their role as an academic instructor, or their belief that students should already know how to behave have all been noted as potential barriers to implementation (Bohanon et al., 2009; Flannery et al., 2009; Putnam et al., 2009). The organizational structure of high schools is complex, limiting collaboration across teaching staff and increasing the need to use systematic strategies for achieving consensus across staff (Bohanon et al., 2009; Flannery et al., 2013; Swain-Bradway et al., 2015). Finally, it has been documented that high schools have higher rates of exclusionary practices (e.g., suspensions) than the lower grades (Muscott et al., 2008; Spaulding et al., 2010) and often have a focus on negative sanctions for lack of student compliance (Fenning et al., 2008; Fenning, Parraga, & Wilczynski, 2000). Based on this literature and the work of these and other authors noted above, this article proposes a set of high school contextual variables that need to be considered when implementing a multitiered system such as SWPBIS in high schools and will discuss potential strategies coaches and others can use to more efficiently support high school personnel who are implementing SWPBIS.

**Contextual influences in high schools**

A range of variables makes up the context of any school. Variables such as the type of community in which the school resides (e.g., urban) and the population of students and families that make up the school community (e.g., ethnicity, socioeconomic status, languages spoken) are important and influential factors that have been documented across elementary, middle, and high schools implementing SWPBIS (Bohanon et al., 2006; McIntosh, Girvan, Horner, & Smolkowski, 2014; Morrissey et al., 2010; Vincent, Randall, Cartledge, Tobin, & Swain-Bradway, 2011). These need to be considered when implementing at any level. This article will describe a conceptual framework for the contextual influences that are unique to and need to be considered when implementing multiltiered systems of support in high schools: size, organizational culture, and the developmental level of the students (Flannery et al., 2013). (For more specifics on implementing SWPBIS in high schools see https://www.pbis.org.school/high-school-pbis.)

**School size**

High school buildings are physically larger than elementary and middle schools, with a corresponding larger student enrollment and faculty/staff population. To manage and provide leadership to larger numbers of students, faculty, and staff, high schools often utilize an administrative team rather than a single administrator. Often, each administrator takes on different sets of responsibilities (e.g., curriculum, discipline, athletics), which can add an additional layer of coordination and complexity to schoolwide efforts. These larger administrative teams also usually make decisions and obtain input through department or division chairs that are clustered by content areas (Bohanon et al., 2012; Newman, Lohman, Newman, Myers, & Smith, 2000). This departmental or curricular organization does have many benefits. It allows high schools to maximize content expertise and to communicate more effectively among faculty. Departmental structures also provide the mechanism through which the instructional or content-related initiatives are delivered. Because high schools rely so heavily on the departmental structure, however, the implementation of an interdisciplinary, schoolwide effort such as SWPBIS requires special consideration.

Finally, school size impacts students. High schools typically have multiple feeder schools, which results in a more diverse student population and the students’ re-formation of many peer networks and supports. This increased diversity can impact the number and types of support services available as students have a wider range of needs. There can also be increased conflict due to differing values and cultural norms being brought together in a new environment (Lee, Byrk, & Smith, 1993). Larger schools offer a number of sports, clubs, or activities for students; however, many students have difficulty accessing them (Lindsay, 1982). In turn, high schools often can have an expansive number of student supports (e.g., tutoring, student clubs) and course offerings (e.g., multiple levels of math, electives), but they are rarely coordinated centrally, which can result in both duplication of efforts and not meeting the needs of all students.

**Organizational culture**

The second contextual influence is the organizational or school culture, or the shared meanings and values, of the members about how the organization should function and why it exists (Lee et al., 1993). Culture is often acquired and spread through the language and symbols used by people in the organization, which in turn shape attitudes and behaviors. The organizational culture of the high school is different from that of elementary and middle schools. First, the prevailing focus of high school teachers is on teaching specific academic content and often only in one area (e.g., science, English). At the lower grade levels, teachers focus on academic content but also teach across content areas. These teachers of younger students also consider it within their role as a teacher to support students in learning non-academic content that supports learning such as social skills or study strategies. Teachers at the secondary level, however, place strong value on the instruction of their specific content area and are less likely to view teaching appropriate social or academic support behaviors as their responsibility. This includes the beliefs and values about students’ abilities to learn and student and teacher classroom conduct (Lee et al., 1993) and the use of acknowledgment systems or direct teaching of social behaviors (McArdle, 2011). Next, there is
frequently a “push out” mentality that there is always another place for this student if he/she does not “fit” in a certain class or in the building. Last, as reflected in the recent popularity of “zero tolerance” policies, the building culture in many high schools is guided by “get tough” consequence protocols (Kang-Brown, Trone, Fratello, & Daftary-Kapur, 2013), which have been shown to be disproportionately applied across different student groups (e.g., male, race) (Flannery, Frank, & Kato, 2012; Rausch & Skiba, 2006; Teske, 2011). These types of exclusionary policies could stem from the fact that numerous high school administrators, faculty, and staff believe that students should already know how to behave socially and academically in the school setting by the time they enter high school.

**Developmental level**

The third contextual variable is the developmental level of the students. High school students are in a stage of increased autonomy from adults and greater dependence on peers (Morrison, Robertson, Laurie, & Kelly, 2002). This increased desire for independence results in adolescents wanting to be more actively involved in decision making, especially if the decision impacts them in some way. Further, research has shown that the adolescent brain is still in development throughout adolescence, impacting both social-emotional and cognitive development (Dobbs, 2011; Steinberg, 2012).

There is evidence that adolescents may not always understand the consequences of their actions, often weigh risks and rewards differently than adults when making decisions and judgments, activate their reward centers more when anticipating a reward than when receiving it, allow peer acceptance to strongly influence decisions, and are developing self-regulatory behaviors (Dobbs, 2011; Steinberg, 2008; Steinberg, 2012). Older students may know what is expected of them but may choose to act outside of those expectations because they perceive there to be a greater social payoff in doing so (Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999; Snyder et al., 2008). Consequently, teachers also may need to understand that this stage of development often requires an increase in the frequency and intensity of acknowledgment for students choosing to do what is expected. Second, students may need to be taught to monitor their own progress and recruit help when they need it, and schools teams may need to develop strategies to provide the right balance of support and monitoring from adults. Last, schools will need to recognize that the social culture of a high school is far more guided by student–student interactions than adult–student interactions and reach out to have students more actively participate (Murphy, Beck, Crawford, Hodges, & McGaughey, 2001). The cultural background and norms of the student body need to be considered when implementing PBIS at any grade level. At the high school level, with the student-to-student connection and the need for student voice, this will become even more critical to consider. High schools need to be sure they are soliciting input from students representing the student population and to link new students (freshmen, transfer students) with experienced students who can provide constructive guidance.

**Impact of context on foundational components of SWPBIS**

These three primary contextual considerations in high schools (size, organizational culture, and developmental level of students) are interconnected. Together they have strong impact on three systems that support SWPBIS implementation: leadership systems, communication systems, and data systems (Figure 1). Each will be discussed below along with examples from high schools.

![Figure 1. Impact of high school context on implementation of SWPBIS. Used with permission of the Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports.](image-url)
Leadership system

Leadership team

Leadership in the implementation of SWPBIS occurs through a schoolwide leadership team. The schoolwide leadership team has membership that represents the staff in the school and those who have skills needed for implementation of SWPBIS (e.g., behavioral expertise). At the lower grade levels, staff representation is typically accomplished through having a representative from each grade or grade cluster. In high schools, it is common to try to build teams by including representation across divisions (i.e., content areas) and adding representation from student support roles (e.g., security, special education, counseling). This type of representation can often result in too many team members, making it hard to accomplish the work. As a result, we recommend that high schools have a leadership team of approximately eight members, who are representative of the classifications in the building; members representing some curricular areas but not all, representation from the support systems and administration. The members of this leadership team then reach out to others in the building to ensure that all faculty and staff have a “voice.” The reduction in size of the membership not only helps with the facilitation of the meetings but also assists with the second issue for leadership teams: scheduling. Due to the longer school day and the involvement of faculty in extracurricular activities (e.g., sports, music, clubs), finding a time to meet can be especially difficult for a large group of individuals.

Additional faculty and staff may be recruited to engage through a committee structure that works directly with the leadership team (e.g., communication, acknowledgments, student involvement). Other schools have developed a standing list of faculty willing to assist and then form ad hoc committees as needed. Ad hoc committees function best when they include a member from the schoolwide leadership team to ensure adequate communication and connection to the schoolwide action plan. This approach requires the team facilitator, coach, and/or administration to look at the composition of the team as a whole to be sure there are individuals with behavioral expertise, knowledge about the school context, and skills to examine academic and behavioral data.

Research also has shown that principal support is a critical leadership variable for implementing and sustaining evidence-based practices (Adelman & Taylor, 2011; Grissom, Loeb, & Urban Institute, 2009; McIntosh et al., 2014). Principals directly influence educational processes (e.g., school norms, policies, and teacher practices) and thus have a significant influence on student outcomes (Fuller, Young, & Baker, 2011). One of the most important practices in SWPBIS leadership is the participation of the principal or vice principal as an active member of the schoolwide leadership team. As discussed previously, high schools are rarely administered by a single individual, but rather by a team of administrators (e.g., principal, vice principals), as well as a second management level consisting of department heads, division leaders, or lead teachers. All administrators in a high school building collectively influence implementation and sustainability through the development of policies, the prioritization of practices and initiatives, the allocation of building-level resources (e.g., teacher training, time, funding), and the removal of barriers to implementing effective practices and systems. If the discipline dean or a vice principal is the administrative representative on the leadership team, it is important that the other administrators (e.g., principal, administrator for curriculum) are also knowledgeable about the activities and action plan for the implementation of SWPBIS, and that they all provide regular public statements in support of the effort. Swain-Bradway, Pinckney, and Flannery (2015) identified strategies such as (a) weekly announcements, (b) announcements at staff meetings, (c) sharing positive data reports, and (d) distributing acknowledgments to staff. In this way, the leadership team in a high school needs to go beyond simply including one administrator on the team and also implement multiple strategies to ensure consistent communication between the leadership team and the entire administrative team.

Students

As discussed above, the developmental stage of high school students requires broadening the concept of school leadership from active involvement of administration and staff to include active participation of students in the planning and implementation of practices. This will allow students to be active in decision making and have more student-to-student influence in the implementation. Leadership teams in high schools have involved students in a variety of ways (Bohanon et al., 2012; Flannery et al., 2009; Swain-Bradway et al., 2015). Although leadership teams occasionally have one or more students serve as regular members of the team, many implementers have told us that this configuration is problematic. It is difficult to select a small number of students who are representative of the entire student body and for students to be available for meetings that occur during the school day or after school. Some schools have found more success in establishing a standing committee of students who work with the leadership team in developing and delivering some of the SWPBIS components (e.g., development of lessons or videos, delivery of lessons related to expectations, orientations for new students, delivery of acknowledgment to students and staff). Other schools have recruited or appointed students representative of the school population to serve on short-term ad hoc committees focused on a specific issue or initiative (e.g., “Use another word” to reduce harassment), or focused on a specific task (e.g., developing and teaching lessons for expectations, freshmen orientation, creating a video around a specific expectation). Last, some schools have worked within their existing club and student infrastructure by selecting a specific club to support the development and implementation of a specific related initiative (e.g., media club to develop an SWPBIS video) or asked clubs to send a representative to a schoolwide ad hoc team. No matter how a high school organizes the incorporation of students, the selection in membership should ensure representation across the many different groups of students within the building.

Communication system

Critical to beginning and sustaining any new initiative is strong communication to maintain support and participation from all stakeholders—students, families, staff, and the community. In
high schools, the development of a comprehensive communication system is directly impacted by the more complex structure of the school, such as the number of people, the departmental structure, and the larger campus (Isakson & Jarvis, 1999; Sato & McLaughlin, 1992; Siskin, 1994). The communication is often stronger among faculty in their departments than across the school. A study by Siskin (1994) found that when teachers described the support or efforts to improve and sustain their practices they did so in comparison to other departments. The team and administration will need to strengthen the schoolwide communication system as well as use the existing departmental communication systems. The communication system has two key functions: (a) to build awareness and initial consensus and (b) to facilitate and sustain implementation. To initially educate and build consensus among staff and students, teams can develop processes to (a) identify and gain agreement on the presence of a problem, (b) provide orientation to basic SWPBIS principles and practices, and (c) gain agreement that SWPBIS is a good solution to the problem. These processes need to be inclusive of each of the primary constituency groups (e.g., administrative team, staff, students), although it may look a bit different with each group. High school staff often spend more time conversing and sharing with their departmental peers than with the school staff as a whole. Due to morning and afternoon conflicting schedules and the longer school day in high schools, faculty meetings may not be held with all faculty present. Leadership teams need to examine the communication systems in their schools to identify the most effective way to communicate with staff and students.

Building consensus
Schools have found that obtaining agreement on the status of schoolwide academic and social needs of all students is best accomplished through the objective sharing of schoolwide data, in graphic format by grade level or other subgroups (Kennedy, Mimmack, & Flannery, 2012; Swain-Bradway et al., 2015). This approach illustrates the performance of all students in the school and facilitates initial acknowledgment and agreement across staff on problem areas in the building. High schools use both informal processes, such as discussions within departmental meetings, and more formal processes, such as the Gallery Walk (Kennedy et al., 2012). The initial work of educating and gaining consensus often takes multiple conversations with the educational staff and students. Some high schools take several months to prepare and complete this process.

Supporting implementation
The second function of a communication system is to facilitate and sustain SWPBIS implementation. Once staff consensus has been reached, communication can then focus on the implementation of the initiative (Bohanon & Wu, 2014). This level of communication involves planning, decision making, implementing, and evaluating the SWPBIS components. The high school structure can impede effective communication, so developing an ongoing communication system is complicated and requires substantial planning. It is important to keep in mind all three primary constituency groups (students, staff, and the administrative team, to ensure that all groups are part of the comprehensive communication system. It is also important to consider and include families and the community.

Data systems
Data-based decision making is a key component for the implementation and sustainability of SWPBIS (Coffey & Horner, 2012; Horner, Sugai, & Todd, 2001; McIntosh et al., 2013), but it is often difficult for high school personnel due to the typical focus in high schools on data collection and reporting solely for accountability and to the magnitude of the data. High school data collection and reporting systems are not typically designed for staff to use in decision making (Kennedy et al., 2009). Instead, administrators collect data with the purpose of reporting to the state, school board, and public, and data are usually reported at an aggregate level. Teams can be successful at any grade level, if they have clearly identified outcomes and benchmarks, have the right information at the right time, and have the process and procedures in place that are necessary for using the data effectively (Kennedy et al., 2009).

In high schools, the strong focus on academic achievement requires that school teams expand the focus of their data that are used to monitor outcomes and in ongoing decision making. One way to consider data best suited for decision making at the high school is to ensure that leadership teams are examining the “ABCs” of student outcomes—attendance, behavior, and course performance. Because attendance can be such a pervasive issue in high schools, leadership teams can look at overall attendance rates, but it is beneficial to focus on more specific data points related to attendance (i.e., excused and unexcused absences, tardies, skips). Behavior data can center on the "Big Five": number of office discipline referrals (ODRs) per day per month, number of ODRs by student, number of ODRs by location, number of ODRs by type of problem behavior, and number of ODRs by time of day (Horner et al., 2001). It has been demonstrated that most behaviors occur in the classroom, and the most common types of behavior for this age group are tardy, skip, and defiance and disrespect (Spaulding et al., 2010). Course Performance data may include more distal measures (e.g., GPA, courses passed, graduation, state test performance) but should also consider more proximal measures (homework completion, proficiency exams, testing and study skills, time and self-management skills). It is also important to look across all three categories at the relation of these sets between each other (e.g., attendance or skip rates for students with poor course performance) and by subgroups (e.g., freshmen, students’ racial/ethnicity, students with ELL, students with disabilities).

Schoolwide leadership teams can identify their available data, review it to establish benchmarks, and determine when to follow up on this data throughout the year. Having the identified data at the right time (i.e., prior to each leadership team meeting) can be a challenge in high schools (Flannery et al., 2009; Swain-Bradway et al., 2015). High school teams new to the process struggle in obtaining the right data at the right time for two primary reasons. In the implementation of SWPBIS in high schools, the authors have found that data at the high school often is entered and maintained in different computer applications and by different personnel. Also, as mentioned
earlier, these data collection and reporting systems were developed for accountability and purposes rather than for use in ongoing decision making and thus are not compatible or accessible to staff working with students or teams making decisions. These data are also collected and maintained by different people at different locations (e.g., district, building). For example, a high school may need to collect data from the district data warehouse, the state department website, the ODR database, and a school survey. To successfully use data in decision making, school teams must identify what data they need and how to get it in a timely manner (Swain-Bradway et al., 2015).

Second, larger enrollment at the high school level can make the simple task of working with data enormously time consuming and error prone. The large amounts of academic and social behavior data that are generated on a daily basis, often do not have efficient systems or strategies to integrate for decision making (Bohanon et al., 2009). These issues result in a gap between what is available to leadership teams and what is needed by teams for decision making. High schools need to become familiar with the student data that already exists within their school and work with data managers/data entry personnel in order to obtain relevant reports on a regular basis. In our work with schoolwide leadership teams, we spend much of the first year of implementation focused on identifying the data needed for decision making in their school, who has the needed data, and how to obtain it in a format that can be used efficiently by the leadership team. Once these are identified, we have found that the decision-making process proceeds similarly to that in the lower grade levels.

**Conclusion**

SWPBIS is increasingly being implemented with fidelity in high schools around the nation (Flannery et al., 2013; Swain-Bradway et al., 2015). In our research, the principles underlying SWPBIS are the same as at the elementary level, but the high school context impacts the process used during implementation, and therefore high schools must rely heavily on their leadership, data, and communication systems, often with adaptations to the high school context. This article provided a framework to use when examining the influence of the high school context. Considering this context results in several key implications. First, given the additional time for implementation and resources needed for making data available, it is essential to establish district-level support to help guide implementation and to help ensure access to district-level training and other resources (George & Kincaid, 2008). Most districts manage the implementation of SWPBIS in the Student Services Department but it can also be housed in Curriculum and Instruction. As with implementation at the lower levels, a district coach supports the high school team and facilitator with implementation. Unlike the lower grades, there are often only a few high schools in the district and maybe only one or two are implementing. High school coaches and staff have often indicated that they want to get ideas from other high schools and go to trainings with other high schools. This will result in collaborating with neighboring districts instead of just adding the high school teams to the district trainings. Due to the content-specific teaching assignments of teachers in high schools, trainings must be planned enough in advance to be able to get qualified substitutes for the different content areas of the leadership team members. As the number of high schools implementing SWPBIS increases, future research is needed on considerations at the district level due to administrative structure, governance, etc.

Next, as in elementary schools (McIntosh et al., 2014), the establishment of principal support can make a critical difference in the success of SWPBIS implementation at the high school level, along with the support and involvement of the entire building leadership team. In this way, we recommend that the building leadership team roles, functions, and time expectations are revisited at least annually.

Regarding students, it is helpful in high schools to recognize and build on the developmental level of high school students. One strategy is to teach expectations that maximize self-regulation and self-recruited support, rather than relying on adult-driven supports. In accordance with teaching students strategies around greater independence, schools can also maximize the increased reliance on peers that is common in adolescence by enhancing the role of upperclassmen in the support of freshmen- and sophomore-level students.

Finally, high schools must have data systems that fit and facilitate high school decision making. In addition to normal behavior indexes, high school teams can expand the data they use to include a focus on indicators that include attendance (overall attendance, period attendance, tardy rates) and course performance (homework completion, course failures, assessment performance). Such data match the contextual needs of high schools.

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