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Opportunities and Access: Exploring How School District Leaders Make Meaning of Equity in Practice through Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

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Abstract

Purpose The purpose of this research was to explore how PBIS and equity interacted according to school and district leaders.

Research methods/approach This study examined how five schools made meaning of the implementation process, ongoing efforts, and structures created. Through a case study including interviews, focus groups, and observations, the primary research question was explored: How do school leaders and teachers make meaning of implementing and assessing PBIS in their schools as a component of a journey toward equity?

Findings While the five schools had unique aspects, four common themes emerged across schools, including the benefits of PBIS, the power of relationships, the importance of communication and leadership, and PBIS challenges.

Keywords PBIS; Equity; School leadership

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Introduction

Schools and school leaders continue to consider mechanisms both structurally and interpersonally to improve outcomes for all children through an equity mindset (Nadelson, Miller, Hu, Bang, & Walthall, 2019). By defining equity as ensuring that all children receive what they need (e.g., supports, instruction, communication) when they need it, districts seek to help all children reach their potential intellectually, socially, and emotionally. Sophie Ward, Carl Bagley, Jacky Lumby, Philip Woods, Tom Hamilton, and Amanda Roberts (2014) conducted a review of literature, noting three main keys to developing equity in school organizations, including critical reflection, a common vision, and transforming dialogue. Culturally responsive leadership also holds promise for improving outcomes when focused on culturally responsive pedagogy, intentional community engagement, resisting exclusionary practices, and promoting the culture of children in all aspects of schooling (Gooden & Dantley, 2012; Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016; Santamaría, 2014). As the diversity of school communities grows, it is important to embrace this flourishing asset of schools, but also attend to the varying needs of individual children and those who have been historically underserved.

The 2008 American Community Survey (ACS) (United States Census Bureau/American FactFinder, 2013) indicated that of the 53.4 million children enrolled in United States kindergarten to Grade 12 schools, 59 percent were White; 18 percent were Hispanic; 15 percent were Black; and five percent were Asian. As demonstrated by the 2010 United States Census (United States Census Bureau/American FactFinder, 2010), the Hispanic population within the United States has grown dramatically in the last several decades. High birth rates and increased immigration have contributed to this growth. Hispanic enrollment in public schools has tripled since 1968. During that same period, the Black student population has increased by 30 percent and the White student population has decreased by 17 percent (Frankenberg & Lee, 2002; Orfield & Lee, 2004). By 2050, Frankenberg and Lee (2002) reported the number of Latinos and Asians in the United States is anticipated to triple, and the number of African Americans is estimated to grow by nearly two percent. Researchers expect a similar trend, estimating that by 2050 the number of students of color in the U.S. will likely jump from 44 percent to 62 percent (Tefara, Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Chirichigno, 2011). Additionally, the number of school-aged children categorized as Limited English Proficient has grown and is expected to continue to rise. There is also increased attention on supporting students of other historically marginalized groups, including students with disabilities, students who are military connected, students who are homeless, and students who are LGBT, to name a few.

This study examined how five schools implemented Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) in order to promote equity, access, and inclusion.[1] In the context of this school district and geographic region, equity was operationalized through a collaboratively developed definition of giving all students what they need to be successful and achieve their potential. This definition was developed over time and with other school districts in consultation with researcher and speaker Pedro Noguera (2003). This study examined how leaders and teachers (in two ele-

mentary schools, two middle schools, and one high school) made meaning of the PBIS implementation process to ensure children excelled socially, academically, and emotionally through equity, ongoing efforts, and newly established structures. Through case study, including interviews, focus groups, and targeted observations, a research team collaboratively collected and analyzed data. The primary research question was: How do school leaders and teachers implement and assess PBIS in their schools as a component of a journey toward equity?

Given that leaders have a key ability to foster change within their schools, they should monitor the impact of diversity and an equity mindset on student outcomes and facilitate measures to maintain conditions that lead to the highest benefit for students. Scholars have emphasized the importance of leaders understanding school culture in a way that allows them to influence instruction in a way that promotes a sense of personal safety and values (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Fullan, 2001; Sergiovanni, 2001).

Promoting equity through leadership

With the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling to desegregate schools in 1954 came the first major step toward ending the systemic marginalization of children of color (Normore & Jean-Marie, 2008). Since that time, education policy on equity continues to emphasize fairness and improved student outcomes within a context of an unequal playing field (Bensimon, 2005; Brayboy, Costagno, & Maughan, 2007; Gutierrez & Jaramillo, 2006). With particular attention on the "achievement gap," critiqued as an oversimplification of the economic, historical, sociopolitical, and moral "education debt" (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 5), educational leaders and the schools they lead are vehicles for preparing citizens for equal access to opportunities in a democratic society (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014). Persistent challenges to attaining this ideal are rapidly changing student demographics coupled with racial and other group-based disparities in academic achievement and an educational system unprepared to respond in systemic ways (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Brayboy et al., 2007). Prior research identifies the school principal as a deeply impactful influence on instruction and student learning (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013), as well as the person held most accountable for progress, or lack thereof, and the most empowered by district and state policy (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016). As a result, the implementation of initiatives and interventions, especially those mandated at the district level, are only effective to the extent that building-level leaders demonstrate support and the enforcement of evidence-based practices (McIntosh, Kelm, & Delabra, 2016). These school-based practices also ensure the unique needs of individual children are met. School-wide practices, such as PBIS, may be one such mechanism to ensure school personnel carefully consider student behaviors and access to instruction.

Researchers and practitioners who focus on equity state that a school environment conducive to learning is fair, equitable, and has a high level of buy-in from all stakeholders to increase student achievement (Richards, Aguilera, Murakami, & Weiland, 2014). Programs designed to increase the academic achievement and enhance the capacity of schools to educate all students through the implementation of

positive, preventative, and effective instructional approaches to behavior management and discipline are viable options to increase student achievement from a positive and equitable standpoint. The district of study for this research implemented PBIS as a way to address disparities in discipline practices evident in their schools, which showed a disproportionate amount of suspensions and behavioral consequences for Black males.

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (PBIS) is a three-tiered, proactive, schoolwide behavior management philosophy designed to address the needs of students who struggle academically and behaviorally in a traditional classroom setting. The PBIS approach is considered to be a global system that encourages fairness and equity in a culture conducive to learning (Richards et al., 2014). The three-tiered approach focuses on interventions for students who do not benefit from general behavior improvement efforts to help those students remain in their general education classrooms, as opposed to being subject to disciplinary action such as suspensions. These value-based tiers of interventions integrate research-based practices in behavioral, social, educational, and biomedical sciences to reduce or prevent problem behaviors and enhance individuals' quality of life (Bambara, Nonnemacher, & Kern, 2009). These three tiers are then coupled with establishing clear expectations for students and staff (Protheroe, 2005; Simonsen, Sugai, & Negron, 2008). Marcie W. Handler, Jannette Rey, James Connell, Kimberly Thier, Adam Feinberg, and Robert Putnam (2007) further identified five elements key to the successful implementation of PBIS: 1) a functioning leadership team, 2) staff participation, 3) administrative support, 4) the development of competent coaching capacity, and 5) district-level support.

Researchers found that administrator support was a crucial element to achieve the full implementation of PBIS (Lohrmann, Forman, Martin, & Palmieri, 2008). Without that support, any effort to sustain the initiative will likely fail (Bambara, Goh, Kern, & Caskie, 2012; Lohrmann et al., 2008). Simonsen et al. (2008) also recommend at least 80 percent buy-in from teachers and staff for PBIS adoption, a reliable data system, and PBIS training for all personnel tailored to the needs of the individual school. Richards et al. (2014) also emphasize the importance of extensive training and technical assistance at all levels, from top district-level personnel to all practitioners within a school. As this shift in practice may be disorienting for teachers, training and professional development for administrators, teachers, staff, as well as district-level personnel is integral during the beginning stages of PBIS implementation. Handler et al. (2007) found that participation and involvement at every level is imperative in order for PBIS to be successful. Additionally, similar to structures and supports at the building level to increase the success of PBIS implementation, the district should commit time and resources to PBIS efforts and establish and maintain direct communication with each school.

Howard Muscott, Eric Mann, and Marcel LeBrun (2008) found that the school principal plays a key role in providing training, implementation, and ongoing support for PBIS, since it often requires paradigmatic changes to existing school structures, protocols, and social norms. These researchers state that school leaders can

demonstrate their commitment to PBIS through a variety of words, actions, and habits, combined with a "depth of understanding of, and real philosophical alignment with, the use of positive and preventative practices that become part of the school culture" (p. 204).

The school district in this study has been engaged in promoting excellence through equity for four years, both independently and in collaboration with other regional school districts. The collaborative excellence through equity efforts began in earnest two years ago when the district, as part of its effort to prioritize a lens of equity, extended an invitation to neighboring school districts to collaborate on a conference convening school and district leaders. The district's superintendent has held the position for five years, and this work represents new initiatives under his tenure. The design-based research partnership, which evolved with a local university, sought to develop solutions for ensuring equity in schools, while also studying and interrogating the impact of those solutions to allow for iterative and ongoing improvement.

One important related effort by the district was to implement PBIS in its schools. This began in 2013–2014 with a pilot group of schools, and PBIS has become part of the educational program in over 60 percent of the district's schools. The district made the decision to use PBIS to address disproportionate behavioral reports and achievement gaps for Black students, in particular males, which the district saw as a key issue of inequity. While the school division outperforms national averages across the grade span in areas such as graduation rates and reading and math scores, it sought to focus on ways to keep students in class and succeed in rigorous coursework. This study examined how five district schools (two elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school) created structures and implemented the process. Through interviews, focus groups, and targeted observations, a research team comprised of two internal administrators and one university faculty collaboratively collected and analyzed data.

Methodology

The case study was selected as a method to examine how five schools have implemented PBIS and built structures to sustain it, and then study the resultant outcomes and needed improvements. While an effort was made to learn deeply about each school's story, the comparative case analysis also made it possible to explore cross-cutting themes that might have benefit for other schools. The research team collaboratively designed the research protocols to be used in interviews with administrators, focus groups with teachers, and targeted observations. At least two visits were made to each participating school in order to interview the principal and administrative team and a select group of teachers, and to engage in participant observation and talk with students.

Using Atlas.ti, the research team engaged first in open coding by school, looking for school-level trends. An additional coding cycle was then engaged to look at overarching cross-case codes. Once codes were identified, interrogated, and discussed, the team settled on a final codebook. It was then discussed how the codes fit into themes, which will be shared in the findings.

The site for this research was a mid-Atlantic district that serves nearly 70,000 students; in 2017–2018, 100 percent of the district's schools were fully accredited. The 2016 fall membership report indicated that students were 49.4 percent White, 23.9 percent Black, 11.1 percent Hispanic, 9.0 percent two or more races, 5.9 percent Asian, 0.5 percent Native Hawaiian, and 0.2 percent Native American. Additionally, the district serves 11.1 percent of its students through special education and 39.7 percent are economically disadvantaged. The dropout rate of 4.5 percent is below the state average, and the percentage of students graduating with an advance diploma exceeds the state data. Despite gaps between racial groups decreasing in academic performance, there remains a double-digit achievement gap between White and Black students in the advanced proficient designation in reading, writing, and math. Students with disabilities also underperform compared to overall students in the district by double-digit gaps. This case study included five schools, whose profiles will be shared in the findings. The primary research question was: How do school leaders and teachers make meaning of implementing and assessing PBIS in their schools as a component of a journey toward equity?

Findings

The findings include a rich description of each school in narrative form, including themes unique to each site. After identifying individual characteristics, this article describes findings that emerged from the cross-case analysis.

Southern Elementary School (SES)

Southern Elementary School (SES) is a pre-kindergarten to grade 5 (PK–5) elementary school that accommodated approximately 450 students in the fall of 2016, including 26.3 percent African American, 0.2 percent American Indian, 7.8 percent Asian, 13.4 percent Hispanic, 1.5 percent Native Hawaiian, 9.9 percent multiracial, and 40.8 percent Caucasian. The school has a slightly lower economically disadvantaged population (35.9%) than the overall school division and serves 8.6 percent of its students through special education. Despite having slightly fewer kindergarten students reading at grade level compared to the school division, the school's students in Grades 1–3 surpass reading on grade level compared to the overall division data. The school also outperforms the overall division in critical thinking, problem-solving, and written communication, as demonstrated by its fourth graders. The school principal began at SES in 2016 and the assistant principal began in 2017, but they are both career educators with many years of experience. During observations showing positive and productive interactions between all school stakeholders as well as through school climate data that showed high mean scores and a strong response rate on all items, it is clear that SES has a positive school climate focused on a structured, nurturing environment. Many staff described it as a family. School climate survey data indicate that SES students report the school as a safe and orderly place to learn that feels welcoming. A hallmark of these characteristics is a code developed using the school mascot and easily memorized by all school stakeholders, including students, which was developed through the implementation of PBIS that focuses on three tenets: be respectful, be responsible, be safe.

Southern Elementary School began its PBIS implementation three years ago in 2014 and has had three principals during that time period, including one who served in an interim capacity. Southern's teachers appear to have longevity, several have been at the school more than ten years and some have come directly from student teaching. The notion of the school as a family was a powerful theme expressed across participants. Southern's personnel were very reflective about what had helped them in implementation, namely the leadership of two teachers who provided a consistent anchor and the fact that teachers were involved from the outset.

Copper Loop Elementary School

Copper Loop Elementary School (CLES) is a PK–5 elementary school that accommodated approximately 426 students in the fall of 2016, including 18.5 percent African American, 3.3 percent Asian, 13.4 percent Hispanic, 0.2 percent Native Hawaiian, 14.6 percent multiracial, and 50.0 percent Caucasian. The school has a slightly higher economically disadvantaged population (52.2%) than the overall school division and serves 11.7 percent of its students through special education. Despite having slightly less kindergarten to Grade 2 students reading at grade level when compared to the school division, the school's Grade 3 students surpass reading on grade level compared to the overall division data. The school also outperforms the overall division in problem-solving, as demonstrated by its fourth graders. The principal of CLES has been in her role at the building since 2013, and her assistant principal has been in her role since 2017. During observations and through school climate data, CLES demonstrates its commitment to caring for each whole child and the families and communities they serve. School climate survey data indicate that CLES students describe the school as a safe and orderly place to learn that feels welcoming. A hallmark of these characteristics is the "I am CLES code," which was developed through the implementation of PBIS and focuses on four tenets: care about the community, learn safely and responsibly, earn and give respect, and strive to do one's best.

Copper Loop Elementary School's principal and assistant principal are both clear positive influences on the staff and teachers. This positive atmosphere was noted in the teacher focus groups, by the school counselor, and during walk-throughs by students. The school seems to have a masked challenge with poverty due to military families, which seem to be less likely to apply for benefits for which they are eligible, with participants noting the free and reduced-price lunch statistics likely underestimate the true poverty facing their children. There was much empathy expressed for parents in this large military community in this large military community and a true recognition of how the military lifestyle impacts children behaviorally.

Bell Middle School

Bell Middle School (BMS) is a Grade 6–8 middle school that accommodated approximately 1,200 students in the fall of 2016, including 34.5 percent African American, 0.2 percent American Indian, 6.7 percent Asian, 11.0 percent Hispanic, 0.9 percent Native Hawaiian, 9.6 percent multiracial, and 37.2 percent Caucasian. The school has a higher percentage of students identified as being economically disadvantaged

(43.4%) and having disabilities (13.0%) and a lower percentage of gifted students (9.9%) than the overall school division. Academically the school performs at or below the division mean in the majority of reporting categories. Behaviorally the school has shown a slight decrease in referrals and suspensions over the past three years. The principal started at the school in 2009; in 2017 her administrative team as a whole had been together for less than one year. They believe PBIS, in its third year, when executed consistently and with fidelity, can help them reach typically underserved student groups.

The relatively new administrative team dynamic does present a real obstacle for clear communication and common expectations around PBIS implementation, yet the team openly acknowledged and embraced this issue. In fact, the team felt this "newness" would turn into a positive as they grew together with staff as they continued the PBIS journey. One commonality between the administrative team and teachers who participated in the focus groups was the acknowledgement of areas for improvement with select populations.

Belmont Sixth Grade Campus

Belmont Sixth Grade Campus (BSGC) is a Grade 6 only, Title I middle school that accommodated approximately 430 students in the fall of 2017, its fourth year of existence, including 63.4 percent African American, 2.9 percent Asian, 8.4 percent Hispanic, 0.9 percent Native Hawaiian, 6.7 percent multiracial, and 17.7 percent Caucasian. The school has a significantly higher percentage of students identified as being economically disadvantaged (71.3%) and having disabilities (14.8%) and a lower percentage of gifted students (6.7%) than the overall school division. Academically the school performs at or below the division mean in the majority of reporting categories. Behaviorally the school has shown a slight decrease in referrals and suspensions over the past three years. The principal began at the school in 2015; in 2017 her administrative team had been together for less than one year. A new service as of 2017 is the placement of a part-time Communities in Schools liaison who works directly with a small group of students and families that are most in need to provide wrap-around services. The administrative team and teachers that participated in the focus groups acknowledge areas for improvement with select populations.

This school experienced higher teacher turnover and had an energetic new administrative team. Building consistency requires time and support, as demonstrated by other locations. While some teachers reported a lack of consistency regarding discipline across administrators, the administration was beginning to take steps to address this issue. School personnel discussed a lack of resources when compared to other schools, and several teachers and administrators noted a need for additional training.

Golden Rod High School

Golden Rod High School (GRHS) is a Grade 9–12 high school that accommodated approximately 1,422 students in the fall of 2016, including 43.97 percent African American, 0.4 percent American Indian, 6.0 percent Asian, 11.5 percent Hispanic, 0.6 percent Native Hawaiian, 8.6 percent multiracial, and 29.0 percent Caucasian. The school has a higher economically disadvantaged population (55.2%) than the

overall school division (37.4 %) and serves 15.8 percent of its students through special education. The school has a lower percentage of students reading on grade level (57%) compared to the overall division (79%). The school has a lower percentage of students enrolled in rigorous coursework (38%) compared to the overall division (57%). In regards to on-time graduation, GRHS (90%) is slightly below the division (92%). The principal at GRHS has held the position since 2012 and has been in education for over 20 years. During observations and through school climate data, it is clear that GRHS has a positive school climate focused on a structured, nurturing environment, and many staff describe it as a family. School climate survey data indicate that GRHS students know what behavior is expected of them at the school and know the consequences for their behavior. Through the implementation of PBIS, clear expectations have been established for students as well as staff.

Golden Rod High School began its implementation of PBIS three years ago. A particular teacher with a passion for the work spearheaded the implementation. The teacher then left the building and PBIS did not gain much leverage. Though PBIS had been in place for three years, 2017 presented a "rebranding" of PBIS at GRHS. The administrative team expressed concerns that the high teacher-turnover rate was a barrier to implementation. The teachers elaborated on this concept, reporting that PBIS training for the new staff is not delivered until mid-September. The administrative team indicated that while PBIS is still a focus, they are targeting instructional practices in the building, as they believe solid instruction reduces behaviors. The teachers echoed this by saying that instructional practices have changed and there is much more positive language being used in the classroom throughout instruction. According to the teachers, PBIS has had a positive influence on the students and staff at GRHS and the collaboration it brings makes a large school feel like a small school.

Cross-case analysis

After each school was analyzed, the codes that emerged across cases were examined, with an emphasis on the lived experiences of the participants. Twenty-six codes were categorized into four overarching themes as seen by participants: the benefits of PBIS, the importance of school culture, the power of relationships in equity work, and challenges and next steps.

PBIS benefits

The most frequent theme that emerged was related to the benefits of the implementation and structures of PBIS. While the two elementary schools experienced PBIS more positively across roles, middle- and high-school leaders and staff also described the overarching benefits of PBIS. Study participants saw the benefits of PBIS in a number of ways, primarily in how it shifted their mindsets to looking for the positive in all aspects of their school and even their personal lives. One teacher noted, "I love PBIS personally, because I think it's such a positive way to redirect. I do not like when people are negative with kids and have negative mindsets." This teacher further explained how PBIS changed her worldview, noting it impacts how she sees those in the grocery store, the bank, and her community at large. Another teacher echoed, "When you look for the positive, it's going to help you feel better and it's going to make you

see things differently." She indicated that she now begins each day reminding herself to see the good in every student interaction, and it has made a difference for her. A shift in worldview to seeing the positive was a consistent theme across all sites.

Hallmarks of the successful implementation of PBIS include looking for and commenting specifically on positive behaviors and reframing.

Implementation, while a challenge, was a beneficial process for the schools. It is critical to recognize the importance of a full cultural shift among leaders, teachers, and students from the outset. Principals knew the need for cross-school buy in. One school leader said,

> All along from the beginning, we looked at implementation as a twofold process. What are we going to do to train and support our teachers? What are we going to do to train our students and help them learn this process of PBIS? I think that's been one of the cornerstones of our success, that we looked at it twofold. We knew we were ultimately going to change the culture here. That wouldn't happen if we only worked with students. It had to be teachers and students, to get that common language, that school-wide language that is PBIS. So, we worked hard at the common language with specific protocols during faculty meetings to gain consensus.

Another member of the leadership team discussing implementation noted, "You're training your teachers. You're training your students. You're developing this culture, this common language. It's [a] school-wide approach." Schools also noted the importance of the implementation being school based and the benefit that PBIS provided in being able to address the unique context of their own students and environment. One school leader said, "The coaches kind of tell us the big-picture piece of, 'This is what the research shows. The schools that are effective do this. Now, think about how you would apply this at your school, and you write that code.'"[2] The importance of the school-wide approach was critical, as one leader noted, "It's been really beneficial, especially for teachers to talk about it, be exposed to it, and then to be the voice within their departments [and] around their hall to advocate for the program." Another leader noted how critical teacher involvement was and its benefits, "If you think of it, you're developing a school-wide language. Who spends the majority of their day with their students?" Even participants who were skeptical of the initial implementation reported in focus groups that they had evolved and now acknowledged the benefits.

Several participants noted the importance of collecting data across schools through the School-Wide Information System (SWIS) (Educational and Community Supports, 2017), behavior observation forms, and other data analysis techniques. These data allowed for student-level analysis. One teacher described it thus,

> As a teacher, we feel like, "Oh, this child is not only misbehaving in my classroom, but he's misbehaving here and here and here and here." It makes you think what's really going on with the kid, because we don't really have that much time to think about things anyway during the day. We have the team to look at it and say, "Well,

> what are the real needs of this child?" or, "What time of day is affecting him or her?" I think that piece of it helps to bring it all back and say, "Well, this is what this child really needs."

The trends helped teachers think about how to address individual student needs. One teacher new to the school said,

> I have two students in check-in, check-out and that's new for me … They're starting to see their own patterns too once they're coming up to me or a specialist. I have one in particular … It's always the two hours right before lunch and it's not necessarily that he's getting hungry. It's what we're doing in class. After lunch, he's fine, and that's our reading, writing, and small groups.

The level of student commitment to the practices and structures of PBIS was noted across sites. In observations, students described the matrices that detailed expected behaviors and examples of what positive behavior looks like. Students also noted how these matrices serve as a resource for new students or even their peers who might veer off track. One teacher noted, "I've seen other students help the new students like, 'This is what you're supposed to do,' or, 'This is what being respectful is.' They take ownership of it. They really own it." Students engaged in self-regulation, but also in acknowledging the behaviors of their peers. One teacher described, "It's funny because I have some kids [who] can't read and write, but boy, when you listen to them talk they're shooting off behavior-specific praise left and right. It's that universal language they know, and it's amazing when you hear a kid say, 'Oh, so and so, I love the way that you are being so quiet on the carpet. That's respectful.'"

Participants also talked about the improvement in behavior that accompanied a school-wide approach. One teacher relayed,

> I think most of our kids are a lot more—even though that's the code—respectful, responsible, and safe. They're literally consciously thinking of, "Is that a nice thing to do? Should I do that?" Many of them are thinking about their own behavior in a sense of, "How can I help this person?" or, "How can I stick up for this person?" I'm seeing [it] a lot more in the last two years … "Is that a good thing to do?" I think I didn't normally see that before.

The benefit to teachers and students from this approach was detailed as the ability to prevent more major infractions. One leader described, "They've really taught teachers the difference between what's a minor and what's a major referral. And so those minor things that should and can be handled in the classroom are handled in the classroom." It also provided a tangible anchor to use with students. One teacher shared a story about a specific student saying,

> I had a fifth grader last year, a continual talker. I started writing the BOF [Behavior Observation Form]. One day, it was just like he'd had too many reminders. I called him up to my computer and I said, "I'm going to show you these definitions." I read him the definitions for disruption. I said, "There are two definitions here. The

> one is what I see, what I hear. This is just from my records, it's what I'm tracking." I said, "But the other one, the major one, goes to the office." And he goes, "Well, I'm the major one, you reminded me way too many times today."

Teachers also acknowledged what they learned from the process and ongoing PBIS, with one noting, "Maybe I was just unaware, naïve or something, but I never really thought about the fact that we needed to have the same code coming in on the bus and leaving on the bus and the same structure. I thought my job just entailed when I have the kids. It opened up my mind to think that I need to be a part of teaching that on the bus too or in the hallway or in the bathroom."

Finally, participants discussed the long-term benefits for students from the PBIS model. One leader said,

> You're asking teachers to change the way they're doing some things. Some of our teachers that didn't come on board right away were our teachers that had really strong classroom management. But, what was actually happening in the classroom was compliance. Because once those students left that classroom, they weren't carrying those behaviors into art and music. What we're giving them is that lifelong gift of learning to manage their behavior.

The long-term benefits were emphasized repeatedly. A school leader summarized it well noting,

> the heart of PBIS and its purpose truly is in systems change. What you're addressing [is] this slow and steady incremental change throughout the year. That's what PBIS really is. Seeing our schoolwide expectations that are explicitly taught in the classroom—how those are executed throughout the years, how those impact the students throughout the year, their school career. That is what PBIS really is. But, at its core we are trying to change the culture and in seeing those changes throughout the year.

School and district culture

Participants noted the intangible "feel" of a community that existed in the school before PBIS, with one saying, "We're like a family." It was noted though that this culture was strengthened via PBIS through the norms, expectations, and shared language. The clear and consistent expectations driven by the school district and senior leadership were seen as necessary ingredients to the success of PBIS implementation. One school leader said, "the focus on the students and loving children and having a relationship with children, that's kind of been hit hard in the last few years with our new superintendent." Similarly, a teacher noted, "when it's done as a division it helps, in the sense that we're all on the same page, we're all looking at the same content, we all have the same goal." The academic mission as a centerpiece to PBIS efforts was a key norm of the school culture in the schools visited. One principal noted, "Over the course of the three years [since we implemented PBIS], our focus has been on quality classroom instruction because I think, administratively, we feel like if the quality of our instruction is improving, so will the level of discipline that

occurs in our classrooms." Similarly, a teacher noted, "Trying to connect students with interventions to meet their needs so that they can connect with the curriculum is our priority." Even as improvements were seen, there was some frustration that the measures do not always allow for the focus on the individual to carry over to assessment. This challenge was noted by one administrator, who said, "Part of that is the nature of the beast. Our students receive specialized instruction because they learn in a different way. That means if they are going to test in the same way that everybody gets to test, they may not be successful. It's just the reality."

Lastly, adults and children alike highlighted the benefits of a common language and the branding of that language through visible posters and clear rubrics. There was a consistent ability across schools to know the school based and developed behavioral expectation matrices and codes in word and meaning. The school-wide practices in one case were called, "learning a second language." Similarly, a school counselor noted,

> it's given us a common vocabulary throughout the whole school. And when the kids get in trouble and they come in the office, whether they talk to me or the principal or assistant principal, they'll often refer to [the] matrix: 'I wasn't being respectful.' It's kind of neat that they tie it in. But it does give us a common language, and it has really helped, I think. It's a very proactive kind of system where it really helps kids feel safe and feel comfortable. I don't know how exactly it's affected my work other than I think kids feel safer definitely and feel like they know what the expectations are.

Teachers and administrators indicated it is a daily reminder to children when consistent language is used, saying, "they hear the same things from everyone," and that the messaging is, "Very simple, very basic. We teach that every day." Teachers and administrators offered examples of the language they used, such as, "What's the expectation when you're in the hallway? What do you hear in the morning? What have we been saying?" This requires ongoing retraining, even of staff.

Participants indicated one norm of the culture across schools was an expectation to support students in their social, emotional, and academic needs. This applied not only to teachers and administrators but to staff, as noted by one administrator who said,

> We have support staff who continually work to address the needs in terms of our students who have basic needs that aren't being met. We work together all the time. That's how we get to the excellence piece. That's how we address the equity and our focus is to achieve academically and that's in everything that we do, the goal is to get there.

Recognizing this common school culture, language, and approach was highlighted at all five schools and captured by one leadership team member who said,

> Without that common language, it was almost like we were satellites. If I had a problem in music, I would go to the homeroom teacher and say, "Are you seeing the same problem? Is it just in my class?" Things like that. Now with this common language … it doesn't matter where the kids go throughout the day. Everything is about

> [being] respectful, responsible, and safe. It's going to look a little different in music, it's going to look a little different in independent work. It's going to look a little different in the fire drill.

Equity and the power of relationships

A consistent theme was the importance of relationships among stakeholders, administrators, teachers, students, and families. These relationships were seen as critical components to the pre-conditions for success in the early buy-in stage and to realizing the fullness of the transition to PBIS. These relationships served not only as the foundation for PBIS but, importantly, for larger equity goals. One school leader described equity as,

> Equity is not equal. No, it's not only ensuring that everyone has shoes but also that the shoe that each person has is the right size for them, but again, it's not equal. Equity is opportunity, in that we're providing all of our students with opportunities to be successful.

Participants of all roles noted that receiving appropriate levels of support from school leaders was critical to the achievement of equity and the utilization of PBIS as a tool. Specifically, as it related to participation in Tier I and Tier II (the higher the tier, the more significant interventions were being provided for students) meetings, a teacher said, "Yeah, people know it's serious because they're both there. I mean, you could have just one, I mean it's hard to get both administrators in there for the whole day. So, for them to be there, it shows to the staff that it's important." The school leaders interviewed had a focus on this work, but also demonstrated humility in underscoring the work of their teams. In particular, one leader said,

> I'm one of a team of many that love kids and will do anything for them to be successful, because … and I know this is going to sound cliché, it's our future. If we can't get it right here, then what's going to become of us later on? You have to have that relationship with the kids; you have to have that relationship with the staff and with the community in order to make that work. If you don't … my kids will work hard for us, because they know I love them.

It was apparent that building relationships and viewing students as individuals with unique needs and strengths was important to school personnel across all schools. Teachers noted the immense challenges students face and the impact it has on their behavior and academic outcomes. One teacher noted that throughout her career, "My heart breaks at least once a day. At least once a day working with these kids because of things that they're going through. It affects them greatly. It affects me." Another indicated the deep challenges students face,

> Our kids are genuinely good kids and a lot of them come from very poor situations. They come to school with a lot of baggage every day. We do … I know the staff does a great job of dealing with it, but sometimes it gets overwhelming because there's such a high percentage of the kids that are dealing with things that most of us don't even know about until it just comes out one day.

Teachers also noted the proactive approach. In one school, teachers tracked student participation in activities to ensure there were opportunities for children to have interactions and develop relationships with adults. When they noted a group that had not participated, they created a special class to allow those children to bond with an adult in the school. The importance of authentic relationships was highlighted by a school leader who said, "We've all been trained to do it all a certain way, but if you don't have that heart, then you can write papers all day long but you've got to love what you're doing and you've got to love the children. And they need to see that, and they can tell if it's fake."

Teacher buy-in for PBIS and building relationships with students was also named as a necessary ingredient for success. One administrator said, "You need the leadership from the teachers. You need the time. You need the systematic support of the coach and the school division." The administrator also highlighted the SWISS behavior-tracking system as a necessary data tool for teacher buy-in. Teachers and administrators across two schools specifically mentioned this system. In essence though, the teacher commitment to students was the foundation. One administrator said, "You need teachers who are very dedicated to instruction and who are very loving to our students. [Teachers have to be] willing to do whatever is necessary to help and assist with the day-to-day functions and ensuring that students have a positive learning environment."

Challenges and Next Steps

Participants noted specific challenges they faced at their schools. They also offered advice for schools that will embark on PBIS. It is important to note that the participants at all schools did not paint a perfect picture of the implementation and process; they were reflective of what could still be improved, while remaining committed to maintaining the approach. Division inequity was raised by two schools, where teachers noted, "I have had students say in class, things like, 'Oh, did you see the new building right down the street? They're not going to give us a school like that.' I think that's a shame that the students identify that, hey, we're a group of kids but we're not going to get something like that." Another echoed, "I think it's resources and funding. We are looked at the same as all the other schools that aren't doing it [PBIS] and haven't been doing it, but we haven't had as much resources as maybe we needed." Participants discussed challenges about discipline, implementation, and retraining, and offered specific suggestions for other schools that will implement PBIS.

As PBIS was implemented, participants in this study noted specific challenges, including a dramatic shift in the thinking of the educators. One teacher said, "It was a definite transition for most of us, if not all of us. It's a whole different way of thinking, a whole different way of approaching every problem. It's very different." Teachers and administrators both reported feeling overwhelmed at the scope and pace of work. One said,

> We've been through constant discipline. Every year something new comes out. It's like, "Oh, now we got to learn it all again and everything." I was with the Seven Habits [prior intervention program used in district]. Every year we had eight-hour training on that. You know what I mean? It's like, "Oh, my gosh."

As PBIS continues and is implemented in other schools, participants had suggestions for future steps. They emphasized that schools need to continue to learn from each other, even after implementation, and that more vertical and horizontal interaction and collaboration across schools would provide great benefit. Additionally, retraining for new teachers, especially in schools with high teacher turnover, was a critical component that some schools thought had caused them to take steps backward. Some teachers also expressed that they had colleagues who thought, "this too shall pass." One teacher said, "Some of the teachers have bought into it, and some [have] still taken a philosophy of, 'This is just another behavior-management program, that we're trying out, it'll eventually go.'"

Recommendations

As the critical need for an equity mindset continues to rise in importance and districts wonder how to take actionable steps to help personnel achieve it, PBIS may offer one strategy for ensuring access to instruction. The five schools in this multi-case study elucidated four overarching themes about their journey, including the benefits of PBIS, the power of relationships, the importance of communication and leadership, and PBIS challenges. Additional findings emerged from the individual school analyses that highlighted other mechanisms to facilitate the work. The importance of visible symbols, such as matrices, posted throughout the school—including in buses, hallways, cafeteria, restrooms, and classrooms—was critical to enacting PBIS and providing adults and children with a common language and expectations. This allowed for self and peer regulation by students; positive behavior was noted and behavior inconsistent with the matrices was redirected, even among students. These findings allow the research team to make recommendations for schools and school leaders, as well as for districts and universities engaged in leadership preparation.

Recommendations for schools and school leaders

Leaders that desire to increase their own equity mindset and that of their staffs and communities may commit to a common vision and courageous conversations. PBIS provides a structured mechanism to assist in ensuring student behavior was viewed and analyzed at the individual student level considering the context and needs of individual children and where staff has a focused goal of understanding and finding unique solutions to the behaviors while also improving the overall culture of schools. Leaders implementing PBIS need to expect the process to be disordered and they should have a tolerance for ambiguity. Implementation is an iterative process and there is power in the process, in some cases as much as the outcomes. To facilitate and support them, schools and school leaders should leverage experienced and successful colleagues in the division and resources in the central office.

Division and school-professional learning on fostering relationships among stakeholders should also be prioritized. Teachers need to have multiple opportunities to grapple with what discipline means to them and how they can structure their behavioral interactions to impact student learning positively. Clear expectations are critical, and schools should develop and value norms, expectations, and a common language in all aspects of the school day, including in buses, cafeteria, restrooms,

hallways, and classrooms. This school-based work is bolstered by a foundation provided by senior district leadership, especially the superintendent, but also by the grassroots efforts of school personnel, whose buy-in assists in implementing and sustaining PBIS. Clear and consistent expectations from the superintendent hold great power and the capacity for benefits. In this district, the message was: "Every child. Every day. Every classroom." These findings and recommendations echo the work of Handler et al. (2007), whose five key elements to the successful implementation of PBIS included: 1) a functioning leadership team, 2) staff participation, 3) administrative support, 4) the development of competent coaching capacity, and 5) district-level support. These findings and recommendations echo the work of Handler et al. (2007) and the five elements they list as key to the successful implementation of PBIS.

Leaders and school districts may also benefit from the specific recommendations offered by participants in this study, including:

- Create a school-wide implementation team and craft a timeline that allows for fidelity.
- Use school-wide behavioral tracking and allow teachers time to analyze each student's data to uncover trends and offer solutions.
- Engage in courageous conversations with those staff/teachers who are resistant to PBIS, rather than abandon initiatives or allow that narrative to dominate the effort.
- Ensure care for staff/teachers and assist them in their focus on children by ensuring their own wellness and self-care.

Recommendations for leadership preparation

As districts and universities engage in leadership preparation and support, the role equity will play in the future actions of such leaders and in their own programmatic design is paramount. Ensuring leaders are prepared to steward a shared vision of equity and to support culturally responsive pedagogy is a minimum requirement that should be addressed through coursework, professional learning, and practice-based activities such as internships. Authentic experiences such as leading equity audits, book studies, critical data analysis, and authentic introductions will assist with an overall equity mindset. Preparation also can consider varying school-based programs to ensure future leaders know how to implement programs with fidelity and understand how various programs fit an overall vision.

Conclusion

Equity in education is not an isolated curriculum or training, but rather a lens used by educators that guides decisions, practices, and beliefs. Case study methodology allowed this school district an opportunity to investigate deeply how five schools implemented, sustained, and learned from PBIS as one tool toward excellence through equity. Four findings emerged from school-based administrators, school counselors, and teachers, including the benefits of PBIS, the power of relationships, the importance of communication and leadership, and PBIS challenges. With a continued focus on equity, this district and others may find transferable lessons.

Notes

1. PBIS is a school-wide set of systems and practices used to improve or maintain a school climate focused on building a sense of safety, respect, well-being, and a shared vision and common language. The systems involve all school personnel, students, and families and include a three-tiered system of interventions.
2. Each school created its own code using mnemonics from the mascot or a simple code with three letters, such as the three Rs (respect, responsibility, and ready to learn).

Website

ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH, https://atlasti.com

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol—Administrators and School Counseling Department Chair

- Tell me a bit about your path in education and your professional journey.
- Tell me a little about your school. What would I see and experience as I walk through the halls and classrooms?
- How would your stakeholders describe the school? Teachers? Staff? Parents? Children?
- Tell me a bit about the PBIS journey here. Challenges? Accomplishments?
- What indicators help you know whether PBIS is working or not? Please provide a couple of specific examples.
- How do you define equity?
- What is your school or division's equity story?
- Based upon your building's equity journey, what do you see as next steps that need to be taken?
- What challenges have you seen for engaging in excellence through equity?

10. Where did you learn to lead this type of work? What has worked best and what has not engaged you as well in this preparation?
11. What does it mean to be a successful and equitable school leader? Are there specific skills, knowledge, or dispositions that help or are even necessary?
12. What do we still need to know more about as a group of educators, and how might we best learn that?
13. Is there anything you would like to share that I have not asked you about today?

Focus Group Protocol—Teachers

- Let's begin by going around the group and stating how you would describe your school.
- Tell me a little about your school. What would I see and experience as I walk through the halls and classrooms?
- How would your stakeholders describe the school? Teachers? Staff? Parents? Children?
- Tell me a bit about the PBIS journey here. Challenges? Accomplishments?
- Think of an example when you were able to pull from your PBIS toolkit and how you know that it had an impact.
- What areas are working and what areas need work with regard to PBIS?