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Understanding Staff Perceptions of SWPBIS

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Introduction

About eight years ago a school district, located in the foothills of western Maine, implemented a Tier-1, universal, school-wide positive behavior interventions and supports (SWPBIS) framework to provide school staff with positive behavior supports to achieve positive outcomes for all students. A key factor to the initial success of SWPBIS was staff buy-in. Research has shown that teacher and staff support is needed, not just for the implementation phase, but for the continued success of the framework. In the eight years since implementation, one of the district's elementary schools has seen a staff and teacher turnover rate of over 50%. Also, a recent Fidelity Evaluation Report (FET) on the health of the framework reported the absence of a formal process of professional development for new staff. Research supports the benefit of developing targeted training by understanding individuals' perceptions of a phenomenon. Such is the focus of this research project –to understand teacher and staff perceptions of SWPBIS in order to create targeted professional development of the framework at this school.

Literature Review

Since the enactment of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) and No Child Left Behind (2001), scientifically based research has been promoted within schools to improve outcomes for all students. Fulfilling this mandate, SWPBIS emerged as a preventative and proactive framework for communicating behavioral expectations and establishing consistent behavior management practices for today's schools. Since its inception over two decades ago, about 27,294 schools have implemented SWPBIS, affecting over 15 million students resulting in

35% fewer office discipline referrals (ODR) and 46% fewer out of school suspensions (OSS) (George, 2019). However, not every school has experienced success in implementing SWPBIS and researchers continue to identify and address these barriers. In a qualitative study by Kincaid, Childs, Blase, & Wallace (2007), lack of staff buy-in was identified as the most significant barrier to successful SWPBIS implementation. Consequently, Simonsen, Sugai, G. & Negron (2008) set staff buy-in at 80% as a threshold to facilitate successful implementation of SWPBIS.

Barriers to Staff Buy-In

A qualitative survey by Lohrman, Forman, Martin, & Palmieri (2008) identified various barriers to staff support of SWPBIS implementation - lack of administrative direction and leadership, skepticism of the need for universal intervention, hopelessness regarding change, philosophical differences, and feelings of disenfranchisement from colleagues, administrator or the school mission. Similar barriers parallel results by Tyre & Feuerborn (2017) whose most significant findings reveal that staff opposed to SWPBIS have concerns over colleague consistency of implementation, school climate unrelated to SWPBIS, inconsistent and inadequate administrator support, implementation concerns specific to the school and not SWPBIS, and philosophical concerns over the use of reinforcement procedures. Additionally, staff surveyed by George, Cox, Minch, & Sandomierski (2018) perceived a lack of buy-in by school leadership as a barrier to positive perception of SWPBIS, specifically the lack of leadership's understanding that behavior and achievement are equally important to student success.

Alternate Perspectives to Understanding Perception

In the past, staff implementing SWPBIS have resorted to the use of reactive strategies to counter staff and administrator resistance to implementation (Lohrmann et al., 2008). In this process, presentation of behavior data became a key reactive tool providing evidence of the benefits of SWPBIS in their schools. This correlates to the observation attribute of Roger's diffusion of innovation theory, introduced by Chitoyo & May (2018), which posits that the adoption of an innovation is influenced by outcomes visible to its users.

Chitoyo & May (2018) shifted their perspective to SWPBIS as an innovation rather than framework and used Roger's diffusion of innovation theory attributes to categorize questionnaire responses. Of the five attributes - relative advantage, observation, compatibility, trial ability, and complexity - only observation (outcomes visible to users), and relative advantage (the perception that one innovation is superior to another), were significant to staff perception of SWPBIS. Also drawing upon Roger's diffusion of innovation theory, Feuerborn & Tyre (2016) noted that, "momentum gained with successful initial implementation of an innovation facilitates increasing levels of stakeholder support" (p. 58). This supports the importance of tools to collect and report data for outcomes to be visible to school staff.

Tyre & Feuerborn (2017) incorporated the CBAM (Concern's Based Adoption Model) into their study to show that staff perceptions evolved as their understanding of SWPBIS increased. Differences in staff perceptions were noted in schools initiating and already implementing SWPBIS. Staff in schools already implementing SWPBIS had higher positive

perception rates than staff in planning stages (Feuerborn & Tyre, 2016). Again, possibly a result of positive outcomes being visible to its users.

Feuerborn, Tyre & Zečević (2019) delved into the field of organizational and systems change to develop the needs assessment, SPBD (Staff Perceptions of Behavior and Discipline). The authors note its primary purposes are to "involve staff and create greater ownership in the implementation process, gather data from staff to better understand their perspectives, needs, and concerns and to leverage this understanding to develop a data-informed implementation plan" (Feuerborn et al., 2019, p. 33). But what about schools already implementing SWPBIS which are facing attrition of the framework due to staff turnover?

Professional Development Concerns

In response to this query and also reported in the review of literature was the continued need for staff professional development in implementing and maintaining SWPBIS. McIntosh, Mercer, Nese, Strickland-Cohen, Kittelman, Hoselton & Horner (2018) noted that, aside from ensuring fidelity of implementation, schools need to develop initiatives to counter the effects of staff turnover, which occurs beyond the implementation phase. Conclusions by Andreou, McIntosh, Ross & Kahn (2015) concur with this need by noting the importance of bringing new staff into the SWPBIS school culture, which not only helps new staff increase ownership of the framework, but also helps mitigate conflicts arising from mistaken personal beliefs. Another concern affecting the sustainability of SPBIS was identified in a study by Tyre, Feuerborn & Woods (2018) which revealed that staff opposed to SWPBIS received an average of only 2.6 hours of training. Research indicates that an average of 49 hours of professional development of

staff is required to produce about a 21% increase in student achievement results

(Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). McIntosh, et. al., (2018)

concluded that "districts can best support initial and sustained implementation of behavior

support practices by providing training and ongoing coaching. As schools achieve adequate

fidelity, it appears key to provide training and coaching … for continuous improvement."

Limitations of Literature Review

Limitations of two studies consisted of the small sample sizes of participants (Kincaid et

al., 2007; Lohrmann et al., 2018), which may or may not be representative of staff in different

geographical locations or settings. Tyre et al. (2018) noted that a segment of staff who supported

SWPBIS, over 20% did not know what it was, indicating the survey may not have accurately

reflected their perceptions.

Resistance can erode the effectiveness of any model or framework, and limit its

longevity. Understanding barriers to positive staff perception of SWPBIS can help produce

targeted training and professional development which will ultimately affect student achievement.

Some researchers are using theories and systems from outside the field of education to provide

tools for planning implementation and training. Recommendations include research to identify

barriers to positive staff perception encountered in rural schools.

Research Questions

What are teacher and staff perceptions towards SWPBIS at this rural elementary school

which may be barriers to its sustained practice? What barriers are identified and understood?

How can they be addressed through targeted professional development?

Method

Mixed Methods Design

This convergent, mixed methods study employed the survey tool, *Staff Perceptions of Behavior and Discipline* (SPBD), (Feuerborn, Tyre, & Zečević, 2019), which is an online, anonymous survey assessing 5 domains and 4 critical indicators which provide an understanding of facilitators and barriers in staff beliefs of behavior and discipline, "including (staff) beliefs about school-wide expectations, school climate, and supports and resources" (Feuerborn, et. al., 2019). The 5 domains are, "Teaching & Acknowledging Expectations; Systemic Resources, Supports and Climate; Implementation Integrity; Philosophical Views of Behavior and Discipline; Systemic Cohesiveness and Openness to Change" (Feuerborn, et. al., 2019). The 4 critical indicators are knowledge, training, buy-in, and communication. The survey consists of twenty seven closed-ended survey questions and three open-ended questions eliciting respondent's beliefs and concerns about SWPBIS as it relates to their school and their perspectives on the strengths and needs of the school. Survey results were automatically generated in report form by researchers at the University of Washington and sent to this researcher via email. Appendix A includes the open- and closed-ended questions contained in the anonymous survey.

A recent study noted the "internal consistency and convergent validity" (Feuerborn, et. al., 2019), of the psychometric properties of the survey. The "structural and internal consistency were (also) supported by the acceptable fit index along with equivalent or higher Cronbach's alphas" (Feuerborn, et. al., 2019).

Participants

In this mixed methods design, a purposeful sampling was used to recruit certified and support staff who work with students at the school. Since the school is small, a personal invitation was extended to all certified teachers and staff attending a staff meeting. Following a presentation of the project and completion of an informed consent form, which included the purpose of the study, the online SPBD survey link was emailed to staff. Twenty-nine staff members participated in the survey which consisted of 16 certified teachers, 3 certified support staff members, 6 other support staff members, 2 student teachers, one administrator, and one classified staff member (office, kitchen, etc.).

Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis was used to calculate response percentages to 22, "agree" and "disagree" questions focusing on the five domain areas. Questions 23 through 27, focusing on 4 critical areas for SWPBIS implementation, offered a variety of responses to highlight areas of strengths and needs.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Responses to three open-ended questions were explored using a grounded theory systematic coding approach to create a summary of staff perceptions collected from question responses. The open-ended questions were:

1. When it comes to behavior, what is working well?

2. What is needed to make it better?

3. When you think about schoolwide positive behavior supports, what concerns do you have?
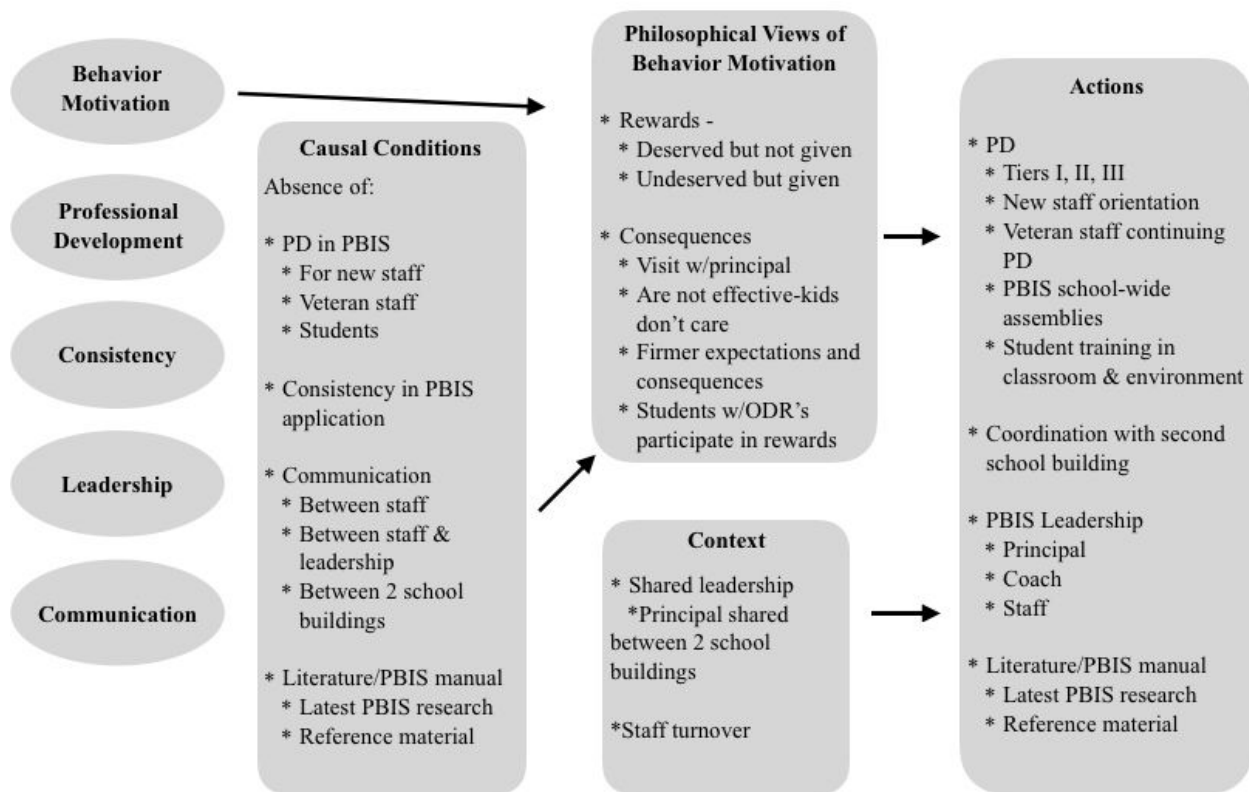
Following an initial study of all responses, a multi-step process included color coding similar segments of data into 12 categories and reducing them to five open codes - behavior motivation (*n*=30), PD (*n*=18), consistency (*n*=16), leadership (*n*=10) and communication (*n*=10). The behavior motivation category was derived from two open coded categories of rewards and consequences and is similarly referred to as behavior and discipline. Positive responses considered facilitators of SWPBIS were not included in the analysis since that is not the focus of this project. Further review of responses and analysis included assigning one open code as the core phenomenon of the data and subjecting it to axial coding to develop a coding paradigm. Developing a coding paradigm involved returning to the qualitative data and identifying the core phenomenon, causal conditions, context, and actions. When selecting a core phenomenon, Creswell and Guetterman (2019) note that it must be "relateable to all other categories, appear frequently in the data, not be forced, be sufficiently abstract, grow in depth and explanatory power yet maintain its basis" (p. 447). Figure 1 visualizes the axial coding paradigm for this project.

Figure 1

Axial coding paradigm

Behavior Motivation

Professional Development

Consistency

Leadership

Communication

Causal Conditions

Absence of:

* PD in PBIS
  * For new staff
  * Veteran staff
  * Students

* Consistency in PBIS application

* Communication
  * Between staff
  * Between staff & leadership
  * Between 2 school buildings

* Literature/PBIS manual
  * Latest PBIS research
  * Reference material

Philosophical Views of Behavior Motivation

* Rewards -
  * Deserved but not given
  * Undeserved but given

* Consequences
  * Visit w/principal
  * Are not effective-kids don't care
  * Firmer expectations and consequences
  * Students w/ODR's participate in rewards

Context

* Shared leadership
  * Principal shared between 2 school buildings

* Staff turnover

Actions

* PD
  * Tiers I, II, III
  * New staff orientation
  * Veteran staff continuing PD
  * PBIS school-wide assemblies
  * Student training in classroom & environment

* Coordination with second school building

* PBIS Leadership
  * Principal
  * Coach
  * Staff

* Literature/PBIS manual
  * Latest PBIS research
  * Reference material

Behavior motivation related to the application of rewards and consequences garnered the most responses and directs the overarching focus of this research paper, PD in SWPBIS. The context in which staff find themselves is a school that shares its principal with another and has experienced significant staff turnover since implementing SWPBIS. Causal conditions were identified as an absence of leadership and training in PBIS, and lack of consistency in the application of rewards and consequences, and communication. After additional review of data, actions requested in staff responses were PD in PBIS for Tiers I, II, and III, and for all school staff and students, a request for PBIS leadership, and the latest research literature on PBIS as well as a reference manual. Also requested was PBIS coordination with the second school building, which is a feeder into the focus school.
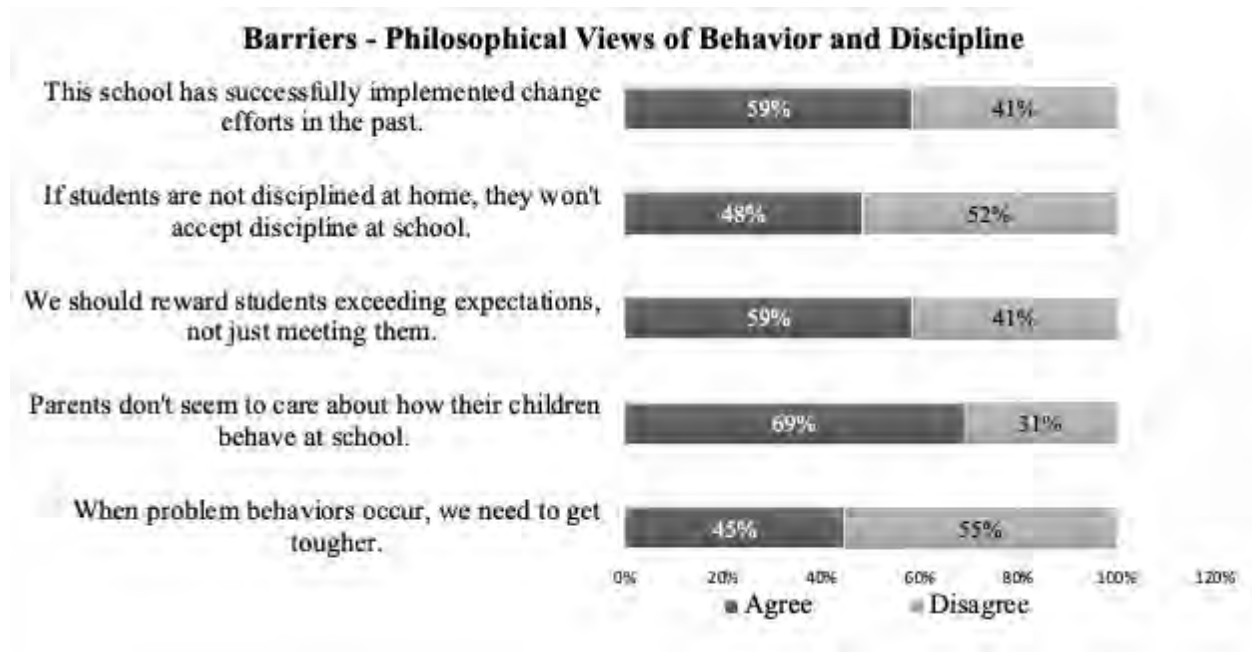
Results

Quantitative Results

Quantitative research results revealed significant misconceptions in staff's understanding of behavior and discipline. Responses which garnered less than 75% of positive responses were flagged as barriers. Responses included a lack of confidence in change being successful at the school, students accepting discipline at school, staff's disbelief that student behavior can be changed at any age, a belief in reserving rewards for students who meet or exceed behavior expectations, a lack of partnerships with parents, and a possible over-reliance on punishment. Figure 2 visualizes responses.

Figure 2

Quantitative survey results indicating staff perceptions which are barriers to SWPBIS

Barriers - Philosophical Views of Behavior and Discipline

	Agree	Disagree
This school has successfully implemented change efforts in the past.	59%	41%
If students are not disciplined at home, they won't accept discipline at school.	48%	52%
We should reward students exceeding expectations, not just meeting them.	59%	41%
Parents don't seem to care about how their children behave at school.	69%	31%
When problem behaviors occur, we need to get tougher.	45%	55%

Qualitative Results

Five categories arising from the open coding process applied to the qualitative responses. Categories included behavior motivation, PD, consistency, leadership, and communication. Results included summaries of the comments made in relation to each theme along with supporting quotations from participants.

Behavior Motivation. Comments coded to behavior motivation included the subcategories of rewards and consequences and included a total of 39 comments. Seven comments were in response to the question of what was working well at the school. Twenty eight comments were in response to questions asking staff for solutions to perceived problems. Staff had concerns that "good kids" did not receive the attention and rewards they deserved, while students receiving office discipline referrals (ODR's) got to participate in school rewards. "I have concerns about rewarding students that are not always following expectations. Students

following expectations get lost in the jumble and (are) not as appropriately and positively

acknowledged as they should be."

Professional Development. The PD category had 25 responses of which 18 responses

addressed staff concerns. Comments in this category related to training in all three PBIS tiers, a

general request for PD in PBIS and a connection that PD is needed for framework imlementation

and consistency. "Nobody has told me how we act PBIS out. I'm not sure what behavior I

should support… I would love to have a time to learn more about how to implement PBIS in my

role in the classroom."

Consistency. Responses in this category included staff concerns that inconsistency was

primarily a result of a lack of PD. Also included were comments that discrepancies existed

between classroom practices and schoolwide PBIS and an acknowledgement that veteran staff,

who had received training, applied SWPBIS practices with greater success. "Inconsistency

between classroom expectations and SWPBIS is sometimes an issue. Some teachers have not

been given much training or PD on implementing PBIS in the classroom and / or school."

Communication. Responses in this category generated five positive and 8 concern

comments. Although there were 5 comments commending communication and monthly Tier II

behavior meetings, the remaining comments focused on the need for greater communication

among staff on the specifics of student behavior plans and of PBIS expectations in general.

"Very few people are in (on) what the expectations and the plans are, and those people are not

communicating with the rest of us. I definitely do not feel like it is a priority here."

Leadership. Staff had high praise for their administrator, as evidenced by six positive

comments to that effect. The remaining responses focused on the lack of leadership in PBIS at

the school with one response suggesting a "Dean of Students" to oversee and make daily

connections, intervene (in behavior situations and be a) contact person." "I have found that there

is no leadership as far as PBIS goes."

In summary, the majority of barriers were found in the application of PBIS resulting from

varying perceptions of behavior and discipline. Of the 39 behavior motivation category

responses, 9 were positive or neutral, while the remaining responses indicated misunderstandings

about behavior rewards and consequences.

Connecting Quantitative and Qualitative Results

The five qualitative categories included professional development (PD), behavior

motivation, leadership, consistency and communication. These categories closely correlate to the

five survey domains and four critical measures from the quantitative survey, as visualized in

Table 1. The behavior motivation category generated the greatest number of comments which

contained expressions of concern and frustration over rewards and consequences. In the SPBD

report, Domain 4, Philosophical Views of Behavior and Discipline, was the single domain in

which was flagged as a barrier. This was an area where respondents showed their

misperceptions, misunderstanding and disagreement that can potentially be mitigated through

knowledge and training, 2 of the four quantitative critical measures.

Table 1

Correlation of Quantitative and Qualitative Measures

Quantitative Domains	Quantitative Critical Measures	Qualitative Open Codes
Domain 1: Teaching & acknowledging expectations	Knowledge, training	PD
Domain 2: Systemic resources, supports and climate	Support, communication	Leadership Communication
Domain 3: Implementation Integrity	Knowledge, training	Consistency PD
Domain 4: Philosophical views of behavior and discipline	Knowledge, training	PD Behavior motivation
Domain 5: Systemic cohesiveness and openness to change	Support, communication	Leadership Communication

Discussion

The objective of this research was to identify staff perceptions posing as barriers to

sustaining SWPBIS and present the resulting findings to school staff to support them in creating

relevant PD. Positive perception data was available but not a focus of this research and was

therefore not addressed unless needed to clarify a barrier.

Data from quantitative and qualitative results support the supposition that the most

significant barrier in staff perception of SWPBS lies in their understanding of behavior and

discipline. Comments related to behavior motivation dominated responses among all three open

ended questions, easily identifying it as the core category and one that required further analysis.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is the inherent bias unintentionally applied as a result of

being there being a sole researcher of this project. Also, perceptions are reflective of staff from

one school in a rural community in Northern New England. In addition, as a new staff member at

this school, I too experienced what other new staff experienced when confronted with the

language and events of PBIS. I knew what PBIS was but never formally introduced to how it

worked at the school. As a result I struggled with determining what behaviors qualified for an

ODR.

An important limitation was noted by a respondent related to questions 20, 24 & 25,

citing insufficient response options. Indeed, when new staff are asked if the school has

successfully implemented change in the past, they are not able to accurately provide an "agree"

or "disagree" response and a neutral response option was not available.

Implications

Since the school is beyond the implementation stage and has experienced behavior

success with students, almost all staff have bought into the framework even though they may not

understand the foundational concepts of behavior science underlying SWPBIS. Several staff

members made positive comments about it. "I am actually very proud of our school and staff as

we truly do a lot to help our students with behavior issues." This stands in contrast to comments

easily discernable as coming from new staff. "Very few people are in (on) what the expectations

and the plans are, and those people are not communicating with the rest of us. I definitely do not feel like it is a priority here."

Considerations for the SWPBIS team include veteran staff mentoring new staff or even including PBIS as a point of discussion on a teacher or staff mentor checklist. Another consideration is the development of a school PBIS manual which all staff can reference, which may help maintain framework consistency. A manual could be developed by the school with agreed upon tenets, yet differentiated based upon developmental and behavioral needs unique to the student body. Researchers continue testing the best approaches to behavior change and relaying results of evidence-based strategies to staff in an understandable way is another consideration for PD. Also, consistent PD could be provided online using pre-recorded materials and videos either developed by school staff or purchased. Finally, in the event that one does not exist, having SWPBIS leadership would benefit the school. The team would be able to research, plan, implement and evaluate various facets of the framework to the school's best advantage.

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Appendix A

SPBD Survey Questions

Domain 1: Teaching & Acknowledging Expectations

> *Responses choices are "Agree" or "Disagree."*

Question 1: I don't have time to teach the school-wide behavioral expectations.

Question 2: School-wide behavior supports may work in other schools, but I doubt it will work in ours.

Question 3: We should not have to teach students how to behave at school.

Question 4: I resent being asked to do one more thing.

Question 5: I feel that rewarding students is the same as bribing them.

Domain 2: Systemic Resources, Supports and Climate

> *Responses choices are "Agree" or "Disagree."*

Question 6: The climate at this school is positive.

Question 7: I have trust in my administrator's ability to lead us through change.

Question 8: Overall, I am satisfied with my job.

Question 9: I believe our school has (or will have) the necessary resources to support schoolwide positive behavior support.

Question 10: School-wide behavior support is likely to be yet another fad that comes and goes in this school.

Domain 3: Implementation Integrity

Responses choices are "Agree" or "Disagree."

Question 11: Currently, I teach the agreed upon school-wide behavior expectations to students.

Question 12: Currently, I acknowledge/reward students for meeting the agreed upon school-wide behavior expectations.

Question 13: Currently, I apply the agreed upon schoolwide disciplinary consequences.

Domain 4: Philosophical Views of Behavior and Discipline

Responses choices are "Agree" or "Disagree."

Question 14: When problem behaviors occur, we need to get tougher.

Question 15: The students at this school need to be held more responsible for their own behavior.

Question 16: Parents in the community don't seem to care about how their children behave at school.

Question 17: I believe we should reserve rewards for students exceeding expectations, not simply for meeting them.

Question 18: If students are not disciplined at home, they are not likely to accept any discipline at school.

Domain 5: Systemic Cohesiveness and Openness to Change

Responses choices are "Agree" or "Disagree."

Question 19: The staff at this school tends to resist change with concerns such as "We don't do it that way here."

Question 20: This school has successfully implemented change efforts in the past.

Question 21: My colleagues and I share a common philosophy for behavior and discipline.

Question 22: I suspect that my colleagues will not (or are not) consistently implementing the agreed upon schoolwide behavior plan.

Strengths & Needs

Knowledge & Training

Question 23: When it comes to the concepts and procedures of positive behavior supports, my level of understanding is:

Responses choices are "Unfamiliar", "Limited", "Basic", "High"

Question 24: Over the past year, about how many hours of professional development in behavior supports have you received?

Responses choices are: 0, 1, 2-3, 4-6, 7-10.

Question 25: If you have received professional development in behavior supports, did you find it to be helpful?

Responses choices are, "Yes", "No, I have not received professional development."

Level of Support for SWPBS

Question 26: If you are familiar with schoolwide positive behavior supports, please indicate your current level of support or commitment.

Responses choices are:

I agree with this effort, but I do not plan to participate in leadership or committee work.

I am unfamiliar with positive behavior supports.

I disagree with this effort, but I will not resist it.

I strongly agree with this effort; I plan to actively support it.

I strongly disagree with this effort

Communication

Question 27: Please rate the communication at this school.

Responses choices are:

Good: Communication is clear and timely.

Adequate: I tend to be aware of changes before they occur.

Needs improvement: I am sometimes unaware of changes.

Poor: I am unaware of changes that affect staff and students.

SPBD Staff Comments for Open-ended Questions

Strengths

Question 28: When it comes to behavior and discipline, what is working well in this school?

Needs

Question 29: What is needed to make it better?

Concerns

Question 30: When you think about school wide positive behavior supports, what concerns do you have? Please be frank and answer in complete sentences.

Questions retrieved from

https://spbdsupport.com/Content/samplereports/CloudyDayElementary.v2.pdf