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Effects of a Positive Behavior Support System on a Rural Middle School

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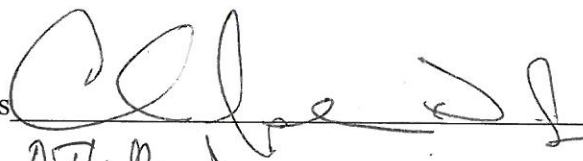
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Effects of a Positive Behavior
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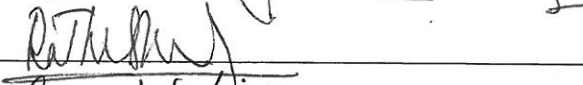
Jessee Megan Helbert

Longwood University

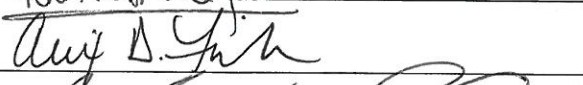
Dr. Christopher Jones



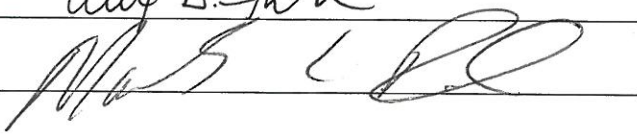
Dr. Rachel Mathews



Dr. Alix Fink



Dr. Mark Fink



Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of a positive behavior intervention system (PBS) on eighth grade students located in rural middle school. Office referral data was collected from the 2004-2005 school year—comparing September-December 2004 (Group 1) behavioral office referrals to January-April 2005 (Group 2) behavioral office referrals. Group 1 data represented pre-PBS and Group 2 represented post-PBS. The data was analyzed with a paired sample t-test of dependence and showed an increase of behavior referrals for Group 2. However, due to the study's limitations and confounding variables alternative explanations are discussed.

Effects of a Positive Behavior Support System on a Rural Middle School

Middle School Behaviors

Middle school is a critical time for the development of our countries future leaders. These adolescents are at a crucial time in their life in which they are trying to discover who they are, where they fit in, and what they aspire to be (Kellam, Brown, Rubin, & Ensminger, 1983). Through the process of puberty, adolescents are not only in search of self-discovery, but they are also seeking familiarity with their peer groups. Parents, administrators, and educators often recognize a change in behavior once a child has entered middle school. Many issues face adolescents such as: asserting independence, finding a self-image, following popular culture, striving to fit into the established status quo, and dealing with the peer pressure issue that is so prevalent at that stage of development. Administrators and educators at the middle school level have an extreme amount of pressure placed upon them in fostering and developing soon to be adults for the real world (Tobin, Sugai, & Colvin, 1996).

Middle School Risk Factors

Students at the middle school level frequently display aggressive and antisocial behaviors due to a high frequency of non-school risk factors including poverty, poor parenting, and consumption of drugs and alcohol (Mehas, Boling, Sobieniak, Sprague, Burke, & Hagan, 1998). One of the major challenges middle school administrators face involves coping with chronic discipline problems that continue due to ineffective strategies (Tobin, Sugai, & Colvin, 2000). Middle school is often a time that these problematic behaviors can be corrected before adversely effecting students' overall

quality of life.

Early implementation of positive behavior supports

Educators, administrators, and parents strive to mold their adolescent into successful young adults through a process of behavior modification, punishments, and rewards (Mehas, et. al, 1998). As stated earlier, middle school is a time of self-discovery. Many adolescents begin to display inappropriate behaviors in academic, home, and social settings. However, if a system of positive behavior supports is initiated before these “typical adolescent behaviors” begin, then it is more likely for adolescents to make positive behavior choices (Tobin, et. al., 2000). Children are more malleable at a younger age helping to draw the conclusion that the implementation of a positive behavior support system at an early academic age is more effective for modifying behavior.

Positive Behavior Supports

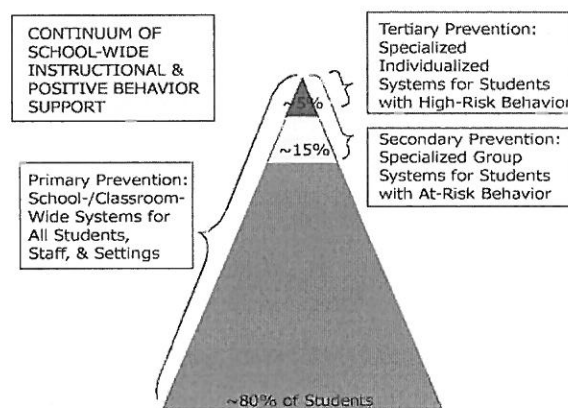
As educators, it is important to prepare our students, both academically and behaviorally, to ensure their success as an adult. Behaviors exhibited in the classroom can impede upon their academic growth (Gable, Quinn, Rutherford, and Howell, 1998). Many educators rely upon various strategies, concise rules and expectations, teaching methods, classroom setup, and positive reinforcement to address inappropriate behaviors in the classroom. However, these efforts are not always successful for students -- both with and without disabilities (Quinn, Gable, Rutherford, Howell, and Hoffman, 2000). It is important that educators ensure that all students receive the best quality of education possible in an environment conducive to learning—not only involving classroom set up and materials but the implementation of a PBS to ensure

behaviors are not distracting or impeding the learning of others. It is apparent that one of the positive aspects of a school-wide positive behavior support system is the reduction of problematic behaviors thus increasing the quality of instruction time, therefore increasing the students' quality of academic learning. Recently, researchers have stressed the importance of proactive positive strategies when addressing problem behaviors (Elliot, Hamburg, & Williams, 1998; Gotfredson, Gotfredson, & Hybl, 1993; Walker, Horner, Sugai, Bullis, Sprague, Bricker & Kaufman, 1996; Sugai, Horner, Dunlap, Heneman, Lewis, Nelson, 2000). This issue has also captured the attention of the public with numerous legislation bills, including IDEA 1997 and re-affirmed by IDEIA 2004. Using the current legislation as their guide, Dunlap and Koegel (1999) stated that there are many strategies that can be used in addressing problem behaviors, including conducting a functional behavioral assessment, creating measurable and observable behavioral goals, and developing a Behavioral Intervention Plan that focuses on positive behavior support strategies. Positive behavior support strategies involve the systematic teaching of appropriate behaviors that can transfer across numerous settings--overall improving the students' quality of life.

Definition.

Positive Behavior Supports (PBS or PBIS) are a "team based system approach" implemented school wide in order to educate all students on socially appropriate behaviors (Sugai, et. al., 2000). Sugai et. al., (2000) stat that a PBS is a proactive behavior system striving to clearly define behaviors and educate students on appropriate behaviors to ensure the quality of education of all students. Positive Behavior Supports offers assistance and development of positive behaviors in all aspects of life including

work, social, recreational, academic, and community atmospheres (Carr, Dunlap, Horner, Koegel, Turnbull, Sailor, Anderson, Albin, Koegel, & Fox, 2004). PBSs also strive to teach behaviors across four distinct levels: school wide, specific setting (non-classroom), specific setting (classroom), and individual settings. In effect, the usage of positive behavior supports should increase the student's overall quality of life. Positive behavior supports transcend multiple prevention levels and serve students with mild, moderate, and extreme problem behaviors.



1. From: <http://www.pbis.org/schoolwide.htm>

Prevention Levels.

Three primary prevention levels are placed along a timeline as set by the organization and implementation of a PBS (Walker, Horner, Sugai, Bullis, Sprague, Bricker, Kaufman, 1996). These prevention levels start at a minimum intensity level and increase in severity. The overall goal of a PBS is to increase students' quality of life.

Primary prevention calls for the use of behavior management skills, use of instructional best practices, and support from school administrators through school-wide

disciplinary actions in order to decrease problem behaviors (Sugai, 2002). Those students who do not benefit from primary prevention strategies enter into secondary prevention methods, which consist of explicit behavioral instruction and teaching of various strategies in a small group setting in hopes to aide in the reduction of the pre-existing behavior problems (Sugai, 2002). Complex behavior problems that are resistant to Primary and Secondary prevention level teaching are addressed at the Tertiary prevention level. For students at this level, functional behavior assessments and behavior intervention plans behavior plans are developed and implemented in order to reduce the duration and intensity of the problem behavior (Sugai, 2002).

All administrators and educators should recognize that students and their behaviors are not the same. This being, educators and administrators can classify all students under a three-tiered model for school wide discipline systems, under the classifications of Universal, Selected, and Targeted/Intensive (Sprague, Sugai, Horner & Walker, 1999). However, for the purpose of this study Universal is synonymous to Primary, Selected equates Secondary, and Targeted/Intensive is equivalent to Tertiary. This model acts as a funnel in order to better serve students' levels of problematic behaviors.

Universal/Primary

The Universal (Primary Prevention) tier of a school wide discipline strategy is concentrated upon all students through a school-wide system of supports. At the Universal level, social skills and behavior expectations are taught. Students' behavioral progress is actively supervised and monitored. During these observations, students are positively reinforced for appropriate behaviors. However, inappropriate behaviors are

managed through firm, fair, and corrective discipline. Students who do not progress under the Universal tier of the school wide discipline strategy and are found at risk are funneled into the second tier, Selected.

Selected/Secondary

The Selected (Secondary Prevention) tier is estimated to serve seven to ten percent of students within an academic setting (Sprague et. al., 1999). These students are identified as being at risk for problematic behaviors and receive academic support and intensive social skills training in a small group setting. These at risk students are usually paired with an adult mentor in order to “check in” with and learn various self-behavior management strategies and aide in the assistance of self-behavior management strategies. Those students who are not having their needs continuously met at the Universal and Selected tiers advance to the third and final tier of the school wide disciplinary strategy, Targeted/Intensive.

Targeted-Intensive/Tertiary

The Targeted-Intensive (Tertiary Prevention) level of the school wide discipline strategy is estimated to serve three to five percent of students within an academic setting (Sprague et. al., 1999). These individuals are labeled high at-risk for problematic behaviors. Due to the intensity of their behaviors, these students receive individual interventions and behavior plans that concentrate on extreme intensive social skills teaching and collaboration amongst the school and pertinent outside agencies located in the community. Parents of students in the Targeted/Intensive tier are trained and involved in the collaboration with outside agencies.

PBS Guidelines.

According to George, Harrower, and Knoster (2003), there are six basic guidelines that are contingent upon the success of a school's Positive Behavior Support System (PBS). These guidelines are established in a step-by-step process in order to mold a notable PBS.

1. Ensure all faculty, staff, and administration are familiar with the school improvement, including its goals and objectives.
2. Build faculty involvement, allowing for the staff's input on the design and implementation of the PBS. A key concept at this stage is that all parties are in agreement concerning the PBS objectives (both long and short term) and data collection methods.
3. A system of evaluation needs to be activated in order to collect data on the effectiveness of the PBS and to hold schools accountable for the appropriate accomplishments of the goals and objectives.
4. Taking into consideration the given schools goals and objectives, administrators and faculty must come together and brainstorm on various strategies that will aide them in the instruction and implementation of the PBS.
5. Creating a specific calendar date for which the PBS will initiate. This includes discussing students' behavior expectations, teaching appropriate behaviors to all students, and the administration of positive reinforcement.
6. Implementation of the PBS, assessments, evaluations, and modifications must be in place in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the PBS.

Ideally, if a PBS is implemented effectively using the above guidelines, there will

be a decrease need of disciplinary procedures, particularly when considering office referrals, which is the precursor to other disciplinary procedures with a more substantial consequence (George et. al., 2003).

Office Referrals

By simply using data that schools already collect, office discipline referrals, number of enrolled students, total number of school days, and the ratio of office discipline referrals by student location and date, it is easy to evaluate the effectiveness of a schools behavior intervention plan (Tobin, Sugai, Colvin, 2000).

Definition of an office referral.

An office referral is defined as: a student participated in an event or a behavior that violated a school rule, a staff member observed or identified the event or behavior, a member of the administrative staff documented the event in writing, and delivered a relevant consequence (Sugai, 2000). Office referrals and suspension rates aide in the identification of representative student statistical factors. These factors include discipline rates for minority students, patterns of discipline for students with and without disabilities, identification of needed improvements in school wide behavior systems, and the need for staff members to obtain further training. Discipline referral information can provide an extensive “database” containing general information concerning students, including name, grade level, gender, referral date, reason for referral, including observable and measurable behaviors, staff who witness and report the incident, and administrative actions (Tobin et. al., 2000). It is important to note that office disciplinary referrals show more than student behaviors; they assess the effectiveness of the schools’ current disciplinary system. However, offices discipline

referral collection data can easily be skewed based upon administrative and educator inconsistencies.

Potential Confounds.

The use of office discipline referrals in order to collect data on a schools' PBS must be used cautiously. Teachers vary, similar to students, and therefore offer various responses to various situations (Sprague et. al., 1999). It is important for all faculty and staff to possess a clear contingency of referable offenses as not to misrepresent PBS data collection. The personal and professional relationship held between administrators and educators may confound data collection (Sprague et. al., 1999). Teachers who do not feel supported by their administrator(s), concerning discipline, might be hesitant to refer a student for an otherwise referable offense. It is contingent upon staff, faculty, and administrators to use collaboration and management strategies across the continuum of the PBS. Due to the nature of student behavior, office discipline referral rates may vary depending upon seasonal factors, including number of students being referred, prevalence of appropriate and inappropriate behaviors, gender, and differences amongst grade levels (Tobin, Sugai, Colvin, 2000).

Statement of purpose.

Dealing with problematic behaviors is not an easy task and can impede upon classroom instruction time (George et. al, 2003). Through the use of Positive Behavior Supports students are able to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to improve behaviors leading to an overall betterment of the students' quality of life. Students at the middle school level are susceptible to many behaviors deemed problematic by parents, administrators, and teachers. Through the use of PBS, middle school students

will have the opportunity to replace their inappropriate behaviors with those considered more appropriate. An evaluation tool beneficial for PBS evaluation is the examining of office referral data. Therefore, it is my purpose to collect data upon the effectiveness of a PBS at the middle school level, using office referral data.

Hypothesis: The use of PBS will significantly decrease the number of behavioral office referrals for January to April, 2005.

Method

Setting

The setting for this collaborative research project is a rural middle school in Southeast Virginia. Total enrollment for the 2002 school year was four hundred and sixty nine students. Demographically, seventy-two percent of the students are African American (state average, thirty two percent), less than one percent are American Indian (state average, less than one percent), zero percent are Asian (state average, three percent), one percent are Hispanic (state average, five percent), and White/Caucasian students account for twenty-seven percent of the school population (state average, sixty-two percent). This middle school is classified as a Title I school and fifty-nine percent of students receive free or reduced lunch.

Subjects

Subjects for this study include any eighth grade student who has received a behavioral office referral for the 2004-2005 school year, disregarding those who have received office referrals for skipping class or for being tardy. Tardys were eliminated from this study because they are cumulative thus influencing the number of referrals written later in the school year.

Instruments

The instrument used in the study to determine the effectiveness of the school wide positive behavior intervention system was office referral data. Office referral data was examined for the 2004-2005 school year.

Procedure

A cover letter explaining my methods and the purpose of this research was sent to the participating middle school. Upon receiving permission from the participating school I, compiled a data collection sheet ensuring confidentiality of the middle school and the referred students. Contact with the school principal was made via email and a convenient time was scheduled for my data collection. While collecting data at the given school system, I examined office referral folders made for each student who received an office referral. Students who received office discipline referrals that were not behavior related, tardiness and skipping class, were eliminated from this study. Convenient sampling was used. After collecting behavioral office referral data I created two groups based upon the date the office referral was submitted. Group one represents the total amount of behavioral referrals received from September to December 2004, before the school-wide PBS was implemented. Group two represents the total number of behavioral referrals received after the implementation of the school wide positive behavior intervention system ranging from January to April 2005. However, it is important to note that the students comprised in Group 1 are the same students within Group 2.

Analysis of Data

To determine the effectiveness of a school wide behavior intervention system in a rural middle school a paired sample t-test of dependence was used. The purpose of a

paired sample t-test is to determine if the mean difference between the two variables differs from zero (Green & Salkind, 2005). A paired sample t-test allows for a repeated measure design in which subjects are tested on two differing occasions (Green & Salkind, 2005).

Results

A total of eighty students accounted for two hundred and three total office referrals for the 2004-2005 school year. However, thirty-eight office referrals were dismissed because they were not behavioral related and eight students were dismissed from this study because all of the office referrals were non-behavioral. These factors resulted in a total of one hundred sixty-five total behavioral office referrals for seventy-two students. Doing a comparison of the two groups it was found that Group 1 (September-December 2004) accumulated 68 behavioral office referrals whereas, Group 2 (January-April 2005) accounted for 97 total behavioral office referrals. In comparing the number of behavior related office referrals of the two groups, the data shows that Group 2 (January-April 2005) accounted for twenty-nine more referrals than Group 1.

The following statistics were obtained using a paired sample T-test of dependence. Group 1 (September to December 2004) mean office referral rate was 0.94 and Group 2 (January to April 2005) mean office referral rate was 1.33 (Table 1). The standard deviation of Group 1 was 1.24 (Table 1) and Group 2's standard deviation was 1.28 (Table 1). The correlation between Group 1 and 2 was 0.47 (Table 2) with statistical significance at the 0.062 (Table 2) level. In examining the groups paired differences the mean was -.39 (Table 3) with a standard deviation of 1.74 (Table 3).

The t -value was -1.9 with a 71 degree of freedom. While examining the data it was determined that, I failed to reject the hypothesis.

Table 1

Statistical Data of Behavioral Office Referrals During the 2004-2005 School Year.

| Group | N | M | SD | SEM |
|-------------------------------|----|------|------|------|
| 1 (September – December 2004) | 72 | .94 | 1.24 | .147 |
| 2 (January – April 2005) | 72 | 1.33 | 1.28 | 1.51 |

Table 2

Statistical Data for the Paired Differences for Group 1 and Group 2

| Groups | M | SD | SEM |
|--|------|------|-----|
| Groups 1 and 2 (September-December 2004 and January-April 2005) | -.39 | 1.74 | .21 |

Table 3

Statistical Data for the Paired Samples Significance Level

| Groups | t | df | Statistical Significance |
|----------------|------|------|--------------------------|
| Groups 1 and 2 | -1.9 | 71 | .062 |

Discussion

Disruptive classroom behaviors can impede the academic growth of students (Gable, Quinn, Rutherford, and Howell, 1998). Through the use of a positive behavior support system disruptive behaviors can be reduced. PBS is a proactive behavior

system striving to clearly define behaviors and educate students on appropriate behaviors to ensure the quality of education of all students is not impeded by inappropriate classroom behaviors (Sugai et. al., 2000). Through the data interpretation, it was apparent that the faculty and staff of the rural middle school had distributed more office referrals after the implementation of the PBS. This information has both positive and negative aspects.

An increase of office referrals rates for the second half of the school year, after PBS training, might reflect that educators were more aware of referable offenses and in turn began referring more students to the office for behavioral problems. The increase number of behavioral referrals for January-April 2005 school period could reflect that the PBS has helped educators to realize the importance of holding their students accountable for all negative behaviors exhibited within the classroom.

An increase in behavioral referrals after the implementation of the PBS could also reflect that the administration, faculty, and staff of the rural middle school did not properly follow through with the implementation of the PBS. Guidelines given for the implementation of the PBS call for assessments, evaluations, and modifications to be in place in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the PBS (George, Harrower, & Knoster 2003). During my times at the middle school I saw no form of on-going assessment or evaluation in place to convey the effectiveness of the PBS.

During my data collection, I observed office referrals written uniformly from all educators during the month of February. The faculty referring a student would give the school rule broken and then explain in further detail how that rule was breached. For example, School Rule 4.5 Student will have appropriate conduct in class—The student

violated this rule by shouting during classroom instruction. However, March and April office referrals were not written as detailed. In fact, most referrals only contained one sentence as to why the student was being referred. Through an interview with Dr. F. Howe and Dr. S. Keith I discovered that many of the training workshops for the faculty were given in February. Leading me to assume that during the month of February all administrators, faculty, and staff were following the given PBS guidelines. However, for months following April I gather that faculty digressed. Dr. Howe and Dr. Keith also stated that a possible increase of office referrals after the implementation of the PBS could be because the directors of the program did not give adequate support and feedback.

Overall, the effectiveness of the school-wide PBS cannot be stated—even though the data shows an increase of behavioral referrals for Group 2. The data can be interoperated in various ways—showing the PBS as either effective or non-effective. Therefore, I feel in order to determine the true effectiveness of the PBS further investigation is needed.

Limitations.

Due to the fact of new administration for the 2004-2005 school year (Principal and Vice Principal) I was unable to collect office referral data from the previous school year. The administration informed me they were unsure of the location for last year's referrals. Therefore, a comparison of office referral data was not made of Spring 2004 to Spring 2005. It can be hypothesized that the disorganization of the school has affected the faculty and staff in a negative way—leaving them frustrated and uncooperative in the implementation of the PBS.

Suggestions for Further Research.

In order to determine if the school-wide PBS is effective for the given rural middle school I suggest that a survey be completed by all administrators and faculty concerning their perceptions of student behavior before and after the implementation of the PBS. I also suggest that January-April 2004 data be compared to January-April 2005 data to eliminate the possibility that usually more office referrals are made in the second semester of the school year.

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Appendix A
Permission Letter to School Division

Date: February 22, 2005
To: Administration of Greenville Middle School
From: Jesse Helbert

I am currently working on a collaboration research project in order to obtain my masters degree in special education from Longwood University. I am writing to request your permission to conduct a study in the Greenville County Middle School in regards to the effectiveness of the Positive Behavior Support System (PBS) recently implemented within the school. As you are aware, PBS explicitly teaches appropriate behaviors across various domains in order to increase students overall quality of life. No interaction with students, faculty, or staff will be necessary. Office discipline referral data will also be collected in numerical form as an assessment of the school wide PBS.

We assure you the name of the school division will not be used and the study will be completed in total anonymity. You may request at any time to withdrawal from this study.

Thank you,

Jessee Megan Helbert
Longwood University Graduate Student