

# Gaining Staff Support for Schoolwide Positive Behavior Supports: A Guide for Teams

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**S**choolwide positive behavioral intervention and supports (SWPBS) is a multitiered framework of supports designed to address a wide variety of social, emotional, and behavioral needs. Universal supports promote an encouraging school climate whereby all students are actively taught behavioral expectations and reinforced for appropriate behavior; supplemental supports are provided at the targeted level for those who are unresponsive to universal supports; and intensive supports are implemented for individual students with chronic levels of challenging behavior. At all levels of support, local data are utilized to determine student needs and response to interventions (Sugai & Horner, 2006; Sugai, Horner, & McIntosh, 2008). Many positive outcomes are associated with SWPBS, including reduced rates of office disciplinary referrals, detentions, and suspensions (e.g., Bohanon et al., 2006; Bradshaw, Reinke, Brown, Bevans, & Leaf, 2008; Scott & Barrett, 2004) and increased instructional time (e.g., Lassen, Steele, & Sailor, 2006; Luiselli, Putnam, Handler, & Feinberg, 2005). Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that SWPBS may be particularly beneficial to students at risk for and with emotional and behavioral disorders. Without the infrastructure of multitiered assessment and intervention that SWPBS yield, the prognosis for students with emotional and behavioral challenges becomes increasingly bleak (Gunter & Jack, 1994; Lewis, Jones, Horner, & Sugai, 2010; Severson, Walker, Hope-

Doolittle, Kratochwill, & Gresham, 2007).

Despite the positive student outcomes associated with SWPBS, many schools struggle with implementation. One reason for this struggle may reside in the complex nature of systemic change and the propensity of educators, administrators, and policy makers alike to underestimate this complexity (Fixen, Naoom, Blasé, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005; Muscott et al., 2004). When the complexity of schoolwide reform is not appreciated, creating systemic readiness may be a neglected step. Without readiness, challenges in initial implementation may result in failure to achieve meaningful and sustainable change. Too often, we prioritize the procedural tasks associated with an innovation and underestimate the need to actively foster the readiness and support from the very school staff crucial to implementation (Adelman & Taylor, 2007; Hall & Hord, 2011).

Only within the last decade has the field of SWPBS begun to address the importance of staff perceptions in implementation, and, as found with other innovation adoptions, staff support or "buy-in" appears to be key. For example, SWPBS coordinators and coaches have rated staff buy-in as one of the top facilitating factors to implementation and lack of buy-in as a critical barrier (Kincaid, Childs, Blase, & Wallace, 2007). Similarly, in interviews of SWPBS coordinators, Lohrmann, Forman, Martin, and Palmieri (2008) also found that main barriers to successful implementation were directly related to staff perceptions.

Notably, this study highlighted the philosophical differences held by teachers in opposition with SWPBS principles. For example, many staff emphasized punitive responses rather than proactive or instructional ones, and even more so with students with emotional and behavioral challenges. Many also were opposed to providing rewards for behaviors, believing that students should be intrinsically motivated to do the right thing (Lohrmann et al.). Furthermore, team members supporting student needs at the individual level reported that variables related to teacher perceptions and practices were among the most pervasive barriers to implementation (Bambara, Nonnemacher, & Kern, 2009). Most (84%) reported that conflicting beliefs of staff interfered with the implementation of behavioral supports. For example, attempts to understand environmental influences of problem behaviors were often viewed as "making excuses for the child." Difficulty with staff perceptions and support for SWPBS may be particularly challenging in secondary schools. Recently, high school behavior leadership teams rated staff commitment or buy-in to SWPBS as one of their most salient challenges and top priorities. In fact, only 30% of team members reported that they obtained a majority of staff support for implementation. Similar to the previous studies, teams reported challenges with differing opinions over the philosophy such as "old values and attitudes" about school discipline, perceptions of lack of sustainability, staff stress from multiple mandates or initiative

fatigue, and lack of staff training (Flannery, Sugai, & Anderson, 2009).

Building knowledge and skills seems to be a necessary, but not quite sufficient, approach to addressing resistance toward change. Despite the importance of teacher perceptions, this contributing variable is often overlooked in professional development models. Teachers often fail to find the training they have received to be useful to them in the field (Garrahy, Cothran, & Kulinna, 2005; Oliver & Reschley, 2010). Tillery, Varjas, Meyers, and Collins (2010) found that despite having received a full year of training, participating teachers continued to demonstrate limited knowledge of SWPBS. Not surprisingly, then, the ability to manage student behavior, particularly those of students with special needs, is among the top concerns of teachers (Meister & Melnick, 2003). To sufficiently plan for the professional development of staff, needs assessment data should be collected.

Gathering data to drive implementation is an integral component of SWPBS. Because SWPBS is not a packaged program but a framework, it requires teams to tailor implementation to the unique needs of their students, system, and staff. Thus, creating readiness for SWPBS involves collecting student needs assessment data such as student discipline, social-emotional screeners, attendance, suspensions, and expulsions. Additionally, creating readiness involves collecting systems data via tools such as the Schoolwide Evaluation Tool or the Benchmarks of Quality (see <http://www.pbis.org> for access to these tools) to assess level of implementation and assist in future action planning. Creating readiness also involves collecting staff needs assessment data. However, seldom do teams proactively and systematically consider the unique needs of the staff—the very individuals charged with implementation of SWPBS. Rather, there is a tendency to apply a

standardized form of professional development across all staff, irrespective of the practices, knowledge, roles, and beliefs they hold.

We advocate for thoughtful, intentional consideration of the current practices, knowledge, beliefs, and perspectives of all school staff, both certificated and classified school personnel who regularly work with students. Rather than overlooking the perceptions and level of readiness of staff and applying a standardized form of professional development for all, we suggest school teams take a different approach. Similar to the manner in which one considers the background knowledge and experiences of learners in the classroom, we suggest teams consider the unique perspectives of staff and adjust professional development and supports more precisely. This approach may allow meeting the needs of staff both more effectively and more efficiently. Likewise, similar to the manner in which we suggest teachers view problematic student behavior, by reframing the behavior as functional and communicative of needs, we suggest teams view staff resistance as functional, purposeful communication of needs and concerns. Instead of side-stepping resistance with the hope that staff will eventually “come on board,” we suggest proactively addressing resistance in the spirit of supporting staff through the difficult change process.

#### **Strategies for Understanding and Supporting Staff Needs**

Most SWPBS researchers suggest that a buy-in by 80% of staff is necessary to ensure long-term sustainability and success (e.g., Handler et al., 2007; Muscott et al., 2004; Sugai & Horner, 2006). However, despite the importance of staff support for SWPBS, specific strategies for attaining this level of staff commitment are not readily accessible. To address this need, we

offer strategies for teams that are based upon both our experiences working with schools and a comprehensive review of the systems change and SWPBS literature bases. We have identified five salient themes in the literature and created five key strategies to foster staff buy-in and support for SWPBS: (a) develop a clear understanding of staff perspectives of behavior and discipline, (b) secure resources, (c) provide a strong rationale for SWPBS, (d) build skills and knowledge, and (e) facilitate a shared vision and ownership. Themes are presented in numerical order and contain action steps for consideration by school teams. Specific examples, tools, and resources for facilitating buy-in and addressing resistance are provided to facilitate implementation. Links to supporting research and tips for handling common problems are offered. It is important that strategies be driven by needs assessment data and should thus be considered with a flexible lens towards applicability. Teams are encouraged to utilize these ideas as a framework—to stimulate discussions about what might work best for their schools.

#### ***Step 1: Develop a Clear Understanding of Staff Perceptions***

Because staff perceptions can affect the implementation of broad change initiatives in schools, initial actions should include assessing perceptions of the status of current systems, structures, and needs prior to implementation (Adelman & Taylor, 2007; Hall & Hord, 2011). Areas of assessment include those perceptions that, as indicated in both the systems-change and SWPBS literature, act as inhibiting and facilitating factors: the need for change and the need for SWPBS, administrative supports, available resources, personal knowledge and skills, beliefs/philosophy, school climate, and personal commitment to SWPBS. Assessment methods could include surveys and interviews (Hall & Hord, 2011).

**Table 1** EXAMPLE SURVEY ITEMS

Area	Item
Need for change	I am satisfied with the manner in which we handle discipline in this school.
Need for SWPBS	I believe that SWPBS will lead to meaningful outcomes in my classroom and with my students.
Administrative support	I believe my administrators are supportive of SWPBS implementation and will make a (long-term) commitment to its implementation.
Resources	I believe that we will be provided the necessary resources to implement and sustain SWPBS.
Knowledge and skills	I feel confident in my ability to implement a wide range of proactive behavior support strategies.
Philosophy	I believe that reward/reinforcement is a form of bribery.
School climate	Staff at this school are resistant to change.
Personal commitment	I support moving forward with the implementation of SWPBS in my school.

Surveys offer an opportunity to understand the perceptions of all staff who regularly work with students. It is important to remember key aspects of format, timing, staff availability, and privacy for survey completion. Teams could consider using online formats such as Survey Monkey (<http://www.surveymonkey.com>) to create individualized surveys (see *Table 1* for examples of survey items). We have created a Staff Perceptions of Behavior and Discipline (SPBD) survey that is designed to assess staff perceptions central to the themes discussed here (readers may contact the lead author for free access to this online survey). We encourage teams to proactively communicate how results will be disseminated once information is gathered (e.g., who will read the responses, when they will be read, and what will be done with information).

We suggest teams create items based upon the unique needs and situations of their school and consider questions in multiple formats, including multiple choice, short answer, and open-ended questions. The advantages of closed questions are ease in survey completion and data analysis. However, closed questions do not allow staff to elaborate on their concerns or offer suggestions. A specific example of an open-ended question might be the Statement of Concern: "When you think about [SWPBS], what are your concerns? Please be frank and answer in complete sentences" (Hall & Hord, 2011, p. 79).

This type of item is time intensive to analyze, but because it requires introspection to draw upon one's knowledge, experiences, and beliefs, it is often worth the investment.

Interviews may also be used to supplement survey data and can be conducted on an individual or small-group basis. Interviews require consideration of staff availability and time constraints. Because full staff participation is not reasonably attainable in typical schools, consider interviewing small, representative groups such as grade-level team, department, and professional learning community (PLC) leaders. Alternatively, teams could create a sign-up sheet for staff to make individual appointments.

Teams are encouraged to proceed through the remaining four strategies as guided by needs assessment data. Although all four strategies may facilitate implementation of SWPBS, the level of attention each requires will differ as a function of staff needs. For example, if staff overwhelmingly feel as if a change in current disciplinary practices is needed and feel SWPBS will be effective with their students, then teams may decide to spend less time with the procedures within Step 3 (revealing a need for change) and emphasize other strategies as indicated by data.

#### *Step 2: Secure Resources for SWPBS*

It is important that resources such as administrative support, funding, and time are secured for

ongoing implementation of SWPBS. It is just as important that staff are aware that these resources exist; thus, maintaining transparency throughout this step is critical. Survey data should provide information about the perceptions of staff resources, both at the building and administrator level. These data will inform teams about what is currently lacking or needed in their buildings.

#### *Administrative supports.*

Administrative leadership is critical to the systemic change process. When staff members believe that administration is committed to implementing a change, they are more likely to follow through with implementation (Adelman & Taylor, 2007; Fixen et al., 2005). Conversely, if staff members perceive a lack of administrative support for SWPBS, then this perception can serve as a barrier to implementation (Kincaid et al., 2007; Lohrmann et al., 2008). Thus, the building administrator must be actively involved and make contributions throughout all processes (McGlinchey & Goodman, 2008; Sugai et al., 2008). This requires a rigorous campaign of effort and visibility that links administrators to the schoolwide team, data dissemination, knowledge, and long-term commitment. As active team members, administrators attend most meetings and trainings and facilitate staff discussions. As data managers, they aid in the compilation and dissemination of school and district data, which includes both sharing

data and requesting feedback on information shared. It is important that administrators are knowledgeable—that they are fully cognizant of the foundational principles of SWPBS and are able to partake in meaningful dialogue (i.e., able to discuss both procedural issues and philosophical issues). It is important that administrators seek staff input in making decisions but also hold staff accountable once those decisions are made. Finally, administrators demonstrate commitment to the initiative by ensuring that the necessary support and resources are provided on a continuing basis (Fixen et al., 2005). This includes a scheduled time for SWPBS work that is protected and built into building calendars.

*Link to existing capacity.* An inventory of current resources and supports allows teams to build upon existing capacity. This not only respects the current knowledge and activities of staff, but also reduces the amount of change necessary for implementation. We suggest teams begin by carefully considering all current resources in place; these resources include not just funding (e.g., for student reward systems) and time (e.g., for collaboration), but also include people. Survey data can be used to identify those who are already familiar with and supportive of SWPBS. Some staff may be implementing specific practices associated with SWPBS that simply require system-wide alignment for greater sustainability and impact. For example, the counselor may be implementing an evidence-based social emotional learning program for small groups of students, but additional resources and supports would be necessary for broader impact and sustainability.

### **Step 3: Reveal a Need for Change and a Need for SWPBS**

As complex systems, schools establish a state of equilibrium in their day-to-day operations. Change often results in disruption to this

equilibrium, and some resistance to this change is natural and to be expected (Noell & Gansle, 2009). Staff members may be more motivated to change when they perceive a need for change in the practices currently ingrained in the system (Adelman & Taylor, 2007; Rogers, 2003). Conversely, staff members are less likely to support a change when they feel more or less satisfied with the current systems (Lohrmann et al., 2008). Therefore, a case must be made for change that addresses the current practices, provides a rationale for change, and provides a promising alternative (e.g., SWPBS).

*Reveal a need for change.* To reveal a need for change in current disciplinary policies and procedures, teams are encouraged to compile school data from all available sources (e.g., local assessments, attendance, tardies, office referrals, suspensions). This may also include district-wide and state data to provide a larger context (e.g., test scores, disciplinary actions, dropout rates). Data may be presented in a variety of ways and should accompany sufficient opportunities for reflection and questions. For example, some teams allocate a staff meeting for the purpose of presenting data and then follow this presentation with small group work for reflection and discussion of data.

*Offer SWPBS as a beneficial alternative.* After presenting the need for change in current disciplinary practices, SWPBS is then offered as a promising alternative to the status quo. It should be clear to the staff that the benefits of SWPBS outweigh the costs (i.e., the investment of time and energy needed to change daily practice). Specific issues identified through assessment data that are of particular interest to the staff should be highlighted. For example, if staff feel as if academics are the priority, a reasonable perception given the requirements of No Child Left Behind, teams could showcase the strong relationship between proactive social, emotional, and behavioral

supports and increased academic achievement. Some teams find success in presenting SWPBS at staff meetings and again in small group work during PLC time.

*Emphasize connections to schools successfully implementing SWPBS.* If staff believe that SWPBS is likely to lead to socially meaningful outcomes in *their* school with *their* students, they may be more likely to support implementation (Lohrmann et al., 2008). Partner findings from the literature with authentic examples from schools successfully implementing SWPBS to demonstrate how SWPBS aligns with specific building needs. Testimonials of peers are powerful and resonate strongly with teachers, often more than data alone (Landrum, Cook, Tankersley, & Fitzgerald, 2007). Thus, we encourage teams to identify examples and outcomes from regional schools and consider physical and virtual site visits with regional schools. This is an opportunity to add authenticity and credibility and add “real faces” to SWPBS. We recommend teams locate schools with similar demographics and characteristics and showcase these data. Some school teams have invited local teams to come speak with staff and share their experiences with SWPBS. People commonly need to see a situation in context in order to process its validity; therefore, consider showcasing examples of situations commonly faced by staff and students. For example, a team could offer video examples of schools addressing bullying, coupled with research materials and data for small groups. Other formats for sharing example(s) include discussions at staff meetings, small group work, or webinars.

### **Step 4: Build Knowledge and Skills**

Staff confidence in their ability to implement SWPBS within their current job role may affect fidelity of implementation (Rogers, 2003). As the primary vehicle for providing classified and certified staff with continued education and feedback, professional development is critical.

It must be linked to specific certified and classified staff needs and thoughtfully planned (Begeny & Martens, 2006; Fullan, 2001).

Determining the type of professional development needed, intensity, and format for training is a pivotal job for school teams. This process is to be guided by both student and staff data gathered in Steps 1 and 3.

*Seek purposeful training experiences.* Trainings can be organized with consideration of the following:

(a) whole staff versus small groups, (b) mandatory versus optional, and (c) selected versus voluntary participation. In addition, instructional methods will be driven by the content. For example, a session on systems frameworks may be more instructional than interactive.

Alternatively, trainings on conducting functional assessments should include case examples, opportunities for hands-on data collection, and performance feedback. We suggest teams consider using PLCs, each facilitated by a team member, as a method to offer ongoing training and feedback. Teams could also consider inviting guest speakers to staff meetings and sending socially influential staff to a SWPBS conference. Some teams find success in inviting district behavior specialists to provide a refresher on classroom management strategies during the days preceding the start of the school year. Access can be voluntary for some and recommended to upcoming teachers of high needs students.

Professional development should be viewed as a process whereby trainings are continually evaluated and next steps are responsive to staff and student needs. We know that students often require repetition for true learning to occur. The same is true for adult learning; it is a common mistake to provide training in a one-shot, hit-or-miss method. Thus, it is crucial to engage in ongoing evaluation of professional development offerings (Stollar et al., 2008). To that end, teams should have

systems in place for evaluating training, identifying ongoing needs, and assessing staff benefit or outcomes. This could include posttraining knowledge assessments, check-ins with grade-level teams, and discussions during whole-staff meetings. Additionally, teams could create a brief checklist of potential themes for training and have staff rate items in order of importance or need.

#### *Step 5: Facilitate Shared Vision and Ownership*

Ultimately, the decision to incorporate the SWPBS plan into one's job role is individual (Hall & Hord, 2011), and each individual will go through a process that includes seeking information, forming an opinion about the value of SWPBS, and deciding whether to adopt SWPBS (Rogers, 2003). Although school systems comprise individuals with unique personal experiences and goals for students, teams can facilitate a sense of unity by encouraging active participation and honor the input and contribution of everyone. This highlights the importance of incorporating information gathered from staff in Step 1 as well as data gathered in subsequent steps (e.g., providing a case for change, securing resources, and selecting trainings).

*Shared vision.* Identifying a shared set of goals is a critical, unifying step to implementing systemic change (George, White, & Schaffer, 2007). First, a set of common hopes and goals can be identified at a staff meeting. Then, work groups could refine common aspirations into specific goals and outcomes and report back for a communal vote. Teams should allow for compromise and alternatives as appropriate to the shared vision (Bambara et al., 2009; Lohrmann et al., 2008). Some staff may be expected to sacrifice some autonomy by adjusting their practices for the greater good of the school (George et al., 2007; Noell & Gansle, 2009). It is important to honor these

individuals through one-on-one conversations, support, and continued follow-up.

*Ownership.* Throughout all phases of implementation, it is crucial to foster ownership by seeking the perspectives and insights of staff. Thus, it is important to offer multiple venues for staff to voice their insights and actively engage in the process (Curtis, Castillo, & Cohen, 2008; Fixen et al., 2005). Giving a voice to all staff requires recognition that individuals have different preferences and comfort levels for sharing (e.g., private vs. public participation). For example, teams could elicit conversations during whole-staff and small-group work, use a drop box in the teacher's room for suggestions or concerns, or host a monthly SWPBS breakfast. This is an informal gathering time, supplemented with food, encouraging staff to drop in and share information or concerns.

It is also essential that staff members be kept abreast of new information and possible changes. Team members act as point people, facilitating opportunities for discussion and addressing concerns. Scheduled communication is important; teams could consider bimonthly check-ins between grade level team members and staff members (e.g., 15–20 minute meetings).

Tackling change is difficult. It is wise for us to remember that both students and adults flourish with a 3:1 positivity ratio; hence, teams are encouraged to acknowledge and appreciate the efforts of all staff (Klingner, Ahwee, & Pilonieta, 2003; Lohrmann et al., 2008; Rogers, 2003). Community companies and parent-teacher associations may be willing to donate goods and services (e.g., meals, massages, gift certificates, car washes). Also, administrators or team members may be able to donate time (e.g., to cover a class period, recess, or lunch) or special privileges (e.g., parking spot, leaving early). Additionally, teams could consider

**Table 2** SAMPLE RESOURCES FOR FACILITATING DISCOURSE ON REINFORCEMENT

- Akin-Little, K. A., Eckert, T. L., Lovett, J., & Little, S. G. (2004). Extrinsic reinforcement in the classroom: Bribery or best practice. *School Psychology Review, 33*, 344-362.
- Beaman, R., & Wheldall, K. (2000). Teachers' use of approval and disapproval in the classroom. *Educational Psychology, 20*, 431-446.
- Brophy, J. (1981). Teacher praise: A functional analysis. *Review of Educational Research, 51*, 5-32.
- Dweck, C. S. (2007). The perils and problems of praise. *Educational Leadership, 65*(2), 34-39.
- Flora, S. R. (2000). Praise's magic reinforcement ratio: Five to one gets the job done. *The Behavior Analyst Today, 1*(4), 64-69.
- Kamins, M. L., & Dweck, C. S. (1999). Person versus process praise and criticism: Implications for contingent self-worth and coping. *Developmental Psychology, 34*, 835-847.
- Maag, J. W. (2001). Rewarded by punishment: Reflections on the disuse of positive reinforcement in schools. *Exceptional Children, 67*, 173-186.
- Mueller, C. M., & Dweck, C. S. (1998). Praise for intelligence can undermine children's motivation and performance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 75*(1), 33-52.
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recognizing staff at meetings, school publications (e.g., school newsletter), and public areas (e.g., bulletin board). Low-cost options could include a handwritten thank-you card, flowers, banners on a classroom door, recognition during morning announcements, or even a "flash mob" outside their room. It is important to use both fun and respectful acknowledgements, so we suggest scheduling time during a staff meeting to finalize a list. Finally, it is also important to showcase positive student outcomes by recognizing individuals for their efforts and sharing their practices for the benefit of all staff. Teams could invite an individual to share a successful practice at a staff meeting (e.g., social skills lesson) and include student participation.

### Avoiding Common Pitfalls

Staff resistance or outright refusal to implement SWPBS can vex even the most effective and efficient teams (Flannery et al., 2009; Lohrmann et al., 2008). Instead of meeting resistance with more resistance, teams are encouraged to refer to Step 1 to investigate the cause or function of the resistance and then use this information to act accordingly. If, for instance, the staff resistance is due to low confidence or self-efficacy in behavior management with students

with emotional and behavioral disorders, then the staff should receive additional training in this specific area of need. If, however, the resistance is due to stress or work overload, then the team should investigate ways to better support or streamline the process for staff. This might include providing ready-made lesson plans or scripts for staff to use in providing praise and mild consequences. Often, the resistance is due to a misunderstanding of the nature of SWPBS and may be remedied by addressing these misconceptions openly and directly. In our experiences, a common misunderstanding among staff is a perception that SWPBS consists entirely of extrinsic reinforcement (e.g., giving students tickets) and does not include consequences or student accountability. We have addressed this resistance by providing professional development that highlights the balanced disciplinary practices of SWPBS, both acknowledgment and consequences. See Table 2 for a list of additional resources to facilitate discussions relevant to positive reinforcement.

In situations where full consensus is still not achieved; teams may need to use other strategic efforts. To build momentum, teams might consider piloting efforts with a subgroup of staff (e.g., grade level)

and then showcase results to the whole staff (Handler et al., 2007; Simonsen, Sugai, & Negron, 2008). Also, including staff with social influence on the SWPBS team can increase the visibility and perceived importance of SWPBS (George et al., 2007; Hall & Hord, 2006; Rogers, 2003). Ultimately, we are all responsible for ensuring the best possible outcomes for students, and building administrators should be notified of staff who are in direct opposition with this goal.

### Conclusion

Implementing SWPBS requires a thoughtful, collaborative process with a steady eye toward long-term goals and sustainability. In addition to attending to the procedural components of SWPBS, it is equally important to acknowledge and respect the perceptions of the very people whose practices we are asking to change. This requires school teams to view resistance not as an obstacle but as an opportunity for growth and dialogue. By proactively achieving a full understanding of staff needs, concerns, and overall perceptions of SWPBS, teams can be more open to creative ways to empower staff and thereby enhance meaningful, lasting change in the manner we support the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students.

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