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THE IMPACT OF PBIS ON BEHAVIORAL AND ACADEMIC SUCCESSES OF AFRICAN  
AMERICAN STUDENTS IN NC MIDDLE GRADES SCHOOLS

Dr. Dekel “Jonte” Hill  
Dr. Kathleen Brown  
Dr. Kathleen Roney

## Introduction

You hear the pattering of feet running down the hall, only to see your child lean over your bed with open arms and softly say good morning. Later that morning, you kiss your children good-bye and watch them board the big yellow bus. As you wave them off and the bus disappears in the distance, you hope that they will not become victims to your own experiences and fears associated with public schooling. However, the question is not *if* they will become a victim but *when* they will fall victim to those experiences. Acts of school violence have increasingly become part of the public school experience for students in the United States, especially middle school students. During the 2007-2008 school year, middle school students experienced more instances of problems requiring disciplinary action as compared to elementary and high school students in five of eight areas. These areas included racial and ethnic tensions, bullying, sexual harassment, verbal abuse, disrespect, widespread disorder, gang activity, and cult activities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010).

The heightened level of public concern can be attributed to the perception of academically failing schools. The fears of unruly student behaviors faced by teachers and administrators, and lower levels of student achievement for both the student exhibiting the behaviors and their classmates, have contributed to an increased awareness of the negative impact of student behavior on academic achievement (Lannie & McCurdy, 2007; National Center for Education Statistics, 2010).

Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS), also known as positive behavior support (PBS), is a relatively new approach that targets individuals who have severe behavioral problems or those in jeopardy of developing problem behaviors (Carr et al., 2002). The emergence of PBIS resulted from the need to alleviate a reliance on punitive consequences for students with disabilities (Bambara & Kern, 2005; Dunlap, Sailor, Horner, & Sugai, 2009). PBS began as an individualistic approach that involved the identification of behaviors, analysis of

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environmental- or context-specific variables, development of positive interventions, and an emphasis on data collection, monitoring, and evaluation processes to aid in the reduction and elimination of problem behaviors (Carr et al., 2002; Simonsen & Sugai, 2009; Watson & Watson, 2009). The success of PBS as a means of altering an individual's behavior, coupled with the charge of educational organizations to produce productive and well-educated members of society, has resulted in the birth of school-wide positive behavior support (SW-PBS).

Horner, Sugai, Todd, and Lewis-Palmer (2005) and Walker and Shinn (2002) describe SW-PBS as a three-tier approach. The primary tier provides universal supports for approximately 80% of all students. The secondary tier targets approximately 15% of the student body; interventions are provided in clusters of small groups comprising students who have been identified as exhibiting the same or very similar behaviors. The tertiary tier serves approximately 5% of the student body. Students who are unresponsive to the behavioral interventions in the first two tiers are provided individual supports to assist in the prevention and elimination of their antisocial behaviors.

PBIS is currently deployed in over 21,000 schools in the United States (Horner & Sugai, 2015). Researchers (Barrett et al., 2008; Horner & Sugai, 2015; Mass-Galloway et al., 2008; Muscott et al., 2008) agree that SW-PBS is a feasible means of improving the behaviors of students and ultimately improving their academic achievement. The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact that the Positive Behavior Intervention and Support framework, implemented with high fidelity, had on the behavioral and academic successes of African American students in North Carolina middle schools.

### **Context**

In society, the use of punishment and pain has traditionally been used to deter individuals from exhibiting the same socially unacceptable behaviors (Jackson & Panyan, 2002). In schools, punishment and pain have taken the form of exclusionary practices most commonly known as

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suspension, expulsion, zero-tolerance policies, corporal punishment, and pushouts (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Martinez, 2009; Townsend, 2000). These practices have become questionable for a number of reasons, including the disproportionate number of African American students who are subjected due to administrators' overreliance on reactive disciplinary practices (Pane, Rocco, Miller, & Salmon, 2014; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2000). For instance, African American males in K-12 public education are two to three times more likely to be suspended than their white counterparts (Children's Defense Fund, 1975; Skiba et al., 2000).

The disciplinary choices made by school leaders have dire consequences for African American students and can contribute to their underachievement (Jenkins, 2006; Pitre, 2009). The higher use of reactive disciplinary practices, particularly in middle schools, runs contrary to an educational leader's mission to provide a high caliber education for all students. The academic underperformance of African American students is a direct consequence of reductions in instructional time due to behavioral consequences (Children's Defense Fund, 1975; Fenning & Rose, 2007; Townsend, 2000). Pane, Rocco, Miller, and Salmon (2014) continue that "African American students have a 31% higher likelihood of being suspended than White students even though no evidence supports the notion that African American students misbehave more" (2014, par. 4).

The current body of literature on proactive disciplinary methods overwhelmingly suggests that SW-PBS has positive effects on student behavior and on academic achievement (Muscott et al., 2008; Sadler, 2000; Taylor-Greene & Kartub, 2000), but limited research has been conducted on the specific effects of SW-PBS in middle schools and with African Americans at any educational level. School leaders and policy makers should not assume that the general success stories associated with SW-PBS are the same success stories experienced by the majority of African Americans in middle schools. Therefore, to expand upon the current body of literature, address the needs of practitioners, and positively change educational outcomes for

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African American middle school students, a closer analysis of proactive disciplinary practices and their impact on underachievement is urgently needed.

In 2000, the Exceptional Children Division at the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction began to support the state's school districts with the implementation of the SW-PBS framework. With state backing, 790 schools were utilizing the framework, and North Carolina was considered a leader in the use of Positive Behavior Intervention and Support. The Department of Instruction administrators were aware that North Carolina's African American students were at a higher risk than their White counterparts for committing crimes and acts of violence, receiving out-of-school suspension, and dropping out of school (North Carolina Department of Instruction, 2010). Therefore, this investigation has examined middle schools across the state that (a) have used PBIS, (b) have implemented the framework with high fidelity, and (c) have shown academic and behavioral improvement for two consecutive years.

The stark reality is that American middle schools are faced with higher incidents of widespread disorder, disrespect, and aggressive behavior between students than elementary and high schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). Therefore, the pressing need to address the behavioral and developmental complexities of middle school students is of dire need and has become the educational setting of this investigation.

Within middle schools, African American students have been disproportionately represented in the number of office disciplinary referrals (ODRs), out-of-school suspensions (OSS), in-school suspensions (ISS), and expulsions (Skiba et al., 2000). The loss of instructional time, academic failure and the disengagement of African Americans because of disciplinary consequences have led to high retention rates and large numbers of dropouts in the African American community (Garibaldi, 1992). Positive Behavior Intervention and Support has had a proven record of success, both academically and behaviorally, when looked at across all students (Muscott et al., 2008; Sadler, 2000; Taylor-Greene & Kartub, 2000); however, the use of

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proactive methods to address discipline must be examined to determine its impact on African Americans in middle schools. In an effort to fulfill this need, the positive and proactive interventions incorporated into the Positive Behavior Intervention and Support framework have been utilized to determine the impact that non-traditional disciplinary methods have had on the behavioral problems and academic achievement of African American middle school students.

### **Methodology**

This study employed a quantitative-qualitative mixed methods approach. The effectiveness of PBIS was determined based on the use of academic indicators which are math and language arts proficiency rates and the use of social controls within the school environment such as suspensions, expulsions, and office disciplinary referrals.

The research questions that guided this investigation are:

1. Has the implementation of the Positive Behavior Intervention and Support framework produced a decrease in the number of discipline referrals associated with African American students?
2. Has the implementation of the Positive Behavior Intervention and Support framework produced a decrease in the rate of students receiving short-term suspensions?
3. Has the implementation of the Positive Behavior Intervention and Support framework produced an increase in African American middle school students' proficiency in both (a) math end-of-grade and (b) language arts end-of-grade exams?
4. Has the implementation of the Positive Behavior Intervention and Support framework reduced the Black-White Achievement gap in select North Carolina schools?
5. What are the perceptions of principals in Positive Behavior Intervention and Support Exemplar schools on the attributes that contribute to improvements in (a) academic achievement and (b) student behavior?

### **Population and Sample Size**

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The focus of this study is on middle schools throughout North Carolina that have implemented the Positive Behavior Intervention and Support framework with high fidelity, which has been defined as schools that have received a 95% or greater on the School-wide Evaluation Tool (SET) or a 90% or greater on Benchmarks of Quality (BoQ). In lieu of completing the SET, schools can complete the Benchmarks of Quality (BoQ) instrument. The BoQ, much like the SET, is a means of evaluating the level of success a school has had in implementing PBIS. The criteria for recognition as a PBIS Exemplar school are: a school leader's participation in PIS efforts, having an active school-based PBIS team, having a school PBIS coach, and showing evidence of implementation progress. According to a database provided by the North Carolina Department of Instruction, 12 middle schools across the state were recognized as PBIS Exemplar schools during the 2008-2009 academic school year. However, only five of these school became part of this study, as six schools submitted incomplete data and one school's data file (school #4) became corrupted. Therefore, the five remaining schools and their associated administrators have become the sample of this study (Table 1).

Table 1: Site Demographics

Study Sites	2005-06 School Year	2010-11 School Year	Change in enrollment over 5 years
School 1	708 students	837 students	+18%
School 2	892 students	743 students	-14%
School 3	1145 students	1392 students	+22%
School 5	557 students	605 students	+8%
School 6	735 students	698 students	-5%

### Data Collection

Quantitative data were collected to provide an understanding of the research problem, situate select North Carolina public schools within the context of the problem, convey the scope of the research problem after the implementation of PBIS in North Carolina public schools, and

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determine a feasible explanation for disciplinary inequities faced by African American students.

The qualitative data explained and elaborated on significant and/or surprising quantitative-based results (Creswell, 2005; Glensne, 2011). Additionally, qualitative data assisted in determining the perceptions of school leaders regarding PBIS on student behavior and academic achievement.

A pre-existing data set was supplied by a PBIS consultant in the North Carolina Department of Instruction with the (a) PBIS school rating; (b) average aggregated long-term, short-term, and expulsion discipline data; (c) percentage of African American students proficient on both reading and math end-of-grade (EOG) exams; (d) school enrollment of African American students; (e) number of ODRs associated with African American students; (f) number of ODRs per school day per 100 days; and (g) total school enrollment . The above stated data were collected and analyzed for the 2005-2011 school years; three years of data before and after the implementation of PBIS with high fidelity. Twelve schools, spread over eight school districts, during the 2008-2009 school year in North Carolina were labeled as a PBIS Exemplar School.

By interviewing multiple middle school administrators of 2008-2009 North Carolina Exemplar PBIS schools, the researchers were able to move beyond a particular case and provide a broader context and greater insight into the practices and perceptions of school leaders in North Carolina. The research questions were the basis for the development of the interview protocol and served as the basis for data analysis. The interview protocol addressed the perceptions and practices of school leaders, the leadership skills of school leaders under the PBIS framework in relation to discipline and academics, and the impact of PBIS.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Analysis of quantitative data focused on the social controls and achievement indicators for all students. The research moved beyond a surface analysis of PBIS to determine if the successes of the framework implemented with high fidelity for all students had the same effect

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on African American students. Academically, an analysis of disaggregated pre and post reading and math proficiency data was used in investigating the academic impact of PBIS on African American students. The researchers determined if a correlation existed between the behavioral and academic indicators that were specific to (a) all students and (b) African American students.

A coding process was used in processing the qualitative data with two overarching themes: (1) the impact of PBIS on social controls/student behavior, and (2) the impact of PBIS on achievement outcomes. By creating a coding scheme the researchers were able to effectively condense the data obtained into small units that were more easily analyzed. As a result, new themes and patterns presented themselves and aided in explaining the impact of Positive Behavior Intervention and Support in North Carolina middle schools for African American students.

While our purpose here is to report on the insights from an analysis of the qualitative data, a short summary of the quantitative findings follows as an entry point. We elaborate on the quantitative findings and our conclusions in a complimentary article to be published at a later date.

### **Summary of Quantitative Findings**

Positive Behavior Interventions and Support has assisted the general population of students in each of the schools to reduce the number of office disciplinary referrals that school personnel submit on students due to behavioral violations. A 24.77% reduction in the reported behavioral violations for all students has aided school administrators in reducing the consequences, specifically short-term suspensions, by 13.52%. With an increase in compliance with school policies, the student achievement levels of all students increased by 6.67% percentage points over achievement levels prior to being labeled a PBIS Exemplar school. However, for African American students, even greater levels of success were noted in regards to the reduction of ODRs. A 29.09% decrease in the submission of ODRs for African American

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students was noted. It is assumed, like that for all students, that a reduction of referable behaviors for African American students would result in a reduction in the behaviors requiring consequences such as short-term suspensions. With fewer antisocial behaviors being reported, African American students have increased their achievement proficiency levels by 14.93% post implementation of PBIS with high fidelity. The increased levels of proficiency assisted African American student in reducing the discrepancy in educational outcomes that exist between African American and White students in select North Carolina middle schools by 6.86 percentage points.

A review of the quantitative findings would suggest that PBIS implemented with high fidelity into North Carolina middle schools will assist in creating educational environments that result in the reduction of antisocial behavior and ultimately increased achievement levels amongst all students. However, the educational environments that lead to the greatest strides in improving the academic achievement amongst all students and African American students differ.

### **Qualitative Data Analysis**

Six themes emerged from an analysis of the qualitative data collected from the five PBIS Exemplar middle schools in North Carolina included in this study.

#### **PBIS: Tailoring Rewards to the Needs of Middle School Students**

The familiarity of students with PBIS in Schools 2, 3, and 6 can be attributed to the implementation of PBIS in elementary schools that feed into each middle school. However, the familiarity has caused these middle schools to reinvent the PBIS reward system in order to reap the academic and behavioral benefits associated with the PBIS framework. The feeder elementary schools are providing students with “little fuzzy balls” to positively reinforce behavior; however, a “sixth grade boy coming into middle school thinks he’s a middle schooler now. He doesn’t want fuzzies. And if that’s his perception of PBIS, he’s gonna be like Nah, I’m not interested. Keep your little purple piece of paper” (School 6, Administrator). As students

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mature, it would be ideal for students to intrinsically see the benefit in positively altering and maintaining their own behaviors; however, the PBIS reward continuum must continue to extrinsically motivate students to change behavior during adolescence.

To effectively design a reward system in middle schools, the reward system must keep pace with the developmental needs of students.

There's a big difference between sixth graders and eighth graders....and one example of that is ... we have tickets to recognize kids for doing well...That works really well in sixth grade, sorta well in seventh grade, and the eighth graders I mean we surveyed them a couple years ago, and they said you know what? It would mean more to me for you to call my mom and dad and say you did a great job as opposed to giving me a paper ticket. (School 3, Administrator)

You gotta play it [rewards] in a way that makes it feel middle school appropriate and grown-up enough. (School 6, Administrator)

As a result, these schools have continuously held focus groups that solicit the feedback of students that allow PBIS teams to implement rewards that have value to middle school students such as additional social time, having field days, bringing in Dairy Queen, going on field trips, having dances, providing meal vouchers, providing athletic tickets, opportunities for public recognition, and positive parental contact (School 2, Administrator; School 3, Administrator; School 6, Administrator). It is a diverse collection and use of extrinsic rewards coupled with peer pressure throughout the academic school year that assist in maintaining the effectiveness of a school's PBIS efforts. Administrators in School 3 and School 6 recognized the benefits associated with peer pressure. Many times peer pressure has negative associations; however, these schools are channeling peer pressure positively to assist them in reinforcing appropriate student behavior. Rewards are not solely provided to students based on their individual efforts. Instead, the collective efforts of the student body are used to obtain a desired reward. You hear

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students say to other students “Put it [tickets for good behavior/deeds] in the jar. Get up and put it in the jar now” (School 6, Administrator). These tickets could be used for their personal use such as buying items in the student store, but students are provided collective rewards such as dances if a certain number of tickets are collected over the course of the year. Students encourage appropriate behavior amongst their peers as they are working for a collective goal that is of value to them.

It is most important to realize that one school’s collection of rewards cannot be transplanted and utilized as if it were a prescription. Instead, a diverse continuum of rewards must be created and implemented based on societal factors that impact the desires of young adolescents in conjunction with the culture of each middle school. School 2, School 3, and School 6 have chosen to implement the PBIS framework, as have thousands of other schools across the state, but it is their ability to listen to the voices of their students and their willingness to adapt to the specific needs of their students that have positively contributed to their efforts to motivate students to change behavior.

### **Building Relationships: Staff and Students**

The building of relationships was an integral component in the success of the PBIS efforts in each of these schools. While the building of relationships between staff and families and staff and community members were important and served very specific purposes (i.e. funding for PBIS), it was the relationships between staff members and students that resonated in each of the schools. Relationships are built:

... by putting yourself out there, by being vulnerable, by sharing things about yourself, by listening to the other person you want to build a relationship with, by showing them that you care. These are the steps required to build a relationship with people. (School 6, Administrator)

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An ongoing debate among educators continues to exist in regards to the significance and impact that relationships between school staff and students have on the academic success of students.

However, the views of the school administrator in School 6 was representative of this subgroup of schools in terms of the relationships that should exist between school personnel and students.

I don't really care about the curriculum until we build relationships with the students, and they want to be here to learn. If the kids don't want to be here, you – you're done. You know you're not gonna get to the curriculum. So time spent up front building relationships with kids and their families, setting expectations, making sure it's a safe place to learn, it's a positive place to be, then you can get to the curriculum. PBIS is a precursor to [the] academic piece. (School 3, Administrator)

While the building of relationships appeared to be an integral component in the success of these schools, School 6 and School 3 realized that they have not maximized the use of relationships in order to meet the needs of students of color as well as they have with their majority student populations. It is not that staff members within schools are disconnected from students of color or incapable of building relationships with them. Rather,

... it's not that they don't know how to build [relationships because] those steps aren't any different for a student of color or you know a White adult with whom I wish to start a relationship [with]. Those are the same steps, [but] your approach may be slightly different. It's not that they don't know how to build a relationship. It's that they aren't comfortable. (School 3, Administrator)

To assist in developing school personnel-student relationships, School 2 has embedded an advisee advisor program that reinforces the importance of relationship building. The purpose of the advisor advisee program is ensure that every student in the building builds a valuable relationship with an adult over the three years they are in middle school that will positively impact their performance in the academic setting. It is believed that their effort to develop

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relationships with every student in the building has produced a mixture of genuine and superficial relationships. Successes in the building of relationships have occurred with this intervention; however, the disengagement of some students in the academic setting has not been impacted positively and can be in part associated with an unwillingness of adults to forge caring and meaningful relationships with students.

In addition to some school personnel feeling a level of discomfort in forging relationships with all students some staff believed that relationships directly contributed to inconsistencies in the handling of antisocial behaviors. In School 2 a number of staff members interpreted the building of deeper relationships with students to be a mechanism to increase the inequities in how adults respond to the antisocial behaviors of students as their relationships with students become highly personal with some adults unable to separate personal relationships from the role and responsibilities associated with being an educator. This was not uncommon in School 6, as an administrator stated in reference to staff-student relationship building with their staff that it “doesn’t mean you will let them off the hook. If they act out you need to treat them accordingly” (School 6, Administrator). The school administrators in these three schools agree that relationships are key to reaching students; however, it is vital that the building of relationships does not negatively impact the level of equity, in terms of holding students accountable, that is mandated within the organization. An increase in valuable relationships between adults and students, but a reduction in accountability amongst students runs contrary to establishing a culture in which students can excel academically. These PBIS Exemplar schools are seeking to create deep and lasting relationships between adults and students that allows schools to demand high behavioral expectations within a caring environment.

### **PBIS: Not a Prepackaged Program**

PBIS is viewed by some people as a program that should be followed in a prescribed way that provides schools relief from the behavioral and academic challenges that they face.

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However, these three PBIS exemplar schools did not view PBIS as a prepackaged program, but rather as a framework that could be utilized to guide their efforts to reduce antisocial behaviors and produce an environment that would note academic gains. PBIS leaders and school administrators must have a fundamental understanding of PBIS and a wiliness to accept the ever changing obstacles that present themselves in an educational environment. Like School 2 and School 3, School 6 recognized the state of their PBIS efforts:

The system, for the most part, was about six years old with very few changes. We kept winning – You're a banner school. You're an exemplar school. Exemplar, exemplar, exemplar, but what we were seeing on the ground level was diminishing returns. So you either ride that thing out until you know – until it's obviously ineffective or at the point where you start to feel it's ineffective you scrap it and build from the ground up. (School 6, Administrator)

Each of these schools worked to rebuild, refocus, and add a unique component that would address areas of concerns (i.e bullying, character building) to increase the effectiveness of PBIS on behavioral and academic indicators. School 6 implemented a character education component into their PBIS efforts. Faculty and staff developed character education lessons based on the work of Martin Seligman, the founder of Positive Psychology. These lessons were implemented during the first twelve weeks of school and were weaved into the school's PBIS efforts (i.e delivery of expectations, reward system). As a result of integrating PBIS and character education, the school experienced a 40% reduction in referrals during the first twelve weeks of school. However, the lack of direct and explicit efforts to maintain these efforts after twelve weeks caused disciplinary referral rates to return to their prior levels.

The largest behavioral problem faced by administrators in School 2 and School 3 was bullying. Therefore, PBIS teams and administrators at both schools have worked to tailor their PBIS efforts to focus on the prevention of bullying. Both schools chose to utilize similar tactics

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by incorporating a bully prevention program. These programs, like School 6, are proactive in nature, but differ in the implementation. Instead of entirely frontloading the bullying program, these schools chose to frontload their bullying efforts and then integrate bullying lessons throughout the school year.

Students teach bullying lessons at the beginning of the year to every kid on campus, and then in addition to that homeroom teachers teach lessons throughout the year that build on our existing topics. So you know at the beginning of the year it's how to identify bullying, how to avoid being a bystander, how to avoid cyber bullying, and how to report cyber bullying. So it's constantly in front of students. (School 2, Administrator)

The desired behaviors, that were taught by students (i.e. National Junior Honor Society, Students Against Bullying), faculty, and staff were then reinforced through the use of PBIS as students received tickets for exhibiting appropriate behaviors that could be used to redeem individual and group rewards. In addition, PBIS posters and flyers were made and posted throughout the school that become a constant reminder to students of the role they could play in preventing bullying.

Each of the PBIS teams at Schools 2, 3, and 6, have done a behavior assembly at the beginning of the school year where we can call all kids by grade level to the gym, and talk them through expectations. From how you move through the building, what hallway you use when you get off the bus, what hallway you use when you go to the carpool to how you dismiss from the cafeteria. (School 2, Administrator)

However, PBIS in School 2, School 3, and School 6 has become more than providing clear expectations for all students in all areas of the building. PBIS has been specifically tailored to address behavior needs of students. Integrating proactive interventions (i.e. character and bullying education) in the PBIS tiered systems that are specifically designed to meet the behavior needs of students has assisted these schools in positively impacting the behavioral and ultimately the academic needs of their students. Generic interventions will not provide or maximize the

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positive impact that specifically tailored interventions will have on students. Therefore, the tiered interventions must be put into place based on the culture of the school, the culture of the community, and the specific needs of the student body. Without an understanding of the context, the implementation of a generically invented and implemented tiered system will not provide benefits indicative of PBIS Exemplar schools.

### **Staff Buy-In: Essential to Positive Academic and Behavioral Outcomes**

School administrators are charged with determining how to maintain the positive academic and behavioral growth that they have experienced while simultaneously working to make progress in these areas. However, with the implementation of any new initiative there will be a level of resistance from stakeholders. The implementation of PBIS into schools was not void of resistance from faculty and staff members, but they understand that “you really need, especially initially, at least eighty percent staff buy-in. The other twenty percent will start trickling in” (School 1, Administrator). Even with the buy-in required initially and with a theoretical understanding of PBIS “it will take about three years for staff to whole heartily buy in, understand it, implement it, and ask the necessary questions” (School 5, Administrator).

The resistance encountered at School 1 and School 5 took the form of two overarching themes, classroom management and intrinsic versus extrinsic student motivation (School 1, Administrator; School 5, Administrator). Teachers are an integral part in the success of any initiative to improve the behavioral and/or academic outcomes desired by an organization. However, it is apparent that with the deployment of the PBIS framework “some [teachers] like it. Some don’t. You know that when you have teachers that manage their classrooms really, really well they don’t think they need it” (School 1, Administrator). Classroom management is an area of growth that most teachers have identified with at some point in their career and PBIS has become a structured way to support teachers who are struggling with classroom management. The PBIS framework has assisted in the development of a whole school approach to discipline

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that can be tailored to the specific needs of the classroom teacher. “You have some teachers that rely on the structures of PBIS because they need help getting the management piece in place in order to ensure teaching can take place” (School 5, Administrator).

The improvement of classroom management is not a top priority for all educators. Some teachers simply believe that exhibiting behaviors appropriate to learning should be standard (School 1, Administrator; School 5, Administrator) as educational institutions are “in the business of educating students” not behavior management (School 1, Administrator). However, the realities that public educational institutions face is that students are coming from different backgrounds that have a wide array of or lack of behavioral expectations and values associated with education. Therefore, teaching appropriate behaviors and instilling value in obtaining an education has become vital in a school’s efforts to provide a quality educational program that produces lifelong learners that are prepared for college and/or careers. The administrator at School 5 only reinforces the contemporary role of educational institutions, “we must be real about the situation. Some children are not intrinsically motivated and in order to do what we are here for [educate students] we have to address all the other issues that students bring” (School 5, Administrator). One other, exhibiting appropriate behavior, has produced a mix of students, those students who intrinsically see the value in exhibiting appropriate behavior and those students that require outside factors to reinforce appropriate behavior. “Some teachers believe that rewarding students with tickets [and] prizes is not something that they should be spending their time doing. They feel that students should know to come, sit down, learn, and leave” (School 1, Administrator).

[Teachers] were not rewarded for behaving or doing what they were suppose to do when they were in school. This is why some of them believe [as they do]. But this is a different time and we must do whatever it takes to prepare our students. (School 5, Administrator)

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Creating buy-in and minimizing resistance is important as educational administrators work to implement initiatives such as PBIS. School 1 and School 5 administrators employed two strategies, teacher led PBIS efforts and building capacity amongst faculty and staff, that have assisted in creating buy-in and combating the resistance that is inherent in using the PBIS framework. At the onset, the PBIS committee consisted of a team of educators that was lead by an “a teacher and an assistant principal who were the co-chairs, but now it’s lead entirely by a teacher” (School 5, Administrator). This practice was not uncommon to School 1, as the administrator felt that

they [teachers] listen to their peers more than anything else. So, when the teachers put PBIS out they’re more receptive and that has made it work a lot better here. So, an administrator doesn’t really lead the PBIS team. It’s teacher lead. You must spend time identifying your teacher leaders and make sure they’re on board one hundred percent.

(School 1, Administrator)

To assist in facilitating buy-in and minimize staff resistance, administrators have found their role to be one of support. “I support the teachers. I support the initiatives. I help get buy-in” (School 1, Administrator). “I assist with logistics. I assist in making sure we stay true to the process. I make sure that everyone is onboard. Really, I’m just a support for our leaders” (School 5, Administrator).

The purpose or perceived purpose of PBIS has been overshadowed by the reward continuum that is embedded within the PBIS framework. As a result, this has created a level of resistance amongst educators. PBIS leaders and administrators continuously work to build capacity amongst stakeholders by ensuring that they have an understanding of the core purpose and principles and understand that the reward continuum is only a means to a desired end.

It’s more than just giving tickets for being on time, really it’s about teaching expectations and modeling expectations...We [PBIS leaders and administrators] have to get them

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[faculty and staff] out of that mind frame that it's about rewards, rewards, rewards. It's not about that. It's about teaching and modeling behaviors so that they [students] can be productive in life. Not just for the hour that they [students] are in their [teachers's] classroom. (School 1, Administrator)

The PBIS team and each teacher in the building must move beyond a working understanding of PBIS and seek to obtain an in-depth understanding of PBIS. By doing so, this will assist in facilitating a change in the ways in which educators address antisocial behaviors. A lack of knowledge in regards to PBIS only reinforces a teacher's misconceptions and heightens levels of resistance.

It definitely takes someone who understands the program. The mistake that teachers make because they don't really understand PBIS [and then] leads to a lack of buy-in is that it's not designed for consequences. We find the positive in student behavior and celebrate those instances to teach behavior to others instead of the reverse. (School 5, Administrator)

PBIS is not simply a temporary fix to a larger and more persistent problem. Instead,

It is a big umbrella that sets expectations, teaches expectations, [and] rewards [students for appropriate behavior]. It's not what people believe PBIS is about rewards. That's not what it's about. So, once you understand that, and understand that this program covers your whole school, then you're good, and that it doesn't just cover Johnny and the rest of them who don't want to do what they're supposed to. (School 5, Administrator)

Resistance is a natural component of change and cannot be avoided if new initiatives are to thrive and make a positive impact on behavioral and achievement outcomes. An understanding of the reasons behind the resistance must be understood in order to minimize the negative impact and ultimately increase the buy-in amongst staff members. However, PBIS leaders and administrators are addressing these issues by building capacity amongst staff

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members in regards to PBIS and the utilization of successful behavioral modification practices. In addition, creating higher levels of buy-in has been achieved by ensuring that PBIS continues to be a staff led initiative and is not perceived as a top down approach to staff and student deficiencies.

### **PBIS: Potential to Transcend the Physical Walls of the School**

PBIS is most commonly thought to be used within the confines of a school building. However, some schools are using the framework to assist parents in improving the behaviors of their children outside of the school day. Parental support has been an ongoing area of growth with majority of the support seen from parents and guardians coming from the Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA) (School 1, Administrator; School 5, Administrator). With school administrators understanding the realities and challenges that they face in regards to parental support, each school has worked to create a culture where all stakeholders understand that they are interdependent.

I need to help you [stakeholders] because you're part of the bigger picture and we need you [stakeholders] to assist us in order to make the bigger picture a reality. We try to instill that in everybody that we come into contact with. (School 5, Administrator).

The effective partnerships created between the school, parents, and community members cannot be achieved without trust.

They [stakeholders] must feel and believe that you have their interest in the forefront of our priorities. I can say that, but that means nothing if its not felt. Without trust we are doomed. We can't do it without them well not effectively at least. (School 1, Administrator)

The genuine feeling of trust and interdependence has created a culture that has caused the school to solicit the feedback and input from stakeholders as they work to perfect the strategies that they currently employ to meet the behavioral needs of students. As a result "when we are

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promoting things with PBIS the parents are on board too and pushing their kids to you know behave well, and meet those expectations” (School 5, Administrator). Setting and holding students to high behavioral expectations appears to be innate for some parents and aligns with the expectation of educational organizations. For others this has become challenging, but the support and relationships that exist between school officials and parents were critical in addressing the behavioral needs of students.

Last year I had a student that I had to suspend over a dozen times. This year I have not had to suspend him once, but we spent a lot of time setting expectations, modeling the expectations, and holding him accountable. This wasn’t any different than what I did last year, but this year his mom was on board. I worked on building my relationship with her and so you know his mom is on board now. You know we have a really good relationship. He knows that I mean what I say, he knows the expectations, he knows that we talk every time I see her. It makes a difference because he can’t go home and say I was lying. That’s not true, I didn’t do that. His mother knows that I want to help him. She knows that I can send him home if I wanted to. But I’m trying not to because those last seventeen days did not help him. (School 1, Administrator)

The support obtained from parents due to a culture of trust and interdependence has assisted in changing the behaviors of students in the school building (School 1, Administrator; School 5, Administrator), but has PBIS assisted in modifying the behaviors of students outside of the school’s walls? The positive behavioral changes that students have made have not gone unnoticed by parents.

A student transferred close to the beginning of the year and if you looked at his record he had been disciplined time after time. If we just looked at his patterns of behavior my prediction was that he would show signs of the same behaviors here. I am not trying to suggest that we are miracle workers because we aren’t, but we saw a drastic reduction in

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the behaviors that he exhibited. He needed positive support and we gave him that...The mom called and wanted to schedule a conference and out of that she really just wanted an update and to determine what we were doing that was working for him .... We all had realized that he made progress. (School 5, Administrator)

The behavioral changes as a result of PBIS for some students can range from unnoticeable change to drastic changes, but it truly depends on the student. However,

parents that have high expectations behaviorally for their children don't have problems here at school, but when the parent doesn't hold their kids accountable at home or have high expectations for them then we have to have the high expectations for them and it takes them a while to say oh, they're not playing. I have to do this. I can't behave this way. I find that it is those parents that end of needing our help the most. (School 1, Administrator)

The behavioral challenges faced by some students cannot be appropriately addressed with isolated behavioral systems, a school and home system. Rather, in order for some students to change the behavioral practices that they have been accustomed to there may be value in having one consistent system (School 1, Administrator; School 5, Administrator) as the two separate systems are to drastically different. Some parents recognize the value in the positive approach and the results achieved from PBIS.

Parents come in or contact me and say I just don't know what to do. What can I do because now my child is a teenager and they are crazy...There is a fine line between help and telling them how to parent but we provide them with gentle suggestions on how that can adapt what we do at school to work at home. (School 1, Administrator)

School 5 has also adapted this practice, "our team actually gives tips to parents on how to use it at home" (School 5, Administrator). The results derived from these efforts are unknown as parent interviews were not part of this study; however, parents and educators have realized the

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potential in setting and holding high expectations for students during the school day and at home. The benefits in creating a seamless set of expectations for students has benefits for the school as they work to improve academic outcomes, for the student as they transition out of K-12 institutions into postsecondary institutions or jobs, and for parents who are seeking to eliminate barriers that prevent them from providing their children the best opportunities. PBIS has infiltrated schools across the nation and has aided in improving behavioral and academic outcomes; however, the practices employed within the PBIS framework can no longer be isolated within the walls of educational institutions. The tenets of PBIS have the potential to impact the practices of not only educators, but parents as they seek to modify undesirable behaviors exhibited by their children outside of the school environment.

### **Reaching African American Students...It's Not a Science!**

Tier 3 is a representation of approximately 5% of the student body that has not responded to Tier 1 and Tier 2 supports and interventions. It is reasonable to assume that the demographic make-up of the 5% would be closely aligned with the schools demographic makeup; however, in many cases, this assumption does not hold true. Instead, the administrator in School 5 found that “ninety-five percent of my five percenters are African American boys” (School 5, Administrator) and in School 1 “majority of them were minority students” (School 1, Administrator). The rationale behind the high percentage of minority and African American students involved in Tier 3 is multifaceted. School administrators believe that when “expectations are not taught at home and they’re just use to getting away with certain behaviors” (School 1, Administrator), and when “parents don’t hold their kids accountable at home and to the standards mandated by others” students have a higher probability of becoming a member of Tier 3. “Teaching parents how to be better parents is not something we do [and] we can’t spend lots of time thinking about stuff we have no control over” (School 5, Administrator). Instead, educators must focus on those practices that they employ that maintain or contribute to assisting students in reaching Tier 3.

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One of the most critical factors that can be utilized to assist in reducing the number of African American students that are involved in Tier 3 is the process of building relationships with students (School 1, Administrator; School 5, Administrator). All students, but especially students in Tier 3, need to feel cared about, a sense of belonging, and a strong sense of trust.

It's gonna be very hard to get those students on board if you do not build a relationship.

So, I can say check-in and check-out with me every day. Here's your behavior rubric.

Your teachers will fill this out and we're gonna discuss it at the end of every day. Well, if my words don't mean anything to the student then any intervention that I use is pointless.

There're just gonna say yeah that lady is crazy. Instead of seeing that Mrs. Thompson is trying to help me. So trying different strategies without having a meaningful relationship where students feel loved and a sense of trust won't help them change their behavior.

You are just another person probably doing the same thing everyone else has been doing, talking at them. (School 1, Administrator)

Educators must obtain a better understanding of the child which cannot necessarily be obtained by reading the cumulative folder, exceptional children's folder, or reviewing the test scores of students. This information may be important in the process of designing interventions for students, but without building a relationship that will allow one to understand the child's story, triggers, and motivations, interventions are doomed to fail.

We can sit around a table and ask, what is going to work for this student? Do they need to meet with a counselor once a week? Do they need to meet with a principal? What resources can we get them? Do I need to do an observation? But it won't work because we are applying generic ideas to students who have already not responded to the other tiers. (School 5, Administrator)

At this stage, the supports designed for students must bypass being tailored to the entire student body. Instead, interventions must be individualized and be implemented by a team of

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collaborative and caring adults in which the students trust if the interventions being utilized will assist in the long-term modification of behavior.

As educators work to build fruitful relationships with students, it is essential that all adults within the building are holding Tier 3 students to the same set of common expectations that have been taught, displayed, and reinforced throughout the school year (School 1, Administrator). However, some students lack beneficial contact and relationships with school officials that result in a lack of accountability because of the adult's perceptions, assumptions, and lack of familiarity with the student. In addition, the fears associated with those who don't resemble themselves may also cause "teachers to be afraid to approach them and correct them" (School 1, Administrator). Along with an unwillingness on the part of some educators to address their own fears and maintain high levels of accountability for students, some educators have refused to persevere in the midst of these challenges (School 5, Administrator).

They're [teachers] frustrated. They feel like they've tried all they can do, and they're just looking for you to say this is the answer. I want you to try this and this will work. This will fix Johnny. They are looking for everyone else to fix them [the student] and they sometimes forget that they to have an opportunity to [positively] impact them. (School 5, Administrator)

The development of relationships and the school's ability to maintain high levels of accountability are under the control of educators, but the role of the building administrator is essential in ensuring that these two foundational components are maintained. Administrators must work with teachers and other staff members to ensure that the frustration encountered due to failed interventions becomes an isolated event and does not negatively impact the culture within the building (School 1, Administrator). Educators must ensure that the failures in interventions are not due to institutional factors such as inconsistencies in the organizations ability to maintain high levels of accountability or the organizations failure to develop and ensure

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that students are connected to caring adults. If not, we have to assist teachers in understanding that the failures are only opportunities for growth. “We are dealing with adolescents. Some things we try will work and some won’t, but giving up on students should not be an option. It is our [administrators] job to bring this message home” (School 1, Administrator).

Like School 1, the role of the building administrator ensures that mediocrity cannot thrive.

“I try to get them [teachers] back to a place where they really want to try to work with the kids again. If I don’t the student loses, the school loses, and while they don’t get it they lose” (School 5, Administrator). It must be remembered that “these students have not responded well to the whole school initiative. Is that their fault? Nah. That’s ours” (School 1, Administrator). The generic practices and tactics that are utilized will work for the majority of students. However, when working with Tier 3 students the generic practices will no longer be beneficial and will need to be adapted to successfully meet the behavioral and academic needs of students.

Educators must work on those factors that we have control over, relationship building and our ability to maintain high levels of accountability. It is not a science. We must build on those core practices in order to change the outcomes of African American students.

### **Conclusions: Going Forward**

PBIS Exemplar middle schools in North Carolina are grounded in providing high levels of differentiation and in creating positive and supportive school environments. While the methods utilized by the schools to accomplish this manifested in different ways, the outcomes were similar in nature. PBIS Exemplar schools have used differentiation to effectively meet the needs of each individual site by “listening to students to find out what makes them tick, what motivates them, and taking that to build our efforts around them and not them around us” (School 2, Administrator). These schools realized that collaboration amongst schools implementing PBIS was a good use of support, but the interventions, design, and methods used to improve behavioral outcomes and ultimately academic outcomes would not come by

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mimicking the practices of others (School 1, Administrator; School 2, Administrator; School 5, Administrator). Rather, the differentiated reward continuum must be used as an extrinsic motivator until students have matured and/or developed appropriate behaviors. This realization assisted schools in understanding that their PBIS efforts could not be viewed as ‘canned’ interventions that have been pushed into schools. Furthermore, the highly individualized and intensive needs of students in Tier 3, primarily African American and other minority students, could not be met with generic whole school, or group based interventions. Instead, efforts must be specifically tailored to address the behaviors currently being exhibited by students. These PBIS Exemplar schools have worked to meet the developmental and interest needs of sixth, seventh, and eight grade students; females and males, etc. while simultaneously addressing the needs of Tier 3 students, primarily African American and other minority students, who needed individualized interventions that lead to positive behavioral changes.

While each of the schools involved in the study understood the importance in tailoring their efforts to the needs of their clientele, each agreed that this understanding in isolation could not lead to the modification in student behavior that is needed to ensure the academic success of all their students. Differentiation must be coupled with an ability to create a positive and supportive school environment. An understanding of effective differentiation without having the buy-in from staff produces a knowledgeable staff with a lack of action to produce the desired results. Development of a positive and supportive school environment was achieved by focusing heavily, but not entirely, on building effective relationships between students and staff. The use of differentiation without meaningful relationships from caring adults typically results in the failure of interventions.

With commonalities come differences. Some schools made strides to move beyond the school setting where the PBIS framework has most commonly been used into the homes of students. Parents have reaped the benefits of the proactive and positive approaches that schools

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have employed to aid in modifying the antisocial behaviors exhibited by students. As a result, these schools have begun to assist students in moving beyond isolated or environmental dependent behavioral changes to long-term and life changing behavioral changes. A uniform behavioral system with high levels of accountability in and out side of the school building has greater chances of making long-lasting changes than those in which the behavioral system and high expectations are confined within the walls of educational organizations. This differs from the approach that schools that experienced a decrease in the African American population have taken as they have been most concerned with extinguishing the behaviors exhibited at school.

The administrators at schools that have implemented the PBIS framework with high fidelity in North Carolina public schools have created school environments that are changing the academic forecast of students by proactively and positively addressing the behavioral needs of students. PBIS Exemplar schools possess caring adults who are able to effectively build productive relationships with students that then allow them to design specialized programming for students. School officials are enticing and motivating students to exhibit behaviors conducive to their academic success in hopes that the improvement in behavior becomes ingrained within the student. The themes that have emerged from this study provide insight into the overarching attributes of PBIS Exemplar rated schools. However, the means in which schools arrive at these common attributes “can only be done, by listening to students in [your] building...PBIS efforts must be designed based on each school [and] each student (School 3, Administrator).

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Show all authors

[Debra Mayes Pane,](#)

[, Tonette S. Rocco,](#)

[, Lynne D. Miller,](#) Salmon, A. K.

,

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