PBIS Adaptations in Alternative Programs

Positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) is being implemented in alternative programs, including residential and day programs such as disciplinary day schools, therapeutic day schools, residential mental health treatment programs, and juvenile justice programs. Residential programs may opt to implement PBIS in a single program setting such as education, or facility-wide in all youth service divisions such as education, treatment, housing/daily living, vocational, recreation, and medical services.

In alternative schools, the essential elements of the PBIS framework (systems, data, and practices) are consistent with those in typical schools. And, as expected in a framework approach, modified application of those elements is sometimes needed to accommodate unique characteristics of some alternative programs or the youth served in those programs (Grasley-Boy et al., 2021; Nelson et al., 2009). Specifically, modifications may be needed for leadership team functions, such as training and coaching, or for core Tier 1 practices of teaching, acknowledgement systems, and response to violations. Finally, alternative programs characteristically include multiple divisions (mental health, education, vocational, daily living, etc.), each of which has its own procedures and practices. Modifications of the PBIS framework may facilitate integration of PBIS with existing practices, which should provide more streamlined, consistent programming for youth throughout the facility.

Although modifications may be warranted, they must reflect the foundational principles and intent of the PBIS framework. The Facility-Wide Tiered Fidelity Inventory (FW-TFI, v0.2; OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, June 2020) is a tool for assessing implementation fidelity of the PBIS framework in alternative settings. This tool can serve as a guide for ensuring fidelity to critical PBIS principles when making adaptations to essential elements and core practices. We recommend that PBIS teams review descriptions and the corresponding scoring criteria for each essential element. This information can provide parameters within which modifications can be made.

In this brief, we present results from a facilitated discussion held at the 2022 PBIS Leadership Forum focused on modifications needed to PBIS in alternative programs, and examples of those modifications. In addition, we discuss how those modifications maintain fidelity to essential elements. Finally, we provide recommendations based on our discussion.

Facilitated Discussion

During the 2022 PBIS Leadership Forum, a facilitated discussion session sought to collect information about participants' experiences adapting PBIS in alternative settings where they work or coach. The session began with an introduction and explanation of a facilitator-created, one-page handout referencing PBIS features of Training; Teaming; Coaching/Support; Data; Teaching; Acknowledgment Systems; and Responses to

Violations. Participants were given 20 minutes to reflect on and write comments about their experiences on the handout. A facilitator-led discussion followed, and additional insights from the group were recorded and added to the data collected from 17 returned handouts (6 from residential settings; 11 from non-residential settings).

Participants' handouts were analyzed by one facilitator, reviewed by other facilitators, and analyses were discussed to reach consensus. For each feature, common themes emerged about why modifications were needed, and types of modifications used. In the sections below, we summarize participants' responses regarding the reasons and examples of modifications to PBIS features and overall framework as applied in alternative settings. To help PBIS teams maintain focus on fidelity of PBIS implementation, even if modifications are needed, we reference relevant items from the FW-TFI (v0.2), the instrument recommended for assessing PBIS fidelity in alternative programs.

PBIS Training

Item 1.7 on the FW-TFI prescribes criteria for assessment of staff professional development related to PBIS implementation. The assessment scale honors foundational principles of formal, written training processes with tangible materials for all staff. Based on PBIS training typically presented in public schools, respondents identified reasons modifications may be needed, including modifications in training format and content.

Reason Why Modification May Be Needed	Modifications Described by Respondents
- Variation in staff existing knowledge base makes it necessary to differentiate training. - Training must accommodate multiple shifts and high staff turnover. - Training may be needed to address punitive mindsets among staff. - Lack of training resources (e.g., trainers with experience in alternative settings) - Training must address staff physical/emotional wellness due to high-stress work environment. - Training must include and address needs of multiple entities/divisions within the program.	*Training Format* - Include PBIS training during new employee orientation. - Provide multiple training times. - Provide training after hours or between shifts and compensation (e.g., early release, stipends, compensatory time). - Use learning management system for refresher or ongoing training. - Provide brief training sessions across time rather than all at once. - Conduct training as small group sessions or cohorts. - Disseminate PBIS information via memos or bulletins. - Conduct training at the facility rather than at external locations; perhaps bring professionals from outside the agency to the facility for training. - Ensure that trainers represent all divisions/agencies within the facility (e.g., education, mental health, probation).

• Training must provide rationale for Tiers 1, 2 because of mindset that "everyone here is Tier 3."	• Designate staff to act as PBIS ambassadors; have them conduct some trainings. • Implement a train-the-trainer model. *Training Content* • Consider whether training in foundational principles related to PBIS for at-risk youth (e.g., skill deficits versus motivation deficits; rationale for emphasis on prevention) is needed prior to PBIS concepts. • Include many examples from divisions within program or similar programs rather than theory or school examples. • Trainers should use terminology of the alternative program (e.g., youth rather than students; 'write-up' or 'security violation' rather than office disciplinary referral). • Conduct ongoing performance assessments of staff PBIS implementation to identify needed skills. • Provide differentiated training on specific skills (e.g., staff-youth verbal interactions).

PBIS Teams

The PBIS team is intended to represent all program divisions that provide services to youth (e.g., education, treatment, direct care, recreation, vocational), and to facilitate communication with those various divisions for PBIS planning. The FW-TFI items 1.1 and 1.2 describe criteria for the team that reflect these goals. While it may not be feasible to have representatives from all divisions physically present at each team meeting, any modifications to team meetings must ensure that the foundational principles of active representation and communication are intact.

Reason Why Modification May Be Needed	Modifications Described by Respondents
• Must include representation from all divisions (e.g., education, security, frontline staff, mental health team). • Meeting schedules may need to accommodate staff from evening, overnight, and weekend shifts; offsite administrators or staff; or may need to ensure adequate supervision is available for youth.	• Team meets during staff meetings. • In small programs, most/all staff are on the team. • Designate team members to disseminate team information. • Have virtual meetings. • Alternate meeting days and times. • Seek technical assistance for team from PBIS Center. • Explore unique options for finding dedicated team time and space that allows privacy for discussion of youth needs.

• Meeting space is often at a premium, particularly for large teams.	

Coaching PBIS

FW-FTI item 1.11 addresses access to coaching and technical assistance, honoring foundational principles related to building capacity by tapping easy-to-access, on-going opportunities to interact with internal and external PBIS expertise.

Reason Why Modification May Be Needed	Modifications Described by Respondents

• Similar to modifications needed for training and team in terms of:
   o Logistics and time to meet with coaches.
   o Geographic isolation
   o Access to experts who understand PBIS in alternative settings is limited.
• Staff may believe that punitive approaches are more appropriate or effective than positive, trauma-informed approaches. This type of mindset may need attention through training, coaching, and other practices.
	• Adaptations needed are similar to those for training and teams in terms of content or focus of coaching, and how coaching is conducted.
	• Emphasize skills and practice that reflect critical concepts related to PBIS, including how to build positive relationships and de-escalation strategies.
	• More coaching follow-up is needed to support acquisition of essential skills.

Teaching PBIS Expectations to Youth

Insufficient information was gathered for the practice of Teaching. This may be due to a misunderstanding among participants regarding what facilitators meant by "teaching," or it may mean that programs lack frequent, formal teaching of expected behaviors, especially outside of the school setting. Participants referenced academic teaching and content instruction rather than teaching behavior and expectations. Limited time for the facilitated discussion precluded clarification of this topic.

Data to Guide PBIS Decisions

FW-TFI items 1.13 and 1.14 address discipline data and data-based decision-making by PBIS leadership teams. Foundational principles include access to readily available graphic representations of disaggregated

data that shows frequency and trends of important behaviors, as well as timely and regular use of such data for monthly decision-making.

Reason Why Modification May Be Needed	Modifications Described by Respondents
• Available data may not match what is needed for PBIS planning. For example, to monitor minor misbehaviors, PBIS teams may need to rely on disciplinary reports written by direct care staff. • Available data systems, including climate surveys and systems for collecting behavior data, may not reflect the terminology and structure of alternative programs. • Available data systems may not have the capacity to provide graphed reports or disaggregate data by day, time, or location. • Available data systems may not capture improvements in positive behaviors, such as improvements in academic performance or meeting therapeutic goals.	• Adapt existing data systems to capture data, reports, and/or analyses needed for PBIS planning. • Create data dashboards that are customizable to local needs. These should allow easy access to data reports for the PBIS team and for sharing with administrators and staff.

Acknowledgment Systems

FW-FTI item 1.8 addresses youth feedback and acknowledgment, honoring the foundational principle of implementing a formally written system, widely used, that provides staff recognition and specific behavior feedback linked to facility-wide behavioral expectations.

Reason Why Modification May Be Needed	Modifications Described by Respondents
• Identifying effective reinforcers may be difficult due to safety and security restrictions. • Youth who are in short-term placement for only brief periods of time may not have enough time to earn reinforcers.	• Plan acknowledgment systems that incorporate existing terminology, restrictions or limitations, and geographic configurations/locations. • Use Check In-Check Out as a Tier 1 practice.

• It is important to plan acknowledgment systems to be implemented facility-wide, in all areas and activities. • As with coaching, staff beliefs about acknowledgment systems may need to be assessed and addressed; otherwise, acknowledgment systems may not be implemented consistently or with fidelity. • All youth need more prompts and more feedback about their behavior than do youth in typical school settings. • Many alternative programs require that all youth have individualized treatment plans. These need to be addressed as part of the PBIS framework.	

Of note, point systems and level systems may serve as the PBIS incentive system. If so, it is important that these align with PBIS expectations and reflect criteria for acknowledgement systems as described in the FW-TFI item 1.8.

Responses to Minor Misbehavior

FW-FTI items 1.5 and 1.6 address definitions of challenging behaviors and policies to address youths' challenging behaviors, respectively. Foundational principles prescribe a clear distinction between major and minor rule violations, as well as clear distinctions in the way they are documented, and interventions are taught to youth and staff. Moreover, policy and practice emphasize proactive, instructive, or restorative approaches that honor developmentally appropriate balance to punitive consequences.

Reason Why Modification May Be Needed	Modifications Described by Respondents

• Lack of understanding regarding:
  o Communicative nature of behavior
  o Purpose of consequences
  o Punishment as ineffective in absence of acknowledgements
	• Replace punitive responses with a continuum of responses to discourage minor misbehavior and encourage alternative positive behavior.
	• Increase Tier 3 practices for youth who exhibit high frequencies of misbehavior or misbehavior that is highly disruptive or dangerous.

• Existing practice lacks a continuum of consequences. • Punitive consequences are often applied to whole group (e.g., taking away privileges from the group based on the behavior of one or a few youth).	• Implement strategies to increase consistency of responses to misbehavior across multiple staff. Ideas for this include creating flowcharts to describe differentiated responses for major versus minor misbehavior or providing visual reminders for staff to use recommended responses.

Philosophical Alignment with PBIS

Discussion facilitators noted a common theme among participants during both the verbal discussion and in written responses across multiple features. Participants emphasized the challenge in implementing PBIS in alternative settings that are not aligned to the strength-based, teaching mindset, and prevention philosophy of PBIS.

Challenges Related to Organizational Philosophy and Facility Climate
• Philosophical mindset of staff and organization may reflect a punitive mindset (e.g., youth need to be punished for their offenses). • Program may not have adopted a developmental- and/or trauma-informed approach to treatment and programming. • Staff may object to reward systems, sometimes voicing concerns about "buying behavior." This may also relate to the philosophical mindset of staff and climate of the program. • Staff may not have training in behavioral principles related to effective and ethical uses of negative consequences for misbehavior.

Summary

This facilitated discussion identified several reasons why (a) adaptations may be needed in the design of PBIS essential elements, and (b) types of adaptations that are being used. Perhaps even before making adaptations to the essential elements of PBIS, it is important to consider the overall philosophy or climate of the program. Beginning in the 1980's, discipline programming for youth in all types of settings began to skew toward more "law and order," punitive approaches that relied on reactive, exclusionary practices such as zero tolerance policies, suspension and expulsion, and severe penalties for youth charged with committing low-level crimes (National Research Council, 2013; Puzzanchera, Hockenberry, & Sickmund, 2022). While that trend has begun to change in the direction of more nurturing approaches that reflect the social, emotional, and developmental needs of at-risk youth, some alternative programs continue to have vestiges of punitive philosophies or practices (Puzzanchera et al., 2022).

For this reason, planning PBIS in alternative programs must first include an assessment of the program's philosophy of treatment for youth. A program in which existing policies and practices are indicative of

punitive approaches, and/or in which majority of adult-youth interactions are neutral or negative, may require additional action steps to address the underlying treatment philosophy. For example, it may be that a punitive climate is due to the design of existing behavior management programs, and that changing those programs in favor of PBIS practices will create a more positive climate. On the other hand, a harsh climate may be attributable to an administrative and staff philosophy regarding optimal approaches to the youth they serve. In this case, for PBIS to be successful, we advise that steps must be taken to further assess and address that philosophy before proceeding with typical PBIS planning. Doing so will facilitate the task of designing the essential elements of PBIS and may even reduce the need for adaptations.

References

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