Advanced Tiers in High School: Lessons Learned from Initial Implementation

Introduction

An increasing number of high schools have adopted Tier 1 PBIS; however, implementation of advanced tiers of PBIS in high schools is less common and specific guidance is scarce. To address this need and better understand the level of support needed to successfully implement advanced tiers of PBIS at the high school level, the National Center on PBIS is conducting a model demonstration with a cohort of four high schools. The intent of this brief is to share lessons learned related to strengths and challenges that have influenced the initial implementation of advanced tiers of support for schools and lessons learned for district leaders and trainers to consider when supporting high schools.

Model Demonstration Demographics

The four high schools participating in the model demonstration are in small cities across Massachusetts.

- School size ranges from 750 to 1900 students.
- 26-46% of students are classified as economically disadvantaged.
- 36-58% of students are considered high needs according to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.
- The largest racial subgroup in each school is White and varies from 48-69%. Other prominent racial subgroups included Hispanic, African American, and Asian.
- Graduation rates vary across schools from 80-95%.

All high schools received previous training and coaching in implementing Tier 1 PBIS, had active Tier 1 teams, and had been implementing Tier 1 for at least 2 years prior to joining the model demonstration.

Implementation Supports

As part of the model demonstration, a two-year Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was agreed upon with the goal of building schools' capacity to implement and sustain Tier 2 and 3 of PBIS. All schools formed advanced tier teams and designated at least two coaches per team. All three tiers of the Tiered Fidelity Inventory were completed with schools to assess baseline infrastructure.

- Schools received four days of training the first year (two days for coaches, and two days for teams including coaches). Two additional coaches' meetings were conducted after the shift to virtual learning in lieu of scheduled training days, for a total of four coaches' meetings over the academic year.

  o Training topics included establishing a team, using data for decision making, identifying students for additional supports, selecting and adopting Tier 2 practices, coaching advanced tiers teams, and pivoting practices and systems for virtual learning.

- On-site technical assistance and coaching were available for all teams. Utilization of technical assistance varied from two to ten hours, with an average of six hours per school. The focus of on-site coaching and assistance included assessing Tier 1 and Tier 2 to identify strengths, priorities, and capacity; supporting Tier 1 implementation as a foundation for Tier 2; creating a comprehensive inventory and description of existing Tier 2 interventions; and defining clear entrance and exit criteria for Tier 2 interventions.

PBIS Implementation in High Schools

Unique features of the high school environment (e.g., school size, student developmental level, organization) has been shown to effect implementation of PBIS (Flannery & Kato, 2017). The larger size of high schools and their organization by department often means teachers and staff only see and interact with a small number of their colleagues. While this structure has many benefits, it often results in silos that impair school-wide communication and collaboration. The age of students also impacts PBIS implementation. At the high school level, students play a critical role in the development and implementation of PBIS, offering input on expectations, lessons, and reinforcement, and participating in peer mediated interventions. However, with this responsibility also comes the potential bias by adults that students "should" possess self-management skills and that it is not the role of staff to explicitly teach social, study, and/or organizational skills.

Critical Features of Advanced Tiers

The first year of the High School Advanced Tiers Academy focused on developing systems to support Tier 2 practices. Tier 2 practices and systems are designed to: use data to identify students who are at-risk for or currently experiencing social, emotional and/or behavioral difficulties; prevent the development or decrease the frequency and/or intensity of students' problem behaviors; and provide standardized interventions that effectively and efficiently support students yet do not require the time and resources needed for individualized plans (Center on PBIS, 2021). Within a continuum of supports, interventions at Tier 2 are easily accessible, continuously available, familiar to all school staff, and build upon Tier 1 practices (e.g., skill instruction, acknowledgement of appropriate behavior, frequent performance feedback, and increased adult support). In the next section, we describe strengths and challenges related to high school implementation of these critical features of advanced tiers across data, practices, and systems.

Data

Strengths: Data Fluency

We found high school personnel to be remarkably fluent with data. These skills included comfort with data systems (e.g., school information systems) and flexibility and creativity with leveraging data systems for problem solving. For example, one school team added school climate questions for students into their existing school information system, and used student responses to both inform school-wide efforts (to reflect student voice and feedback) and screen for individual students in need of additional supports. In addition, teams demonstrated fluency in review, analysis, and synthesis of data across multiple sources. Most teams regularly review attendance, academic, and behavioral data together to make decisions about students' needs.

One school, in concert with a district-wide comprehensive mental health initiative, regularly screens all high school students using multiple measures, including the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9), and the General Anxiety Disorder (GAD-7). At the high school level, these data are used across sources to identify students in need of intervention and to monitor progress in and response to interventions. At the district level, the data are aggregated to monitor the impact of the initiative to improve and expand a tiered system of mental health supports.

Challenges: Data Systems

High school teams lacked routines and structures to support the use of data for decisions. Often, data were collected but not communicated across teams or stakeholders. Further, there did not seem to be a common understanding or school-wide consensus about the utility of data for decision-making. All teams identified the need for developing data systems, including school-wide decision rules for student access to and match with interventions, progress monitoring, and exiting interventions. There were no coordinated efforts to collect fidelity and outcome data for existing Tier 2 interventions to support decisions regarding intervention effectiveness at the school or student level. Schools used the training time to begin to systematically review data across sources and match to interventions, for example, using the hexagon tool (Metz & Louison, 2018) as a vehicle to review data across sources, with the goal of evaluating the need for new practices.

Practices

Strengths: Depth and Diversity of Interventions

High school team members initially self-reported that they "did not have much in place" for practices, especially at Tier 2. However, during training, teams completed a thorough inventory of interventions in their buildings. This inventory yielded a surprising and extensive number of supports available to students across academic, mental health, behavioral, and social interventions. Interventions were innovative, creatively reallocated staff, and often involved collaboration and partnerships with outside agencies.

For example, with regard to academic supports, one high school inventoried the following interventions: credit recovery program, academic seminar for at-risk 9th grade students, peer tutoring, summer high school transition program for at-risk rising freshmen, a dedicated program (and designated area) for daily academic support, supports for 9th grade first generation college-bound students, and formal systems to connect students with subject area teachers for additional help. The same school partnered with community mental health agencies that provide school-based individual and group counseling and comprehensive supports to students returning to school following hospitalization or extended absence.

Another high school used behavioral referral data to screen students into credited life skills classes designed to teach and strengthen social emotional skills and develop connections between students and staff. This school re-invented and re-conceptualized their in-school suspension program as an intervention center, including groups supporting problem-solving and re-teaching. A third high school provided a number of interventions targeting attendance for at-risk students within a tiered system of support, organizing acknowledgements, increased contact with students and families, and targeted interventions across a continuum of intensity.

Challenges: Standardized Interventions and Siloed Implementation

So many of the interventions in place came close to meeting the critical features of Tier 2 interventions. Supports, such as those described above, were selected and developed to meet the needs of at-risk students. However, most lacked consistent, standardized implementation across students, were variably accessible/available to students, and were not often integrated or aligned with Tier 1 supports.

Many of the practices schools were implementing operated in isolation, with different personnel providing and coordinating each separate intervention. Schools lacked a team to coordinate across interventions and to support connections to the broader context and outcomes. None of the schools had standardized procedures for matching interventions to student need. In addition, without standardized procedures and data, practices are far less likely to be durable and sustainable.

Implementation Systems

Strengths: Utilization of Existing Infrastructure

Development, organization, and initial implementation of advanced tiers in high schools were of course, facilitated by systems level supports. District level priorities, initiatives, and personnel played an important role in supporting school team progress. For example, as mentioned above, a district-wide school mental health initiative supported universal screening tied to evidence-based cognitive behavioral interventions for at-risk students at the high school. Another district created a new behavioral support coordinator position; this individual facilitated resource allocation, advocated for team needs, and supported consistency across two participating schools. Within schools, we found that coaches and teams who creatively re-defined their roles to focus on student support were more successful in their efforts to develop advanced tiers.

Challenges: Time and Resources, Professional Development

Despite the size of high schools and the range of interventions to coordinate and implement, each schools' advanced tiers team consisted of a small number of staff, each of whom have multiple commitments, wear many hats, and seem to be the "go-to" people in their buildings. These stretched resources made even foundation-level tasks, such as scheduling team meetings, challenging. Participating schools lacked school-wide procedures for intervention referral (for staff, students, and families), use of data to match students to interventions, monitor student progress, monitor fidelity of implementation, and evaluate level of use.

Traditionally, specialists (e.g., school psychologists, school counselors, academic coaches) have been responsible for providing supports to at-risk students. Our teams reported that most high school staff were not aware of the range of available Tier 2 interventions, the purpose of the practices, or how to connect students with targeted interventions. This lack of knowledge made it difficult for staff to support and participate in Tier 2 implementation. In addition, as high school teachers' primary focus is content area instruction, it is a significant shift for many teachers to implement Tier 2 social, emotional, and behavioral supports in the classroom. Given the structure of high schools, staff-wide professional development and communication was both needed and challenging.

Lessons Learned about Supporting Advanced Tiers Implementation

1. Continue Investing in Tier 1

Successful implementation of Advanced Tiers is supported by a solid Tier 1 foundation. Core features, such as a representative PBIS team that meets regularly, a system for teaching expectations to students, and regular communication with staff and other stakeholders support the implementation of Advanced Tiers. A solid foundation of Tier 1 systems is essential for the development of Advanced Tiers. Even with strong Tier 1 foundations, it was beneficial to spend time assessing, reviewing and supporting implementation of Tier 1 systems and practices. We recommend the following to support and build upon Tier 1 implementation:

- Complete Tier 1 of the Tiered Fidelity Inventory as a team and use the results to update priorities and develop an action plan.
- Ensure communication between the Tier 1 PBIS team and Advanced Tiers teams. At minimum, coordination between the Tier 1 team and a combined Tier 2/Tier 3 systems team that identifies students in need of additional supports and coordinates provision of a continuum of interventions is necessary. Most high schools have multiple teams involved in coordinating and delivering supports addressing students' safety, social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes (e.g., Academic Support Team, peer tutoring, group counseling, credit recovery, Freshman Academy, etc.). Establishing formal communication systems avoids duplication of efforts, supports alignment, and facilitates staff buy-in.
- Acknowledge Tier 1 features that are implemented with fidelity and/or resulting in positive outcomes even or especially when those positive outcomes are incremental, in order to celebrate accomplishments and maintain momentum.

- Invest the time in building and sustaining a solid Tier 1 foundation.

2. Connect with a Community of Practice

While every high school is different, teams valued connecting and networking with other high school teams. Early on in the trainings, coaches and team members requested more time to hear from one another and share ideas. Going forward, whole group discussion time was built into trainings for teams to share current practices, barriers, and solutions. Teams also shared action planning steps following team activities. Building networking time into training activities allowed teams to learn from one another, share resources, brainstorm ideas, celebrate progress, and problem-solve challenges and barriers specific to the high school context. Check with your regional PBIS network to see if they facilitate a community of practice for high schools or join the PBIS High School Network organized by APBS.

3. Align Academic, Social, Emotional, Behavioral and Mental Health Efforts

As discussed above, high schools often have multiple Tier 2 interventions in place to support students' mental health and academic, social, emotional, and behavioral development. However, these interventions tend to be siloed and uncoordinated. It is important to clarify from the beginning that the Tier 2 framework encompasses all these interventions. Misconceptions that Tier 2 of PBIS applies only to behavioral interventions and outcomes can result in continued inefficiencies in referral, intervention, and progress monitoring practices. We recommend the following to help teams align interventions from the beginning:

- Inventory all current Tier 2 interventions, including the purpose of the intervention (e.g., what), student entry criteria (e.g., who), process for referring students to the intervention (e.g., how), and the name and contact information of staff responsible for the intervention. Before adding new interventions, evaluate the effectiveness of existing interventions and consider strengthening those that are effective and eliminating those that are not. Pilot any new or enhanced interventions on a small scale to assess feasibility and refine systems before expanding.
- Since most students in need of additional supports require some combination of academic, social, mental health, and/or behavioral supports, teams should develop routines for reviewing these data together and one system for referring and matching students with appropriate interventions.
- Develop communication protocols between teams (e.g., Tier 1/Schoolwide Leadership team, administrative or instructional leadership teams, student problem-solving teams) and communicate early and often the objective of the Tier 2 framework in supporting decision-making across social, emotional, behavioral and mental health efforts.
- Educate and inform faculty and staff on Tier 2 interventions to promote awareness and shared participation.

Conclusion

When implementing advanced tiers in high schools, it is critical that teams lay the groundwork that will support initial implementation. This includes a continued investment in Tier 1 implementation, connecting with a community of practice, and taking the time to catalogue and align academic, social, emotional, behavioral and mental health programs and initiatives. High schools bring many strengths to the

development of advanced tiers. A common challenge is developing systems and procedures that support consistency, efficiency, communication and access.

Hyperlinks Shared in Brief

[1]https://uhs.fsu.edu/sites/g/files/upcbnu1651/files/docs/PHQ-9 and GAD-7 Form_a.pdf

[2]https://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/sites/nirn.fpg.unc.edu/files/imce/documents/NIRN%20Hexagon%20Discussion%20Analysis%20Tool_September2020_1.pdf

[3]https://www.apbs.org/networks#PBIS-High-School

References

Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (2021). Tier 2. Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports [Website]. www.pbis.org.

Flannery, K. B., & McGrath Kato, M. (2017). Implementation of SWPBIS in high school: Why is it different? *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth, 61*(1), 69-79. https://doi:10.1080/1045988X.2016.1196644

Metz, A. & Louison, L. (2018). *The Hexagon Tool: Exploring Context*. Chapel Hill, NC: National Implementation Research Network, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.