

Why implement Tier 1 PBIS for students with disabilities? What does research say?

The Office of Special Education Programs has continuously funded the National Technical Assistance Center on PBIS since 1998. During that time, the Center on PBIS has supported all U.S. states and territories to build their capacity to implement evidence-based practices within a PBIS framework. Although the Center recommends and supports the implementation of a full continuum (Tiers 1, 2, and 3) of social, emotional, and behavioral (SEB) support, many schools focus only on school-wide Tier 1 implementation. For example, more schools measure and report fidelity of Tier 1 than Tiers 2 and 3 combined. Tier 1 should provide a strong foundation of positive and proactive support for *all* students, including students with disabilities.

This brief summarizes empirical research on the effects of Tier 1 PBIS for students with disabilities. We included articles that (a) explicitly stated that their sample included students with disabilities (as defined by services documented on an Individualized Education Plan or 504 plan) and (b) reported findings specifically for students with disabilities (e.g., results reported exclusively for students with disabilities, overall results disaggregated to examine effects by disability status). We are currently conducting a systematic review of the research literature, so check for future summary updates with additional research findings.

Key Findings from Research

In general, when schools implement PBIS with fidelity, students with disabilities experience: (a) improved **SEB outcomes** and (b) reduced **exclusionary discipline** (i.e., office discipline referrals, suspensions, restraint, seclusion). In this section, we briefly summarize key findings from research examining the effects of Tier 1 PBIS for students with disabilities. We also indicate the types of research that support these findings.

Improved SEB Outcomes

Preliminary research indicates students with disabilities experience improved SEB outcomes in alternative, special education, and inclusive settings in schools that implement Tier 1 PBIS with fidelity.

- When schools implement Tier 1 PBIS with fidelity, students, including those with disabilities, increase **prosocial behavior** and **emotional regulation**, as demonstrated in group experimental (e.g., Bradshaw et al., 2012) and descriptive case study (e.g., Farkas et al., 2012) research.
- In addition, students with disabilities experience fewer **SEB challenges** when schools implement Tier 1 PBIS with fidelity (e.g., decreased clinical symptoms, internalizing and externalizing behavior, concentration problems), as demonstrated in group experimental (Bradshaw et al., 2012), experimental single case design (Loman et al., 2018); quasi-experimental (pretest-posttest) design (Benner et al., 2010), and descriptive case study (Simonsen et al., 2010) research.



Reduced Exclusionary Discipline

In addition to improved SEB outcomes, research indicates students with disabilities may experience fewer exclusionary discipline events, such as suspensions, restraints, and seclusions, when schools implement Tier 1 PBIS with fidelity.

- Preliminary case study research suggests students with disabilities may receive fewer **office discipline referrals** (e.g., Farkas et al., 2012; Jolivette et al., 2014).
- Students with disabilities may also be less likely to experience **suspension** when schools implement Tier 1 PBIS with fidelity, with empirical support coming from group experimental (e.g., Bradshaw et al., 2012), state-level evaluation (e.g., Gage et al., 2019; Grasley-Boy et al., 2022), and national evaluation (e.g., Simonsen et al., 2022) research.
- Although data on crisis responses, such as **restraint and seclusion**, are less reliable at the national level (e.g., Simonsen et al., 2022), case studies (e.g., Gelbar et al., 2015; George et al., 2013; Simonsen et al., 2010) and a systematic review of the literature (e.g., Grasley-Boy et al., 2022) suggest educators may use fewer crisis responses when schools implement Tier 1 PBIS with fidelity.
- Quasi-experimental research (e.g., Grasley-Boy et al., 2019) also indicates that schools implementing Tier 1 PBIS with fidelity may be less likely to refer students with disabilities to **alternative setting placements** because of behavioral concerns.

Recommendations from Research

Given the promising empirically-supported effects of Tier 1 PBIS, we recommend schools continue to prioritize Tier 1 supports that are inclusive, robust, and supportive of *all* students, including students with disabilities. (See [Supporting Students with Disabilities in the Classroom within a PBIS Framework](#) for more details.) In addition, because some students, with and without identified disabilities, will require additional support to experience success, we continue to recommend that districts support schools in establishing a full continuum of support for students' SEB needs. (See www.pbis.org, [Tier 2](#) and [Tier 3](#) topics, for an overview.) In future summaries, we may provide more nuanced recommendations as researchers continue to (a) study effects of PBIS for specific subgroups of students with disabilities (e.g., students with extensive support needs; Conradi et al., 2022) and (b) further examine what works for whom under what conditions.

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The following author team contributed to this brief (listed in alphabetical order): Laura Kern, Katherine Meyer, Barbara Mitchell, Tobey Duble Moore, Ashley Plumb, Robert Putnam, Maria Reina Santiago-Rosario, Sandra Sears, Brandi Simonsen, Kathleen Strickland Cohen, & Kimberly Yanek

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