

The Use of Level Systems in Alternative Settings: Fidelity, Design, and Alignment with PBIS

Introduction

Juvenile justice and other alternative programs implement behavior management systems to teach and encourage appropriate behavior and respond to unacceptable behavior. One approach used for this purpose is level systems, or hierarchical frameworks of differentiated expectations and privileges; higher levels are usually associated with higher standards for behavior and more desirable privileges and greater freedoms. Typically, youth move through levels based on points earned in a separate point system. Some level systems include contingencies for returning to previous levels for predetermined misbehaviors or even repeated failure to earn a set percentage of daily points.

Level systems are conceptually linked to behavioral principles and practices (Cihon et al., 2019), including positive reinforcement, shaping, fading, and response cost (Smith & Ferrell, 1993). They are also the subject of debate around effectiveness and design. Proponents cite flexible design elements that can promote shaping, naturally-occurring reinforcers, and generalization to meet individual or group needs (e.g., Cancio & Johnson, 2013, Filcheck, McNeil, Greco, & Bernard, 2004). Critics raise concerns over negative side effects, limited fidelity of implementation and potential for misuse, and being antithetical to a therapeutic and developmentally appropriate environment (Sprague et al., 2013; Thompkins-Rosenblatt & VanderVen, 2005). However, most discussions of level systems agree on the need to design level systems that are individualized, promote socially important behaviors, and are equitable. Furthermore, there is consensus on the need for level system research to provide guidance about critical design features and overall efficacy for specific populations, including youth in alternative placements.

This practice brief is the culmination of activities conducted during a Facilitated Discussion session at the 2021 PBIS Forum. The focus of the Facilitated Discussion was level systems as used in alternative programs, and the purpose was to gather input from session participants related to their experiences with level system design, implementation, and alignment with PBIS. Our goal was to translate those experiences into specific recommendations for designing and implementing level systems in alternative settings that are coordinated with PBIS.

Facilitated Discussion Participants and Procedures

Participants included representatives from short- and long-term secure programs (juvenile justice or mental health treatment) and alternative school programs. Participant roles included teachers, administrators, internal and external PBIS coaches, and secure facility staff. Prior to the Facilitated Discussion, participants were invited to complete an online survey related to level systems within their programs. The survey focused on respondents' perceptions of their level systems' goals, effectiveness, fidelity, strengths, and challenges. We received a total of 22 completed surveys. Following were some of the themes which emerged in the survey responses:

- The majority of participants identified the following as primary goals of their level systems:
 - serves as a behavior management system to determine and award privileges;
 - documents and analyzes youth progress to determine support needs or transition planning;
 - and provides progress data for determining release/exit dates.
- 36% of respondents reported high confidence levels that their level system meets its intended goals.
- 55% of respondents stated that their level system is aligned with their PBIS systems and practices.
- 77% of respondents identified inconsistent implementation as the biggest obstacle of their level system.

During the Facilitated Discussion, participants were provided a link to log in to Google Jamboard, a web-based collaborative digital whiteboard. Each of the four slides on the Jamboard posed structured questions, and participants were asked to share their ideas on each slide using "digital sticky notes." The questions were:

- How have you seen alternative settings successfully align their level systems with the core features of Tier I PBIS?
- How can PBIS teams plan for alignment between level system incentives or consequences and PBIS acknowledgment system incentives?
- What systems and strategies effectively improve the fidelity of level system implementation?
- How could data from your level systems be used to inform your PBIS systems and practices?

Following the Jamboard activity, participants were divided into small groups and asked to focus on one main area for improvement in level systems, based on the previous discussions and ideas posted on Jamboard. Finally, all participants came back together, and each group shared their recommendations for strengthening level systems.

A summary of the main themes and recommendations that emerged during the discussions are presented in the following table.



Themes	Recommendations
Design of level systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ensure that level system points relate to established PBIS rules and school-wide expectations.• Consider a structure where students have differential access to incentives or store items based on their level status.• Solicit input from students and staff when designing integrated functions of the level system and PBIS to ensure contextual fit.• Consider the site's culture and goals when determining whether students will enter the program at the highest or lowest levels.• Focus heavily on students earning points and receiving positive acknowledgment through the level system.
Fidelity of level system implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Create systems for sharing level system data regularly with team members.• Develop and utilize clearly defined system protocols describing decision rules and the step-by-step implementation of the level system.• Provide training, coaching, and oversight related to consistent implementation of the level system (and related point system) across all staff.• Include acknowledgment systems for staff related to appropriate and consistent implementation of the level system.
Use of level system data to inform PBIS systems and practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify level system data trends across students, informing action planning related to Tier I systems and practices.• Monitor student progress data to determine if the level system produces desired student outcomes.
Prioritized action plans for improving level system design, implementation, and outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cultivate a team mindset that focuses on skill development and positive reinforcement within the level system rather than emphasizing punishment and consequences.• Educate staff on the value of using a level system more as a data tool for student progress monitoring instead of primarily a punishment system.• Increase accountability and guidance for correct implementation of level systems.• Refine the level system expectations to increase clarity and ease of implementation, thus improving consistency across all staff.

Strategies for Aligning Level Systems with PBIS

The following strategies elaborate on the recommendations provided by participants in the Facilitated Discussion. We highlight a few critical recommendations from participants and provide examples for how these might be carried out in the context of PBIS data, systems, and practices.

Data: One theme expressed by many Facilitated Discussion participants included utilizing level system data to inform Tier I systems and practices. One approach to using Level System data in this manner would be to include the analysis of program-wide level system data into monthly PBIS meetings. For example, perhaps

the level system data could be analyzed to look for patterns related to time of day, specific routines, or locations where points were not earned or where levels were dropped. In that case, that information could inform the team about opportunities for improvement and troubleshooting.

Another possible use of level system data is to evaluate the fidelity of staff implementation by comparing level system data to other data sources. For example, the PBIS team could compare documentation of specific significant behavior incidents to the corresponding occurrence of level drops or point losses to evaluate whether particular behaviors are consistently resulting in the intended level system-related consequences.

Level system data can also screen for students who may need Tier II or III intensified support. The intervention team could regularly analyze level system data to look for students who are frequently assigned level drops or have difficulty earning points and then take a closer look at each student's specific needs to determine whether additional support is warranted.

Systems: Inconsistent implementation was identified by 77% of survey respondents as the biggest challenge of level systems, and a common theme within the Facilitated Discussion was the need to increase training, coaching, and accountability. A critical prerequisite before considering staff training is to ensure that the decision rules for the level system are clearly defined and documented (Jones, Dunn, & Dohrn, 2004). The level system should be outlined in a manner that leaves little room for personal judgment calls about whether or not students should change levels or earn points. Heightened clarity around which specific behaviors earn points or levels is one element that can significantly increase consistency across staff members. The decision rules related to point-earning and level advancement or level drops should not be too cumbersome or confusing; staff members should be fluent in describing the contingencies of the level system for all students. In addition, teams should outline specific plans for initial and ongoing training on level system implementation and include regularly scheduled observations and fidelity checks. Supervisors or coaches should regularly provide positive and corrective feedback directly to individual staff about the consistency of level system implementation. Some sites also incorporate staff acknowledgment systems to publicly recognize team members for implementing the level system as written.

Practices: Discussion participants agreed that the criteria for students to earn points and advance levels should be directly related to the site's PBIS values and behavioral expectations. The criteria for earning points and moving levels should be fully transparent for students, and should be frequently referenced. For example, criteria to earn points could be visually posted in all settings and tied into posted PBIS behavioral expectations across contexts and locations. In addition, when staff are providing positive and constructive feedback to students about their performance and points, staff should include specific examples from the PBIS expectations to provide rationale for the point or level assignments.

The level system should also be aligned with targeted skill development (Cancio & Johnson, 2013). Teams can identify deficits in prosocial skills, coping skills, self-management, and academic engagement skills, and

develop consistent practices for teaching, prompting, practicing, and reinforcing those behaviors. Those targeted skills can be integrated into the PBIS expectations matrix as well as into the criteria for earning points and advancing levels.

Discussion participants also offered suggestions for a variety of ways to provide differential access to reinforcement options based on a student's earned level. In one example provided, students must achieve a set minimum level in order to access certain privileges (e.g., "late night" privileges, certain clothing items, etc.). In another example, students on different levels had access to different sections of the PBIS store; students on lower levels could still purchase PBIS store items but their options were limited compared to students at higher levels.

Summary

Alternative settings that choose to implement level systems in addition to their PBIS systems and practices must be intentional about the design of each of those systems for consistency, clarity, and to more efficiently reach their desired outcomes. A focus on program-wide positive supports includes providing clear and consistent feedback and positive reinforcement (Conroy et al, 2009), and these elements should also be integrated into level system protocols. Team buy-in related to supportive aspects of a level system is also critical; participants in the Facilitated Discussion gave examples of supportive leadership teams that engaged in transparent discussions about the need for a "philosophical shift" away from a focus on punishment. This change in mindset can be a key factor in ensuring that a level system is aligned with a program's PBIS framework. Team members at all levels should be involved in planning sessions which focus on conceptual and practical alignment of PBIS and the level system (National Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, 2017). In order to address common obstacles to level system implementation, teams should also develop strong systems for training, coaching, and accountability to ensure that the level system is being implemented as intended. Teams should also ensure that there are clearly outlined desired outcomes for students, and should engage in ongoing data analysis and evaluation to ensure that the system is producing the desired results.

While there are some commonly reported complications associated with the implementation of level systems in alternative settings, the consensus from the participants in this Facilitated Discussion is that there are select key actions that can be taken to improve fidelity and outcomes. Teams who choose to implement level systems in conjunction with their PBIS systems and practices should work together to identify opportunities to strengthen their level system data, systems, and practices, considering some of the suggestions outlined within this brief.

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