Improving Tier 3 Implementation and Outcomes in a High-Needs School

The National Center on Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) provides professional development and technical assistance to more than 27,000 schools nationwide (OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2021). Although much has been documented on the impact of Tier I PBIS implementation with fidelity on student outcomes (McIntosh et al., 2023), there is a need for more research regarding Tier 3 implementation with fidelity across a school or district. Additionally, students without effective supports experience increased exclusionary discipline, and educators experience increased stress and burnout (e.g., Brunsting et al., 2022; Soares et al., 2021; Sullivan et al., 2014). To better understand the supports needed to improve outcomes for students served with Tier 3 services positively, this model demonstration examined the impact of Tier system implementation within a school implementing all three tiers. This brief examines the impact of both improved Tier 3 implementation fidelity as measured by Tiered Implementation Fidelity (TFI) and the Self-Assessment Survey (SAS) 4.0, as well as an improved implementation of individual behavior support practices with a Tier 3 group with focused support as compared to Tier 3 group without focused support in a high-needs elementary school in a rural area in the northeast. The information learned from this model demonstration may assist others working in and supporting schools in similar settings.

School Demographics

The elementary school in this model demonstration is in northern Massachusetts and serves 987 students, grades PK-4. The student-to-teacher ratio is 11.6 to 1. The student population includes students who identify as white (60.4%), Hispanic (29%), multi-racial (6.3%), African American (2.5%), or Asian (1.4%). Students considered “high needs” by the state department of education comprise 75.8% of the population, meaning that students are designated as either low-income, economically disadvantaged, English Language Learners, or students with disabilities. The majority (68.8%) of the student population is low-income, 20.7% are those with disabilities, 13.7% speak a first language that is not English, and 11.6% are considered English Language Learners.

For this model demonstration, we identified students for Tier 3 services if they had five or more Office Discipline Referrals (ODRs). Of the 38 students, approximately 4% of the school population was served in Tier 3 services during the 2022-2023 school year, and 60% were classified as a student with a disability. Most students qualified for special education under the eligibility category of Autism Spectrum Disorder, followed by Other Health Impaired. Other eligibility categories included Emotional Disability, Developmentally Delayed, Specific Learning Disability, and Communication Impairment. Among those receiving support in Tier 3, students
identified as white (71%), African American (13%), Hispanic (8%), or Asian (8%). There were no students in Tier 3 services that were English Language Learners. Of the students in Tier 3 services, 31 were male, and 7 were female.

Tier 3 Data Collected

**Fidelity**
Fidelity was measured using the TFI Tier 3 subscale and the Self-Assessment Survey 4.0. The TFI is a standardized measure that measures implementation fidelity across all three tiers and had been used several times before this study began. The SAS is an annual, multiple-response survey to help teams identify the staff perception of implementation status and improvement priority for school-wide, classroom, non-classroom, and individual student systems. For the elementary school targeted for the Tier 3 intervention, the school participated in the field test for SAS 4.0, which looks specifically at implementing all tiers.

**Student Outcomes**
Staff collected Office Discipline Referrals (ODRs) and recorded them in the Schoolwide Information System across the year. School staff also monitored each student’s progress on their behavior goals or objectives, depending on their specific behavioral needs.

**Tier 3 Practices and Systems**

**Practices and Systems Already in Place**
In this school, there was already a Tier Systems 3 team in place that met twice per month as well as individual teams for each student that also met twice a month. Previous Tier 3 TFI scores in 2021 were 38%. In 2022, it was 68%. The strengths noted on the TFI Tier 3 were data-based decision-making, comprehensive support, professional development, and teaming. Items needing strengthening included quality of life indicators and student/family/community involvement. Most (70%) students had an individual behavior support plan (BSP). Observations, however, found varying levels of fidelity. Data were collected on each student’s BSP. However, these data were not always updated and graphed for progress monitoring when the systems and individual student teams met, thus limiting data-based decision-making.

**Consultation to Enhance Tier 3**
Of the 38 eligible students, we obtained consent to gather information and enhance support for 11 students. Once consent was received for these 11 students in the intervention group, the two members of our team, who both had advanced expertise and experience supporting Tier 3,
provided intensive consultation beginning in February 2023 to the Tier 3 system team and individual Tier 3 teams and staff working with these students. The consultation was approximately 60 hours and was provided on at least a weekly basis with a focus on improving both the school-wide Tier 3 services, practices, and data collection as well as the individual student’s behavior support practices. About 40 hours were on-site with school staff, and the other 20 hours were focused on data analysis (e.g., cleaning data, trend analysis, etc.).

Specifically, consultants enhanced support in four main areas:

1. **Data analysis.** The consultation supported updating both the ODR information and BSP progress monitoring data to allow timely data-based decision-making.
2. **Fidelity of existing plans.** Consultants focused on improving fidelity on the implementation of the existing BSPs.
3. **Conducting FBAs and developing new BSPs.** Consultants supported the development and implementation of new BSPs for students who still need to get current BSPs.
4. **Performance feedback.** Consultants provided performance feedback to instructional staff on using evidenced-based classroom behavior support practices to improve these practices.

**Tier 3 Fidelity and Outcomes Resulting from Enhanced Implementation**

As a result of consultation to enhance implementation, fidelity, and outcomes improved. The following sections describe observed changes in each measure.

**TFI Scores**

PBIS considers fidelity a crucial implementation component, and teams typically measure the fidelity of the entire framework at least annually using the TFI or another validated fidelity measure. The school in this model demonstration continuously improved its fidelity for Tier 3 across the past three years. The Tier 3 TFI score in 2021 was 38%; in 2022, it was 68%; and in 2023, it was 85%. Specifically, in 2023 the score for the Team subscale was 88%, the Resources subscale was 83%, the Support Plan subscale was 83%, and the Evaluation subscale was 88% (see Figure 1).
Self-Assessment Survey (SAS) Scores
The SAS 4.0 field test was administered in 2022 and again in 2023. The SAS is used by school staff to assess effective behavior support systems in their school. It asks staff members to state whether they think the core features are fully implemented and in place, partially implemented and partially in place, or not implemented and not in place. The items cover team procedures, access to Tier 1 and Tier 2 supports, stakeholder engagement, student progress monitoring, fidelity, and more. Tier 3 SAS scores increased from 64% in 2022 to 76% in 2023 (see Figure 2).
Rates of ODRs
The intervention with the school began in February 2023. The students in Tier 3 received a cumulative amount of 996 ODRs in the first half of the school year (September-January). The students in Tier 3 but not part of the group receiving focused support had a total of 612 ODRs for the first half of the year. This was a mean of about 23 referrals per student or a mean of 4.5 referrals per student each month. In the second half of the school year, after the intervention began, the students in Tier 3 received a cumulative amount of 600 ODRs, with a mean of about 22 referrals per student or a mean of 4.4 referrals per student each month. This was a decrease of 2.4%.
However, for the 11 students with focused support in Tier 3, their ODRs dropped almost in half (49.3%) from 384 in the first half of the year to 193 in the second half (when the intervention began). The mean in the year’s first half was about 35 referrals per student, with a mean of 6.9 referrals per student each month, dropping to 18 referrals per student or a mean of 3.5 referrals per student each month. Not only is this a decrease in referrals, but the mean is lower than for the non-targeted students. Both groups showed a decreasing trend across the school year. See Figure 3.

Students Making Progress
During the 2022-2023 school year, the school had 38 students in Tier 3, representing about 3.9% of the school population. Of the students in the group without focused support, 7 students made progress towards decreasing their ODRs, 16 did not make progress (meaning they had an increased amount of ODRs), and 4 remained the same (see Figure 4). Of the students with focused support, ten students made progress in reducing their ODRs, and one student stayed
the same. There were no students with focused support that had increased ODRs. (See Figure 5).
Summary

In a multi-tiered system of support, students in Tier 3 require individualized and more intensive support. These students, while few, often require a significant amount of time and resources. For example, using Scott and Barrett’s (2004) formal of each ODR reducing a student’s instructional time by 20 minutes and absorbing 10 minutes of administrator time, the reduction of 190 ODRs for the last 5 months of school for the 11 students reflects a loss of approximately 8 days of instructional time and 5.3 days of administrator time. Projecting this over a full year for the 11 students reflects a loss of roughly 16 days of instructional time and over 10 days of administrator time. Projecting these savings over a full year for all 38 students reflects a loss of approximately 54 days of instructional time and 36 days of administrator time. This project model demonstration indicates that targeted accountability, fidelity checks, and other support can significantly impact outcomes in Tier 3. The positive outcomes included increased scores on the TFI and SAS, decreased ODRs, increased instructional time, and reduced administrator time in managing discipline. Although more work needs to be done, these outcomes demonstrate the effectiveness of Tier 3 supports if implemented with increased fidelity.

Future Research

This project demonstration was just one step toward improving Tier 3 implementation. Future research in this area should replicate these results in a school as well as scale up these interventions across a district.

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References


McIntosh, K., Herman, K., Bradshaw, C., & Simonsen, B. (2023). IES MTSS-B trial: Key takeaways for district and state leaders. Center on PBIS, University of Oregon. [www.pbis.org](http://www.pbis.org).


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