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Policies and Practices Supporting Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) Implementation in High-poverty Florida Middle Schools

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ABSTRACT

The current study provides foundational research on the extent to which Florida Title 1 middle schools (schools including grades 7 and/or 8) have policies and practices that align with core components of positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS). Principals from 197 (42.73%) of all FL Title 1 schools that included at least grades seven and/or eight responded to a survey that focused on the existence and characteristics of: (1) a continuum of evidence-based interventions; (2) leadership team implementation and coordination; (3) content expertise and fluency; (4) process integrity; (5) continuous progress monitoring; and (6) crisis intervention. Results based on an analytic sample of 36.69% of schools indicate that, while schools predominantly identify using a PBIS framework to guide behavioral policies and practices, important features are lacking that would indicate a comprehensive, coordinated implementation approach. The use of multi-tiered programs and supports, planning for continuous improvement and training, and assessment of fidelity and ecological validity of selected practices in high-poverty schools are issues requiring a greater understanding and implementation support. Additional results, as well as recommendations for research and practice are provided.

Systemic reform efforts to address educational disparities in the lowest-achieving schools have become the *sine qua non* of public education. A well-established association between poverty and student achievement has played a large role in how reform efforts are shaped and distributed (Wong, 2002), as well as in a federal commitment to provide economically disadvantaged students with a chance to succeed (Sousa & Armor, 2016; Wong & Nicotera, 2004). Yet, the number of low-income students continues to increase. Recent data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, Snyder & Dillow, 2015) indicate that low-income students now comprise a majority (51%) of students served by the nation's public schools. In response to the increased need, half of U.S. public schools now operate schoolwide programs to support economically disadvantaged student populations. To wit, the largest expenditures (approximately 14 billion dollars per year) of the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015; 114th Congress S. 1177) are used to provide financial assistance to LEAs and schools with high numbers or percentages of low-income children to fund schoolwide Title I programming. Recent data indicate more than 56,000 public schools use Title I funds to provide disadvantaged student populations additional academic and social-behavioral support (U.S. Department of Education (USDOE), 2016-2017).

Despite the substantial financial investment, research indicates that prevention and intervention programs are difficult to implement and sustain, particularly in high-poverty schools (McIntosh, Kim, Mercer, Strickland-Cohen, & Horner, 2015; Payne, 2009; Payne & Eckert, 2010; Wong & Meyer, 1998). Moreover, the absence of a defined set of practices or accountability measures has resulted in substantial variability in the nature and delivery of student support across high-poverty

schools (Walsh et al., 2014). Nonetheless, promising approaches to providing school supports to economically disadvantaged students have been suggested (e.g., Adelman & Taylor, 2006). Notably, researchers have recommended that schools adopt a comprehensive, coordinated approach to addressing the academic and behavioral needs of students. Schoolwide programs addressing educational disparities in Title I schools have increasingly emphasized the implementation of targeted assistance programs based on a prevention-oriented, multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) frameworks. MTSS frameworks offer a practical approach and guidance for reconciling whole-school implementation with supplemental academic and social-behavioral programming targeted to specific students.

Positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) are one MTSS approach that improves student behavior and school climate, two factors that are related to positive academic outcomes (Horner et al., 2009). For high-poverty schools in particular, school climate appears to be an important factor in student attitudes toward and motivation for school (Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1995), as well as student achievement and behavior (Hopson & Lee, 2011). Moreover, a positive school climate has been found to mitigate the negative contribution of a low socioeconomic background on academic achievement (Berkowitz, Moore, Astor, & Benbenishty, 2017). Yet, the effectiveness of systemic reform efforts such as PBIS as applied specifically to high-poverty schools are not well known. In light of substantial federal support to address disparities in these schools, there is a need to understand the extent to which implementation for schoolwide reforms efforts such as PBIS have been successful in creating meaningful changes in practice.

Positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS)

As recently defined, PBIS utilizes a process of research-based assessment, intervention, and data-driven decision-making (Kincaid et al., 2015) that can be delivered within a tiered framework of behavioral supports. By creating improved systems (e.g., discipline, reinforcement, data management) and procedures (e.g. office referral, reinforcement, training, leadership) that promote positive change in staff and student behaviors, PBIS works as a non-curricular prevention strategy that aims to modify the school environment, thereby reducing disciplinary incidents, increasing safety, and supporting improved academic outcomes (Sprague & Horner, 2007). PBIS as a framework or approach distinguishes non-aversive and positive strategies, which maintain and are respectful of student's dignity and promote overall well-being (Kincaid et al.). The framework draws upon behavioral, social learning, and organizational behavior principles (Lewis & Sugai, 1999) that have been traditionally used with individual students and extends and applies them to the entire student body consistently across all school contexts. This whole-school strategy employs intervention based on need and risk factors (Sprague et al., 2002) using primary (universal or school-wide), secondary (selective), and tertiary (indicated) systems of support. Primary or universal supports include proactive and positive behavioral elements that apply to all learners in a school. Selective supports identify and serve learners at high risk for behavior problems, and those with some limited behavioral difficulties. Indicated supports are designed to provide intensive and individualized behavioral interventions to learners with the greatest behavioral need.

The Technical Assistance Center on PBIS (2015) recently identified seven core features of PBIS: (1) universal and comprehensive screening; (2) continuum of evidence-based interventions; (3) leadership team implementation and coordination; (4) content expertise and fluency; (5) process integrity; (6) continuous progress monitoring; and (7) cultural and contextual relevance. Within the PBIS model, it is posited that delivering all three tiers of support by effectively addressing these seven core features will result in improved and sustainable appropriate and prosocial student behavior. In addition, it is acknowledged that a plan for crisis intervention is also a necessary condition for the successful implementation of PBIS (e.g., Espelage et al., 2011).

PBIS in secondary schools

Schoolwide PBIS has been implemented in more than 25,000 schools in 49 states and Washington DC (PBIS, 2019). Much of the outcome-related research on PBIS, however, has taken place at the elementary school level. Although PBIS implementation has been found to be effective in elementary schools, effective implementation in secondary schools is documented by relatively fewer studies. Warren et al. (2003) found that implementation in an urban middle school was associated with a 20% reduction in office discipline referrals (ODRs), as well as a 17% reduction of in-school conferences and a 57% reduction in suspensions. Other researchers (Lassen, Steele, & Sailor, 2006; Nocera, Whitbread, & Nocera, 2014) have found similar reductions in ODRs and suspensions. Beyond a reduction in discipline problems, PBIS has been reported by teachers and administrators to also lead to positive changes in the learning environment. Improved teacher–student relationships and teacher ratings of school climate (Calderella, Shatzer, Gray, Richard Young, & Young, 2011), as well as reduced time spent addressing behavior problems (Lassen et al.) indicate that student exposure to academic material and time spent on positive learning activities are increased with PBIS implementation.

With nearly a quarter of Title I schools in the U.S. serving students in the middle grades 6–8, an important question is whether and how the effects observed for PBIS as implemented in middle schools translate to schools that serve high percentages of economically disadvantaged students. Despite a coordinated review of the literature, we found no studies that have focused on outcomes of PBIS implementation specifically within Title I middle schools.

PBIS implementation in Florida

Florida, the state with the fourth largest student population, implements a statewide program to promote the effective use of PBIS. Florida's PBIS Project (FL PBIS, 2018) reports that staff in 1,969 schools have been trained in PBIS and, in 2017–2018, approximately 83% of those schools were actively implementing PBIS. Over time, implementation has resulted in a reduction in suspensions and office disciplinary referrals PBIS (FL PBIS). Despite coordinated efforts, the state continues to have difficulties with the implementation of Tier II and Tier III interventions, where fidelity over the last few years has hovered around 60-70% (FL PBIS). Moreover, the state has maintained high and disproportionate rates of punitive discipline. For example, FL suspends a higher percentage of students than any state at both the elementary and secondary levels (Losen, Hodson, Keith, Morrison, & Belway, 2015). A recent study of statewide school discipline data also revealed that FL schools with higher ratios of students receiving free and reduced lunch are more likely to rely on punitive discipline, in particular, suspension (Gagnon, Gurel, & Barber, 2017). Gagnon and colleagues also reported that the use of punitive discipline practices were more frequent in middle schools.

Although these findings indicate a clear need for investigation of the practices and policies leading to disproportionate disciplinary outcomes in FL high-poverty schools, there has been no statewide investigation to date of the extent to which Title I middle schools are engaged in activities aligned with a PBIS approach. Understanding these schools' approaches to addressing student behavior and supporting their achievement through establishing a positive school climate will make it possible for FL and other states to develop a clearer and more targeted statewide plan that provides professional development (PD), supports, and resources in the areas of greatest need.

Purpose

Given concerns with high levels of punitive discipline practices in FL high poverty and middle schools, we sought to provide foundational research concerning the implementation of PBIS in these schools. Specifically, the current study provides principal reports on the extent that FL Title I schools with grades 7 and/or 8 have policies and practices that align with key PBIS components. The primary research question was: To what extent do schools have policies and implement practices that, (a)

support the provision of a continuum of evidence-based behavioral interventions, (b) assist in leadership team implementation and coordination, (c) promote content expertise and fluency, (d) ensure process integrity and continuous progress monitoring, and (e) include training and a plan for crisis prevention and intervention?

Methods

Survey development

Other PBIS surveys, such as the School-wide Evaluation Tool (SET; Sugai, Lewis-Palmer, Todd, & Horner, 2005) are rather lengthy and have a much more comprehensive purpose that allows for schools to, “assess features that are in place, determine annual goals for school-wide effective behavior support, evaluate ongoing efforts toward school-wide behavior support, design, and revise procedures as needed, and compare efforts toward school-wide effective behavior support from year to year” (Sugai et al., p. 1). Further, use of the SET or similar evaluation tool in the current study would have required respondents to actually collect and report data. As such, the goal of developing a new survey was to focus more broadly on key policies and practices that are necessary to support effective behavioral interventions aligning with PBIS. Given a lack of previous research in this area for Title 1 schools including grades 7 and/or 8, the current survey provides basic descriptive information needed to understand the current state of affairs in these schools.

The initial pool of survey items focused on the aforementioned attributes identified in the recent *PBIS Blueprint* as key implementation characteristics of schools providing PBIS (OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2015). Specifically, these included items related to five domains described within the *Blueprint*: (a) continuum of evidence-based interventions, (b) leadership team implementation and coordination, (c) content expertise and fluency, (d) process integrity, and (e) continuous progress monitoring (for the purposes of this survey, this domain included items related to data-based decision-making). We also included items related to crisis planning and prevention, which are commonly viewed as a prerequisite to comprehensive PBIS efforts. We did not address two components identified in the *Blueprint* (e.g., conducting the universal and comprehensive screening, ensuring cultural and contextual relevance) for reasons described below.

First, we excluded items on conducting universal and comprehensive screening due to concerns with available research on the topic. While common forms of screening include teacher nominations or use of existing school data, these approaches are not evidence-based and are not reliable methods by themselves for identifying behavior problems with accuracy (Kalberg, Lane, Driscoll, & Wehby, 2011). A variety of behavioral screening tools are now available, but they differ in their reliability, validity, purchase cost, student, and staff time required to complete, as well as time to analyze results. Moreover, while the psychometric properties of some measures have demonstrated a utility for middle school (e.g., SSRS; see Lane, Bruhn, Eisner, & Kalberg, 2010), many have not been validated for this population, or found to be feasible given the procedural demands (SDQ; see Lane, Kalberg, Parks, & Carter, 2008).

Next, we excluded items on the cultural and contextual relevance of behavior practices. Levenson, Smith, McIntosh, Rose, and Pinkelman (2019) note that cultural responsiveness is a key aspect of fully implementing SWPBIS. Yet, researchers have noted the literature lacks robust theoretical approaches to systematically define contextual fitness or cultural responsiveness in PBIS (Sugai, O’Keeffe, & Fallon, 2012). Bal (2015) further suggests that educators, “find themselves in a *double-bind* wherein they are expected to implement PBIS with high fidelity while maintaining cultural responsiveness without systematic and locally meaningful guidance on cultural responsiveness from PBIS scholars and technical assistance centers” (p. 2).

We employed several procedures to address the validity and reliability of the survey developed for the current study. To improve survey validity, leaders in the field of special education with expertise in PBIS, as well as a secondary-level principal of a FL school not included in the sample reviewed survey drafts. These reviewers applied criteria proposed by Campanelli (2008) to evaluate the layout,

ease of directions, and clarity of questions for the survey, as well as whether items aligned with research questions and key aspects of the aforementioned broad PBIS attributes. The survey was revised based on the feedback provided and, as a result, was regarded as a valid indicator of the constructs upon reevaluation by the reviewers.

We also analyzed the content validity of items by calculating the content validity index (CVI) and modified kappa (k^*) statistic for each survey section. To evaluate CVI, Lynn (1986) recommended a minimum of three expert evaluations. In this study, four experts were asked to judge the extent to which the items met specifications for each domain using a four-point ordinal scale (1 = not relevant, 2 = somewhat relevant, 3 = quite relevant, 4 = highly relevant). Evaluations were categorized for each item and the number of relevant ratings (rating of 3 or 4) was divided by the number of content experts to express the proportion of agreement for each section (Polit & Beck, 2006). Because a higher CVI can reflect the chance agreement, we also calculated the modified kappa, or k^* for each section. Polit, Beck, and Owen (2007) suggested that CVI values of .78 and higher are evidence of good content validity. Similarly, Cicchetti and Sparrow (1981) suggested the following guidelines to evaluate the value of kappa: (1) Poor = $k^* < .40$, (2) Fair = $.40 < k^* < .59$, (3) Good = $.60 < k^* < .74$, (4) Excellent = $k^* > .74$. Following these criteria, all survey sections exhibited excellent agreement (1.00 for CVI and k^*), indicating strong content validity across survey sections.

Our resulting survey included 32 items that aligned with the six-mentioned areas of PBIS implementation, as well as two questions regarding school characteristics which served as verification of the school as (a) serving middle-level grades (grades 7, and/or 8), and (b) a public (versus private/alternative or charter) school. Due to the nature of some of the survey items (e.g., the inclusion of *Check all that apply* and open-ended response items), it was not possible to calculate internal consistency reliabilities for the survey sections. To address threats to procedural reliability, the survey directions and format were standardized. Additionally, we maintained a codebook to identify any necessary rule decisions concerning data entry (Litwin, 1995). To calculate the data entry operator agreement, we checked data points found within a random selection of approximately 30% ($n = 48$) of all completed surveys entered into a Microsoft Excel database against the actual values provided within each respective hard copy survey. Agreement was calculated by dividing the number of agreements by the combined number of agreements and disagreements multiplied by 100. Our data entry reliability was 99.85%; we made corrections to the dataset post hoc to correct the found errors before subsequent analysis.

Survey sampling and data collection

The survey universe consisted of principals in all FL schools identified as Title I schools (i.e., those with at least 40% of the student body that receive free or reduced lunch; see U.S. DOE, 2015) that included grades seven and/or eight. We derived the population from the *Florida Department of Education, Bureau of Federal Education Programs 2010–2011 Final Title 1 School List* (FDOE, 2011) and identified an initial universe of 461 schools. Prior to the study, we calculated the needed sample size based on the number of Title 1 schools in Florida ($n = 461$) using a 95% confidence level and a $\pm 10\%$ margin of error. When applying a finite population correction factor, the calculated sample size in this study was 80. A minimum of 80 surveys would allow us to assert that the data is representative of FL Title 1 Schools that include grades 7 and/or 8. Because we anticipated a minimum response rate of 30% (or 138 surveys) and wanted to ensure that we reached the necessary 80 surveys, we mailed the survey to the entire universe.

Upon return of the survey, 27 and 21 respondents, respectively, noted that they were not Title I schools or did not serve students in grades seven and/or eight. Additionally, seven schools had either closed or moved and were unreachable. Thus, the total sampling frame was adjusted to include the 406 verified Title I schools.

Because the principal is critical to developing a positive and proactive school environment, and active administrator involvement is critical for successful implementation and sustainability of PBIS (Flannery & Sugai, 2009) the survey cover letter and consent form requested that the principal

complete the survey. We conducted three mailings, and provided participants with a \$5.00 gift card during in the initial mailing as an incentive to respond.

Respondents and nonrespondents

One hundred and forty-nine usable surveys were returned for a valid response rate of 36.69%. Although the response rate is slightly below the 50% desired when using the entire universe as the sampling frame (Weisberg, Krosnick, & Bowen, 1989), we exceeded the necessary number of responses (80) needed for our chosen confidence level and margin of error. Responding principals were typically from regular public schools ($n = 103$), followed by charter schools ($n = 23$) and alternative schools ($n = 20$). Principals also noted if, in addition to grades 7 and/or 8, their school included any of grades 1–5, grade 6, or any of grades 9–12. Almost all schools included grade 6 ($n = 135$). Schools also were split between including students in the early grades ($n = 50$) and students in high school ($n = 45$). Ten schools included all grades.

Regarding respondent and nonrespondent comparisons, we conducted a Chi-Square test and found no relationship between respondents and locale (i.e., urban, suburban, rural), ($\chi^2(2) = 5.368$, $p = .068$). Upon examination of respondent schools' location, 139 of the surveyed schools are in urban locations and 58 schools (41.7%) responded to the survey. The total number of schools in a rural location was 215, and 76 schools (35.3%) responded to the survey. Among 100 suburban schools, 63 (63.0%) responded to the survey.

To examine the influence of response bias, we also analyzed associations between respondent status and ratios of in-school suspensions (ISS) and out-of-school suspensions (OSS) for the 2010–11 school year (the year of survey administration). Using available state-reported discipline data, we compared group rates of ISS and OSS for respondents and non-respondents. Some schools had more cases in terms of either the number of ISS or the number of OSS (i.e., included students with multiple suspensions) than their reported student population, and thus ratios using school size were used in comparisons. Results of Levene's test of equality of variances indicated that respondent and non-respondent schools did not differ by the rate of ISS ($F = 1.18$, $p = .27$) or OSS ($F = 2.07$, $p = .15$). As such, schools with lower rates of suspensions were not more likely to respond, indicating response bias was not influential to the resulting pool of responses.

Data analysis

Due to the foundational nature of the research, our analyses included descriptive statistics. In some instances, principals may not have answered every question and therefore response totals for individual questions vary. Additionally, in cases where respondents were allowed to “Choose all that apply” from a list of possible responses, only response frequencies are reported. For some survey questions, respondents were able to write in “Other” responses. We analyzed these responses according to a recommended process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) whereby the first and second authors independently categorized and coded responses, discussed and adjusted, recoded individually, and conducted a final discussion to calculate the number of responses per code and inter-rater reliability. Initial inter-rater reliability was 89.47% and rose to 100% after discussion and recoding.

Results

Continuum of evidence-based interventions

A majority of principals identified that a PBIS approach was used in their school ($n = 113$, 76.9%), although the existence of key practices that support the use of PBIS were more varied. In terms of having a multi-year prevention-based action plan for student behavior, only 41.3% ($n = 59$) identified that their school had such a plan. When asked about the behavioral interventions for all students

and for students not responding to universal interventions, respectively, respondents reported the use of systems of reinforcement ($n = 124$, $n = 84$), a system of sanctions ($n = 92$, $n = 66$), a system that relies on student removal from class ($n = 77$, $n = 80$), a system that relies on cognitive or skills training ($n = 53$, $n = 61$), none of the above ($n = 2$, $n = 6$), and don't know ($n = 3$, $n = 2$). For indicated/tertiary interventions, respondents reported on the approaches that best describe the interventions for youth who are in need of intensive, individualized supports. Respondents noted systems of reinforcement ($n = 22$, 29.3%), a system of sanctions ($n = 7$, 9.3%), a system that relies on student removal from class ($n = 13$, 17.3%), a system that relies on cognitive or skills training ($n = 20$, 26.7%), none of the above ($n = 11$, 14.7%), and don't know ($n = 2$, 2.7%).

Overwhelmingly, principals reported that a common set of expectations had been established for all staff, students, and areas in the school ($n = 135$, 92.5%) (See Table 1). Most respondents also reported that behavioral expectations are stated positively ($n = 128$, 88.9%). Principals reported a frequent use of multiple approaches to teaching behavioral expectations, including teaching expectations explicitly to students at the beginning of the school year or when new students enroll ($n = 122$), teaching expectations in class ($n = 111$), and providing expectations in written form ($n = 105$). Overwhelmingly, expectations were connected to rules for student conduct in specific areas or activities in the school ($n = 142$, 95.9%). Students understanding of school rules was most commonly assessed informally ($n = 100$). Rules were most commonly posted in classrooms, but less often in other parts of the school. Consequences were rarely posted, with only 83 principals reporting that they were posted in the classrooms.

Leadership team implementation and coordination

For schools with a school-wide behavior support team ($n = 113$, 76.9%), the most frequently included participants were teachers or other educational staff ($n = 124$), as well as counselors or other therapeutic agents ($n = 106$) (see Table 2). Respondents also noted additional team members,

Table 1. Continuum of evidence-based interventions.

Survey Items ^a	No. (%)
Which of the following describe how behavioral expectations are taught to students?	
Behavioral expectations are not taught explicitly to students	13
Behavior expectations are taught at intake	122
Behavior expectations are taught in class	111
Behavior expectations are provided to students in written form	105
Are expectations connected to rules for student conduct in specific areas or activities in the school?	
Yes	142 (95.9%)
No	5 (3.4%)
I Don't Know	1 (.7%)
Which of the following describe how students are assessed to identify if they know the school rules?	
Students are not assessed	41
Student knowledge of school rules is assessed via paper and pencil test or quizzes	32
Student knowledge of school rules is assessed informally by staff	100
Student knowledge of school rules is assessed during formal (oral) recitation	22
School rules are readily available in which of the following locations?	
Rules are not posted	9
Classrooms	137
Administrative offices	91
Media centers (e.g., library, computer lab)	89
Non-academic shared areas (e.g., hallways, lunchroom)	77
School behavioral consequences are readily available in which of the following locations?	
Consequences are not posted	47
Classrooms	83
Administrative offices	63
Media centers (e.g., Library, Computer Lab)	34
Non-academic shared areas (e.g., hallways, lunchroom)	34

Only frequencies are reported for items that involved a *Check All That Apply* response.

Only items involving multiple response options are included in Table; other items are reviewed in the text only.

Table 2. Leadership team implementation and coordination.

Survey Items ^a	No. (%)
The school-wide behavior team includes which of the following people?	
There is no school-wide behavior team	18
Teachers or other educational personnel	124
Security staff	64
Counselors or therapeutic agents	106
Community members	24
Students	41
Parents or legal guardians	38
Other	19
Which best describes how often the school-wide behavior support team meets?	
Less than once a month	33 (26.0%)
Once a month	69 (54.3%)
More than once a month	25 (19.7%)
Which best describes how often the school-wide behavior support team reports on meeting proceedings and implementation progress to staff?	
Less than once a month	52 (41.3%)
Once a month	52 (41.3%)
More than once a month	22 (17.5%)
Written procedural guidelines are used for decision-making regarding school behavior policies?	
Not at all	5 (3.5%)
Sometimes	31 (21.4%)
Frequently	55 (37.9%)
Always	54 (37.2%)
Which best described the adoption process for school rules taken by your school?	
No specific process	2 (1.7%)
Organizational (e.g., state educational agency, corporate) decision	20 (17.4%)
School administrator decision	35 (30.4%)
Security administrator decision	0 (0%)
Committee decision	51 (44.3%)
Other	7 (6.1%)

Only frequencies are reported for items that involved a *Check All That Apply* response.

Only items involving multiple response options are included in Table; other items are reviewed in text only.

including the school principal or administrator ($n = 7$) and support personnel (e.g., behavior specialist, Exceptional Student Education (ESE) specialist, coaches, nurse, volunteers) ($n = 6$).

Teams commonly met on a monthly basis ($n = 69$, 54.3%). An equal percentage of respondents noted that teams reported to staff either less than once a month or once a month ($n = 52$, 41.3%). About three-fourths of respondents reported using written procedural guidelines for decision-making about school behavior policies *frequently* ($n = 55$, 37.9%) or *always* ($n = 54$, 37.2%). Only 46.1% ($n = 53$) of respondents reported that committee decisions are used in the adoption process for school rules.

Content expertise and fluency

Training, experience, and input from others are critical to ensuring a school's behavior support team functions effectively. In terms of training related to student behavior, a majority of principals reported using school-based PD opportunities ($n = 121$) and that they developed a plan for continuous improvement and training ($n = 89$) (see Table 3). Principals also reported on the existence of school district/regional examples of school behavior teams. However, only 46.6% ($n = 68$) of principals reported that these existed and another 39.0% ($n = 57$) were unaware if such programs did exist. Additionally, almost half of teams ($n = 56$, 44.8%) did not observe any model programs. Many teams, however, did receive input on the school-wide behavior plan from internal ($n = 48$, 32.9%) or internal and external ($n = 71$, 48.6%) stakeholders.

Table 3. Content expertise and fluency.

Survey Items ^a	No. (%)
Please indicate whether each of the following training steps has been conducted with regard to addressing student behavior:	
Select evidence-based programs	52
Professional development opportunities	121
Seek consultation to build and sustain effective behavior practices	52
Develop a plan for continuous improvement and training	89
Seek membership in a group or network that builds and sustains school-wide use of effective behavior practices	40
Designate school-based or local coaches to guide implementation	70
Identify personnel and coaching functions for school-based and district or regional coaching supports	50
The school district/regional jurisdiction has examples of school behavior teams to model effective implementation of behavioral policies and practices	
No	21 (14.4%)
Yes	68 (46.6%)
I am not aware of any such demonstrations by the district/regional jurisdiction	57 (39.0%)
Which best describes how many other school-wide behavior programs the behavior support team has observed?	
None	56 (44.8%)
One	26 (20.8%)
Two	29 (23.2%)
Three or more	14 (11.2%)
Internal and external stakeholders have been identified and solicited for input regarding the school-wide behavior plan	
No	27 (18.5%)
Both internal and external stakeholder input have been solicited	71 (48.6%)
Internal stakeholders only	48 (32.9%)
External stakeholders only	0 (0%)

Only frequencies are reported for items that involved a *Check All That Apply* response.

Only items involving multiple response options are included in Table; other items are reviewed in text only.

Process integrity

In terms of evaluating whether staff follow the school behavior plan, the most common methods of assessment used were direct observation of staff using the plan ($n = 105$) and reviews of disciplinary data ($n = 103$) (no corresponding table). Reviews of reward/reinforcement data ($n = 68$) and questioning staff regarding behavioral policies and procedures ($n = 57$) were less frequently used. Respondents also noted the use of (a) informal observation ($n = 1$); (b) review of [non-disciplinary] behavioral data ($n = 3$); and (c) student interviews ($n = 1$). Most schools ($n = 99$, 69.2%) did not conduct a formal audit of school-wide behavioral programs to refine school behavior policies. Of those schools that did use audits, they were commonly conducted every month or 3 months ($n = 9$), followed by every 12 months ($n = 7$) and 2 or 6 months ($n = 6$). Other participants noted quarterly audits and single respondents each identified 1, 5, 9, or 10-month audits of PBIS programs.

Continuous progress monitoring

Principals also responded to survey items concerning the monitoring of student behavior. Only five schools did not use an office discipline referral (ODR) form. Of those that did, the components most commonly included identification of referring staff ($n = 141$), date and time of the incident ($n = 139$), problem behavior ($n = 139$), student name and grade ($n = 138$), location of the behavioral violation ($n = 135$), and persons involved (including staff) ($n = 124$). The probable motivation for the violation ($n = 52$), administrative decision ($n = 135$), and recommendations for remediation ($n = 72$) were less frequently included. Respondents also noted “Other” aspects of the form, including: (a) future consequences ($n = 2$); (b) previous consequences ($n = 8$); (c) referred to other professionals (e.g., police, school board, counselor) ($n = 5$); (d) if parent was contacted or

involved ($n = 5$); (e) type of intervention needed (rather than actual intervention) ($n = 2$); (f) if student is ELL or ESE ($n = 1$); (g) number of referrals ($n = 1$); and (h) administrator signature ($n = 1$). When asked how often teachers refer students to the administration for problem behavior, most respondents believed that teachers did so at a rate that was *about right* ($n = 81$, 56.3%), followed by *too much* (55, 38.2%). Less frequent responses included *far too much* ($n = 5$, 3.5%), *too little*, ($n = 3$, 2.1%) and *far too little* ($n = 0$).

In terms of using and reporting student data, principals reported on the assessment methods used in planning behavior interventions (see Table 4). Observations of student behavior were most common ($n = 135$), followed by teacher-reported assessments, such as behavior rating scales ($n = 115$). Respondents also noted additional forms of data including: (a) functional behavior assessment ($n = 1$); (b) child study, RTI ($n = 1$); and (c) parent interview ($n = 1$). Principals also reported on the nature and frequency of summary data reports for student behavior. These reports are most commonly provided to staff on a monthly basis ($n = 60$, 43.5%). However, in 28 schools (20.3%), summary reports of student behavior are not provided to staff. A majority of schools use student behavioral and discipline data to adjust policies and improve implementation of school programs ($n = 116$).

Crisis management

Principals noted the existence of a documented crisis plan for responding to dangerous situations relating to student behavior in 93.4% ($n = 127$) of schools. The components of the crisis plan included: (a) a protocol for response, including physical management techniques ($n = 103$), (b) school-wide and classroom level preparations ($n = 92$), (c) prevention/mitigation strategies (i.e., conflict resolution program) ($n = 84$), and (d) techniques for staff and student recovery and/or re-engagement ($n = 75$). Only 37.80% ($n = 48$) of schools that had a crisis plan included all components (i.e., prevention and mitigation strategies, preparedness, response, recovery) recommended by the U.S. DOE, The Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools (2007).

During a crisis, 56.3% ($n = 54$) respondents noted that it is a teacher's responsibility to call an administrator. Also, 27.1% ($n = 26$) and 16.7% ($n = 16$) of respondents, respectively, reported that teachers have a responsibility to intervene directly and call a crisis team member. In terms of approaches to ensuring staff awareness of the crisis intervention plan, respondents identified all applicable choices: (a) incoming education staff and security staff were trained on crisis management

Table 4. Continuous progress monitoring.

Survey Items ^a	No. (%)
Indicate the assessment methods used to develop a plan for behavior intervention at your school	
Teacher-reported assessments of student behavior (e.g., behavior rating scales)	115
Psychological assessments or screenings	89
Observation of student behavior	135
Student and/or teacher interview	104
Review of student record from prior school placement(s)	104
None of the methods listed above are used	2
Other	11
Ways in which discipline data are used for making decisions concerning the school behavior plan	
None	7
Used to design the behavior plan	82
Used to adjust policies to improve implementation	116
Used to revise the behavior plan	92
Indicate the frequency by which the administrative team provides discipline data summary reports to the staff	
None	28 (20.3%)
Daily	8 (5.8%)
Weekly	14 (10.1%)
Monthly	60 (43.5%)
Semiannually	28 (20.3%)

Only frequencies are reported for items that involved a *Check All That Apply* response.

Only items involving multiple response options are included in Table; other items are reviewed in text only.

($n = 100$, $n = 60$), (b) routine follow-up training sessions were provided to review the crisis plan throughout the school year ($n = 78$), and (c) staff participated in practice scenarios throughout the year to ensure maintenance of knowledge ($n = 60$). Also, 40 respondents noted all of the steps were taken. No corresponding Table is provided for responses from this survey domain as all items included either (a) dichotomous or, (b) *Choose All That Apply* response options.

Discussion

Researchers assert that supportive school climates can positively influence the outcomes of students; thus, potentially reducing achievement gaps between students and schools of different socioeconomic backgrounds (see Berkowitz et al., 2017). In the absence of a positive school climate, it is thought that schools serving high proportions of students in poverty will see a more direct, negative influence of socioeconomic background on student achievement and behavior (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). PBIS is a framework for delivering both the whole-school social culture and additional tiers of behavior support intensity needed to improve educational and social outcomes for all students (Horner & Sugai, 2015). Given the importance of school climate in mitigating the relationship between poverty and achievement, as well as the federal commitment to programming targeting improved outcomes for high-poverty schools with Title I funding, it is important to determine the nature of PBIS implementation in high-poverty schools. The current study provides foundational research concerning principal reports of policies and practices that support the implementation of PBIS in Title I middle schools in the state of Florida. To structure the discussion of respondent's implementation activities, we discuss salient findings related to each major survey category below.

Continuum of evidence-based interventions

A clear emphasis within the PBIS framework is the use of practices that have empirical and applied documentation of their effectiveness (Kincaid et al., 2015). Practices such as maximizing structure and predictability; teaching, reviewing, and monitoring expectations; and using a continuum of strategies to address student behavior are common features of a PBIS approach (Simonsen, Fairbanks, Briesch, Myers, & Sugai, 2008). A majority of respondents noted that a PBIS approach was used in their school and aligned with the essential features of school-wide PBIS. Also, principals overwhelmingly noted a common set of expectations were established across staff, students, and school areas. Defining and teaching expectations are key activities for high-quality PBIS implementation, and the widespread use of schoolwide expectations is a positive sign that principals have adopted, at least in part, a proactive behavioral approach (Calderella et al., 2011). Moreover, the fact that expectations are stated positively and taught explicitly to students at beginning of the school year in class and via written guidelines (e.g., student handbooks) suggests that professionals working in these schools are appropriately engaging in best practice regarding the teaching of expectations. However, while strong connections were reported between expectations and rules for student conduct in specific areas or activities within the school, rules were infrequently posted outside of classrooms. Consequences were also rarely posted, suggesting that teachers and staff may be modifying this practice based on underlying assumptions that students should already understand consequences and use socially appropriate behaviors.

In contrast to the basic tenets of a multi-tiered approach, principals commonly responded that there was a graduated reduction in the implementation of sanctions and reinforcement, as well as a reduction in the use of cognitive or skills training programs for students with increasingly intensive behavioral needs. An oft-cited benefit to multi-tiered systems, such as PBIS, is that students are provided with evidence-based supports that promote social and emotional growth and early prevention of problem behavior so they are not left out of services until they engage in maladaptive behaviors (Horner & Sugai, 2015). For schools that reportedly applied a PBIS approach in this study, however, the absence of structured support systems and evidence-based training programs for

students with more intensive behavioral needs is problematic. Other researchers (e.g., Bradshaw, Waasdorp, & Leaf, 2012) have noted that schools continue to struggle with the integration of evidence-based practices and approaches at more intensive tiers of support. Specifically in FL, there remains difficulties across the state with the implementation of Tier II and III interventions within schools implementing PBIS (FL PBIS, 2018).

Perhaps equally problematic is that less than half of principals identified that their school had a multi-year prevention-based action plan for student behavior. A school improvement process that entails a multi-year plan for developing, implementing, and monitoring prevention activities is essential to schoolwide prevention efforts, such as PBIS. Researchers have highlighted the critical role that a multi-year prevention-based plan plays in bringing school-wide PBIS to scale (e.g., Cressey, Whitcomb, McGilvray-Rivet, Morrison, & Shander-Reynolds, 2015; Horner, Sugai, & Fixsen, 2017). Without a clear plan for the coordination of activities, even sound prevention strategies are likely to yield to adaptations and inconsistencies that weaken their effectiveness.

Leadership team implementation and coordination

The establishment of a school-based leadership team for coordinating PBIS activities is a important component for successful implementation. The majority of schools in this study indicated the existence of a behavior support team. Sugai and Horner (2006) recommended that a representative team of 6–10 individuals be assembled to facilitate PBIS implementation efforts. Teams identified in this study generally consisted of teachers and other educational staff, as well as counselors or other therapeutic agents. Representation by other professionals (e.g., principal or school administrator, behavior specialist, ESE specialist, coaches) was infrequent, suggesting that the makeup of the team is not always representative of all professionals engaged with students.

Of equal importance to establishing a leadership team is the effectiveness of the team's functioning. Activities such as meeting regularly to analyze and share school-wide behavior management systems and data, developing materials to support implementation, providing continued staff development, and evaluating the integrity of PBIS implementation all fall under the purview of the leadership team (Coffey & Horner, 2012; McIntosh et al., 2013). A majority of the teams in this study met at least on a monthly basis, and adhered to procedural guidelines for decision-making on behavior policies *frequently* or *always*. McIntosh, Predy, Upreti, Hume, and Mathews (2014) reported that school personnel rated organized and regular meetings as a critical feature of sustained PBIS implementation. Of concern, however, is the fact that only 46.1% of respondents reported that committee decisions are used in the adoption process for school rules. If efforts are to be successful, the leadership team must be afforded the capacity to make decisions. In instances that a school's administration overrides the team's decisions, a resulting perception that PBIS activities are mandated could affect teacher and staff acceptance and commitment to implementation efforts.

Content expertise and fluency

An administrator's ability to develop and implement a cohesive plan for staff engagement is critical to sustaining implementation (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2004). Moreover, providing training and technical assistance to staff is positively related to fidelity of implementation of PBIS strategies and processes (Horner et al., 2009). The information obtained by this survey provides initial data concerning principal approaches to ensuring that leadership teams are knowledgeable of PBIS components and processes. Principals frequently reported using PD opportunities, yet far fewer actually had developed a plan for continuous improvement and training. Action plans for training are necessary to address needed staff skills with training activities. It is unclear if the lack of a plan is due to an assessment of the importance for PD related to PBIS, an inability to develop a plan, or other issues such as insufficient funding.

Two important components of effective staff training are the observation of local school exemplars and the use of internal and external coaches (Horner et al., 2014). Less than half of principals reported that model schools existed in their area, and another 39% reported they were unaware if such schools existed. Less than half of school leadership teams had actually observed another school's implementation and only about a third of schools received feedback from an internal or external stakeholder on PBIS implementation. Again, the data do not provide information regarding the reasons these approaches to training are underutilized. Nonetheless, it is important to consider that general recommendations exist suggesting that building school-level capacity via training and ongoing technical assistance is critical and should include targeted support from district and state PBIS leadership teams (Lewis, Barrett, Sugai, & Horner, 2010).

Process integrity

A main concern in the application of school-based interventions is whether a given practice or set of practices is implemented as designed. PBIS implementation produces stronger effects on student behavioral outcomes (e.g., office discipline referrals) with increased integrity to essential school-wide features (Flannery, Fenning, McGrath Kato, & McIntosh, 2014). Monitoring and assessment of fidelity of implementation may take a variety of forms, and principals reported directly observing staff implementation of the plan and reviewing disciplinary data as common monitoring mechanisms. Less common methods included reviewing data for school-wide reinforcement plans (e.g., token economy) and questioning staff on behavioral policies and procedures. Importantly, incorporating student awareness or knowledge of PBIS activities, such as school-wide expectations or consequences for misbehavior was noted as an indicator of process integrity in only a single case.

Regarding formal reviews of implementation, a majority of the schools did not refine PBIS policies or practices by involving formal audits of process integrity and/or program effects. Formal audits by regional or state leadership teams or technical assistance providers allow for objective input on the nature and success of implementation (Lewis et al., 2010). Moreover, information from audits can help to specify the optimal organization of resources. In the absence of formal reviews by regional or state leadership teams, it is unclear how schools are maintaining an assurance that key PBIS features and processes are operating as intended.

Continuous progress monitoring

The collection and use of student behavioral data are key components for the effective implementation of PBIS. All but five respondents reported using an ODR form as a method of monitoring student behavior. Key background information about the incident was commonly included (e.g., referring staff, date and time of the incident, problem behavior, student name and grade, location of the behavioral violation, and persons involved, administrative decision). The nature of collected data, however, should be considered in light of its usefulness for continuous improvement in providing systems of supports for at-risk students. It is clear that, while basic information on the nature of behavioral incidents is generally collected, the probable motivation or function for the behavior is not often documented. Moreover, follow-up planning and use of disciplinary actions as instructional or remediation opportunities are also infrequently considered. ODRs, like suspensions, serve as temporary and reactive solutions to student problem behavior. Researchers have determined that regular receipt of ODRs results in students' limited access to instruction and preventive behavior interventions (Scott & Barrett, 2004) and can lead to harmful long-term outcomes for students (Tobin & Sugai, 1996). The benefits of ODRs are fully realized only if information on the function of students' behavior and plans for remediation are integrated components. Without this information, there are concerns that schools will rely too heavily on ODRs and use them solely as a punitive approach. As noted by 41% of principals, the assertion that ODRs are used *too often* or *far too often* serves to confirm this concern.

Principals noted the assessment methods used to develop plans for behavior intervention. Observations of student behavior were most commonly used, followed by teacher-reported assessments, student or teacher interviews, and student records. It is encouraging that principals typically rely on information from several sources. Additional research would be beneficial to more clearly understand details of the complimentary use of data sources, and to better understand how each approach is used for intervention planning. For example, most respondents noted using student observations, although the frequency of observations and length of time, and the extent to which a standardized format and procedures are used, remains unknown.

Principals also reported on the nature and frequency of administrative reports of data on student behavior. More than half of principals provide reports on a monthly or more frequent basis. However, a smaller number of principals either do not provide reports (20%) or provide reports only on a bi-annual basis. The lack of communication regarding student behavior and/or disciplinary data are particularly problematic given that a large number of principals noted that student data is used to adjust school behavior policies. Timely and accurate reporting of student behavioral and disciplinary data provide concrete evidence of program effectiveness that can be an important staff motivator for program sustainability (Mathews, McIntosh, Frank, & May, 2014). Moreover, such data are integral to behavior team planning and decisions. It is unclear, however, how leadership teams could work to revise their PBIS policies with sparse or non-existent reports of student data.

Crisis management

Research indicates that preventive approaches can reduce challenging behavior and thus reduce the need for crisis intervention techniques, such as physical restraint (Couvillon, Peterson, Ryan, Scheuermann, & Stegall, 2010). While not unique to school-wide PBIS, development, and availability of a formal crisis plan for managing dangerous situations, and training staff on procedures to use during a crisis are requisite for the effectiveness of the approach (Bradshaw, Reinke, Brown, Bevens, & Leaf, 2008). Nearly all of the schools in the sample maintained a documented plan for crisis situations, and ensured staff awareness of the plan via training, follow-up, and practice opportunities. However, only slightly over one-third of schools reported crisis plans consisting of prevention and mitigation strategies and preparedness, response, and recovery protocols, components recommended within the final report of the Safe School Initiative (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2004). Aligning elements of a plan for responding to crisis situations with research-based recommendations for prevention and mitigation may facilitate the broad goal of ensuring a positive school climate and reinforcing a staff focus on proactive management techniques. Further, installing protocols that involve guidelines for post-crisis recovery can help to develop staff consistency and focus on prevention of future incidents, thereby reinforcing PBIS objectives and activities.

Study limitations

The findings of this study should be considered in light of a few important limitations. First, the valid response rate of 36.69% is lower than the commonly accepted 50% for mail surveys. However, our response rate exceeded the number of surveys needed (80) for a 95% confidence level and 10% margin of error. Regarding respondent and nonrespondent comparisons, we found no relationship between respondents and locale, or respondents and suspension rates that may indicate the presence of a response bias. Thus, we believe the findings provide accurate initial information regarding the nature of statewide PBIS implementation for Florida Title I schools with grades 7 and/or 8. Other limitations point to the need for follow-up research. For example, the data did not allow for analysis based on the extent of each school's participation in the FL PBIS efforts or to compare schools with different grade configurations (e.g., middle and high school, elementary, and middle schools, schools with all grade levels). Moreover, the level of information garnered from a survey is not sufficient to verify the quality of implementation for given PBIS components (e.g., the existence versus appropriate operation of behavior

support teams). Additional observational research is needed to understand the nature of PBIS implementation efforts underway. Lastly, it is important to note that survey responses represent only principal views of PBIS implementation and it is possible that teachers, school staff, and members of the PBIS leadership team may have varied views of policies and practices.

Recommendation for future research

Given the foundational nature of our results, we offer suggestions for future research with Title I middle schools involved in PBIS efforts. First, existing assessments of PBIS implementation quality can be used to corroborate the principal reports provided herein. For example, in 2016–2017, 75% ($n = 1,203$) of schools involved in Florida's Positive Behavioral Interventions & Support Project were evaluated using the Benchmarks of Quality assessment for Tier 1 (BOQ; FL PBIS, 2017; Kincaid, Childs, & George, 2010). However, only 412 and 419 schools, respectively, participated in the BOQ for Tiers II and III. Nonetheless, the BOQ scores can be an important tool and additional research should determine the extent to which principal views of school policies and practices aligned with PBIS are associated with BOQ scores for individual schools. Similar comparative studies using the School-Wide Evaluation Tool (SET; Horner et al., 2004) may also provide insight on the extent to which principal views align with observed and documented implementation.

Next, although existing studies of school-level disciplinary data suggest that schools with high percentages of students in poverty continue to exhibit both disparity and disproportionality in the provision of punitive disciplinary practices (Gagnon et al., 2017), studies are needed to conclude whether these issues continue to exist in schools adopting a PBIS orientation. It is conceivable that adequate training and appropriate use of monitoring strategies would facilitate recognition of the unequal and inappropriate application of disciplinary practices, and testing this hypothesis could confirm or disconfirm the importance of schoolwide socioeconomic variables to patterns observed in schoolwide discipline.

Finally, studies are needed to determine the extent to which school-wide PBIS in Title I schools lead to socially important improvements for students from impoverished backgrounds. The inclusion of quality of life indicators could provide data on important outcomes for students in school settings where poor instruction and a lack of resources often lead to long-term disadvantage. Intentional social and behavioral programming, such as that which is provided within a PBIS framework, could mitigate the effects of a lack of privilege and improve the standard of well-being experienced by students over time.

Recommendations for practice

Some general recommendations follow from our findings that are relevant to current PBIS implementation in Title I middle schools in the state of FL, as well other high-poverty schools undergoing PBIS

Development and implementation of a plan for continuous PBIS-related improvement and training are important for FL Title 1 schools, as well as other high-poverty schools. Granted, school economic status may not directly impact the implementation effectiveness or sustainability of PBIS in high-poverty schools (Frank, Horner, & Anderson, 2009; McIntosh et al., 2014). However, it should also be recognized that high-poverty schools commonly have less qualified teachers (Mason-Williams, 2015). As such, it is certain that PD, as well as observation of school exemplars and coaching are necessary to implement PBIS with integrity.

We can also render some recommendations regarding the utility of data collection and monitoring of the effectiveness of PBIS efforts. Specifically, the ODR reports described by principals in this study contained little information regarding the resolution and recovery processes for given behavioral incidents. This information should be collected to understand the nature and topology of persistent infractions for and across students. Also, transparency in sharing and analysis of school-wide behavioral data is important both for increasing implementer's understanding of PBIS processes, and for achieving buy-in and motivation for high-quality implementation. As leadership teams require more and greater involvement by teachers and staff to achieve continuous improvement goals, decisions must appear connected to observable trends in student behavior.

Finally, although crisis planning is not an activity that is specific to a PBIS approach, efforts to achieve successful PBIS implementation are clearly affected by the existence of a crisis plan. Crisis plans should consist of both prevention and mitigation strategies, as well as preparedness, response, and recovery protocols for handling extreme situations relating to student behavior. Insofar as the prevention of student behavioral incidents is a focal objective of PBIS, so must prevention of dangerous situations be an aspect of a school-wide behavior plan.

Concluding remarks

Despite a statewide effort to promote PBIS, FL Title 1 schools are more likely to suspend youth than more affluent schools (Gagnon et al., 2017). Nevertheless, the implementation of PBIS with fidelity holds great promise for promoting positive youth behavior and a positive school climate. However, the current study identifies specific concerns with PBIS policies and practices in Title 1 schools, including the insufficient support for youth in need of secondary and tertiary supports, as well as development and implementation of a multi-year action plan and a comprehensive plan for PD. These are among the key issues that must be addressed if we are to alter the reliance on reactive and punitive approaches to youth behavior in these schools.

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