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## Implementing Discipline Reform: One District's Experience with PBIS

Catherine Robert Ed.D.  
*University of Texas at Arlington*, [catherine.robert@uta.edu](mailto:catherine.robert@uta.edu)

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### Cover Page Footnote

Author Note Catherine Robert, Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, The University of Texas at Arlington; Box 19575, Trimble Hall, Room 103H, Arlington, Texas 76019, 830-456-5764, [catherine.robert@uta.edu](mailto:catherine.robert@uta.edu) Dr. Robert is an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Texas at Arlington. As a former human resources administrator, Dr. Robert primarily focuses her research on human resource topics, including misconduct, employee turnover, and policy implementation. Correspondence concerning this article can be addressed to Catherine Robert, [catherine.robert@uta.edu](mailto:catherine.robert@uta.edu)

## Implementing Discipline Reform: One District's Experience with PBIS

Under the Obama administration, the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) increased efforts to enforce Title VI of the Civil Rights Act prohibiting discrimination in allocating educational resources on the basis of race, color, or national origin (Lhamon, 2014; D'Orio, 2018). Using the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) to identify areas of disparities between student groups, the OCR specifically considered school discipline rates by ethnicity as indicators of possible Title VI discrimination (Lhamon, 2014; Lhamon & Samuels, 2014). A growing evidence base (e.g., Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Skiba et al., 2011) demonstrates the harmful academic and social effects of disparate discipline practices. As Losen and Gillespie (2012) explain, students encountering persistent disciplinary consequences lose critical instructional time. Teachers may unintentionally use bias in their perceptions of appropriate classroom behaviors and unfairly penalize one group of students over another group for similar behaviors (Skiba et al., 2011).

As the evidence base demonstrating harmful effects of zero tolerance practices in school discipline grew, researchers' attention shifted to alternative disciplinary practices to replace zero tolerance policies (Newburn & Jones, 2007). In response to the OCR's identification of the effects of disparate disciplinary practices, many school districts began examining their practices and initiated disciplinary policy reform. The OCR provided technical guidance through "Dear Colleague" letters that encouraged the use of positive behavior supports over punitive discipline approaches (Lhamon, 2014). Critics of the OCR's increased activities "accused the office of overreach, overregulation, and intimidation" (Murphy, 2017, p. 3) while teachers struggling with new policies expressed the need for additional training to successfully implement disciplinary guidelines (D'Orio, 2018; Watanbe & Blume, 2015).

Research regarding school politics reflects a persisting imbalance of power of professionals (teachers) over parents and students, indicating an impediment to any program that disrupts the traditional power balance in schools (Malen & Cochran, 2015). The nature of discipline reform is to disrupt teachers' traditionally held beliefs regarding student behaviors; thus, it necessarily challenges the traditional power structure of schools to emphasize students' social emotional learning and resolving issues within the classroom (Gregory & Roberts, 2017). The shifting practice of first praising and encouraging students toward positive behavior instead of using negative feedback and quickly removing students for disruptive behavior is not an easy change (e.g., see Andreou, McIntosh, Ross, & Kahn, 2015 for a district's transition story lasting over a decade). In this study, I examine the case of one large urban school district's implementation of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) to

review the competing needs and challenges encountered over a four-year period. In the research questions, I first ask what factors influenced the district's decision to enact discipline policy reform and what was the original plan for implementation. Then I look at the challenges of implementing PBIS on campuses and resulting stakeholder responses. Finally, I review how the district plans to continue the implementation process.

To review one district's PBIS implementation experience, the first section includes relevant literature surrounding positive behavior as a general concept, disparity in discipline practices and the resulting negative impact on students, the evolution of the PBIS framework as an antidote to exclusionary discipline practices, and existing studies describing challenges in PBIS implementation. Next, the study's design and analytic methods are presented, followed by the results from the data and document analysis. Discussion of the findings is considered in light of existing empirical literature. Finally, recommendations and conclusions provide suggestions for policy and practice in addition to suggestions for future research.

### **Literature Review**

Shifting public attention to the issue of student discipline in the late 1980s resulted in an increased effort throughout the 1990s to remove misbehaving students from classrooms (Fabelo et al., 2011). Collectively described as "zero tolerance" policies, coined under the Reagan administration, and also used in the context of drug crimes (Mallett, 2016; Newburn & Jones, 2007), several national and state efforts set required punishments for a variety of infractions. For example, the 1994 Gun-Free Schools Act incentivized schools to create expulsion policies for students who brought weapons on campus (Fabelo et al., 2011; Mallett, 2016). A dramatic increase in suspensions and expulsions followed these harsher guidelines, with disparate effects for African American students and students receiving special education services (Fabelo et al., 2011; Losen & Gillespie, 2012). In addition to the growing disparity for vulnerable populations, researchers found that zero tolerance policies did not improve school safety (Mallett, 2016). Faced with increasing evidence demonstrating the harmful effects of zero tolerance discipline policies (Skiba & Peterson, 2000), federal and state agencies in addition to school districts began considering alternatives to a zero tolerance philosophy (Fabelo et al., 2011).

### **Positive Behavior and Persistent Disparity**

The alternative to a non-negotiable policy with automatic penalties is easily a policy that allows flexibility for administrative discretion and a rehabilitative or positive approach that supports student success instead of an

inevitable cycle of eventual incarceration for students caught in the cycle of suspension and expulsion (see Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams, 2014, for a description of the school to prison pipeline) (Mallett, 2016). Researchers studying behavioral science founded the *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions* (JPBI) in 1999, which was dedicated to exploring the emerging concepts of the field (Koegel, 2018). Chief among their tenets was the question, “Has the application of Positive Behavior Support enriched the lives of all involved in the process?” (Knoster, 2018, p. 24). The researchers’ question represented a significant shift in behavioral science by focusing on positive results of supporting preferred student behavior instead of discussing punitive consequences. The behavioral scientists’ theory that shifting to a focus of positive variables would yield positive results, and if successful, would benefit both students and teachers (Koegel, 2018).

Empirical research supports the measurable success of teachers utilizing positive behaviors in the classroom. Cook and colleagues (2017), for example, found that when teachers were trained to use a 5:1 ratio of five positives for every one negative, their students gained an additional 13.2 minutes of academic engagement per instructional hour due to the decrease in disruptive behavior. With fewer classroom disruptions, students are less likely to receive an office referral and be removed from a classroom. Skiba and Peterson (2000) further posited that by reducing minor incidents in the classrooms, “schools may also be reducing the risk of more serious violent incidents that appear to be associated with higher levels of minor disruption” (p. 336).

Even with the implementation of positive behavior practices, as Bradshaw and colleagues (2010) demonstrated, teachers are more likely to refer African American students to the office at a significantly higher rate than White students. Smolkowski, Girvan, McIntosh, Nese, and Horner (2016) extended this line of inquiry to consider subjective referrals in order to consider teachers’ possible implicit bias at certain times of day and against specific genders and/or ethnicities. Similar to Bradshaw et al., (2010), they found that African American students are more likely to receive a subjective referral and specifically within the first 90 minutes of the day (Smolkowski et al., 2016). Once referred to the office, Huang and Cornell (2017) found that African American students are potentially subjected to “differential decisions” (p. 304) by school administrators as well. Despite controlling for specific behaviors (aggressive attitudes, fighting, substance abuse, weapons), African American students received suspensions at a higher rate than White students (Huang & Cornell, 2017). Barrett, McEachin, Mills, and Valant (2017) studied suspensions based on specific infractions and additionally found that African American students received longer suspensions than White students did for the same infractions.

## **Framework for Increasing Equity in Discipline**

An ideal discipline policy, based on the previously mentioned research, would address both the disparate treatment between student groups and would counter the negative effects of zero tolerance policies. This combination then addresses both the need to improve the overall campus climate in order to reduce total disciplinary incidents (Skiba & Peterson, 2000) and includes cultural training to create awareness of implicit bias (Gregory & Roberts, 2017). Gregory, Skiba, and Mediratta (2017) proposed a framework for increasing equity in school discipline. To prevent incidents requiring disciplinary measures, they recommended building supportive relationships, creating inclusive and positive classrooms, utilizing culturally relevant teaching practices, and providing students opportunities to correct their behavior. To address existing disciplinary incidents, they suggested utilizing data to look for concentrations of inequitable practices, looking for (and addressing) sources of teacher-student conflict, integrating student and family voices within policy and practice, and creating supports to assist students with reentry after an absence. Finally, a system of supports matching students' needs addresses both prevention and intervention strategies (Gregory et al., 2017). These activities are found within a PBIS system if implemented with fidelity. In order to describe the concept of implementation fidelity, the next section describes the evolution of PBIS from its origin to today's complete framework.

## **The Evolution of Positive Behavior Supports**

The terms PBS and SWPBS evolved throughout the early 2000s into Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (PBIS) or SWPBIS (for school-wide). As Carr and colleagues (2002) described, the science of positive behavior evolved from a combination of applied behavior analysis, the inclusion movement, and person-centered values. PBS requires a life span perspective instead of a short-term view and “follow-up is measured in decades, not months” (Carr et al., 2002, p. 7). Ideally, PBS provides support to students throughout their lifetime of transitions into young adulthood, thus cannot be meaningfully quantified in the short term.

The primary distinction between a zero tolerance disciplinary philosophy and a PBS philosophy lies in the unilateral application of a punishment for an infraction. The person-centered values of positive behavior instead emphasize personal dignity of students and opportunities for choice (Carr et al., 2002). Several critical features further distinguish positive behavior support (PBS) from zero tolerance such as stakeholder participation in development of the PBS system which allows students and parents to actively and collaboratively design a structure that suits their needs (Carr et al., 2002). A systemic perspective

emphasizing routine change and adaptation of the PBS system allow practitioners to update intervention techniques as new research is available and as needs of the students change (Carr et al., 2002). Finally, a PBS approach focuses on prevention of problem behavior to minimize the number of disciplinary incidents requiring attention (Carr et al., 2002).

Sugai and Horner (2009) further advanced the formalization of a positive behavior approach by demonstrating how the response-to-intervention (RtI) structure aligns well to the practices of school-wide positive behavior supports (SWPBS). Using the three-tier concept within RtI, the most common supports are applied to the full population of students and the majority of students are successful with these Tier I supports. Tier II and Tier III supports are more complex and designed to address unique needs of a smaller group of students (Sugai & Horner, 2009). By the end of the first full decade of applying PBS practices, researchers defined a full set of implementation guidelines detailing how to form a PBS team, the need to commit extensive resources and time for training and implementation of new practices, how to create data systems to collect and monitor effectiveness, and how to monitor and maintain fidelity throughout the implementation process (Sugai & Horner, 2009).

In the last two decades, the focus in PBIS literature has shifted from an emphasis on student behaviors and parents as intervention agents to research on adult behaviors and adult skills training (Clarke, Zakszeski, & Kern, 2018). Indeed, as Bethune (2017) demonstrated, there is a “functional relationship between coaching and improved SWPBIS fidelity scores” (p. 131). Findings from other PBIS implementation studies in the following section echoed Bethune’s (2017) results and provide additional areas of concern for districts considering PBIS implementation.

### **Implementation Studies of PBIS**

Building on a dataset of 3011 schools, McIntosh and colleagues (2016) provided an overview of differing schools’ characteristics and their predictive power at one, three, and five years of PBIS implementation. Several school characteristics were significant, though explained little variance. Elementary schools (as opposed to secondary schools), schools with lower poverty rates, and schools meeting fidelity in the first year all had higher odds of sustained PBIS implementation at five years. More significantly, states play a larger role in providing coaching, training, and support and state support was more influential in implementation than the school characteristics combined (McIntosh et al., 2016).

Several studies demonstrated the key role of administrative support and teacher buy-in for successful PBIS implementation (Andreou et al., 2015; Coffey & Horner, 2012; Feuerborn, Wallace, & Tyre, 2016; Pinkelman, McIntosh, Rasplica, Berg, & Strickland-Cohen, 2015). Teachers report the need for both peer and administrative support when engaging in new practices. Without a firm commitment to a lengthy implementation, teachers are unwilling to adapt to new practices if faced with inevitable return to previous practices (Feuerborn et al., 2016). Flexibility and a school culture of constant adaptation to new ideas is important to PBIS success, however. As such, administrators and PBIS team leaders must model and reward an adaptive culture (Andreou et al., 2015). New teachers entering schools in mid-implementation need early training in PBIS techniques to dispel confusion (Andreou et al., 2015).

Similarly, unsuccessful PBIS implementation also links administrative support as a key factor in the failed efforts (Pinkelman et al., 2015). Thus, an administrator's overall acceptance or rejection of the PBIS framework speaks directly to the success or failure of an implementation effort. Teachers' available time for planning is the second highest barrier to implementing PBIS (Pinkelman et al., 2015). Planning time issues directly connect to administrator support as it is administrators who create teachers' schedules and allocate campus resources. Andreou and colleagues (2015) recommend that districts build action plans that recruit administrators supportive of PBIS concepts and provide support for newly hired administrators.

### **Theoretical Framework**

PBIS implementation requires a cultural shift within schools that focuses on positive interactions with students and confronts educator bias and deficit-thinking practices that lead to discipline disparity (Coggshall, Osher, & Colombi, 2013). As such, this study utilizes a cultural analytical framework (Carey, 2014; McDermott, Goldman, & Varenne, 2006) which considers the surrounding culture of the individuals and how they work with each other. McDermott, Goldman, and Varenne (2006), for example, utilized cultural analysis to consider the learning disability (LD) label. Through their reasoning, they showed how the meanings we attribute to students labeled as LD ultimately provide a method for treating people differently and allow schools to explain failure through this label. Carey (2014) utilized a cultural analytic framework to critique the achievement gap discourse, explaining that cultural analysis considers "what is culturally acceptable and normalized in our broader sociopolitical context" (p. 442) and challenged dichotomous thinking and the assignment of labels which further fuel existing challenges.



Carey (2014) expanded upon the method used by McDermott and colleagues (2006) by presenting three different versions of how we can describe the achievement gap: version one focuses attention and/or blame on the individual, version two instead focuses on sociocultural considerations, and version three removes focus from the individual and instead considers the larger scope of the full problem and our own roles within the issue. Each version (called a unit by McDermott et al., 2006) essentially expands the perspective we apply to a given label. For example, when considering the label “underperforming” the simplest version is that there will always be some schools performing better than others. The second version acknowledges that underperforming schools are also likely urban schools that are lacking resources. Finally, the third version, in a cultural analysis, questions popular perceptions attributed to urban schools, the role of the media in furthering these perceptions, and the continuing value of schools despite their contextual challenges (Carey, 2014).

### **Study Design and Methods**

Middleton ISD is a large urban school district in Texas with over 60,000 students and more than 70 campuses. The student population is comprised of Hispanic (46%), African American (25%), White (20%), and Asian American (6%) students. Sixty-nine percent of the student population is eligible for free or reduced lunch and the district met the state standard for academic performance in 2016-17, with varying success at the campus level. Middleton was selected for this study due to its shift from a strict zero tolerance policy to a positive behavior system. The policy change was initiated in 2013, providing over four years of data for analysis.

### **Participants**

Interviewees (listed in Table 1) include three campus administrators and one central office staff member and were interviewed individually in the summer of 2018 for approximately 50 minutes using semi-structured questions (see Appendix A for the protocol). All participants worked for the school district and participated in the implementation throughout the full timeline. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded thematically (Saldana, 2013) to describe the implementation process as viewed by staff and consider responses through the lens of the cultural analysis framework (Carey, 2014) in order to identify possible cultural challenges to discipline reform. The study focuses on the administrative level as it is the starting point for the reform effort. Thus, the findings reflect district and campus level administrator perspectives.

Table 1

*Participant Characteristics*

Name	Position	School
Ryan	Principal	Middleton Junior High
Alex	Principal	South Middleton Junior High
Mary	Assistant Principal	North Middleton High School
Belinda	Specialist	Middleton Central Office

Ryan, a principal at Middleton Junior High (MJH), has over ten years' experience as a campus principal. MJH has over 600 students in grades 7 and 8 and there are fewer students receiving free or reduced lunch at this campus. By comparison, Alex's campus, SMJH, has over 1000 students almost all of whom receive free lunch. Alex has four years of experience as a campus principal. Both Ryan and Alex worked in Middleton as teachers and assistant principals before receiving their current assignments. Assistant Principal Mary worked in other districts and her current role is her first in Middleton; she has been in the position for four years. Mary's campus, like Ryan's, has a lower than average poverty level. District Specialist Belinda has a diverse background with several certifications, teaching, special education, and administrator experience prior to her current role.

**Data Sources**

Additional resources were collected and reviewed, including district discipline data, school board meeting minutes, recordings of school board meetings, district-developed strategic plan documents, and district discipline policies. The district discipline data, collected from both the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) and the Texas Education Agency (TEA) includes in campus suspension (ISS), off-campus suspension (OSS), disciplinary alternative education placements (DAEP), and the total number of disciplinary referrals for the years 2008-2017 and are disaggregated by student ethnicities and special education status. School board documentation and recordings of meetings provide both records of official actions and the associated conversations surrounding disciplinary policy changes. Middleton developed two strategic plans throughout the implementation timeline, the first covered the years 2012-2015 and the second plan covers the years 2016-2021.

### **Analytic Strategy**

This study considers the following research questions:

1. What factors influenced the district's decision to enact discipline policy reform?
2. What was the original implementation plan?
3. What have been the challenges of implementing PBIS on campuses?
4. How have the differing stakeholders responded throughout the implementation process?
5. How is the district continuing the implementation process?

The thematic codes resulting from the interviews were further categorized based on their alignment to the research questions. The additional resources provided clarity when interviews did not provide complete information and verified (or contradicted) existing answers from the interviews. Altheide (1996) explains the value of using documents to help process the meaning of social activities, “to examine the complex interaction between individual perspectives and patterns of meaning and symbolic ordering to understand new sources of social definitions and sort out their consequences” (p. 11). Shifting from a zero tolerance philosophy to a positive behavior approach was a radical transition in beliefs, necessitating this consideration of social definitions enshrined through documents and media at the time of transition (Altheide, 1996).

### **Limitations of Design**

The small number of interviewees potentially limits the findings of this study; however, the researcher did determine consistency throughout all four of the participants' responses, demonstrating a coherent view of the implementation throughout the full district. The disciplinary data are considered at the district level instead of campus level, limiting the ability to consider the varying levels of poverty and ethnicities at each campus. The data quantifying disciplinary incidents are presented to further illuminate the participants' perspectives and the research design does not seek to consider statistical significance. Finally, this study tells the story of a district's PBIS implementation from the perspective of mid-level administrators. Teachers would provide rich detail surrounding their experiences, though teachers are not responsible for initiating and continuing reform efforts.

### **Findings**

Participants' responses were thematically coded then grouped according to the research questions. Document and media analysis provided additional context and to answer questions that remained after the interviews.

**RQ1. What factors influenced the district’s decision to enact discipline policy reform?**

Middleton employees and the school board did not describe its decision to enact discipline reform as a result of an OCR investigation. Additionally, Middleton was not one of the several districts investigated by the OCR for discipline disparities between African American students. The district was, however, investigated by the OCR during this time for the disparity between African American and Hispanic students’ access to college and career readiness opportunities compared to White students’ opportunities. While no one factor was identified by participants or in district documents as the cause for enacting discipline reform, it is clear that the national conversation surrounding African American student disparity was a known fact in the school district. The participants all felt that the strategic plan itself (and not a legal challenge or campaign of any one person) drove the decision to begin discipline reform. As Belinda explained, the previous disciplinary system, Boys Town, had fallen out of official use for several years. Belinda describing the start of PBIS planning, commented that, “years later, that [use of Boys Town] wasn’t necessarily occurring, so that’s where the strategic plan said, ‘Hey, we need to figure out how we’re going to work through this.’”

The 2012-2015 strategic plan, developed over several months in 2011-2012 and ratified by the board in August 2012, listed as a goal that the district “will provide a safe and secure environment.” During the board’s ratification discussion, the board stated that the collective group (comprised of panels of students, parents, teachers, and community members) communicated a desire for a more positive behavior system. The action plans developed from the strategic plan further designated action steps to implement a new discipline management program.

**RQ2. What was the original implementation plan?**

The district developed an implementation plan between 2012 and 2014. Based on the goal for a safe and secure environment, the action plan for 2012-13 included the first step of hiring a staff member responsible for enacting positive behavior reform. The first specialist was hired in the summer of 2013 and a group of campus and district staff members gathered to research and develop a plan to enact discipline reform. After a few months of research, they selected a PBIS framework and established a timeline, which was presented to the school board in January of 2014. The action plan for 2013-14 was slightly adjusted to allow the team time to fully research and develop a rollout to all campuses. Belinda explained that the team received advice to initially roll out PBIS to a select group of campuses; however, the district was determined to enact reform consistently on

all campuses. Table 2 lists the implementation steps as identified through board meeting agendas and recorded videos of the meetings.

**Table 2**  
*Key Activities and Dates within PBIS Implementation Process*

Date	Activity	People Involved	Notes
August 2012	2012-15 Strategic Plan Approved	School Board	Multiple stakeholders developed
Summer 2013	PBIS Team begins work	2 staff & employee volunteers	
Aug-Sept 2013	Researched options	District PBIS Team	
Fall 2013	Defined Goals, coordinated with curriculum staff	District PBIS Team	
Fall 2013	PBIS Pilots begin	~ 20 campuses	Principals voluntarily began PBIS implementation in advance of rollout
January 2014	PBIS Presentation to board	Asst. Superintendent/ School Board	-Board mentions it is first time in over 4 years to discuss discipline -Board offers resources to “clean up” discipline on “certain” campuses
Feb-May 2014	Planning, visits to other districts, consult with experts	District PBIS Team	
April 2014	Revision to 2014-15 Student Code of Conduct to align with PBIS	Asst. Superintendent/ School Board	Begins removing zero tolerance language
Fall 2014	All campuses begin PBIS Tier I implementation at campus level	PBIS Department	Behavior expectations and supports for the common areas (cafeteria, hallways, etc.)
November 2014	1 <sup>st</sup> Quarter Update on Strategic Plan in 2013-14	Asst. Superintendent/ School Board	-Training occurred in summer; campus teams established -Board asks how PBIS data will be monitored
May 2015	Revision to 2015-16 Student Code of Conduct to further align with PBIS	Asst. Superintendent/ School Board	-PBIS update shared, reduction in disciplinary incidents cited

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-new code specifies responsibilities for all stakeholders</li> <li>-emphasis on need to maintain commitment to implementation</li> <li>-Board asks about data accuracy and fidelity</li> </ul>
Summer 2015	Teacher training on PBIS strategies in the classroom	PBIS & Professional Development Departments	Corrective actions include parent contact, apology, reflective assignments, behavior contracts, and denial of privileges
Fall 2015	All campuses begin PBIS Tier I implementation at the classroom level	PBIS Department	
September 2015	End of Year report Strategic Plan	Asst. Superintendent/ School Board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Action steps of summer training and incremental PBIS Tier I implementation on schedule</li> <li>-Board member expresses concern about eliminating classroom disruptions</li> </ul>
January 2016	2016-2021 Strategic Plan adopted	School Board	Includes strategy to “enhance an emotionally and physically safe learning environment...”
May 2016	2016-17 Student Code of Conduct	Asst. Superintendent/ School Board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-PBIS not discussed in this context beginning this year and in future years</li> <li>-Board member asks if everything is enforceable and wants teachers to feel that students sent to office will be disciplined</li> </ul>
April 2017	Strategic Plan Update-including strategy for enhancing safe environment	Asst. Superintendent/ School Board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Action step included restorative practices implemented within the PBIS framework at pilot campuses</li> <li>-Additional supports for social emotional</li> </ul>

			learning, parent engagement for specific campuses -Fidelity walks -Board expresses support for restorative practices
November 2017	Year 1 Review of Strategic Plan-including strategy for enhancing safe environment	Asst. Superintendent/ School Board	-Developing training & support for Tier II PBIS implementation -Systematic review of discipline data -PBIS onboarding for late hires -Collaboration with C&I for training -All staff receiving PBIS training
February 2018	Year 2 Mid-Year Review of Strategic Plan-including strategy for enhancing cultural awareness	Asst. Superintendent/ School Board	-Developing training for cultural responsiveness and positive interactions and reinforcements

The full implementation timeline for integrating all three tiers of the PBIS framework was not initially presented in specific detail to the board. Presentations to the school board emphasized that the PBIS framework was a multi-tiered system that would take several years to implement. Belinda stated that the PBIS team was originally advised that full Tier I implementation would take five years. The PBIS department implemented the original Tier I plans as developed through their research including routine checklists for ensuring completion of steps and fidelity to the framework.

**Crafting the why for principals.** The district has a strong culture that encourages careful planning using evidence-based practices. After selecting the PBIS framework as the new discipline policy, the district’s PBIS team began planning the introduction of the reform to the principals. Belinda explained that they began with a needs assessment. “Our superintendent says, ‘Start with why. Give me the why.’ So, any time we present, doesn’t matter where or who we’re presenting to, we always start with why.” The team showed principals both their campus data and explained the philosophical differences between zero tolerance and PBIS. Two of the participants remembered the early presentations as true motivators for action. Alex explained:

Oh man, I still remember her presentation. She talked about how, as a country, we suspend 4 or 5 super bowl stadiums worth of kids every year. And how those kids, very rarely do they change for the better...and how just suspending kids constantly just leads to...to that. So that data was powerful...So, I knew that was something we needed to change. When you want change in an organization, you have to motivate the person's heart and mind. You usually motivate their mind with data and show them why we're doing this. And their heart with something emotional.

**Crafting the why for campuses.** Campus principals then mirrored the approach of “crafting the why” to their campuses but modified the message to suit their unique needs. Alex, for example, showed his teachers that they had the highest number of disciplinary incidents, which was sufficient to demonstrate the need for reform at SMJH. Mary felt that her higher performing campus would not feel motivated based on their data, however.

I think for us, we felt like we had to show a need. At our campus it might be a little different because we don't really have a lot of misbehavior...Showing that data, where we were, what was currently happening in the past year as far as discipline, showing the need within the district, why the district was going this direction, why it would benefit our school, showing those individual things...Why would we do something like this if there wasn't a need?

Mary rationalized the shift to PBIS as a district initiative and showed her teachers how they could contribute to the collective need for discipline reform.

**Extensive resources provided by the district.** The district committed extensive resources to the implementation of a new discipline management strategy. In addition to initially allocating one staff member for the work, within the first year, the district added two additional specialists, allowed several months for the team to research different discipline management strategies and to design the implementation strategy once PBIS was selected, allocated extensive resources for training, and committed to stipends (\$750 per year, per teacher) for teachers serving on the PBIS campus teams.

**Peer leadership.** Peer leadership has been critical to Middleton's implementation efforts and was intentional throughout the process. The original development team consisted of a group of volunteer campus and central office administrators who researched options, developed the implementation strategy, and conducted initial training of principals. As Belinda explained, the presentations from assistant principals were powerful since they were able to describe how they had utilized new techniques and the effects, “That's what was



powerful, it was action research.” In fact, the PBIS department was acutely aware that their efforts could not succeed without campus leadership of PBIS, “Because 5 people for 4000+ teachers for 70+ campuses...the district never intended for us to own all of it. It’s for us to help campuses sustain it.”

On campuses, teachers led presentations to teachers and students helped develop the student material. Mary felt that peer teacher support within the professional learning communities (PLCs) was the most valuable resource for teachers working to implement PBIS strategies, “...working within their PLCs, that’s where that community helps support them and I think that there’s sometimes more of a need for that.” Ryan explained that he had students create videos and posters highlighting PBIS concepts for students, such as the message to be “Ready” for classes by having all supplies, “We try to give the kids some ownership of it as well along the way.”

### **RQ3. What have been the challenges of implementing PBIS on campuses?**

The district radically reversed its discipline philosophy from one of zero tolerance to a positive behavior approach. The initial challenges were both due to the change in philosophy and due to the complexity of the PBIS framework. The implementation process of Tier I supports was lengthy (as appropriate according to PBIS training documents) but this resulted in initial anxiety for teachers. They quickly understood that there was an expectation to take a positive approach, but developing the specific skills took time.

**Managing teachers’ frustrations.** The campus administrators were aware that teacher support was critical to the success of implementation and were careful to listen and communicate their needs back to central office. Ryan felt that the initial frustrations from teachers were subtle, “I think everyone got on board. Obviously, frustration arose, but that’s normal with change.” Mary concurred that the change itself naturally created frustration and that teachers were initially frustrated that they had to take several steps prior to writing a discipline referral. Teachers felt the added required steps prior to a referral (apology, phone call home, behavior plan, etc.) created an excuse for administrators to avoid working on discipline referrals. Alex further identified that teachers had previously valued suspended students’ time away as a needed break from their disruptions.

So, I didn’t find a lot of resistance. But what did happen was, it caused more stress for teachers because at the end of the day, I really realized that, you see, school suspension was really just a break for teachers. So, when I removed that break, the stress and the anxiety of teachers went up.

**Managing the complexity of PBIS.** The PBIS team on each campus was responsible for completing a checklist of tasks each six weeks and reporting back

to central office. In addition, the district conducted fidelity checks in the form of both internal and external walkthroughs. A district team visited campuses to interview students and teachers and, in addition, campus PBIS teams traveled to peer campuses to conduct walkthroughs. Belinda explained, “logistically it was a nightmare,” but felt the challenge was worth the effort so that they could compare and contrast a variety of approaches to PBIS implementation. The central office team, which grew over the implementation timeline to include 5 specialists, managed fidelity checks through sharing documentation over the intranet, using Google forms to track views, and building in work time during trainings to assist teams in completing tasks.

**Campus reward plans.** Part of the PBIS implementation includes establishing a rewards system for students. Campus administrators spent at least half of the interview describing the elaborate reward systems that his or her campus had developed. Each campus created a system with a catchy title tied to their mascot, such as “Cougar Cash” or “Bear Bucks.” Students earn the campus cash for demonstrating positive behaviors. Campuses then offer reward days and/or reward events in which the students can spend their earnings. As Alex explained,

So, every 6 weeks, we’d have a game night. We’d open up 1 gym, fill it up with video games, music, I had foosball tables, air hockey tables...the other gym was open gym for basketball. You had to have 20 merits, no tardies, no skipped classes, no ISS and you could get in. The kids would just be like...they’d go goo-goo for that stuff.

To build excitement, administrators reached out to area businesses for support. Ryan explained that he solicited several boxes of popular t-shirts from a local manufacturer. Alex received 60 movie tickets for a new release from a local celebrity. At the high school, Mary solicited donations of gift cards for \$5 to \$20 each. Student responses to the reward plans are described in the following section about stakeholder responses.

**Allowed to use additional programs for extension.** The district PBIS department was flexible with campuses in that they allowed principals to add supplemental programs to aid in the PBIS efforts. The participants described a variety of programs such as Capturing Kids’ Hearts and Great Expectations. Ryan felt that this addition was expensive for the limited campus budget but that it added cultural training that teachers still needed in order to fully implement Tier I supports with fidelity. Belinda explained that her department was happy for campuses to select their own supplemental support and that this is an advantage of PBIS. It is a framework that guides practice in which any program with the PBS philosophy can reside. As long as the campus PBIS teams completed the required

tasks and were maintaining fidelity, they had autonomy to design or purchase their own programs.

**RQ4. How have the differing stakeholders responded throughout the implementation process?**

The first response from both teachers and administrators was an overall reduction in the number of discipline referrals. Figure 1 displays ten years of Middleton’s total referrals. Note that the student population rose slightly within this time period (an approximate 4% increase) but has incrementally returned to 2008 levels.

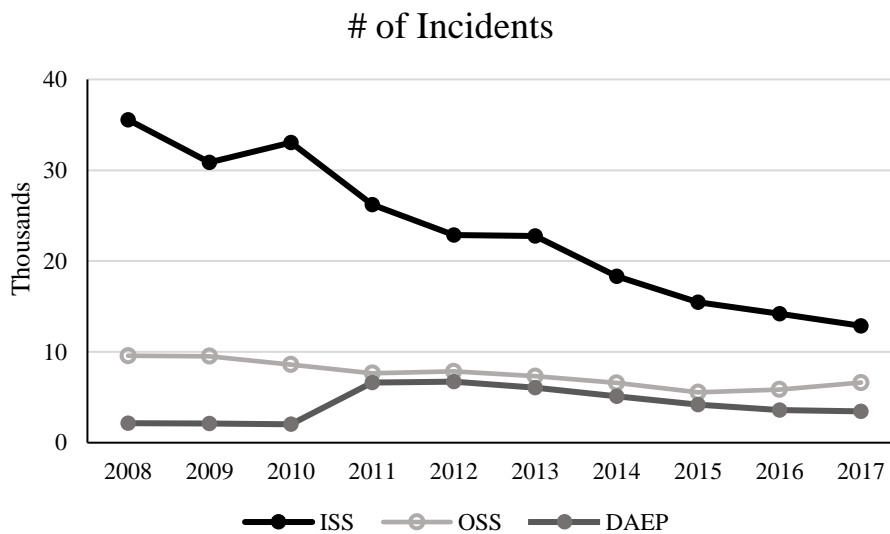


Figure 1. Total disciplinary incidents 2008-2017.

The decline in the number of referrals translated overall into a decline in the percent of students receiving suspensions (ISS and OSS), though does not directly correlate to the fluctuation in the percent of students receiving alternative school placements (DAEP) within each year. The percent of students receiving in-school suspensions most closely correlates with the total number of disciplinary incidents and shows a gradual decline that leveled out in 2017. As seen in Figure 2, African American students and students receiving special education services continued to experience a higher percentage of ISS placements compared to White and Hispanic students.

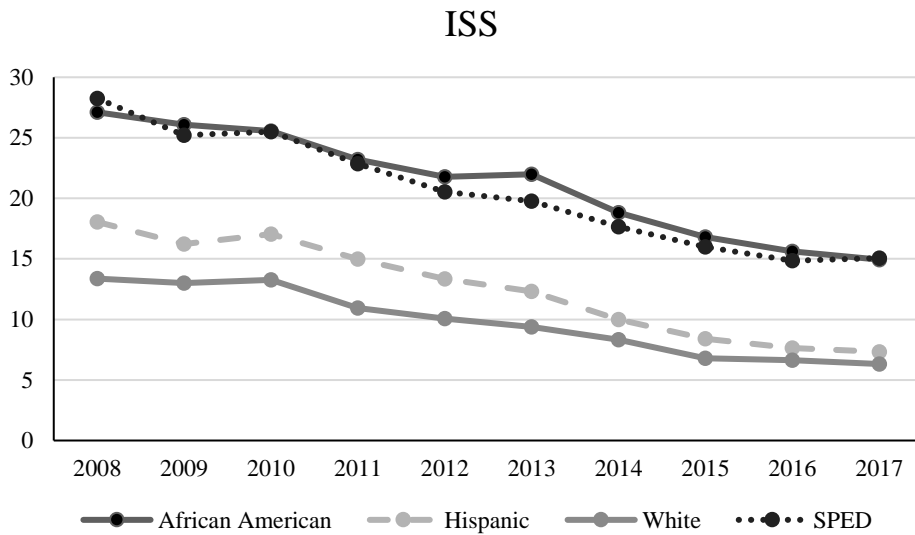


Figure 2. Percent of students receiving an ISS placement 2008-2017.

The percent of students receiving off-campus suspensions, seen in Figure 3, declined over the ten-year period and reflects similar disparities to the ISS placements.

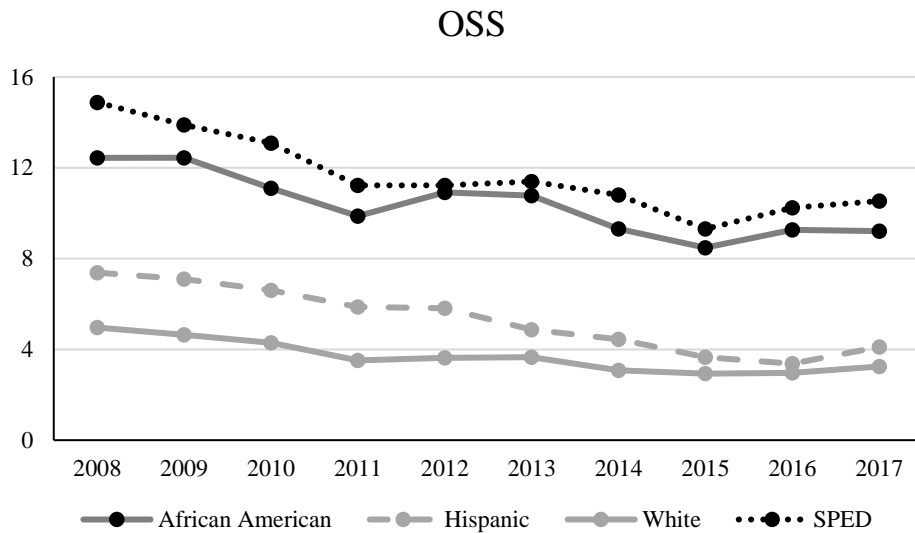


Figure 3. Percent of students receiving an OSS placement 2008-2017.

Fluctuations in alternative school placements (DAEP) align less closely to the total number of district referrals as seen in Figure 4. While illuminating similar disparities and a reduction in the initial implementation in 2014-2015, several outside factors, such as changes in state and federal mandates for specific infractions, contribute to the ten-year results in this category.

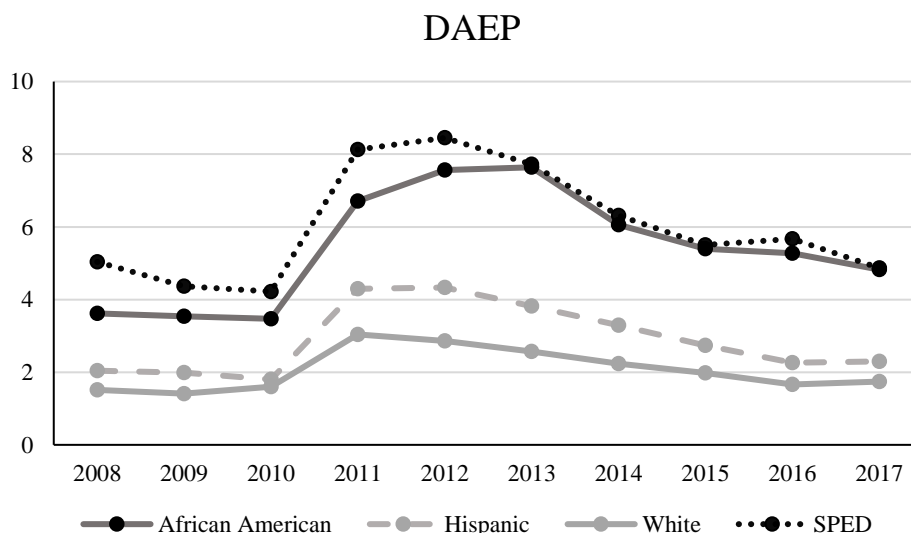


Figure 4. Percent of students receiving a DAEP placement 2008-2017.

**Power of relationships.** Administrators enjoyed the greater flexibility within the PBIS framework to generate creative solutions for student discipline. Under zero tolerance, there were strict guidelines for responses to infractions. Under PBIS, administrators could craft plans that addressed individual student needs. Mary recalled a student receiving special education services who liked to wander the hallways. Under zero tolerance, the student would have been suspended for skipping class. With PBIS, Mary first spent time discovering the student’s motivation for leaving his classroom. “The biggest thing that he wanted was to come and sit in my office for 10 minutes...He just wants to watch what’s going on.” Administrators reported that by practicing flexibility, they quickly built better relationships with students and parents.

Alex proactively built relationships with students before problems occurred:

I started interviewing the toughest students I could find, asking them, “What do you like about this school?”, “What would you change if you could?” ...and they started sharing their stories. Many of them were very

passionate. Many students were like, “I just feel like everyone’s given up on me, so that’s why I act this way.” And some students were like, “You know, I act this way for everyone except for this teacher, who believes in me. So, I work hard in that class.”

The positive relationships built by administrators demonstrated to students that they cared about their success at school. As part of Alex’s proactive work, he visited a student prior to the student’s entry to the campus. The student had a long history of disciplinary incidents, so Alex ate lunch with him a few times before the end of the school year to build their relationship. When the student arrived the following year, the work eventually paid off, “Because we built many relationships and support structures around him, he went from having 20 fights in 2 months his 7<sup>th</sup> grade year to maybe 3 or 4 fights the whole year.”

**Few parent responses.** Parents asked few questions and did not have strong reactions to the shift to PBIS. Participants explained that parents were largely accustomed to a zero tolerance philosophy, so the initial lack of punishment was a surprise to parents. Mary and Alex reported that they reached out to parents for help with selecting appropriate interventions. As Alex explained to them, “What do you think we should do because obviously we’ve tried the suspension before, and it didn’t work.” By working with parents as partners, this teamwork helped parents through more challenging circumstances. Mary worked closely with a mother for several months and the student eventually entered a treatment center, then a job program. Even though the student was no longer enrolled in the school, the mother called at each step to share her son’s progress.

**Students’ responses to rewards.** Ryan enjoyed the challenge of finding rewards that his students would appreciate. “Honestly, you’d be shocked at how many times it’s a bag of Hot Cheetos and a Dr. Pepper...” In addition to the scheduled reward celebrations, Ryan leveraged the rewards as needed to encourage continued student success. If a student needed motivation to make it through a difficult day or week, Ryan allowed him to cash in his reward tickets early to purchase a snack. Each administrator found that different students valued different rewards. Alex found that on his campus, “...they want lip gloss, the girls wanted lotion. The boys wanted headphones.” However, not all students at SMJH valued the rewards. “My Tier III kids...that worked well for my Tier I, pretty well for my Tier II. My Tier III kids were like, “I don’t care about your movie. I don’t care about your dance.”

For Mary, at a high-performing high school, the students asked for recognition in the form of notes and phone calls home. The students responded to requests for wearing their IDs and taking off hats in the hallways when teachers handed out free ice cream coupons, though Mary explained that those rewards had

a very short-term response and reward. The minute the student turned the corner, the hat went back on and the ID was removed. Mary also found that the gift cards from restaurants for \$5-\$20 were the most popular reward items for students, "...but giving a pencil, this kind of stuff, that's not something that our students necessarily will respond to."

### **RQ5. How is the district continuing the implementation process?**

As of September of 2018, the district remained committed to the PBIS framework, though several elements have shifted since the implementation in 2014. The basic structures are the same. Each campus has a PBIS team that is responsible for conducting reward systems, receiving training from the district, fostering the training on campuses, and completing the activities in the six-week checklists designed to maintain fidelity of the Tier I supports.

**Persistent labels remain.** Instead of referring to students as "at-risk", participants referred to students as "Tier II and Tier III students." The name has changed, though the label refers to students needing greater supports. Participants on campuses with fewer disciplinary incidents carefully phrased or couched their status. As Ryan explained in reference to danger levels of incidents, "Our data has never skewed heavily towards red indicators." Mary felt that "...we don't really have a lot of misbehavior," thus her campus chose to delay adding Tier II supports since they felt they did not need to add more supports such as restorative practices at this time.

**Tackling implicit bias.** Belinda, when asked about the continuing disparity between different student groups, felt that the next steps included more cultural training so that teachers could learn to recognize their unacknowledged bias in reprimanding students. The district provided several cultural trainings designed to create a positive and rewarding culture for students and the message and training for providing a positive campus climate will continue.

**Tier II and Tier III implementation.** Belinda was pleased that the feedback she received from campuses had changed over time. In the first two years, common feedback was that teachers struggled with creating positive structures in the classrooms and campuses reward systems required adapting to each campus's unique needs. More recently, the requests from teachers and administrators were for adding Tier II and Tier III supports. While noting it was a good step that campuses were ready to move into the next phases of implementation, Belinda cautioned:

...we're not gonna bring you interventions, OK? We're bringing you the systems to manage the interventions. So, you're already doing check-ins and check-outs with kids, or you might already have a kid on a point sheet,

or you might already have a behavior support plan or a BIP for a kid. We're not bringing you that. When we bring you the system, we'll talk through those things and you might learn some things on how to fine-tune it; but we're bringing you the data systems-how do you know if it's effective or not effective? From a systemic standpoint on the campus, what does that look like and sound like? How are you guys looking at the data? When you're making those decisions, how are you informing the parents? It's those components that we bring with Tier II. It's not just the interventions.

The next challenge in adding Tier II supports is in strengthening not just the number and type of supports, but in reviewing the quality of the structural components of the PBIS framework on the campuses.

**Central office reorganization.** For the 2018-19 school year, the district rearranged departments. A growing interest in social-emotional learning, as a component within successful teaching practices, fueled the transition. A newly created Transformational Learning Department now houses a hub for social emotional learning, which includes PBIS, counseling, and student outreach services. Belinda did not yet know if this would change the expectations or resources for her department but felt that the strategic plan's stated goals ensured a continuing commitment to PBIS. In addition, Belinda explained that the PBIS philosophy was embedded within training for all staff (including bus drivers, security guards, and cafeteria employees) and within other teacher trainings as a natural accompaniment to quality pedagogical practices.

**Shifting the message.** After four full years of implementation and six years since the initial conversations began, a few elements of the PBIS implementation have shifted, though the messaging and practices have remained consistent. When asked if they expected the district to continue with PBIS as a discipline philosophy, participants were consistent in their responses. Alex felt that as long as staff in leadership positions supported PBIS, that the practices would remain, however, "the name of the program will change, or the system will change sooner or later." Mary, who had worked in several districts in her career, had seen many behavior programs come and go, some only lasting for two or three years. She acknowledged the constant pressure from teachers and administrators for the next new program, "I think there needs some revitalization going on, I think it needs another shot of...because I think we need to someplace else with this...you know, grow somehow."

Belinda agreed that the disciplinary system needed to constantly evolve. She cited her department's plans to shift the types of data they presented to metrics such as instructional time gained, academic correlations, and structural



time saved in the office instead of relying solely on discipline data to illustrate positive effects of the PBIS system. She was encouraged by the integration of PBIS into other trainings and departments, "...it can't all be about this little department that could. It has to be picked up by other departments and we're starting that."

## **Discussion**

Middleton ISD implemented and sustained PBIS as a disciplinary policy for four years and is projected to continue its efforts past the time of this study. There are encouraging results that support the finding of a successful PBIS implementation and promising plans for continued implementation to sustain Tier I practices and expand with Tier II supports. Reducing the continued disparity between the percentage of African American students and the percentage of White students receiving disciplinary consequences remains a challenge for Middleton ISD. In addition, work remains to reduce the disproportionate number of students receiving special education services who also receive higher levels of disciplinary consequences. In this section, I will review the findings in light of PBIS research and I will consider the continuing disparity through the cultural analytic framework (Carey, 2014).

### **Encouraging Results**

The district's attention to sociocultural needs at the outset of planning PBIS implementation demonstrated a greater depth of consideration within the cultural analytic framework (Carey, 2014). Further, this study supports Pinkelman et al.'s (2015) findings that key enablers of successful PBIS implementation include staff buy-in and school administrator support. The thoughtful development process of the first strategic plan included all stakeholders resulting in a collective commitment to reform. District and campus administrators demonstrated the need for a change in the disciplinary practices, which resulted in both staff buy-in and administrator support. Pinkelman et al. (2015) further identify a lack of resources, specifically a lack of time for implementation and money, as barriers to successful implementation. Middleton ISD committed generous resources including new staff, time for research and development, travel dollars to support research, funds to hire consultants and national experts in the PBIS field, funds for campus reward systems, and time and money for campus PBIS teams. The high level of professional development for learning new techniques, both from the PBIS department and their selected national and state experts provided important support for their complete shift in discipline philosophy. As Simonsen and colleagues (2017) found, targeted professional development is related to an increase in the average number of times teachers give positive feedback to students. Simonsen et al. (2017) caution however, that their

follow-up success was low. This could forewarn a potential future drop in positive behaviors if the district removes an emphasis and regular training on PBIS.

Another encouraging result is Middleton's integration of PBIS into all departments and training for all staff, which helped shift perspectives from version one (individual) to a sociocultural focus (version two) within the cultural analytic framework (Carey, 2014). Feuerborn, Tyre, and Beaudoin (2018) found that classified staff demonstrates far lower levels of understanding regarding PBIS philosophy. Quality professional development for all staff is essential in order to maintain fidelity of the positive campus environment. Students routinely encounter classified staff on campus that could impact their daily experiences. Students receiving special education services in particular encounter a higher number of classified staff providing their support services and are thus potentially subject to higher levels of negativity if their educators are unaware of PBIS techniques.

### **Promising Plans**

The PBIS Department in Middleton has a realistic perspective of the challenges surrounding their continued PBIS implementation. The commitment to actively seek new data points follows Horner and Sugai's (2018) advice to consider measurement practices and to "...measure whether the change in the target behavior resulted in substantive change in the quality of the lives of those participating" (p. 20). In addition, the district's continued review of measurement practices demonstrates version three of the cultural analytic framework in which participants consider their own roles within the greater context of the issue (Carey, 2014). Belinda also mentioned that the PBIS training is creating targeted support opportunities for teachers in the form of coaching and small-group training in order to provide intensive supports. This practice mirrors recommendations from both Gray and colleagues (2017) and Gregory and Fergus (2017) to focus PBIS resources on intensive teacher training.

### **Persistent Challenges**

Participants' use of terms such as Tier II and Tier III students (in the context of how many students on their campus need additional supports) demonstrates both a continuation of version one of the cultural analytic framework (Carey, 2014) and how these school leaders are interpreting and making sense of their students' needs in the context of PBIS. Evans (2007) describes this process of sensemaking and cautions administrators to not avoid the difficult process of acknowledging "the manifestations of racism" (p. 184). The application of a cultural analytic framework (Carey, 2014) demonstrates the danger of this continued reliance on labels in our sensemaking processes. First, in

the simplest version of understanding Tier II and Tier III students (version one blames the individual; Carey, 2014), these students are persistent disruptors in the classrooms and require constant and extensive social supports in order for them to be allowed within the traditional classroom environment. Next, in version two of cultural analysis (places blame on social forces; Carey, 2014), campuses with greater numbers of students needing Tier II and Tier III supports are situated in neighborhoods with persistent, oppressive societal challenges. It is logical that campuses in these areas would need additional supports, as their lives outside of the classrooms may not provide models of the positive structures and supportive environments that the campus desires. Finally, in version three of our cultural analysis (more holistically considers the entire culture; Carey, 2014), our labeling of students and campuses that need greater Tier II supports is a convenient means to assign a projected solution and to disregard the greater challenges within our segregated schools that manifest in concentrations of power and privilege (Gregory and Fergus, 2017). In fact, PBIS implementation is far easier in wealthy schools (Gray et al., 2017) which results in higher fidelity and less overall stress for teachers (Ross, Romer, & Horner, 2012). The system of categorizing interventions with new labels potentially obfuscates the persistent problem of racial disparity in discipline which must be faced in order to confront and counteract implicit bias (Carter et al., 2017).

### **Limitations**

In this study, I reviewed PBIS implementation through the perspectives of three campus administrators and one central office administrator together with supporting document and discourse analysis. While teachers are critical to the process of PBIS implementation, this study focused on initial planning and steps performed by administrators. No elementary administrators were interviewed which potentially limits the findings to the perspective of secondary administrators. The analysis did not include a detailed review of the PBIS materials such as the matrices and checklists for implementation, and instead considered the implementation process from a systems perspective. Finally, as this is a large urban district in Texas, findings may not be generalized to all school districts situated in differing contexts.

### **Recommendations**

Middleton ISD spent several years planning and implementing the shift from a zero tolerance discipline philosophy to a positive behavior philosophy. Beginning with a new strategic plan, they created action steps to implement changes in both discipline policy and practices. It is important to consider that the vast resources dedicated to their efforts contributed to the success of their implementation. Districts seeking replication of this effort should be prepared to

similarly dedicate staff time, funds for training, and an understanding of the extensive timeline for the lengthy transition process.

There are several implications for future research from this study. First, the district's continuing pursuit of data to represent PBIS success or failure deserves additional attention. Longitudinal data at the individual student level prior to and following PBIS implementation could potentially demonstrate the value of PBIS for students. Administrators also expressed a desire for more research specifically tied to secondary students. They felt the existing studies and popular techniques were most effective with younger students. Finally, Wright and colleagues (2014) posit that prior problem behavior accounts for the racial disparity in discipline data. If accurate, teachers may benefit from intensive focus on implicit bias during the early educational years, which could result in more positive outcomes for African American students in the long term.

### **Conclusion**

Middleton ISD conducted a successful implementation of PBIS Tier I supports, though disparities remain for African American students and students receiving special education services. After four years of implementation on all campuses, reorganization at the central office level potentially imperils continuing efforts, though PBIS practices are expected to continue with the addition of social emotional supports. The shift in discipline policy from zero tolerance to PBIS was most challenging on campuses with greater concentrations of poverty. The implementation took longer and required extensive administrator commitment and passion to maintain focus throughout the multi-year development process. After many years of federal and state guidance demonstrating the harmful effects of zero tolerance policies, the current Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, is considering rescinding federal guidance. Eleven State Attorney Generals resoundingly denounced this possibility in an open letter (Becerra et al., 2018). This removal threatens the continued public support for the lengthy implementation timeline needed to enact positive change. Ultimately, in order to truly address remaining discipline disparity, "we should *turn away* from [considering] the children [as problems] themselves, and look to the institutions that foreground their problems and to the adults positioned to help them" (Carey, 2014, p. 450).

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Appendix A  
Interview Protocol

Note: Interviews were open-ended and followed prompts as detailed below

1) What factors influenced the district's decision to enact discipline policy reform?

Did you participate in the early planning process prior to district selecting PBIS?  
Was a different approach considered?

What type of research/discussion took place prior to decision to enact reform?  
Who led the effort?

Did campus level admin and teachers know about the possible changes to the discipline policy in advance? Did they participate in the process?

Was this reform discussed on the campus level in advance? If so, with whom?

2) What was the original implementation plan?

Describe communication of change to PBIS?

What kind of training took place?

What other communication to staff took place?

Were all teachers trained or just a specific group?

If so, how were they chosen?

Are those teachers still here? Have all been trained by now? How are new teachers trained?

3) What have been challenges of implementing PBIS on campuses?

How did teachers respond to changes at outset/end of first year/today?

Describe first changes made at classroom and campus office level?

Did any teacher refuse at any point to follow guidelines?

Was there subtle or indirect resistance? (estimate % of acceptance)

What type of barriers existed in implementing PBIS?

Was it harder than expected? Why/why not?

4) How have differing stakeholders responded throughout implementation process?

Were parents made aware of the change at the beginning?

Did the change to PBIS affect how you communicate with parents?

Did you receive any feedback from parents about the policy change? From students?

Were there any other stakeholders involved in the reform?

5) How is the district continuing the implementation process?

Describe the district's level of involvement in the reform process?

How much support did you receive (training, specialists, data, \$, monitoring visits, etc.)?

Were any changes made to the policy after initial implementation? Describe.

Do you feel the same momentum to the project 3-4 years later?

What are your plans for continuing with the process?

Do you need additional resources to successfully implement PBIS?