The School Social Work Skill Set and Positive Behavior Support: A Good Match

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In many states, implementation of the broad framework of positive behavior support (PBS) or positive behavior intervention support (PBIS) has become a priority for school districts and state departments of education. With the recognition in the literature that school climate affects academics (Bandypadhyay, Cornell, & Konold, 2009; Dupper & Meyer-Adams, 2002; Stewart, 2008) and school attendance (Bandypadhyay et al., 2009; Nelson, Martella, & Marchand-Martella, 2002), in addition to the encouragement in legislation (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 [P.L. 108-446]) to adopt a response to intervention (RtI) approach that no longer waits for students to fail before intervening, schools have found that PBIS provides a comprehensive model for implementation of a continuum of interventions that result in better outcomes for students (Fairbanks, Simonsen, & Sugai, 2008; Frey, Lingo, & Nelson, 2008; Todd, Campbell, Meyer, & Horner, 2008). Frey et al. (2008) note, that "PBS is not an 'intervention,' and it does not replace what school social workers do in schools. Instead it is a set of problem-solving strategies and processes that can be used to build upon existing strengths" (p. 5). Although both PBIS and RtI are represented by a three-tiered triangle (a continuum of schoolwide, small-group, and individual services), RtI represents the broader concept that addresses both academics and behavior (tier 1 universal supports, tier 2 targeted group intervention, tier 3 intensive individual interventions), whereas PBIS provides a model for the continuum of services (primary, secondary, tertiary) that can be provided to address behavior. However, PBIS is not a manualized program, but a framework for the delivery of prevention and intervention services.

Efforts to train school personnel in PBIS begin with schoolwide PBIS (SWPBS) (for more information, go to http://www.pbis.org/). Although a recent national survey indicated that school social workers completing the survey spent a limited amount of time involved in schoolwide interventions (Kelly et al., 2010), it is hoped that school social workers are taking advantage of this opportunity to be trained and involved in implementation of SWPBS, which provides the foundation for secondary and tertiary interventions. This column does not address the primary prevention (PBIS) or tier 1 RtI in the continuum of services, but, rather, the secondary prevention PBIS/tier 2 RtI and the tertiary prevention PBIS/tier 3 RtI.

SECONDARY PREVENTION

Recognizing that implementation of PBIS involves a team in planning, implementation, and the data analysis process, school social workers can play a pivotal role as team members or team leaders. Intervention strategies occur across school settings, so the involvement of a team is essential to good student outcomes. School social workers possess the skills necessary to effectively implement PBIS at all three levels; in fact, secondary and tertiary prevention are the most common services provided by school social workers (Kelly et al., 2010). Secondary interventions are intended to provide support for students who are at risk for more serious problem behavior and need supports in addition to those provided in the universal or primary prevention tier (Fairbanks et al., 2008; Todd et al., 2008). Movement to secondary supports involves a slight increase in frequency and intensity of intervention (Fairbanks et al., 2008; Frey et al., 2008). Common secondary-level prevention

practices include assessing function of behavior, assessing potential environmental changes in the classroom, implementing evidence-based social skills interventions for small groups of students (all get the same intervention), documenting data during the intervention in collaboration with team members to ascertain its success, and reviewing student outcomes (Fairbanks et al., 2008; Todd et al., 2008). Skills used by school social workers at the secondary prevention level include collaborating with other school personnel, consulting with school personnel and family, observing in the classroom, collecting data, teaching and rehearsing social skills, conducting group interventions, setting measurable goals, tracking progress toward those goals, and involving family members in prevention strategies. Tools used include functional behavior assessments, behavior plans, rating scales, existing data (for example, office referrals, attendance), and reviews of fidelity of implementation and data use (Fairbanks et al., 2008; Todd et al., 2008). Most students will respond to primary and secondary prevention strategies and, at some point, no longer need them; however, a few students will require more intensive and highly individualized interventions and services (Fairbanks et al., 2008; Simonsen, Sugai, & Negron, 2008).

TERTIARY PREVENTION

Tertiary supports provide students who are displaying chronic behavior problems with not just primary and secondary interventions, but also more individualized strategies to address the behaviors (Fairbanks et al., 2008; Frey et al., 2008). In addition to the use of functional behavior assessment to develop an individualized behavior support plan with ongoing evaluation of outcomes (Fairbanks et al., 2008), this level draws on community resources for further essential supports (Frey et al., 2008). Movement to tertiary supports involves a significant increase in frequency and intensity of intervention for students with more chronic behavior issues (Frey et al., 2008). Data collected for at this level mirror those collected at the primary and secondary levels of support.

Common tertiary-level prevention practices include assessing function of behavior, assessing potential environmental changes in the classroom, implementing evidence-based interventions with individual students, documenting data during the intervention in collaboration with team members to ascertain its success, and reviewing student outcomes (Fairbanks et al., 2008). Skills used by school social workers at the tertiary prevention level include collaborating and consulting with other school personnel, observing, collecting data, collaborating with school personnel and family members, promoting consistency across all implementers, working one-on-one with students, teaching social skills, rehearsing social skills, setting measurable goals, tracking progress toward those goals, and involving family members in the prevention strategy. Tools used include functional behavior assessments, behavior plans, rating scales, and existing data (for example, office referrals, attendance) (Fairbanks et al., 2008). School social workers have expertise in mental health interventions that can be blended into PBIS strategies (Harrison & Harrison, 2009). In addition, school social workers are able to assess the type of intensive interventions needed and, at this point, provide consultative services to the team to determine if the student can respond and improve or if a referral for a special education evaluation is indicated (Harrison & Harrison, 2009).

EXISTING SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK SKILL SET

In these troubled economic times when positions are being cut, it is essential that school social workers, like other student services personnel, maximize efficient service provision and outcomes for students despite limited time and resources (McIntosh, Chard, Boland, & Horner, 2006; Sugai & Horner, 1999). School social workers already possess the skills needed to effectively implement PBIS. These skills include data collection, analysis, and interpretation; selection of evidence-based interventions; consultation; assessment, observation, and documentation; and community resource brokering. Our home–school–community linkage can enhance the effectiveness of PBIS prevention and intervention strategies that extend to home and community settings. PBIS is a natural fit for

the broad array of roles and services provided by school social workers. Frey et al. (2008) rightfully contended that

> PBS provides an approach to accomplish what school social workers have been attempting to do for decades, that is, effect change at both the organizational (school, district, program) and individual levels. ... Thus we are encouraging school social workers to adopt PBS as a framework through which to facilitate their existing services. (p. 12)

PBIS is a major undertaking for any school, but it is one worth taking. For this broad systemic approach to work, the entire staff must receive PBIS training, and 80 percent of personnel must agree to uphold the intent of the philosophy (Office of Special Education Programs Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2004). Taking an active role in the implementation of PBIS not only provides a framework for service delivery that is compatible with the host setting, but it increases the visibility of school social workers and the skills they bring to the process (Frey et al., 2008). The PBIS Web site (http://www.pbs.org) outlines what it takes to become a PBIS school. Also included on the Web site is research that supports the effect of PBIS. This is an invaluable resource for those who want to fully understand the investment that is needed and the resulting positive effect that PBIS can have on school climate, school culture, and academic learning. PBIS is a natural match with school social workers' skill set. **CS**

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