

A Citywide Effort to Roll Out Positive Behavior Support (PBS)

A Policy Brief from Public Citizens for Children and Youth

Most educators agree that learning cannot take place in a chaotic, disruptive environment. To improve behavior and climate not only at individual schools, but throughout Philadelphia's public school system, a citywide coalition met three years ago to develop a long-term, thoughtful plan to change school culture. This plan called for the implementation of a nationally recognized framework called Positive Behavior Support, which emphasizes whole school climate improvement as an alternative to punitive discipline approaches such as Zero Tolerance.

Implemented in more than 10,000 schools across the country and with documented results in rigorous national evaluations, PBS centers on six basic elements that include:

1. The entire school, including paraprofessional staff, agrees on 3-5 positively stated, simple rules which are prominently posted around the building and grounds.

2. The behavioral expectations for each rule are taught and reinforced in every location throughout the school year.

3. A system of rewards and consequences is developed to provide incentives to students for following the rules and disincentives for disobeying them.

4. Disruptive behaviors, documented through Office Disciplinary Referrals (ODRs), are reviewed by a school team which meets every few weeks to identify patterns and follow-up on resolutions, with the goal of preventing the incidents and thus decreasing the office referrals.

5. Data is used for decision-making.

6. Specialized intervention and support for students with chronic problem behavior is provided.

The Philadelphia PBS initiative kicked off in March 2009 with a national speaker and a pair of workshop sessions attended by 200 participants. Philadelphia's school leadership initially embraced the framework. But its first year of implementation in an introductory cohort of schools has been rocky and filled with unmet expectations.



The initiative (and at times, the District itself) underwent a series of changes in the eligibility of participating schools; in central and regional office leadership roles; in the implementation timeline; in outside funding; in its assumed lead role in climate support; and in the designation of coaches for schools on implementing PBS.

In spite of these setbacks, PCCY believes it is not too late to put PBS back on track. To do that and to assure that the program proceeds effectively, we encourage District leadership to address some fundamental issues:

We urge that:

1. The PBS Citywide Leadership Team, consisting of both District staff and external stakeholders interested in children's behavioral health and school climate, meet regularly to plan, address needs, troubleshoot, and monitor the progress of implementation.
2. The District clarify its clear commitment to following the essential elements of the model that has been developed, refined, tested and evaluated throughout the country to ensure fidelity of implementation.
3. Leadership and responsibility at the central, regional and school levels for PBS implementation be identified so that all parties know who is accountable for what.
4. Inside and outside groups and educators recognize that, no matter how common sense PBS appears, its adoption represents a huge challenge to most schools, particularly those that are underperforming academically.
5. Other discipline/climate/prevention/safety initiatives be implemented and aligned with PBS so that implementa-

tion can occur without duplicative leadership teams and assessments. The current myriad of initiatives and programs (e.g. CHAMPS, bullying prevention, CSAP, behavioral health liaisons, resource specialists, CADE, et al.), if not clearly differentiated may well dilute a school's focus on single-school culture, rendering PBS just another trinket on the tree.

6. PBS be reflected in school action plans and central office oversight of persistently low-performing Empowerment Schools. The role and expectations of PBS should be formalized in the documents and processes through which the Superintendent monitors progress in persistently low-performing schools, so that it will be taken seriously as a strategic priority.

As the District has taken steady steps in improving academic achievement and providing more supports for Philadelphia's public school students, it is our hope that the issues examined in this report can be addressed so that the 2010-11 school year can begin with a clear picture of how PBS will proceed and grow.

PBS History and Operation **2009-2010 SCHOOL YEAR**

"The most important activity for successful implementation and sustainability is the pre-planning efforts undertaken . . . Without careful attention paid to these planning stages, it is difficult to acquire and sustain long-term change across consecutive school years."
(www.pbis.org)

After the 2007 publication of PCCY's "Every School Should Have A Good Climate and Behavioral Health Supports," a group of behavioral health experts and education advocates met to discuss how to improve

climate and increase behavioral health supports in Philadelphia schools. They identified Positive Behavior Support – implemented in thousands of schools nationwide and gaining legislative support in a growing number of states – as the most promising method to improve climate and address chronic negative behavior in schools.

The group recruited about two dozen educators, behavioral health experts, and school and city officials to form the Philadelphia PBS City-Wide Leadership Team. Tasked with assisting Philadelphia on issues of PBS funding, visibility and political support, the team established as its first goal interesting School District officials in implementing PBS, with the hope that the District would agree to adopt the framework system-wide. Not only did top-level District officials take interest in a ten-year implementation plan introduced by the Leadership Team, the Superintendent suggested that the timeline be shortened to five years and include all schools in the District. In addition, PBS gained mention in the Superintendent's newly introduced strategic plan, *Imagine 2014*.

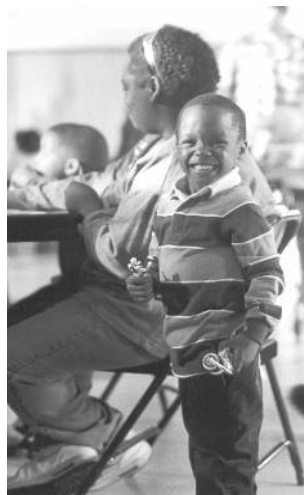
Armed with a number of reasons why PBS is best implemented and sustained when it has grassroots buy-in and when all parties are prepared to accept the responsibility of its implementation, the Leadership Team in March 2009 sponsored two days of information sessions targeting school and regional officials, as well as school leadership teams from interested elementary and middle schools. The schools hailed from the North, Northwest and Southwest Regions, where leadership or other community stakeholders expressed interest in PBS.

At the sessions, George Sugai, co-director of the U.S. Department of Education's Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions, presented a detailed description of the approach, while members of the Leadership

Team explained implementation requirements for the Philadelphia initiative, which would begin with a cohort of 20 schools.

The United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania committed to investing \$600,000 to support the effort and gradually implement PBS over a three-year period. The grant would fund consultant services from Devereux Center for Effective Schools and Arcadia University to be divided between coaching school teams and training District staff to assume this responsibility. The United Way grant required the District to provide matching funds in the form of in-house coaching staff.

As a result of their participation, the schools would receive training and technical assistance – to be provided by Devereux, which had worked in several schools in the selected North Philadelphia Region, and Arcadia, which had relationships in the selected Northwest Region. Another member of the Leadership Team from University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education – already working with a number of schools in the Southwest Region – offered to partner with Devereux in Southwest schools. Numerous schools applied for the cohort. Twenty were selected and visited by the technical consultants in May and June for assessment and baseline data. Then the real work was to begin.



Training

As the school year ended and summer approached, each school team made plans to become a PBS school – which called for two to three days of initial training on the

basic elements of PBS. A job description was posted for a region-based coach who would be hired to support four to six schools in his or her region throughout the school year.

The first training session for the school leadership teams took place in late June 2009 – with plans for one or two additional sessions prior to the opening of the 2009-10 school year. Reaction to the training was highly favorable among participants. However, the other training sessions did not take place. In fact, five months of the school year would pass before the school teams would meet again with PBS experts.

Meanwhile, the cohort schools found themselves part of a new district-wide mandate for all 274 District schools to implement “universal strategies and key elements of PBS.” In its widely distributed 2009-10 school year calendar, the District included Positive Behavior Supports among its “Focus Areas for All School Levels”: “Each school will have clearly defined student expectations, utilize discipline data, and consistently apply rewards/consequences.” The District designed and distributed to every school packets that were reviewed in a principal’s meeting at the start of the 2009-10 school year.

While pleased about interest in making PBS a district-wide initiative, the Leadership Team was concerned that there was inadequate attention being paid to the importance of PBS training and coaching. Much as they wanted widespread adoption of PBS, the reality was that many schools had little experience in the basic features of the PBS model: developing school-wide rules and

“To support school team implementation of school-wide PBS, an overt and maintained link is needed between training experiences and actual use of the PBS systems and practices. Coaching capacity refers to the system’s ability to organize personnel and resources for facilitating, assisting, maintaining, and adapting local school training implementation efforts.”
(www.pbis.org)

behavioral expectations; in having these expectations practiced in all parts of the building; in systematically designing a system of rewards and consequences; in analyzing and tracking data on Office Discipline Referrals; and in intervening in disruptive behaviors

before they escalated into safety problems.

The model nationally had impressed upon the team the need for potential schools to demonstrate both interest and readiness before taking on PBS implementation. Yet the criteria for cohort selection began to change as the District shifted the acceptance guidelines from schools which had “volunteered” to participate, to the volunteer schools minus Empowerment Schools (due to the weight of other initiatives being implemented in those schools), to a cohort that would be open to Empowerment Schools.

Although the final 20 schools selected for the cohort included five Empowerment Schools (one shown to not be ready for implementation was eventually removed from the cohort), all of the District’s 85 Empowerment Schools received some PBS services through District personnel, such as the Discipline Truancy Liaison and PBS Coordinator, based in the Office of School Operations.

The cohort schools received additional attention from Devereux, Arcadia, and to some extent, a member of the University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate School of Education.

While there were reasons for including these other schools into the PBS initiative, the changes brought increased uncertainty into the process.

Job Responsibilities

"It is our responsibility to identify the contextual setting events and environmental conditions that enable exhibition of appropriate behavior. We then must determine the means and systems to provide those resources." (www.pbis.org)

PBS calls for a number of individuals with specific job responsibilities – at the school, regional and central office levels. They include the school PBS leadership team; a group of school staffers that meets to examine positive and negative trends and discuss interventions and necessary supports; the PBS coach, who instructs the implementing schools in the region on how to read the data, identify trends and implement effective interventions; and the central office coordinator, who would oversee the work of the regions and coordinate a seamless system of support for the schools.

A job description was developed and approved for PBS coaches, but just before interviews were to be held for prospective PBS coaches, the job posting was withdrawn and the responsibility for supporting the 20 schools in the first cohort was assigned to the Discipline and Truancy Liaisons (DTLs) who were based in the regional offices. To secure matching funds for a \$200,000 per year PBS grant from the United Way, the District initially assigned these liaisons to dedicate 60% of their time to coaching schools on PBS.

The Leadership Team and funders, however, were concerned about the new position's

focus on negative actions (discipline and truancy rather than Positive Behavior Support) and that the Liaisons would not have the necessary time to devote to working on PBS within the schools in their regions. But the District had already made its decision.

Nevertheless, two of the regional DTLs showed great interest in PBS and seemed to work enthusiastically on balancing their punitive and non-punitive duties. However, in one region, the DTL position went through numerous changes, resulting in almost no PBS training and interaction with schools in that region until late in the school year. At the school level, early on, schools had trouble meeting as a PBS team due to other school pressures, particularly "walk-throughs" that consumed regional staff and at times coincided with the times of the PBS leadership meetings.

To address the United Way's increasing concern about the District's commitment to coaching, in the middle of the year Devereux proposed that each Cohort I school designate an internal coach whom Devereux and Arcadia University would train so that the Discipline Truancy Liaisons would not have all the responsibility for coaching support. One internal coach (e.g., counselor, dean, school-based teacher leader) was identified from each school by the principal.



PCCY
1709 Benjamin Franklin
Parkway, 6th Floor
Philadelphia, Pa 19103
215-563-5848
www.pccy.org

Devereux met with the internal coaches from North region PBS schools (Bethune, Cleveland, Feltonville Arts & Sciences, Feltonville Intermediate, Finletter, Lowell, and Grover Washington) and from South-west region PBS schools (Anderson, Lea, Morton, Patterson, and Wilson), while Arcadia University's BBEST Program met with the internal coaches from Northwest region PBS schools (Howe, Wister, Pennell, Kinsey, Houston, Emlen and AB Day), providing both direct coaching of Discipline Truancy Liaisons and capacity building for internal coaches. Three-hour monthly meetings took place at regional offices in February, March, April, May and June, in which training and support were provided to plan universal systems. School coaches were expected to take back the information to their schools and new monthly action plans were developed at each meeting.

Around the same time, the Chief of School Operations, who co-convened the Leadership Team with PCCY's education director, received a promotion and was replaced by a Regional Superintendent unfamiliar with PBS, who then hired as his special assistant the staffer in the Office of Climate and Safety who had been the lead person in the central office on PBS implementation. Her new responsibilities made it impossible for her to maintain the high level of engagement she had previously and a successor in her former job was not named for several months.

Meanwhile, convening of Leadership Team meetings was transferred from PCCY to the School District, in a promising show of commitment from the District. The Leadership Team – consisting of key District staff and external stakeholders – intended to meet quarterly or semi-annually to monitor implementation and advocate for the necessary support to ensure implementation with fidelity. An executive committee would be created to meet more frequently for troubleshooting.

However, the Leadership Team was called together to meet only once during the entire 2009-10 school year. The Executive Committee was never formed. In the spring of 2010, the United Way withdrew its investment for years 2 and 3 (\$400,000 total).

At its one Citywide Leadership Team meeting in May 2010, the Chief of School Operations proposed that a series of work teams be convened to address how the program would move forward given the changed circumstances, but no further follow-up was provided to the Leadership Team.

Meanwhile, at the school level, PBS has won some favorable reviews – based on the responses of six of the 19 cohort schools (about 30 percent) to a PCCY survey on their PBS experience. One hundred percent of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their PBS training was “useful and informative.” They logged high marks as well for the priority status of PBS in their schools; the level of support provided by the principal; and improved climate, behavior and discipline in their schools due to PBS.

Respondents were less favorable about having adequate time for the PBS Leadership Team to do its job (29 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed), and adequate support from the Regional and Central offices to implement it (29 percent disagreed).

One hundred percent of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed their school should continue with the initiative, and would recommend its participation to other schools.

However, as of August 2010, no plan is in place for selecting additional schools for coaching support, training, DTLs and internal coaches.

Is the District Committed?

"There is nothing magical or innovative about PBS. It is a common-sense approach – no bells and whistles, just back to the basics that have existed in effective schools for as long as anyone can remember."

– Arlene Ackerman,
School District of Philadelphia

From appearances, the District has invested some time and resources in a future for PBS in Philadelphia schools. For example, a District staffer announced in the most recent PBS meeting plans for the District to create its own data system for analyzing Office Discipline Referrals. The 2009-2010 school year did start with references to Positive Behavior Support not only in such broadly-distributed documents as the school calendar, but also a more reader-friendly Code of Conduct, whose new language reflects some PBS teachings. Instead of a list of negatively worded rules for students, it lists "Responsibilities for Everyone: Maintain the school climate while on campus by being Responsible, Respectful, Cooperative"; "Be aware of and clearly communicate the expectations for students and staff"; "Motivate students to follow the expectations through positive reinforcement."

This Code also "establishes a zero tolerance policy" – a policy which has been dismissed by many child psychologists as the opposite of a thoughtful and personalized approach to correcting and teaching behavior. However the Code's references listed above – the three expectations for "Everyone" and urging of behavior through "positive reinforcement," does reflect an intention to heed elements of Positive Behavior Support.

In the complex world of public schools and improving both school climate and student achievement, there are many moving parts which sometimes appear to contradict or cancel each other out. The story of adopting and implementing PBS in this last year reminds us of this phenomenon. But the School District has embraced many of the requisite elements and the Commonwealth itself passed a resolution in support of PBS as a framework for Pennsylvania schools. As the next chapter is written, and with commitment and broader understanding, the School District of Philadelphia can become a model in adopting this framework for a large, urban school system.

As the District has taken steady steps in improving academic achievement and providing more supports for the students of the city, it is our hope that the issues examined in this report can be addressed so the 2010-11 school year can begin with a clear picture of how PBS will proceed and grow.



*We can do this.
We can make the difference.*

About PCCY: Founded in 1980, Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY) serves as the region's leading child advocacy organization and works to improve the lives and life chances of its children. Through thoughtful and informed advocacy, community education, targeted service projects and budget analysis, PCCY seeks to watch out and speak out for children and families.



Tel: 215-563-5848
Fax: 215-563-9442
www.pccy.org

Seven Benjamin Franklin Parkway
Sixth Floor
Philadelphia, Pa 19103

PCCY undertakes specific and focused projects in areas affecting the healthy growth and development of children, including child care, public education, child health, juvenile justice and child welfare.

Project Staff: Shelly D. Yanoff, Executive Director; Sheila Simmons, Education Director; Debra Weiner, Education Specialist, Sid Holmes, Communications Director; Steven E. Fynes, Design and Layout