Department of Research and Evaluation
AUSTIN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

## Positive Behavior Support:2010–2011 SUMMARY RESEARCH BRIEF

June, 2011

Program Description

Positive Behavior Support (PBS) is a systems approach to the prevention of problem behavior and the improvement of student academic performance. Working with Austin Independent School District (AISD) PBS specialists, campus staff use data to problem-solve campus behavior issues and monitor the impact of intervention strategies. Strategies range from universal interventions, implemented across all students, staff, and settings, to intensive interventions for students with high needs. This research brief describes campus participation in PBS since 2003–2004, when it was first piloted by AISD. It also presents results from 2010–2011 end-of-year surveys, in which administrators and staff at PBS campuses shared their perspectives on the implementation and effects of PBS.

Implementation of PBS

PBS was piloted at three AISD middle schools in the spring semester of the 2003–2004 school year and implemented with district support at 16 campuses in 2004–2005. During the 2004–2005 year, implementation at the six elementary schools, nine middle schools, and one high school focused on implementation of the schoolwide PBS system. The 2004–2005 evaluation report (Christian, McCracken, & De La Ronde, 2006) concluded that during the year, campus teams, behavioral expectations, and systems for reinforcing expected behaviors had been established at most PBS schools. The evaluation report included recommendations that the district increase the number of PBS specialists serving campuses as external coaches, shift to a train-the-trainer model, and establish demonstration sites within the district.

The Austin Community Collaboration to Enhance Student Success (ACCESS) initiative, a Safe Schools Healthy Students grant awarded to AISD in 2007, provided increased staff and capacity to support more campuses in PBS implementation. By the end of 2007–2008, the district PBS program was in place at 39 elementary schools, 10 middle schools, 5 high schools, and 2 alternative schools (i.e., 50% of the district's 113 campuses). Recommendations in the 2007–2008 evaluation report included assessing PBS implementation quarterly, offering refresher
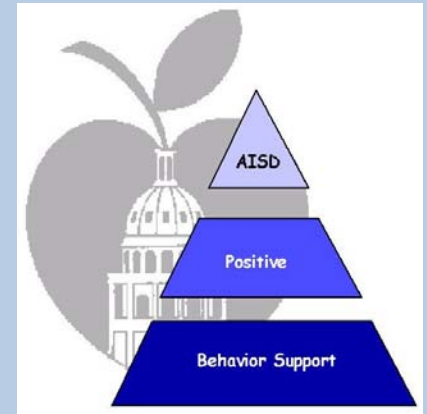
OVERVIEW

The AISD PBS program improved student behavior and the learning environment through school-wide and classroom behavior management structures and individualized student interventions. In Fall 2011, PBS was implemented at 83 campuses, with support from a district team of 15 PBS specialists, a technical assistance facilitator, and a program coordinator.

Highlights

- ✓ *More than 80% of responding administrators at PBS campuses agreed that PBS was an effective use of campus resources.*

- ✓ *More than 70% of responding administrators and staff at PBS campuses agreed that PBS improved student behavior in common areas and classrooms.*

- ✓ *PBS schoolwide system implementation was positively related to perceptions of improved student behavior in common areas.*

- ✓ *More than 55% of responding administrators and staff at PBS campuses agreed that PBS improved services for student with intensive needs.*

- ✓ *Campus PBS team members reported that PBS required a high level of staff buy-in and consistency in order to be effectively implemented.*

- ✓ *During the 7 years of the district PBS program, levels of PBS implementation within campuses fluctuated from year to year. Across campuses, on average, implementation levels remained relatively low, in the planning/training stage to the beginning stage.*

training sessions for campus staff, and providing additional training for district PBS specialists (Basu, LaTurner, & Christian, 2009).

During 2008–2009, five additional elementary schools joined the district PBS program. On average, the elementary and middle schools ended the year in the beginning stage of PBS implementation. At high schools, on average, PBS was in the planning/training stage. Outcome analyses found evidence that improvement in school climate and discipline from 2008–2009 to 2009–2010 was greater at PBS campuses than at non-PBS campuses. Report recommendations included making training available to campus staff throughout the year, reviewing implementation structures for high schools, and expanding PBS efforts to support the achievement of longer-term outcomes.

The school year 2009–2010 brought 20 new campuses into the district PBS program. As the 2009–2010 school year ended, 15 PBS specialists were working at 80 AISD campuses to implement the program. On average, at the end of 2009–2010, implementation was at the beginning stage in elementary and middle schools and at the planning/training stage in high schools. When district support for PBS ended in December 2010, results of the 2009–2010 evaluation were discussed in terms of their implications for future district initiatives: (a) the importance of early identification of campus needs and implementation obstacles; (b) the key role of classroom support systems; and (c) the need to take into account variation among participating campuses, as well as systematic differences between campuses that participate and campuses that do not participate (Johnson & Christian, 2011).

During the 2010–2011 school year, PBS was implemented with district support only during the fall semester. Beginning in January, PBS specialists were called back from campuses to assist in the district-level development and planning for Child Study Teams to be implemented in 2011–2012. Some campus teams elected to continue implementing PBS without district support. However, the level of implementation achieved in the final year was unclear because no measurements were obtained.

During the 7 years of the district PBS program, levels of implementation and the degree to which campuses worked with the district PBS team fluctuated. In addition, some campuses carried out their own PBS initiatives independent of the district program. At times, campuses undergoing major changes suspended implementation for a year; for example, PBS at Johnston High School was temporarily suspended when the school was reconstituted into Eastside Memorial Global Tech and Eastside Memorial Green Tech. Administration and staff changes also contributed to fluctuations across the years in PBS implementation.

Campus Administrators' and Staff Members' Perspectives on PBS

At the end of 2010–2011, administrators and staff at PBS campuses were asked to share their perspectives on PBS implementation and outcomes through two online surveys. Participants rated the degree to which they felt PBS met campus needs and had a positive impact on students at their campuses. They were asked to rate and give feedback about the support their campus received from the district PBS team. Support included the work of the PBS specialists, a district-wide summer refresher training, and a district conference in the fall. The PBS specialists, working in teams of three, trained administrators and staff to implement PBS practices and worked with campus PBS teams to set goals, plan interventions, and monitor change. In addition to building campus PBS capacity, PBS specialists also

responded to administrators' and teachers' requests for individualized help; for example, they managed classroom behavior, problem-solved to improve the behavior of individual students or small groups of students, and coordinated services for students with intensive needs.

CAMPUS ADMINISTRATORS' AND STAFF MEMBERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PBS

Administrators and staff at PBS campuses shared their perspectives about PBS implementation and its impact on students through the annual AISD Employee Coordinated Survey (ECS), conducted online by the Department of Program Evaluation in May 2011. All administrators and a representative sample of staff were invited to participate in the survey. A total of 99 administrators (45% of those invited) and 2,234 campus staff (56% of those invited) at PBS campuses responded. Although all those invited worked at campuses participating in the district PBS program, not all respondents identified their campus as such. The analysis sample consisted of 87 administrators and 1,283 campus staff who answered yes to the statement *Our school implemented the PBS program this year.*

The survey participants were asked to rate statements about PBS implementation, leadership and support, and the impact of PBS on student behavior and support services for students with intensive needs, using a 4-point scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*. Of the three survey items related to PBS implementation, on average, administrators' ratings were between *agree* and *strongly agree*. Staff members' ratings of these items, on average, tended to be slightly lower (Table 1).

Table 1. Administrators' and Staff Members' Perceptions of Positive Behavior Support Implementation

	Number	Average rating	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I feel confident that I understand the goals of PBS on my campus.						
Campus administrators	84	3.43	48.8%	46.4%	3.6%	1.2%
Campus staff	1350	3.19	32.2%	57.4%	7.7%	2.7%
PBS was a good fit for my campus this year.						
Campus administrators	86	3.38	47.7%	44.2%	7.0%	1.2%
Campus staff	1363	2.93	23.1%	52.2%	19.2%	5.6%
PBS was an effective use of campus resources this year.						
Campus administrators	84	3.23	44.1%	38.1%	14.3%	3.6%
Campus staff	1363	2.93	20.3%	46.8%	25.0%	8.0%

Source. AISD Employee Coordinated Survey 2010–2011, Department of Program Evaluation
Note. All items were rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*. Percentages may not sum to exactly 100 because of rounding.

The item to which both administrators and staff were least likely to agree was *PBS was an effective use of campus resources this year;* 18% of administrators and 33% of staff either disagreed or strongly disagreed. Although this item received the lowest ratings, compared with ratings for other survey items, 82% of administrators and 67% of staff agreed or strongly agreed that PBS was an effective use of campus resources.

Two survey items assessed perceptions of the quality of the support received for PBS implementation. Administrators, on average, agreed that their campus PBS team received effective support from district PBS specialists (referred to as district PBS coaches by campus staff), although almost a quarter of respondents did not agree (Table 2). Campus staff members' ratings of support from campus and district PBS leadership had a similar pattern. Ratings may have been influenced by the transition period that PBS entered in January 2011, which led to the cessation of PBS specialists' work with campuses. Despite this, 36% of administrators and 16% of staff strongly agreed that support was effective. Results suggest that campus staff members' experiences with district PBS specialists and support for PBS by campus leadership varied considerably between the campuses. Analyses of responses from a separate survey of campus PBS team members, reported in the following section, explore this issue further.

Table 2. Administrators' and Staff Members' Perceptions of Positive Behavior Support Leadership and Support

	Number	Average rating	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Administrators: Our campus's PBS team received effective support from district PBS coaches this year.	83	3.05	36.1%	39.8%	16.9%	7.2%
Staff: I received effective support for improving student behavior from campus and district PBS leadership this year.	1341	2.78	15.7%	53.4%	24.2%	6.7%

Source. AISD Employee Coordinated Survey 2010–2011, Department of Program Evaluation
Note. All items were rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*. Percentages may not sum to exactly 100 because of rounding.

Administrators and staff were asked whether PBS improved support services for students with intensive needs and whether PBS improved student behavior in common areas and classrooms.[1] Overall, administrators tended to view the impact of PBS more positively than did campus staff (Table 3). Although nearly all administrators (94%) agreed or strongly agreed that PBS improved students' behavior in common areas during 2010–2011, a smaller majority (71%) of staff did so.

Similarly, 89% of administrators agreed or strongly agreed that PBS improved students' behavior in classrooms, compared with 71% of staff. Administrators' and staff members' perceptions of services for students with intensive needs were more closely aligned, with 61% of administrators and 56% of staff agreeing that PBS improved services for students with intensive needs.

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[1] Teachers were asked to rate the impact on their own classroom, and administrators were asked to rate the impact on classrooms in the school.

Table 3. Administrators' and Staff Members' Perceptions of Positive Behavior Support Impact

	Number	Average rating	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
PBS improved student behavior in common areas at my campus this year.						
Campus administrators	85	3.31	37.7%	56.5%	4.7%	1.2%
Campus staff	1307	2.79	16.5%	54.9%	19.8%	8.7%
PBS improved student behavior in classrooms this year.*						
Campus administrators	83	3.17	28.9%	60.2%	9.6%	1.2%
Campus staff	1171	2.80	17.3%	54.1%	19.6%	9.1%
PBS improved support services for students with intensive needs this year.						
Campus administrators	79	2.65	12.7%	48.1%	30.4%	8.9%
Campus staff	1251	2.54	9.5%	46.7%	32.1%	11.8%

Source. AISD Employee Coordinated Survey 2010–2011, Department of Program Evaluation
Note. All items were rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*. Percentages may not sum to exactly 100 because of rounding.
*Administrators were asked about behavior in "classrooms at my school" and staff were asked about behavior "in my classroom."

CAMPUS PBS TEAMS' PERSPECTIVES

A sample of PBS campus team members were asked to share their thoughts on PBS in more detail through an online survey that included five open-ended questions. Responses were obtained from 45 staff who were members of their campus PBS team during 2010–2011, 35 of whom (78%) were the internal coach. Responses were obtained from campus team members at 51% of campuses where PBS was implemented in 2010–2011, including 31 of 56 PBS elementary schools, 8 of 17 PBS middle schools, 1 of 6 PBS high schools, and 1 of 2 PBS alternative schools.

Table 4. Campus Positive Behavior Support Teams' Perceptions of PBS Impact

	Number	Average rating	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
PBS had a positive impact on student behavior at my campus.	45	3.42	48.9%	44.4%	6.7%	0
PBS had a positive impact on student achievement at my campus.	44	3.30	43.2%	43.2%	13.6%	0

Source. PBS Campus Team Survey 2010–2011, Department of Program Evaluation
Note. Items were rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*.

A large majority of the responding campus team members felt that PBS had a positive impact on students' behavior, and almost half of the respondents strongly agreed that it did (Table 4). Ratings of the impact of PBS on achievement were only slightly lower, with 86% of respondents either agreeing or strongly agreeing that PBS had a positive impact on students' achievement at their campus.

Campus PBS team members were asked five open-ended questions to capture their perspectives on strengthes and weaknesses of PBS and a question soliciting general comments. The first

open-ended question was "What aspects of PBS were a good fit for your campus?" This question was answered by 44 survey respondents. Most frequently, respondents mentioned consistent schoolwide expectations (57%). Second most frequently, respondents said the focus on changing students' behavior was a good fit (23%). Third most frequently, respondents mentioned the PBS specialist as a good fit for their campus (14%).

The second open-ended question, "What aspects of PBS were not a good fit for your campus?" was answered by 35 survey respondents. Most frequently, respondents replied that nothing about PBS was not a good fit for their campus (31%). Other respondents, though, described (lack of) buy-in by campus staff (17%), and relatedly, the difficulty of achieving consistency throughout the campus (9%). Three comments were made about the services from PBS specialists: (a) having too many contacts, (b) changes in people from year to year, and (c) ineffective student observations. Two respondents said that the changes made in the Campus Assessment and Planning Tool (CAPT) were not useful.

Issues that were raised by only one respondent varied greatly in their content, illustrating ways in which campus needs varied. For example, a respondent from a middle school wrote that less focus should be given to posting expectations and more should be given to "support for teachers implementing PBS strategies." In contrast, a respondent from a different middle school wrote that teachers "already have pretty good behavior management" in their classrooms and that their campuses "needed more help with campus-wide expectations." A teacher from an elementary school noted yet a different area of need: "At our campus we struggle with extreme behaviors, those tier 3 behaviors, and we have yet to find a good solution to deescalating these behaviors."

The third open-ended question, "What facilitated or hindered implementation at your campus?" was answered by 51 survey respondents. Most frequently, respondents mentioned inconsistency or lack of follow-through (14%) as a hindrance. Other comments about hindrances were similar but reflected a unique perspective (e.g., specific individuals who did not support PBS implementation). Comments on hindrances made by only one respondent included a lack of funding for student rewards, a lack of help with campus expectations, and too many PBS specialists working with the campus. Respondent descriptions of facilitators also spoke to the importance of staff buy-in and consistency (8%) and the key role that campus administrators, the campus PBS team, and the internal and external coaches played in building schoolwide support. One respondent explained, "Our principal [was] wonderful in requiring teams to work together and decide on team protocols, which helped teachers who weren't excited about the system."

Forty-three survey participants responded to a question about the ways that district PBS specialists worked with their campus. Respondents described assistance with staff meetings (47%); problem-solving, classroom strategies, and behavior plans (36%); campus goals and plans (26%); campus observations (26%); training and resources (23%); and using data and evaluating progress (14%). Other ways PBS specialists worked with campuses that were mentioned less frequently included encouragement, communication with teachers and campus administration, and updates on PBS. Generally positive comments about coaches were made by 28% of respondents; negative comments focused on a lack of contact and were made by 7% of respondents.

In response to a question probing for any other comments about PBS, 33 survey respondents expressed additional thoughts. Of these, 25 made positive comments about PBS, five made suggestions for changes, and two made negative comments. The suggestions for changes were (a) more training on PBS strategies, (b) more support for challenging students and classes, (c) a curriculum to teach social skills, (d) more customization to address campus needs, and (e) less time away from campus doing craft-like activities. Examples of comments from staff at elementary and middle school team members included the following:

> "The PBS experience help[ed] me be more successful managing classroom behavior and made me like myself better as a teacher. I became more positive and instructional time more productive." (Elementary school staff member)

> "It has taught all of us how to create positive classroom environments and to have a common framework and philosophy to run our campus. We all believe that there is a purpose to behavior and do not look at punishment as an option." (Elementary school staff member)

> "I believe the data piece was the focus and not the actual strategies." (Middle school staff member)

> "I believe that PBS is a very good program for our students. It helps our teachers help our students focus on every subject lesson." (Middle school staff member)

Two themes were echoed across the five open-ended questions: (a) the importance of staff's buy-in and consistency and (b) capacity building by PBS specialists. Consistency is fundamental to the foundation of PBS and includes a culture of common goals, consistent expectations and reward systems across settings and staff, and follow-through on data-based decision making. Many survey respondents wrote about the importance of consistency and the need to have staff's buy-in to achieve consistency. In some cases, PBS was described as increasing unity among campus staff. In other cases, the need for consistency was cited as an obstacle that made PBS a poor fit for the campus. PBS was credited as increasing "collaboration and sharing of ideas" by a respondent who also said "teachers not participating 100%" was an obstacle to implementation. Other respondents described the need for a very high level of staff support:

> "As a whole, our campus loved PBS and was always willing to try new strategies to support good behavior on campus. We did encounter a staff member who did not always want to comply with what the entire campus was supporting. This made some aspects of PBS difficult to implement, as it set the tone of 'not everyone has to be held accountable.'" (Elementary school staff member)

> "Teacher buy-in is very important. We had to have full staff support for our systems to work." (Elementary school staff member)

A study of barriers and enablers of implementation of PBS by Bambara, Nonnemacher, and Kern (2009) found that a shared understanding of PBS by all members of a school community was "the most pervasive theme" that emerged from interviews with 25 experienced PBS classroom teachers, school administrators, parents, and facilitators (p. 167). Obstacles to a shared understanding were a lack of information about PBS, and beliefs and practices that conflicted with PBS principles. Responses from the

AISD campus team members illustrated the conflict that sometimes arose when striving for consistency in classroom practices:

> "Moving PBS into the classroom became more difficult….if the expectation seemed to impede on personal opinions or classroom structures, faculty [were] less willing to participate." (Elementary school staff member)

Campus leadership was identified by some respondents as critical to creating the conditions necessary for staff buy-in:

> "Many teachers at my school think PBS is one more thing they have to do, rather than a critical way to help make students more successful and their lives easier! Though administrators are supportive of PBS, they do [not] openly show support thus I think the faculty does not value it as much." (Middle school staff member)

A secondary theme that emerged less clearly was the function of the professional development resources that PBS specialists brought to campuses. Respondents who mentioned the training and resources contributed by PBS specialists noted that they were needed and valued. However, respondents at some campuses indicated a continuing need for this support, while others described enough campus capacity to move forward with PBS implementation independently. One respondent noted that "independent observers and data collection [are] so helpful, we need more of this." This contrasted with the statement of a respondent who described a more self-sufficient campus team: "We were self-directed and called upon PBS when we needed someone from the outside to share resources."

Further investigation of the pathways that campuses took to implement PBS could help other district initiatives that have similar campus implementation structures. Campuses did not move in a straight line toward higher level and more independent PBS implementation. At a campus that began PBS in 2009–2010, the PBS internal coach noted that the PBS specialist helped her "stay focused at meetings, set up or lead staff trainings, [and] helped communication among teachers and administrators." She also expressed a "fear that without [PBS specialists] PBS will start to disappear." The initial dependence on district specialists did not necessarily diminish over time. An internal coach at a campus that first participated in PBS in 2007–2008 said that implementation this year was hindered by a lack of "support or guidelines for this past year on expectations and way(s) to improve our campus." Other campuses successfully developed the capacity to independently implement PBS. A respondent at a campus that began PBS in 2007–2008 praised the PBS specialist, "who provided consistent support and resources available to assist teachers and students." According to this internal coach, "PBS has been a very rewarding and positive experience and our campus has agreed to continue on with our PBS efforts regardless of funding."

PBS Implementation and Perceived Effects on Students' Behavior

The relationship between PBS implementation in October 2010 and administrators' and staff members' perceptions of the impact of PBS on students' behavior was investigated by computing correlations between PBS system scores on the AISD Benchmark Tool and staff members' and administrators' ratings from the May 2011 online surveys. A statistically significant relationship was found between Benchmark scores for the PBS schoolwide system and both administrators' and staff members' perceptions that PBS improved students' behavior in common areas at their school during

2010–2011. The better the implementation of the PBS schoolwide system, the more likely administrators and staff were to agree that PBS had improved students' behavior. Little support was found, however, for a relationship between classroom implementation and perceptions of impact on classroom behavior. Benchmark scores for the PBS classroom system were uncorrelated with administrators' ratings, and only marginally related to staff members' ratings of the effect of PBS on students' behavior in their classrooms.

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