

# Perceptions of Implementing Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports in High-Need School Contexts Through the Voice of Local Stakeholders

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**Abstract:** Positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) is an evidence-based framework for preventing and treating challenging behavior in schools and improving overall school climate. The efficacy of this positive, proactive framework has been well established across varying school settings, yet little is known about schoolwide PBIS implementation and sustainability in high-need school contexts. This qualitative study investigated perceptions of the barriers and facilitators to implementing and sustaining PBIS in high-need schools from the perspectives of four stakeholders. A semistructured focus group was conducted with stakeholders from high-need schools with experience in implementing PBIS. Four key categories were identified: (a) perceptions of PBIS outcomes, (b) challenges, (c) additional supports, and (d) suggestions for improving PBIS in high-need schools. Practical implications and next steps are discussed.

Positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) is a prevention framework for establishing positive school climate and student behaviors (Bradshaw, Koth, Bevans, Ialongo, & Leaf, 2008; Simonsen et al., 2012). The framework provides a proactive system for promoting students' success in schools by employing a multitiered continuum of support with evidence-based behavior interventions for all students (Fallon, O'Keeffe, Gage, & Sugai, 2015).

## Implementing and Sustaining Tier 1 PBIS in High-Need School Settings

The effectiveness of PBIS in a decrease of students' negative outcomes such as expulsions, office discipline referrals (ODRs), and suspensions has been reported in an extensive body of research (Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010; Simonsen et al., 2012; Simonsen, Sugai, & Negron, 2008). Therefore, over the past decade a rapidly increasing number of schools in the United States have adopted PBIS. As of 2014, approximately 20,000 schools across states have reported that they have received training and assistance from The Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports and have implemented PBIS (Horner, 2014; see also [www.pbis.org](http://www.pbis.org)).

The schoolwide approach is implemented in three tiers, including universal schoolwide, targeted, and intensive individual interventions. Tier 1, the universal schoolwide level, is to support all students schoolwide and prevent the development of problem behaviors. For the approximately 15% of students for whom universal intervention is not beneficial, targeted interventions at Tier 2 are provided with small groups or individual interventions. Tier 3 interventions focus on students with chronic and serious behavior problems, providing intensive, individualized interventions such as a behavior intervention plan or a wraparound approach (Horner & Sugai, 2015; Kerr & Nelson, 2009).

Among the three tiers of PBIS, the universal intervention has produced the broadest impact on school contexts and students as it requires a significant number of staff and targets all student populations (Lohrmann,

Forman, Martin, & Palmieri, 2008). Because it focuses on supporting all students, the universal intervention is mainly intended to prevent problem behaviors across the school by establishing and instructing schoolwide behavior expectations (Lohrmann et al., 2008; Horner & Sugai, 2015). To implement the universal level (schoolwide PBIS; SWPBIS) of PBIS with high fidelity, there are several general features involving the following.

- SWPBIS is implemented by an established PBIS team within the school.
- The team typically consists of eight to 12 staff, administrators, teachers, representative parents, and students whose roles are related to planning and implementation of SWPBIS and data-based decision making.
- Among the team, one or two members (typically the school psychologist or counselor) serves as the team coach to provide on-site support to their team;
- The team establishes three to five positively stated schoolwide expectations, as well as a concrete reward system for students.
- The entire school presents a cohesive approach to providing a positive school climate and a consistently implemented consequence system while the administration and PBIS team collect and analyze behavior data on a regular basis as part of a data-based, problem-solving approach to reduce discipline incidences and improve school climate.

A recent study by Farkas and colleagues (2012) supported the effectiveness of Tier 1 implementation. They implemented the Tier 1 intervention of PBIS, SWPBIS, in an alternative school setting to support students in grades 5–12 who have an emotional disturbance or otherwise are health impaired. As the Tier 1 intervention was schoolwide, all staff involved in the school (i.e., teachers, social workers, administrators, and psychologists) and all students participated in the program. Through the implementation with fidelity ensured, they found that Tier 1 intervention was effective to promote students' appropriate behaviors

and to decrease the number of ODRs. Additionally, the staff and students reported that implementation of Tier 1 intervention was socially and contextually valid and met the needs of their educational settings.

While there are a significant number of schools implementing SWPBIS across the country, there is a scarcity of research investigating not only the effectiveness of SWPBIS, but also its challenges and applicability in underserved, high-need educational contexts such as high-poverty school settings. Socioeconomic status is one of the many important cultural factors that influence one's quality of life. Students living in economically disadvantaged environments are at an inflated risk for failure in school (Piotrkowski, Botsko, & Matthews, 2001). These failures are frequently related to consistent behavior problems and poor academic performances (Turnbull et al., 2002), and schools in high-poverty areas also experience challenges in efficiently supporting the high number of students with problems (Lassen et al., 2006). Supporting children and school districts in such high-need areas is, thus, a critical task for practitioners and researchers.

A paucity of research exists examining the effectiveness of schoolwide PBIS in high-need schools to help overall school climate and students' social, emotional, and behavior development (Lassen, Steele, & Sailor, 2006; McCurdy, Mannella, & Eldridge, 2003). Lassen and his colleagues (2006) conducted PBIS involving multiple schools in urban areas that were characterized by many high-risk factors such as poverty. They incrementally provided tiered interventions to benefit all students over three years, and the results revealed that there were significant reductions in the number of ODRs and suspensions per student, indicating a decrease in students' problem behaviors. Implementation of PBIS and the decrease in such negative student outcomes might also suggest the improvement of the school climate and functioning, as the administrative time taken to process each ODR was promptly reduced and could be used more proactively through endeavors such as teacher training. Moreover, students' academic performance in math and reading on standardized tests was also improved with PBIS. These results suggest that PBIS is an effective framework for high-need schools in improving school climate, reducing discipline, and improving academics through increased time spent in instruction. Given the complexities of high-need schools (e.g., high student transiency rate, teacher turnover, limited budget, and home/community variables), additional information is needed to guide the planning, training, and coaching efforts needed to implement PBIS in high-need schools. Although the aforementioned research regarding PBIS in various settings illuminates important findings, a paucity of research regarding PBIS in high-need settings exists. Given such, further research is warranted that could address effectiveness of PBIS in high-need settings; adaptations needed to training, coaching, and implementation; and cultural responsiveness of PBIS in an effort to address the documented gap in the literature.

This study aimed to qualitatively explore the perceptions of schoolwide PBIS (SWPBIS) in high-need contexts from various types of education professionals involved with

implementation (i.e., teacher, assistant principal, school psychologist, and school counselor). The purpose of this study was to identify challenges, outcomes, and needs specific to implementing SWPBIS in high-need schools. As there are limited studies on examining challenges or feasibility of Tier 1 implementation across diverse educational contexts, the current research focusing on immediate stakeholders' perceptions of the implementations of SWPBIS in high-need contexts enhances the efficacy of PBIS and strengthens its extant validation. Specifically, by gaining an understanding of how to adapt planning, training, and ongoing coaching and by modifying schoolwide implementation in these unique school settings, SWPBIS can be implemented and sustained with efficacy, improving student and school outcomes. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How was effectiveness of SWPBIS implementation perceived by stakeholders in high-need schools from one school district?
2. How did stakeholders describe barriers to SWPBIS implementation in high-need schools?
3. What, if any, modifications to typical SWPBIS implementation may be necessary to address the complex contexts in high-need schools?

## Method

### *Case Study Design*

This study used a case study design. Yin (2014) explained that case study research seeks to understand the complexities of "how" or "why" some social phenomenon works" (p. 4) and, in particular, it explores an ongoing phenomenon "over which the researcher has little or no control" (p. 14). In this study, the schoolwide implementation of PBIS was a contemporary phenomenon as it was being used in the selected school district and the researchers were not directly impacting the implementation. Rather we were interested in understanding how it was being implemented and perceived.

The unit of analysis, or case, for this study was a school district in the Southeast region of the United States. The school district lacked a district-level PBIS initiative and district-level buy-in for PBIS implementation and individual schools within the district varied widely in PBIS efforts. Limited universal, Tier 1, SWPBIS training conducted by the state department had occurred statewide seven years prior to this study, and much of the district had drifted away from implementing critical PBIS components. Some schools identified the need for retraining as part of school improvement efforts, particularly for schools deemed "failing." Because the specific context of this district was of interest, this is an instrumental case study in which the "choice of the case is made to advance understanding" (Stake, 2005, p. 445) of SWPBIS in high-need schools.

### *Participants*

In this case study, participants were considered for participation in a focus group using purposive selection. In purposive selection, individuals are sought who can

provide information relevant to one's particular research interest (Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 1990), in our case those who have experiences with and knowledge of SWPBIS. Thus, selection was based on the following inclusionary criteria: (a) current or former employee who worked in/served a high-need school that had been trained to implement SWPBIS in the past two years; (b) stakeholder at the school who was involved in SWPBIS implementation; (c) participants across the K-12 grade level spectrum; and (d) varying school professionals, including administration, classroom teachers, and supporting services professionals (i.e., school counselors, school psychologists). Participants were confirmed to meet the inclusionary criteria during the recruitment phase. School representatives from these varying roles within the same school district were recruited due to their experience with SWPBIS from different perspectives with the district and in their schools. SWPBIS is a complex systems framework that requires participation from everyone in the school, particularly members of the school's SWPBIS leadership team. Focus group participants were recruited to represent these varying aspects of SWPBIS implementation in high-need schools. High-need schools were defined as (a) having above average rates of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch services, (b) having currently or previously been identified as a low-achieving or failing school, and (c) having majority minority student population. Researchers who trained and supported PBIS efforts at local schools identified participants through confirming inclusionary criteria and reaching out to recruit for participation. Four participants agreed to participate and were invited to engage in a focus group. The participating school district had a limited number of high-need schools that had been trained in and were implementing SWPBIS. Thus, recruitment for participation focused on representation of different roles within the schools that met the criteria for recruitment.

While the number of participants included is small, their experiences represent a variety of roles and grade levels. The four participants represented the varying school levels and roles within schools and included one elementary teacher, one elementary counselor, one middle school assistant principal, and one school psychologist who served a cluster of schools in a high-need area of the district across all grade levels. All of the participants worked in the school district described above. Their names have been replaced with pseudonyms for the purpose of confidentiality.

Dr. Fredrick represented the middle school that had a recently recorded Schoolwide Evaluation Tool (SET) score of 54% implementation fidelity, 500 students, and 77% of the student body qualifying for free and reduced lunch (indicating "high-poverty" status). Ms. Bragg and Mrs. Fine represented the elementary school that included PBIS remediation in their school improvement grant to turn around their "failing" school and had 450 students, a recent SET score of 74%, and 96% of the student body qualifying for free and reduced lunch. This elementary school had developed a new PBIS framework three years prior to this focus group discussion and had been receiving regular technical assistance for supporting these PBIS efforts. Mrs. Hinton represented the high school with approximately 700 students, a recent SET score of 35%, and 87% of the student body qualifying for free and reduced lunch. Mrs. Hinton, as the school psychologist, was responsible for other schools within the district but spoke from her experience with this high school. All of these schools ranged in racial makeup from 95% to 100% African American student populations. The district overall included approximately 10,000 students, with approximately 41% African American and 65% of the student body who qualified for free and reduced lunch. See Table 1 for participant demographics.

Participants all worked in schools deemed "high need" with the following characteristics: (a) currently or

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

	Gender	Highest Degree	Years of Experience	Position	School Level
Ms. Bragg	F	Bachelor's	37	Counselor	Elementary
Mrs. Fine	F	Bachelor's	24	Teacher	Elementary
Dr. Fredrick	F	Doctorate	17	Assistant Principal	Secondary
Mrs. Hinton	F	EdS	14	School Psychologist	Elementary and Secondary

recently failing school and (b) more than 75% free and reduced lunch status among students. The medium-sized school district educated students of varying backgrounds with diversely rated school performance across the district, correlated generally to regions of the districts with poor-performing and high-performing schools. The local communities in which the targeted schools were housed were also traditionally poor, underserved, and with high rates of transiency due to low-income housing issues.

*Procedure*

For the focus group discussion, the researchers developed 16 questions in the following four categories: (a) general PBIS implementation, (b) outcomes, (c) adaptations to Tier 1 implementation, and (d) leadership. The list of questions addressed gaps in the literature identified by the researchers: practical experiences in training, supporting culturally and contextually responsive PBIS, and including implementation

in high-need schools. There were five questions related to the general PBIS implementation category, five in the category of PBIS outcomes, three questions in the category pertaining to adapting Tier 1 PBIS, and three regarding leadership and Tier 1 implementation. See Table 2 for focus group questions by category. The recorded focus group discussion took place with the one researcher and the four participants using the focus group guide and an audio recording device. The audio recording began once the participants completed consent procedures and continued until the end of the discussion. Overall, the focus group was semistructured (Roulston, 2010) as the researcher facilitated the discussion by asking the predetermined questions, allowing participants to answer and discuss the topic, and probing for follow-up statements from the group. After the focus group, a research assistant transcribed the discussion. The focus group audio and transcriptions comprise the data for this case study.

Table 2

*Focus Group Questions*

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General	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What was your expectation in implementing PBIS?</li> <li>2. Do you think student behaviors changed due to PBIS?</li> <li>3. Is there anything you did not like?</li> <li>4. Are you satisfied with the outcomes?</li> <li>5. Do you recommend PBIS to other educators?</li> </ol>
Outcomes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How did you establish challenging, achievable expectations for all students that are considerate of contextual and cultural learning histories?</li> <li>2. How did your school identify educationally positive student social expectations and behaviors that have similar meaning, understanding, and acceptability across all students, all faculty and family members, and all school settings?</li> <li>3. How well were the expectations and shared values communicated with parents and students?</li> <li>4. How did you promote parents and family participation?</li> <li>5. What recommendations do you have to elicit more positive outcomes for those students?</li> </ol>
Adaptation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What kinds of adaptation were needed to fit the contextual need?</li> <li>2. For the better contextual fit, what kinds of adaptations would be needed in the future?</li> <li>3. How fairly was discipline applied to all students?</li> </ol>
Leadership	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How was the membership of the school leadership team representative of the cultural groups of the school and community?</li> <li>2. How did the membership of the school leadership team reflect cultural and contextual community and school needs?</li> <li>3. How did the school district support your PBIS initiative?</li> </ol>

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## Data Analysis

Data were analyzed inductively using techniques of grounded theory. The analytic process began during transcription and proceeded through open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Open coding is an iterative process of inquiring into the raw data as it is broken down and assigned short descriptive labels (Charmaz, 2014). As a means of investigator triangulation (Golafshani, 2003), the researchers separately read and coded the transcript and constructed an initial list of emerging categories. For example, one researcher described four initial primary categories (i.e., outcomes, challenges, additional support needed, and suggestions for improving PBIS); and the second researcher described six categories (i.e., perceptions of efficacy, influence of poverty, lack of fidelity, discrepancy of shared values, cultural influence, and suggestions).

Next, the researchers reviewed these emerging categories using the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) comparing data as they considered the categories and moved toward broader themes. The final themes were: (a) perceptions, (b) challenges, (c) supports required in high-need schools, and (d) suggestions for improving PBIS in high-need schools. For the themes that emerged, it was determined that each would be subdivided into smaller subthemes that fit within the broader context. These subthemes represent the more nuanced distinctions within each broader theme and were determined through both researchers' cooperative work. For example, through our coding and comparative process, "challenges" emerged as a theme. Everything related to the challenges for implementing PBIS was coded under the theme and then identified into six subthemes upon which both researchers agreed: (a) state, district, and administrator support; (b) teacher training and buy-in; (c) complex high-need student issues; (d) lack of parent and community involvement and shared value; (e) challenges in secondary schools; and (f) culture of poverty. The researchers then worked collaboratively to summarize findings for each theme and identified quotations from the transcript that matched and underscored the resulting summaries using analytic processes to identify themes.

## Results

A total of four primary themes developed through the analytic process and each theme contains emerging subthemes. Results included summaries of the comments made in relation to each theme along with supporting quotations from participants.

### Perceptions of PBIS Outcomes

Participants indicated that results from implementing PBIS in high-need schools vary depending on fidelity, grade level, buy-in, and leadership support. They stated that high-need schools require alternatives to exclusionary discipline and that they thought PBIS is effective at improving rates of ODRs, suspension, and special education referrals. When PBIS is in place, they believe it can also improve academic performance. Ms. Hinton said,

I think the results, you know, were varied by implementation levels of grade levels, implementation levels of teachers whether they really bought into it, owned it, felt like it was a way to really change the culture of the schools to improve the overall climate for the children and the teachers.

Dr. Fredrick said, "Schools who are really trying to be very positive and consistent, and all of those things that we know work for behavior, for reinforcing appropriate behavior, there's more success when they're doing that regularly."

### Challenges

Throughout the focus group discussion, several barriers to implementing PBIS in high-need schools were highlighted by participants. Within this theme, the following emerged: (a) state, district, and administrator buy-in; (b) teacher training and teacher buy-in; (c) complex, high-need student issues; (d) lack of parent and community involvement and shared value for positive behavior support; (e) challenges in secondary schools; and (f) challenges due to a culture of poverty.

**State, district, and administrator support.** Support from state, district, and school leaders is critical to implementing and sustaining PBIS, particularly for high-need schools. Participants from high-need schools perceived resource allocation and distribution as not being matched to student needs in all educational support areas, including PBIS, from the state and district level administration. Support for PBIS at the state level should include (a) prioritizing PBIS as a critical initiative, integrated with additional student supports; (b) providing resources, training, and awareness; and (c) monitoring implementation and adherence to evidence-based PBIS practices. Additionally, it is essential that districts provide similar support to all schools within a district with regard to PBIS implementation. It is possible that high-need schools may require additional resources such as personnel, training, coaching, and budget for PBIS. Therefore, the district should closely monitor PBIS implementation and aptly channel resources and support to match the need of each school.

It was noted that the participants' district does not have dedicated PBIS coaches. Consequently, the PBIS responsibilities, particularly those of the PBIS leadership team, end up with overloaded school personnel such as counselors, school psychologists (who serve several schools), special educators, and administrators.

Administrator support at the school level of PBIS is particularly important to fidelity. When the administrator is not supportive or there are changes in leadership, priorities shift away from PBIS. Buy-in and momentum for PBIS drift and administrators spend more time with reactive, punitive disciplinary procedures. Participants noted that they experienced changes in leadership that drastically affected PBIS implementation. Specifically, in each case discussed, when the principal left, the new principal who came in did not have an understanding

of PBIS, and particularly the PBIS framework that had been previously implemented at the school. In both cases discussed, PBIS efforts drifted with school climate and student outcomes suffering.

The new administrator should seek to bring teachers together and gain an understanding of PBIS and the individualized framework that exists. Ms. Bragg said, "Suspension's probably not changing that child's behavior . . . leadership is huge until you get the behaviors under control. It's hard to move past the behaviors to the academics, and our priorities I think need to change a little bit." Dr. Fredrick said, "When you have a change in leadership there's a different focus of priorities and what's important and what you value."

**Teacher training and buy-in.** Teachers need initial and ongoing training on the historical foundation and critical components of PBIS in addition to the specific PBIS framework at their school. Some teachers in high-need schools may require additional support when there are issues with buy-in and implementation. Many times, teachers feel underprepared to handle challenging behavior and complex student issues and they do not have the knowledge and skill to implement positive, proactive strategies. Teachers tend to default to negative, punitive reactions and get in power struggles with students. Participants explained that this type of school climate makes teachers feel so frustrated and overwhelmed that sometimes suspending students provides them with a break from students with challenging behaviors. Explicit training sets the tone and increases consistency and buy-in across the school. Since many high-need schools experience teacher transiency, it can be difficult to get new teachers on board with PBIS each year. However, teachers and school staff who are new to the school building should be trained on the PBIS framework and what is expected of them in implementing PBIS. Brief booster trainings can be held during planning days prior to the start of the new school year to prevent implementation issues for new teachers. Schools also need to plan for drift across the school year and to keep the PBIS system exciting. Ms. Bragg said, "We spend a lot of time and energy and effort, and then we just let it go. And we don't continue." Mrs. Fine said, "Teachers are tired and so our patience is less, and so we need some ways to kind of boost that." Mrs. Fine also said, "It's not because of a lack of trying; it's not because they don't want to; they're just at a loss." Dr. Fredrick said, "I am soft spoken . . . but then I've gotten to where I've started raising my voice . . . but then I've gotten to where I've started raising my voice at the kids. And I hate when I do that."

**Complex high-need student issues.** Students in high-need schools have several environmental, contextual issues that can serve as barriers to successful PBIS implementation, a positive school climate, and reduced disciplinary problems. Specifically, participants discussed that home, community, and school structures and expectations can vary, which is confusing to students who have to learn two or more sets of expectations and modify their behavior according to their setting. At high-need schools, students may experience poor school climate resulting from power struggles between adults and students, an emphasis on

reactive disciplinary procedures, and poor morale. When there is misalignment between behavior expectations across the home, community, and school settings, schools need to focus on explicitly teaching students new, appropriate skills; use consistent language when referring to expected behaviors; and provide effective and regular reinforcement when positive, expected behaviors occur. Dr. Fredrick said,

I think your average typical child is going to be able to say, 'Okay when I'm at school these are the expectations.' And they're going to adhere to that. And then when I'm at home it's a little bit different. And I think typical kids have that flexibility. And then it might be a little more challenging for some kids. It may take them a little bit longer. You might just have to say, 'Listen, when you're at school this is what we expect. I know Mom's rules are different.' And they may not know that they have other options of what they can do or what they can be. And that's where we have to come in and show them.

**Lack of parent and community involvement and shared value.** Participants highlighted that a lack of shared values between the school and the family exists in communities of high-need schools. Lack of parental involvement, poor communication channels, and differing educational approaches in high-need schools create barriers for improving student behavior at school. Some parental educational approaches at home are misaligned with positive, proactive teaching practices at school. The elementary school involved in this study had a parent liaison who was focused on informing parents of initiatives at the school such as PBIS. High-need schools should make focused efforts to involve parents in PBIS implementation, including inviting parent representatives to meet with the PBIS leadership team when appropriate. Schools may also choose to send PBIS materials home to educate parents and increase consistency of expected behaviors across home and school. Ms. Bragg said, "They [parents] really don't know what to do." Ms. Hinton said, "Then if we are trying to undo that and do something the total opposite at school, then if the parents aren't equipped with the same skill at home then the kids are experiencing both of these approaches."

**Challenges in secondary schools.** Participants discussed differences for implementing PBIS in secondary settings. They expressed that in middle and high schools, students continue to struggle with school behavior and, therefore, continue to require explicit instruction in behavior and that teachers need guidance specific to serving adolescents in secondary settings. Participants identified that low expectations for student behavior, limited options of reinforcers for secondary students, and changing (moving) classes are the factors that correlate with secondary students' problem behaviors and PBIS implementation. Dr. Fredrick said, "It's really hard to find a way to positively reinforce middle and high schoolers." Establishing supportive and close relationships and mentorship with students is important for their behavior development and improvement in adolescents. Additionally, creating a

schoolwide PBIS framework that is adapted to secondary students—their personal characteristics, setting requirements, and movement toward promoting independence and preparation for college and career—is critical to success for PBIS at the secondary level. Dr. Fredrick said,

I got to spend almost a full year at a middle school. And I saw no positive behavior supports at all in place really . . . there were lots of needy children who would end up in my office just because [they] needed somebody to listen to them or talk to them. It's such a difficult age and I just didn't see a whole lot there. We are losing our kids in middle school. We have got to build some relationships with our children so that we can teach them right or wrong whether they're angry with us or not.

**Culture of poverty.** Various environmental factors from poverty affect students' learning and behaviors. Factors highlighted in the discussion include fundamental requirements (i.e., lack of shelter, safety, nutrition, nurturing) and poor quality of life issues such as changes in caregivers, exposure to violence, bullying, and greater risk for disability resulting from exposure to environmental factors such as poor nutrition or fetal alcohol syndrome. Participants also reported student and school culture differences between high-need urban and rural schools. They discussed (a) varying amounts and quality of educational resources and activities, (b) different levels of learning, and (c) varying beliefs and attitudes toward school. Participants reported challenges for planning the best instruction that meets the students' and district's needs in such challenging, high-need environments. Dr. Fredrick said,

Somebody has to . . . have expectations of you, believe in you, and teach you when you need correction about things. . . . I think it is poverty . . . today they use the term hyper-poverty which is generational poverty that is ongoing. . . . It's hard to break some of those cycles.

Mrs. Fine said, "Typically with a lot of parents [from poverty] their default discipline approach is the negative . . . the punishing, spanking and all that." Ms. Bragg said, "You can teach a lot but you cannot go back and undo a lot of that [issues of poverty] damage that is done." Mrs. Fine said, "It's hard to teach in schools of poverty. It can be challenging."

#### *Additional Supports Identified*

**Tiers 2 and 3.** Participants discussed having a limited knowledge base for supports and interventions at Tiers 2 and 3, but all agreed that they would like to learn more strategies and how to more effectively implement supports and strategies at high-need schools for students requiring Tiers 2 and 3. They also highlighted issues with the amount of resources required to implement Tiers 2 and 3 effectively but recognized the importance of targeted and intensive interventions for students in high-need schools.

They indicated that it is possible that more students than the typical 10-20% of students at high-need schools may require Tiers 2 and 3 supports. Ms. Bragg said, "A lot of ours need something else," referring to Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports and interventions. She elaborated: "Because . . . we have a different population. People don't want to say it or believe it or think it, but we do have some issues with kids over here. . . . They're all not the same." Dr. Fredrick said,

If we can strengthen [Tier 1] I think that will relieve a lot of stress on our teams to take care of the ones who are still struggling . . . we definitely needed more support on what to do when they didn't fit into that [Tier 1].

**Classroom management.** In addition to feeling ill-equipped to provide Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports and interventions, participants discussed a knowledge gap with regard to classroom management strategies for students in high-need schools who exhibit challenging behaviors and experience academic failures. Many teachers struggle with classroom management and rely on ODRs as a reactive means to change behavior. Participants identified that, along with training and support for PBIS, teachers need assistance with positive classroom management strategies and indicated that support from seasoned administrators who can lead improvements in classroom management practices would be helpful. Mrs. Fine said,

We need help as teachers. To learn how to change it back toward what it [classroom management practices] needs to be . . . we get frustrated, and we resort to the one thing the kids are going to sort of pay attention to, which is to raise our voices. So, we need to be retrained and retooled to find those positive ways of doing it.

**Preschool and mental health.** The last theme of additional areas of support for educating students in high-need schools that was discussed in relation to PBIS was the need for high-quality, publicly funded preschool and school-based mental health services. Participants discussed the difficulty they experience in educating young children who come to school in kindergarten without any previous school experience. Additionally, they discussed the heavy burden experienced in high-need schools to provide wraparound social work and counseling services to students with mental health needs. Mrs. Fine said, "We definitely needed more support on what to do when they didn't fit into that." Ms. Bragg said, "We've got to have ongoing continuous support in those areas [preschool and mental health]. We needed the PBIS . . . but then we definitely needed more support on what to do when they didn't fit into that."

#### *Suggestions for Improving PBIS in High-Need Schools*

In addition to ideas mentioned above, the group of participants discussed suggestions to provide culturally

responsive PBIS in high-need schools at length. Participants discussed having high, yet realistic, expectations for students and having an understanding of the need for a contextual fit between teachers who may come from different socioeconomic backgrounds, different cultures, and different races from the students they educate. They again emphasized the need for consistency across the building to improve fidelity of implementation and to promote motivation for teachers and leadership. Further, participants identified a need for added training and support for teachers in high-need schools in order to incorporate culturally responsive practices in PBIS, classroom management, and wraparound services. Finally, the group discussed the need to integrate community partners and parent viewpoints into the universal PBIS framework. Mrs. Fine said, "It's got to be cultural responsive and relevant. You wouldn't find a catchall I wouldn't think. You're not going to be able to find a catchall to fit everybody. It's going to be individual." Dr. Fredrick stated,

It's going to vary school to school. So school to school needs to look different. Our challenge was to have a plan that meets the needs of a district where you've got more affluent schools, very poverty-stricken schools, where you've got preschool through high school. We wrote a general framework, and then it's up to the school to make decisions. . . . So what are the values for your school? And your demographic and your age groups? I think it's got to be relevant to the children you are working with.

Ms. Bragg said, "You invite people in from the different entities to come in. To talk about. To discuss . . . and see what we can take from it to make it work for my school." Dr. Fredrick elaborated:

We have to know from the community what it is that you expect of our children. What is it that we want for our children when they leave high school, when they leave elementary school, when they leave middle school? What should that ideal package look like. . . . I think that comes back to those social norms, those social rules, that hidden culture . . . because there needs to be some accountability and ownership with it.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to provide better understanding of education professionals' perceptions of schoolwide PBIS in high-need contexts. In many ways, the feedback received mirrors that of educator perceptions of PBIS that were not specifically working in high-need schools. Various education professionals who implemented Tier 1 PBIS components reported:

- their perceptions of PBIS outcomes;
- challenges (i.e., lack of state, district, and administrator level support; teacher training and buy-in;

issues in high-need students; lack of parent/community involvement; challenges in secondary settings; and poverty issues);

- the need for further support (i.e., Tiers 2 and 3; classroom management; and high quality, publicly funded, preschool mental health support); and
- recommendations for implementing culturally responsive schoolwide PBIS in high-need schools.

All educators emphasized the importance of further training and continuing support for implementation of effective culturally and contextually responsive PBIS with high fidelity. Ms. Bragg summarized the discussion,

If the leader, the principal, is not there, it's not going to work. If all the teachers are not buying into it, it's not going to work. And if you are doing it with the students and you're not being consistent, it's still not going to work. So, everything has to fit together, and everybody has to be on the same page to make it work.

Participants' positive perceptions of PBIS outcomes in the current study are consistent with previous research that examined the effectiveness of PBIS research (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Lassen et al., 2006). As in the findings of other research, the participants in the current study reported that PBIS implementation was specifically effective at reducing students' problem behaviors (i.e., the number of ODRs and suspensions), as well as improving students' education environment and academic outcomes. Their positive evaluations of PBIS added strength to the evidence base and efficacy of existing PBIS studies.

However, all the educators believed that there are several challenges in implementing PBIS in high-need schools. They felt that the support from the administrator level was not sufficient to arouse the motivation for all educational staff to participate. Trainings were not consistent and ongoing support and feedback were not provided. Therefore, failing to create teacher buy-in is not surprising (Kincaid, Childs, Blase, & Wallace, 2007). After the initial training, some teachers in high-need, complex school settings thought that they were left with increased burdens and responsibility for implementation of PBIS and for handling students' problem behavior with limited knowledge. These findings were also fairly consistent with previous research and support previous analyses of the barrier factors for PBIS implementations (Kincaid et al., 2007; Lohrmann et al., 2008). As Lohrmann et al. (2008) described, with such challenges, school staff would remain more skeptical or resistant about adopting and implementing PBIS, particularly at the universal intervention.

The significance of this study was highlighted by identifying the barriers and challenges in implementing PBIS in high-need contexts from perspectives of educators. The educators represented in this study commonly recognized the influence of poverty on students' academic performance, behavior development, attitudes in schools, and

increased likelihood of disability identification (O'Connor & Fernandez, 2006). The culture of poverty, as a significant environmental factor, also pervasively affected school climates and quality of instruction. Such negative impacts of poverty were often exacerbated by lack of parent/community involvement, parents' indifference, and different styles of addressing discipline. These complex factors of poverty seemed to strongly impact students' educations and to make teachers' roles more crucial for students who are struggling to be educated by school culture and expectations (Baker, 1999), but led to teachers feeling underprepared. To address these complex issues, it may be necessary to integrate additional supports at the universal level with wraparound services in high-need contexts. Future research should examine the feasibility and efficacy of adding universal interventions for high-need schools.

The participants pointed to the need for improvements that could make PBIS more culturally responsive and contextually sensitive. Their recommendations were commonly related to systematic assistance to schools and teachers to develop and implement a PBIS plan based on understanding the expectations and needs of each school context and student. They specified that integrating feedback from community partners and parents and providing flexible, age-appropriate, and feasible schoolwide expectations and reward systems should be prioritized. They also specified that constant training and on-site coaching supports for school-level implementation would facilitate successful implementation of PBIS (Kincaid et al., 2007). It may also be necessary to provide additional coaching support for PBIS implementation in high-need schools. Future research should examine necessary coaching "dosage" to yield implementation fidelity in high-need schools.

The results of this study should be interpreted with the understanding of methodological limitations. First, only four participants provided feedback in the focus group discussion. While this provides important initial voice from those who work in high-need schools, future research should include perceptions from more participants across varying high-need school settings such as urban and rural settings. Second, this study was conducted in the Southeast region of the United States and some issues discussed may be state or region specific. Future research should include educators' perceptions from regions that are nationally representative. Finally, the focus group conducted for this study included a semistructured procedure with predetermined questions aimed at gaining a basic understanding of PBIS implementation in high-need schools. Future research should further explore the themes that emerged from this preliminary study.

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