

Sustaining Effective Practices in the Face of Principal Turnover

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Last spring, the faculty at Pecan Creek Elementary was informed that, due to her success in improving student behavior, their principal Ms. Davies was being transferred to a lower-performing school within their district. Ms. Davies was well known as proponent of a multi-tiered School-wide Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) approach, and was considered a “champion” for providing evidence-based interventions for students with behavior disorders. Under her active leadership, the school’s PBIS team met every other week to discuss school-wide data, track individual student progress, and adjust plans for students requiring individualized behavior support. Ms. Davies worked hard to help the team ensure high levels of implementation fidelity and for three years successfully managed to use site-based funds to allow release time for team members to meet during regular school hours and to attend relevant professional development trainings.

This fall, Mr. Thibault was brought on board as the new principal at Pecan Creek. Mr. Thibault’s primary focus is on improving overall achievement, and although he tells staff that he supports the PBIS initiative, he has not made it a priority. For example, PBIS team members are now expected to meet after school, and although the principal states that he will attend meetings, something else always takes priority. By mid year, the team members had stopped meeting as frequently, lost morale, and no longer collected fidelity of implementation data. As a result, problem behavior has increased, staff members have lost faith in system effectiveness, and some have begun searching for alternative approaches.

The field of education does not have a strong track record when it comes to the continued use of practices that improve student outcomes. Scenarios like the one described above are all too common. In recent years, professional associations have made important advances in

defining and implementing effective evidence-based practices for students with and at risk for disabilities (Odom et al., 2005). However, to date much of that effort has focused on documenting small scale demonstrations of short-term improvements (particularly with grant funding and extensive technical assistance). Recently, researchers have expanded efforts to identify factors that influence the sustained implementation of those practices (Coffey & Horner, 2012; McIntosh et al., 2013). Although it remains an important task to identify empirically demonstrated practices for struggling learners, an exhaustive list of evidence-based interventions will not be sufficient to close the gap in achievement between students with disabilities and their peers. It is also necessary to understand and change the variables that help or hinder the sustained use of such practices in schools.

Sustainability and the Role of the Administrator

A number of factors have been described as affecting the sustainability of evidence-based practices in school settings. For example, contextual relevance, staff buy-in, professional development and ongoing technical support, data-based decision making, and a shared vision of expectations and desired outcomes among school personnel have all been identified as critical features of sustained innovation (Coffey & Horner, 2012; Baker, Gersten, Dimino, & Griffiths, 2004). However, the one factor that has received the most focus in the literature is “administrator support.” The role of the building administrator is perceived by school personnel as singularly important to the sustained implementation of effective programs and practices (McIntosh, Predy et al., in press).

SIDEBAR: *The role of the building administrator is perceived by school personnel as singularly important to the sustained implementation of effective programs and practices.*

Building administrators are in a unique position to improve the likelihood of sustained implementation in that they can: a) play a key role in creating a school culture in which staff share common values and work together to achieve common goals, b) provide clear staff expectations, c) ensure accountability by routinely asking staff to report on outcome data, and d) creatively allocate limited resources to help ensure that personnel have access to necessary supports (e.g., data systems needed for decision-making, time available to meet regularly). By doing so, administrators help to ensure the high levels of fidelity of implementation that are associated with sustained success (Bambara, Goh, Kern, & Caskie, 2012).

Administrator Turnover as a Barrier to Sustainability

Because building administrators play a singularly pivotal role in the sustained use of effective programs and practices, administrator turnover can pose a significant threat to their sustainability. When a committed administrator leaves, staff may quickly lose momentum. This is particularly true if the outgoing administrator leaves during the early stages of adoption of a new practice (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005). Yet district policies sometimes require that: a) all principals rotate buildings on an arbitrary schedule regardless of whether a new practice is being installed, or b) exemplary administrators quickly rotate to new buildings, leaving less experienced leaders to oversee continuing implementation of practices. To make matters worse, due to the continual push to improve educational practices by adopting new trends, incoming principals often neglect existing practices or feel a need to “leave their mark” by instituting new policies and practices (Clayton & Johnson, 2011). These policies and practices can deter attempts to sustain effective practices and decrease the likelihood of the long-term positive outcomes of those practices for students.

School-based Team Members

Although turnover of an administrator who championed an effective initiative does often represent a powerful barrier to sustainability, it does not necessarily have to mean an end to the continued use of effective existing school practices. Researchers have also found school-based team functioning to be a particularly strong predictor of sustained implementation. Team leadership, the frequency with which teams meet and share data, and the ways in which the team utilizes that data to make decisions have all been found to significantly impact the likelihood that effective practices will be maintained over time, even in the absence of administrator support (McIntosh et al., 2013). Therefore, there are proactive steps that can be taken by school-based team members to help ensure the durability of effective practices in spite of this obstacle.

SIDEBAR: *Team leadership, frequency with which teams meet and share data, and the ways in which teams utilize that data to make decisions have all been found to significantly impact the likelihood that effective practices will be maintained over time, even in the absence of administrator support.*

Purpose

In the face of principal turnover, a common approach taken by staff is to simply wait until the new school year begins and hope that the new administrator will continue to support current programs. It is our experience that this passive strategy is not as helpful, because there are proactive approaches that are more likely to be successful. Our primary purpose herein is to describe specific practical strategies that school-based team members (along with the outgoing principal) can use to prepare for a change of administrators and ensure sustained implementation of successful evidence-based innovations. Included in our discussion are specific examples of strategies that the Pecan Creek team (from the opening scenario) might have used to bolster the

sustainability of successful PBIS practices both prior to and following the loss of their administrator, Ms. Davies.

The following recommendations are based on the assumptions that: a) the current school practices are evidence-based and a priority for all relevant stakeholders, and b) effectiveness data are being collected regularly and used to inform the implementation of these practices (McIntosh, Horner, & Sugai, 2009). The information presented stems primarily from our experiences related to school-wide and individual positive behavior support; however, the recommendations are applicable to many systems-level interventions or approaches (e.g., response to intervention, collaborative IEP development, inclusion initiatives).

Proactive Team Strategies for Sustaining Effective Practices

When faced with administrator turnover, there are a number of actions that team members can take to help ensure the durability of effective practices. The following strategies can both make administrative transitions smoother as well as considerably enhance practice sustainability in general. Figure 1 provides a condensed list of sustainability enhancing strategies for school teams.

Ensure that teams are representative of the whole school. To promote sustainability of effective practices, it is important to ensure that a majority of school personnel understand the purpose of and support the use of those practices. One way to increase whole-school support for a practice is to make sure that school-based teams who meet regularly to assess the efficacy of the practice include members who represent all relevant contexts and programs within the school, especially across both general and special education. Teams that do not include general education representation may be viewed *only* as a special education initiative, and the opposite can be true for teams that do not include special education representation. Consider, for example,

a school that has recently begun implementing school-wide PBIS. The school-based team is working to develop school-wide expectations that all teachers will teach within their classrooms. In order for the school-wide expectations to be adopted and implemented with fidelity over time by *all* school personnel, it is extremely important for the school-wide PBIS team to include representatives from both general and special education. This will help to guarantee that the expectations will be: a) agreed upon and supported by all staff members, and b) taught and represented in such a way that they are accessible for *all* students within the school.

Plan proactively for sustainability. The true test of a strong school leader is the extent to which the staff continues effective practices long after the administrator leaves. To increase the likelihood that effective practices will sustain, it is critical for team members to work together with the outgoing principal to ensure that a critical mass of school personnel have the skills needed to continue or even advance the practice when the principal is no longer there. Some ways that team members can proactively plan for sustainability include: a) regularly inviting school personnel to school team meetings to discuss how they use specific practices within their individual classrooms, b) pairing new staff members with “veteran” team members for mentoring, and c) strategically rotating the roles of team members, including the role of team leader. The purpose of these strategies is to build capacity within the school, so that multiple individuals understand and have the skills needed to maintain effective practices if one or more team members leave (Andreou & McIntosh, 2013).

SIDEBAR: *The true test of a strong school leader is the extent to which staff continue to implement effective practices long after the administrator leaves.*

Develop policies and create a practice handbook. To ensure that *any* new staff member understands that school personnel are invested in and committed to existing practices,

team members can work alongside the outgoing administrator to: a) embed effective strategies into written school policies (e.g., mission statements, school improvement plans), and b) compile a description of and resources for current practices that they wish to see continue into one handbook or manual (McKevitt & Braaksma, 2008). To enhance sustainability, it can be particularly helpful to include documentation of the organizational systems needed to implement existing practices (e.g., specific policies, data systems, tools for documentation, skills needed by key personnel).

Members of the school-based team can provide the practice handbook to the incoming administrator to note its formalized processes and institutionalization into school practices. Effective handbooks include: a) specific procedures and protocols and how they are used within different school contexts (e.g., in classrooms, during IEP meetings), and b) the roles that team members, administrators, and other school personnel play in implementing those practices. For example, for schools utilizing a daily behavior report card system for students with behavioral IEP goals, a handbook describing the system would need to include information such as: a) the staff who are responsible for implementing the system and can be contacted when questions arise, b) any forms needed, c) documented procedures for how to use the forms and who will fill them out in various settings (e.g., classroom, playground, cafeteria), d) the specific procedures for referring students, and e) documented criteria for determining if a student is making progress and, if not, when a modified or new intervention should be put into place. Handbooks such as the one just described allow for rapid orientation of new personnel and can help new, existing, and itinerant staff to consistently implement practices with greater fidelity over time.

SIDEBAR: *Practice handbooks allow for rapid orientation of new school personnel and can help new, existing, and itinerant staff to consistently implement practices with greater fidelity over time.*

Pecan Creek uses a Check In-Check Out (CICO; Crone, Hawken, & Horner, 2010) approach to address the needs of students who do not require individualized support, but who engage in persistent in problem behavior and are at risk for developing more behavior disorders. Using this approach, students briefly “check in” with an adult (i.e., a CICO “facilitator”) at the beginning of each school day and receive a daily CICO report card. Throughout the school day, specified teachers provide the students with feedback about their behavior using the report card, and the student meets with the facilitator at the end of the day to check-out by reviewing his or her behavior report card. In order to run smoothly, this system requires a good deal of cooperation and consistency between staff and it is important for everyone in the school to understand the process and their roles within it. To help ensure the integrity and continued use of this practice as staff and administrators change, the Pecan Creek PBIS team has created a practice manual for the CICO system to provide all staff with a helpful resource and enhance fidelity of implementation (see Figure 2 for the Pecan Creek CICO Manual Table of Contents).

Collect and show data documenting effectiveness and acceptability. Arguably one of the most important actions that team members can take to improve sustainability of current practices is to document how the use of those practices has resulted in measurable change in valued outcomes (e.g., achievement gains, mastery of IEP goals, decreased office discipline referrals, improved perception of school safety; Hume & McIntosh, in press). In considering what data to share, it is important to consider outcomes that are valued by not only special

education staff, but also general educators. Sharing these data with the whole staff and incoming administrator can help to improve sustainability by bolstering staff “buy-in” and by increasing the probability of support for existing practices from the new principal.

SIDEBAR: *One of the most important actions that team members can take to improve sustainability of current practices is to document how the use of those practices has resulted in measurable change in valued outcomes.*

Ideally, outcome data show how social behavior and academic skills have improved over time. This aspect of data for decision making becomes particularly important when providing this information to the new administrator. If the incoming principal sees only current student success without seeing how implementation led to improvements over time, he or she may not see the practice as necessary or beneficial enough to warrant continued implementation.

Moreover, to demonstrate that school community members support current practices and the outcomes they produce, faculty—and, when appropriate, family—commitment can be formally documented (e.g., through surveys, secret ballot votes). These data can then be shared with the incoming administrator to show stakeholder support for these practices and resultantly, maintain administrator support. The following scenario illustrates the use of this strategy:

As part of the school’s PBIS program, the staff members at Pecan Creek Elementary have been implementing a highly effective collaborative teaming program for supporting students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) who spend more than 20% of their instructional day in inclusive settings. The program involves quarterly data-for decision-making meetings between parents, the principal, and general and special education staff, and monthly progress monitoring updates for parents. Since beginning this practice three years ago the staff have been very pleased with the reduced need for significant accommodations in inclusive

settings and reduced disruption in the classroom due to fewer behavior incidents. However, the staff is concerned that the new principal may not be as supportive of the program. As a proactive strategy, the team members have gathered outcome data specifically illustrating the gains that have been made related to student academic and social goals and reductions in problem behavior since the program was first started. The staff are also asking for letters of support from parents who have participated in the program. Team members hope to be able to show not only how well all of their students are performing in inclusive settings, but also how the specific practices that they are using have been largely responsible for that success.

Meet with the incoming administrator. After gathering and organizing pertinent information (e.g., handbooks, protocols, data), the next proactive step is for team members to ask the incoming administrator if he or she is willing to meet in person with the team (or a team representative) to discuss materials, data, and how the current practices “fit” with the new administrator’s goals. Team members can enhance sustainability by identifying the most highly valued outcomes for their school and explaining to the new administrator how current practices help to produce those outcomes (Adelman & Taylor, 2003). When possible, prior to meeting with the new administrator, team members can identify what initiatives and outcomes he or she is most likely to value. This information will help make it possible to: (a) determine the best way to present current practices as they relate to high-priority initiatives, (b) select and share outcome data that most closely align with the values and goals of the incoming principal, and (c) consider how the new administrators goals might fit within or even enhance existing practices (McIntosh, Horner, Sugai, & Ty, 2013).

SIDEBAR: *Team members can enhance sustainability by identifying the most highly valued outcomes for their school and explaining to the new administrator how current practices help to produce those outcomes.*

For example, the members of the Pecan Creek PBIS team are aware that the new principal, Mr. Thibault, considers increased standardized test scores to be a high priority outcome. To demonstrate the effectiveness and importance of current school practices, the team met with Mr. Thibault at the beginning of the school year to share data documenting how decreases in challenging behavior have been directly tied to improved academic outcomes and, ultimately, higher standardized test scores for students in both special and general education settings.

To promote the continuance of effective practices, it can also be particularly useful for team members to facilitate opportunities for the incoming principal to understand both how and why the practice works. These opportunities can include participating in team meetings of the school-based team, speaking with teachers and students, and observing implementation in individual classrooms. By observing effective practices in typical school contexts, the incoming administrator has a chance to both: a) see the steps involved in implementing the practice, and b) begin to understand why the practice is effective. Understanding the practice both procedurally and conceptually is a key factor related to the continued use of effective interventions (Baker et al., 2004).

Recruit District Support. The responsibility of sustaining effective evidence-based practices in schools cannot rest solely on the backs of school-based team members. Members of district-level administrative teams also play an integral role in helping to ensure that effective practices that support students with or at risk for behavior disorders are not abandoned with the

loss of a championing administrator (McIntosh, Predy et al., in press). By stressing the importance of specific practices in district policies (e.g., goal statements, long-term district improvement plans), establishing performance standards and expectations, and creating job descriptions, district administrators play a key role in ensuring that the incoming principal understands which practices are highly valued in the district and will be expected as part of his or her new role (George & Kincaid, 2008). District team members are also in the unique position to: a) secure local and federal funding for, and b) create district-level coaching positions to support valued initiatives and practices; both of which can significantly increase the likelihood that effective practices will continue after the current principal is gone. (For a more complete list of the ways in which district teams help to enhance sustainability, see Figure 3). For these reasons, an additional strategy that school-based team members can use to promote the continuance of existing practices is to recruit support for effective practices at the district level.

SIDEBAR: *By stressing the importance of specific practices in district policies, establishing performance standards and expectations, and creating job descriptions, district administrators can play a key role in ensuring that the incoming principal understands which practices are highly valued.*

One way that school-based team members can recruit district support for a highly valued practice is to regularly provide district teams with data supporting the continued use of that practice. Since data provide information on effectiveness and show progress over time, it is important that data are collected throughout the school year and disseminated frequently to district administrators to provide ongoing feedback on the progress of activities and promote district buy-in.

School-based team members can also promote district support of effective practices by increasing the visibility of those practices in the larger community. Team members can increase knowledge of current practices both within and outside their district by connecting key implementers from their school to a larger community of practitioners via web-based list serves. Additionally, team members can represent their school and district at local conferences and in networking sessions with personnel from different schools, where they can share data documenting improved student outcomes. Along with promoting the sharing of new approaches to implementation, building these types of connections to the larger community of practice can enhance sustainability by making the positive effects of implementing the practice more visible and potentially increasing shared buy-in at the district level.

To promote support from the district for PBIS practices, the team at Pecan Creek worked with the out-going principal, Ms. Davies to create a quarterly newsletter that a) describes the initiatives and programs that they are working on, and b) displays user-friendly data showing how social and academic behaviors of students with and without special needs are improving over time. This newsletter is regularly distributed to parents and community members, and to all district-level teams. Not long after the Pecan Creek team began sharing the newsletters, district administrators asked team members to represent their school by presenting their data at a local conference. Following the conference, several additional schools in the district began implementing PBIS for students requiring individualized behavior supports, and a few months later PBIS was written into the district's new long-term improvement plan. Since that time, district teams have been stressing the importance of PBIS practices to newly hired personnel and have created a position for a district-level coach to support schools using these practices. By

helping to secure the support of district-level teams, the personnel from Pecan Creek were able to significantly enhance district-wide sustainability of PBIS, both in their school and others.

Conclusion

School administrator turnover is an eventuality that often hinders the sustained use of effective practices in schools. However, this need not necessarily be the case. We have presented a number of proactive steps that school teams can take to help ensure the sustained use of effective practices. In addition to taking action when faced with the imminent loss of a respected principal, several of the suggested strategies can be put into place by all school teams as preventive measures to help safeguard against any negative effects of possible future turnover, (a timeline for when to most effectively implement sustainability enhancing strategies is seen in Figure 4). In summary, to ensure sustainability it is critical that staff not merely wait and hope that existing practices will be continued under new leadership. Instead, by implementing proactive strategies schools and districts can help keep evidence-based special education practices in place and prospering with administrator turnover.

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Figure 1. Sustainability Enhancing Strategies for School Team Members

- Ensure that teams are representative of the whole school
 - Increase whole-school support by including members who represent all relevant contexts and programs within the school
- Plan proactively for sustainability
 - Ensure that multiple individuals understand and have the skills needed to maintain effective practices when key team members (such as the principal) leave
- Create a practice handbook
 - Include detailed descriptions of: a) procedures and protocols and how they are used across school contexts and b) roles that team members, administrators, and other school personnel play in implementing practices
- Collect and show data documenting effectiveness
 - Include outcome data that are valued by both special and general education staff
 - Demonstrate how valued outcomes have improved over time
- Meet with the incoming administrator
 - Determine the best way to present current practices as they relate to high-priority initiatives
 - Select and share outcome data that most closely align with the values and goals of the incoming principal
 - Consider how the new administrator's goals might fit within or can enhance existing practices
- Recruit District Support
 - Provide district teams with regular updates related to highly valued outcomes
 - Increase visibility of high priority practices in the larger community of practice

Figure 2. Pecan Creek CICO Manual Table of Contents

Section I: Overview of the CICO Program

- General Description of CICO
- Referring Students for CICO
- Request for Assistance Form
- School Personnel Referral Form
- Helpful FAQs for Staff and Subs

Section II. Obtaining Parent Consent

- Overview of the Initial Parent Meeting
- Staff Roles & Responsibilities
- Initial Meeting Checklist
- Parent/Guardian Permission Form
- Helpful FAQs for Parents

Section III: Daily Procedures for Implementing CICO

- Step-by-Step Description of Daily Procedures
- CICO Staff Roles & Responsibilities
- How to Teach the CICO Process to Students
- Daily Check-in Checklist for Staff
- Daily Check-out Checklist for Staff
- Student Daily Rating Form

Section IV: Modifying & Fading CICO

- Progress Monitoring
- CICO Review Meeting Form
- How to Modify CICO as Students Progress
- Tips for Increasing Student Self-Monitoring & Independence
- Overview of Process for Fading Support
- Fading Process Checklist

Figure 3. Sustainability Enhancing Strategies for District Teams

Develop District Policies. District administrators can explicitly include effective existing practices as part of standard district policy by:

- Stressing the importance of specific practices in district policies (e.g., goal statements, long-term district improvement plans)
- Establishing specific performance standards and expectations

Hire principals who support effective practices. Through the process of interviewing and hiring potential administrators, district personnel have the opportunity to:

- Explain the importance of specific practices and potential drawbacks associated with abandoning the practice
- Determine how principal's goals and aspirations "fit" with school practices

Secure funding. District administrators can help to secure funding for district-wide implementation of effective practices by:

- Presenting effectiveness data to important district and state-level groups who control funding (e.g., school boards, state education agencies).
- Framing effective practices as essential components of high-priority state and federal programs and initiatives to help ensure continued funding over time

Create district-level coaching positions. Districts can establish district-level coaches to:

- Guide school teams and new principals in the implementation of highly valued practices
- Help mitigate the negative effects that losing key school personnel has on sustainability

Figure 4. Timeline for Implementing Sustainability Enhancing Strategies

Preventive Measures

School teams can put preventive measures in place to help mitigate the negative effects of future principal and staff turnover. Some of these preventive strategies include:

- Ensuring that multiple staff members have the skills needed to maintain effective strategies when key team members and implementers leave. This capacity can be accomplished by:
 - a) regularly inviting school personnel to team meetings to learn more about the practice and to discuss how they are using the practice in their classrooms
 - b) asking veteran team members to act as mentors to new staff
 - c) rotating the roles of team members, including the role of team leader;
- Writing effective existing practices into school policy statements (e.g., school improvement plans, staff handbooks);
- Creating a handbook detailing how to implement highly valued practices across school contexts and include specific information related to how team members, administrators, and other school personnel implement those practices;
- Collecting and regularly sharing effectiveness data with the whole school and district-level teams to garner whole-staff and district support for effective practices.

Proactive Strategies

When faced with the imminent loss of a school administrator, team members can consider the immediate actions they can take to help ensure the continuance of effective existing practices and programs. These strategies include:

- Gathering effectiveness data that show how current practices have improved student outcomes over time;
- Meeting with the incoming administrator to:
 - a) understand the new administrator's goals and how existing practices can fit within his or her highly valued initiatives
 - b) determine how the new administrators high-priority initiatives might be used to enhance existing practices
 - c) present effectiveness data that closely align with the values and goals of the incoming principal