

Schoolwide Positive Behavior Supports and Students with Severe Disability:  
Where Are We?

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### Abstract

While the number of schools implementing school-wide positive behavior supports (SWPBS) has increased dramatically, the inclusion of students with severe disabilities in these efforts remains negligible. This paper describes the evolution of positive behavior intervention and supports (PBIS) into the SWPBS approach used in many schools today, highlighting the impact on and inclusion of SWPBS on students with severe disabilities. In particular, implications for researchers are addressed including the appropriateness, accessibility and availability of SWPBS for students with severe disabilities, and the potential of SWPBS to facilitate inclusive schools.

## **School-wide Positive Behavior Supports and Students with Severe Disabilities:**

### **Where Are We?**

In 2006, *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities (RPSD)* released a special issue on the topic of school-wide positive behavior support (SWPBS) and students with severe disabilities. Since this time, the number of schools implementing SWPBS has continued to increase (Crimmins & Farrell, 2006; Freeman et al., 2006); in fact, there are over 9,000 schools implementing SWPBS in the United States today (Landers, Courtade, & Ryndak, 2012). The increase in SWPBS has engendered positive outcomes for many students at-risk of developing or maintaining problem behaviors (Sugai, Simonsen, Bradshaw, Horner, & Lewis, 2014), including improvements in academic achievement, school attendance, social competence, and safe learning environments (Bohanon et al., 2006; Lohrmann & Bambara, 2006). However, students with severe and complex disabilities, defined here as the 1-2% of students with intellectual disability who complete an alternate assessment, and have support needs across domains (Kennedy, 2004), remain marginalized from SWPBS efforts (Landers, Courtade, & Ryndak, 2012). This paper describes the evolution of individualized positive behavior intervention and supports (PBIS), which largely originated in response to the needs of students with severe disabilities (Crimmins & Farrell, 2006) into the SWPBS approach used in many schools today. We trace this history and highlight the impact on, and inclusion of, SWPBS on students with severe disabilities, culminating with a call to action.

### **Overview of SWPBS**

SWPBS is a broad-based, preventative approach supporting student behavior, incorporating principles of applied behavior analysis, contextual validity, systems change, inclusive ethics, and stakeholder collaboration (Andreou, McIntosh, Ross, & Kahn, 2014). While individualized PBIS emerged as a preventative approach focused on the needs of students with severe disabilities who had intensive behavior problems (Bambara & Lohrmann, 2006), SWPBS assumes all students need support to learn prosocial behaviors, just at different levels and intensities (Hawken & O'Neill, 2006). In fact, some argue teaching social behaviors to all students is equally important as teaching academic content instruction (Sugai, Simonsen, Bradshaw, Horner, & Lewis, 2014).

Due in part to the successes of individualized PBIS, the 2004 authorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) required its use for all students receiving special education services, not just those with severe disabilities. Providing individualized supports for all students, including those with severe but infrequent problem behaviors, proved unfeasible, thus paving the way for more system-wide, universal approaches to behavior problems (Crimmins & Farrell, 2006). PBIS thus evolved from a technology focused on the needs of individual students with severe disabilities to broader, universal applications as found in SWPBS.

Today, SWPBS is applied through a multi-tiered continuum to reflect the support and delivery of positive and preventative services to all students, including the implementation of universal screening, progress monitoring, and problem solving, among others. This multi-tiered continuum generally consists of tier 1 universal supports, or instruction and preventative strategies for all staff and students across all settings; tier 2 targeted supports for students whose behaviors are unresponsive to universal practices;

and tier 3 intensive supports for those needing more supports than provided in tiers 1 and 2 (Sugai et al., 2014). Importantly, these tiers of support are meant to be inclusive and cumulative in that they add to, rather than replace, existing supports at earlier levels (Sugai et al., 2014).

### **SWPBS and Students with Severe Disabilities**

Despite the positive and inclusive foundations of SWPBS, a number of threats have been identified in relationship to SWPBS and students with severe disabilities. First, while the SWPBS literature describes an intended focus on the needs of all students, our education system is replete with examples of how “all” is interpreted as “some” or “most.” For example, though the overall inclusion movement has resulted in greater gains to general education settings for many students, those with severe disabilities remain largely sidelined from this broader movement (Kurth, Morningstar, & Kozleski, 2014), and there is evidence the SWPBS movement has done the same (Hawken & O’Neill, 2006).

Specifically, there is indication that the most intensive services are delivered in separate settings (e.g., Brown & Michaels, 2006), with assumptions that these services must be delivered in such a manner to avoid disrupting the overall effectiveness of SWPBS (Carr, 2006). Second, there is a risk that SWPBS efforts will further bifurcate resources and personnel – that is, universal interventions will remain the purview of general educators, while special educators will be responsible for individualized services (Carr, 2006). Because individualized supports are necessarily more costly, time-consuming, labor-intensive, and complex, there is further threat that the needs of the

majority (SWPBS) will trump the needs of the minority of students requiring intensive individualized supports (Carr, 2006).

In fact, the contributors to the 2006 *RPSD* issue on SWPBS and students with severe disabilities raised a number of concerns and perspectives about the inclusion of this group of students in the overall SWPBS movement. First, there is real concern, substantiated by evidence (e.g., Kurth et al., 2014), that students with severe disabilities are absent from universal (tier 1) instruction due to their physical separation in different classrooms and even school buildings. Therefore, this group of students is likely to miss instruction and school-wide screening procedures (Hawken & O'Neill, 2006). Further, as articulated by Hawken and O'Neill (2006), even when students with severe disabilities are physically present, instruction and materials developed for universal intervention must be modified to facilitate their comprehension and participation.

While this concern was voiced a decade ago, there continues to be no evidence that needed differentiation occurs. Rather, many may assume tertiary interventions will meet the needs of students with severe disabilities, or that discipline issues in self-contained settings will be handled by the staff in those settings, thus negating the need for these students to participate in SWPBS efforts (Hawken & O'Neill, 2006). Secondly, and related to the first concern, is apprehension that SWPBS may represent another continuum similar to the least restrictive environment (LRE) continuum, with intensive, tertiary interventions delivered in separate settings (Brown & Michaels, 2006). When this assumption is enacted, the separation of students with severe disabilities is justified while general education teachers remain “off-the-hook” for learning about and implementing intensive, tertiary supports and interventions (Carr, 2006; Crimmins &

Farrell, 2006). Thus, it is possible students with severe disabilities receive tertiary interventions that are not cumulative of, or linked to, universal and secondary interventions. Finally, the divergent emphases on group (universal) and individual (tertiary) needs may inadvertently create competition for limited resources, such as time for staff development, with the needs of the group usurping the needs of the individual (Carr, 2006).

Since the 2006 special issue in *RPSD*, very little research has been completed addressing these concerns. A notable exception is a survey of state SWPBS coordinators in 2012 by Landers, Courtade, and Ryndak. In an electronic survey of 51 state SWPBS coordinators representing nearly 4,000 U.S. schools, Landers and colleagues found that while 93% of coordinators believed students with severe disabilities could participate in SWPBS, 41% of the respondents indicated students with severe disabilities were not included in their training activities. Many of these state coordinators questioned the need to include students with severe disabilities in SWPBS training, as they believed students with disabilities were not physically present at their schools or assumed special education teachers would address the needs of this population. Furthermore, these state coordinators believed personnel attending SWPBS trainings would not be prepared to meet the needs of students with severe disabilities following the training. Findings from this study suggest the persistent exclusion of students with severe disabilities in SWPBS efforts.

Despite limited attention from researchers and practitioners, SWPBS has potential to positively impact inclusive school reform and outcomes for students with severe disabilities. Namely, SWPBS creates an infrastructure that can support and maintain

inclusive practices by (1) creating inclusive vision and leadership; (2) investing in adequate resources for individual supports; (3) providing well-trained personnel; and (4) creating systems to guide teams in problem solving and making data-based decisions (Freeman et al., 2006). Many students with severe disabilities engage in problem behaviors that impede their learning and access to inclusive settings (O'Neill, 2004). Because problem behavior can be the basis for segregation and exclusion, improving the behavioral skills of teachers and students in schools may benefit students with severe disabilities. Specifically, SWPBS may empower teachers in general settings to learn core PBIS skills to enable all students to succeed through establishment of a common culture and language (Freeman et al., 2006), and may further create environments in which setting events that trigger problem behaviors are reduced while appropriate socio-behavioral role models are produced (Carr, 2006).

### **Call to Action**

It would seem the challenges identified more than a decade ago by *RPSD* exchange authors are as pertinent today. The extant research on SWPBS applications to students with severe disabilities remains limited, with a number of persistent research questions remaining. These research questions are grouped in the following domains: (1) Is SWPBS appropriate for students with severe disabilities? (2) Is SWPBS available and accessible to students with severe disabilities? and (3) Does SWPBS enhance or engender inclusive schooling?

### **Is SWPBS appropriate for students with severe disabilities?**

Given the limited research examining participation of students with severe disabilities in SWPBS efforts, and the differing foci of individualized and SWPBS,



further research is needed to determine the appropriateness of SWPBS for students with severe disabilities. Existing research documents the effectiveness of individualized PBIS, but also, its cost and complexity (Carr, 2006). Thus, it is possible that not all students with severe disabilities will be adequately served in SWPBS models, making tertiary level individualized supports necessary. However, it is possible SWPBS potentiates individualized PBIS, making tertiary supports more effective than they would have been if used alone (Carr, 2006). Research is needed to describe the extent to which this potentiation occurs and its impact on staff and students in SWPBS and individualized PBIS models. The appropriateness of SWPBS reinforcement and prevention methods must also be examined. Specifically, token reinforcements and check-in/check-out procedures may be practices that are too abstract, delayed, or both, to benefit students with severe disabilities.

Furthermore, researchers must determine the capacity within schools to provide effective and high-quality individualized PBIS and SWPBS concomitantly. That is, how do effective schools interlace SWPBS and individualized PBIS (Hawken & O'Neill, 2006)? Freeman and colleagues (2006) identified potential team models to support this effort, such as one team focused on universal interventions, and another team focused on secondary and tertiary interventions. While proposed a decade ago, there remain few descriptions of SWPBS teams and their inclusion of students with severe disabilities or the strategies used by schools to effectively interlace SWPBS and individualized PBIS. Similarly, research describing the costs of SWPBS and individualized PBIS in terms of time and resources to schools interlacing both is missing from the extant literature.

**Is SWPBS available and accessible to students with severe disabilities?**

The extent to which students with severe disabilities participate in SWPBS approaches remains unclear. For example, the extant literature fails to describe how commonly students with severe disabilities receive universal instruction versus individualized PBIS in self-contained settings. Further, the extent to which these individualized PBIS approaches are founded upon universal and secondary interventions taking place in SWPBS schools are unclear. It is possible published research is limited to those studies demonstrating significant effects, and as a result effective universal applications with positive impacts on students with severe disabilities are simply not published. Moreover, it remains unclear how adequately SWPBS teams consist of stakeholders representing the interests of students with severe disabilities and the degree to which their participation varies by virtue of working in self-contained or inclusive schools. The extent to which students with severe disabilities participate in SWPBS assessments such as the School-wide Evaluation Tool (SET; Horner et al., 2004), which require student input to complete, is also unknown. Thus, it is difficult to determine how readily the needs of students with severe disabilities are acknowledged in extant SWPBS efforts.

SWPBS tools generally do not delineate the needs of students with disabilities (Hawken & O'Neill, 2006), and therefore the unique supports of students with disabilities, including severe disabilities, is missing from current SWPBS assessments. While this may be reflective of the "all students" approach of SWPBS, this same approach may fail to capture the participation or accessibility of SWPBS in accounting for the participation of students with severe disabilities. That is, students with severe disabilities remain largely marginalized or absent from typical school experiences in the

first place, making their participation in SWPBS unlikely without a concerted focus on including them.

Assuming students with severe disabilities are participants in SWPBS efforts, the extent to which SWPBS approaches are meaningful and accessible for them remains problematic (e.g., Hawken & O'Neill, 2006). For example, are augmentative and alternative communication systems provided so students with severe disabilities can demonstrate their understanding of SWPBS approaches? Research describing how communication supports are effectively embedded within universal instruction would benefit others seeking to implement high quality SWPBS for all students. Research describing if, and how, behavior expectations are taught in such a manner as to be meaningful to students with severe disabilities is also needed. Absent these types of accommodations and supports, the meaningfulness of SWPBS for students with severe disabilities may remain limited.

### **Does SWPBS enhance or engender inclusive education?**

Inclusive education is associated with positive outcomes for students with severe disabilities across a variety of domains (Foreman, Arthur-Kelly, Pascoe, & King, 2004; Jackson, Ryndak, & Wehmeyer, 2008-2009; Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2012), yet restrictive placements with little access to general education peers, activities, and curriculum remain commonplace (e.g., Kurth et al., 2014). The persistence of restrictive placements can be attributed to the notion of a continuum, implying some degree of restrictiveness is appropriate or needed for students with disabilities (e.g., Turnbull, 1981). The tiered model of SWPBS approach represents another continuum, with many assuming the direction of intervention moves from universal, to targeted, and finally to intensive levels

of behavior support. This implication of direction of movement and intensity of service in many ways replicates the continuum of the LRE, which traps many students with severe disabilities in separate settings (Taylor, 1988). As separate, congregate settings are often conflated with intensity of service (Mayton, Carter, Zhang, & Wheeler, 2014), there is a similar risk that students with severe disabilities will remain stuck in separate settings where intensive behavior interventions are presumed to be delivered. Further, there is a risk schools employing SWPBS models will begin with universal approaches, and never reach a stage in which all teachers are taught strategies for secondary and tertiary interventions (Brown & Michaels, 2006).

Despite these concerns, SWPBS has great potential to engender inclusive schools. For example, it is possible SWPBS can establish a climate, culture, and language that facilitate development of individualized supports for all students, including those with severe disabilities (Freeman et al., 2006). Furthermore, individualized PBIS and SWPBS have the intended goals of preventing students from being placed in more restrictive educational settings; research describing the extent to which this occurs is needed. Additionally, the potential of SWPBS to be delivered in such a way to move students already restricted into more inclusive settings is an important line of needed research (Crimmins & Farrell, 2006). Finally, the impact of teacher training focusing on prevention and environmental modifications, as in SWPBS, has great potential to create environments and teacher behaviors that support inclusive education. The impact of SWPBS on teacher understanding and support of inclusive education is needed.

### **Conclusion**

The use of SWPBS has grown substantially in the past decade, yet the inclusion of students with severe disabilities in this overall movement remains largely ignored despite the great potential of SWPBS to enhance prosocial skill development and inclusive experiences for this group of students. Research has documented the capability of SWPBS approaches to improve outcomes for most students. This focus on “most” fails time and again to account for *all* students; thus, the separation and segregation of students on the basis of presumed capacity and needs persists. As a field we must embrace technologies and strategies that have the potential to take us in the direction towards inclusivity. Research on the possible contributions of SWPBS towards realizing this vision are therefore greatly needed.

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