Effectiveness of Schoolwide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports in Reducing Racially Inequitable Disciplinary Exclusion

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Researchers have consistently documented racially inequitable disciplinary exclusion and concomitant disparities in academic achievement (Aud, Fox, & Kewal-Ramani, 2010; Skiba et al., 2011). Because schoolwide positive behavior interventions and supports (SWPBIS) is widely adopted to reduce overall disciplinary incidents (Sugai & Simonsen, 2012), our goal was to examine its capacity to reduce inequitable disciplinary exclusions, as well as how it might need to be modified to do so more effectively.

According to nationally representative data collected by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights in 2009–2010, about 7.4% of all students enrolled in U.S. public schools were suspended at least once that year. Disaggregated by students' race/ethnicity, disturbing disparities emerge: 17% of all Black, 8% of all American Indian, and 7% of all Latino students were suspended at least once, compared to 5% of all White students (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). And these disparities widen at the secondary level, and even more when the data are further disaggregated by disability status (see Chapter 6).

Black and American Indian students tend to be most affected by disciplinary disparities. Black students tend to be not only excluded at higher rates but also subject to more severe disciplinary consequences, including suspensions, than White students for similar violations (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Skiba & Peterson, 2000). They also are more likely than their White peers to be suspended for subjectively interpretable violations, such as disrespect or noncompliance (Skiba et al., 2011). American Indian students are also suspended at a higher rate than their White peers (Aud et al., 2010). In addition, American Indian students tend to be truant at a much higher rate than White students (Aud et al., 2012).

Disparities in disciplinary out of school suspensions increase at higher grade levels (see Losen's introduction to this book). Not surprisingly, racial disparities in disciplinary exclusion are paralleled by racial disparities in academic outcomes. Based on the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in reading at the 4th-grade level, American Indian students scored 26 points lower than their White peers, whereas Black and Latino students scored 25 points lower. Similar results occurred at the 8th-grade level: American Indian students trailed their White peers by 22 points, Black students by 27 points, and Latino students by 24 points (Aud et al., 2011). On the most recent NAEP 4th-grade reading assessment, conducted in 2013, Black students scored 24 points lower, Latino students 21 points lower, and American Indian students 19 points lower than their White peers.[1] Based on the most current data available, the average freshman graduation rate for American Indian students in 2009−2010 was 69%, compared to 83% of White students, 71% of Latino students, and 66% of Black students (Aud et al., 2013).

In sum, racial disparities in disciplinary exclusion have increased in recent decades; they are more pronounced in secondary than elementary schools and for students with disabilities; they

affect Black and American Indian students most severely; and they are accompanied by disparities in academic performance and high school graduation rates. Because SWPBIS has been linked to overall reductions in disciplinary referrals, it presents itself as a potential remedy for disciplinary inequities.

SCHOOLWIDE POSITIVE BEHAVIOR INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORTS

To provide an overview of SWPBIS, we briefly describe its key features, the extent to which it has been adopted by schools across the United States, its presence in educational policy, and the evidence-base linking its implementation to improved student outcomes.

Key Features

With its origin in positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) strategies designed to include students with emotional and behavioral disability in general education classrooms (Carr et al., 2002; Colvin, Kame'enui, & Sugai, 1993), SWPBIS has evolved into a schoolwide approach to discipline that is intended to create safe, predictable, and positive school environments that are responsive to entire school populations' varying needs for certain types and levels of support (Sprague & Horner, 2006). The key SWPBIS practices are (a) clearly defining behavioral expectations valued by the school community, (b) proactively teaching what those expected behaviors look like in various school settings at least once a year, (c) frequently rewarding students who comply with behavioral expectations, (d) administering a clearly defined continuum of consequences for behavioral violations, and (e) continuously collecting and analyzing data to assess students' responsiveness to the behavioral support provided.

The hallmark of SWPBIS is a focus on changing adult behavior, such as proactively teaching behavioral expectations, frequently rewarding students for engaging in appropriate behaviors,

and making data-based decisions about students' support needs based on their behavioral performance. Implementation of SWPBIS is team based and driven by adults. A team whose members are representative of the school's demographics and include the school administrator and members of all school constituencies (e.g., general education teacher, special education teacher, parent, school psychologist, counselor, custodial staff) defines the school's behavioral expectations, develops lessons to teach these expected behaviors to all students at the beginning of the school year and as needed throughout the year, designs activities to acknowledge and celebrate students' behavioral successes, and reviews patterns of office discipline referral (ODR) data.

To accommodate students with differing needs, the implementation of SWPBIS follows the multitiered response-to-intervention logic. Universal support (tier 1) is provided to all students at all times; that is, all students are exposed to annual lessons in how to comply with behavioral expectations and are rewarded for doing so. Students who do not respond sufficiently to this universal tier receive additional support, often in the form of a check-in/check-out program (tier 2). This type of program gives students increased contact with adults. In the morning, students check in with a staff member who makes sure the student has all materials and is prepared for the day, and in the afternoon students check out with the same staff member, who provides praise and encouragement for the next day. Students also carry a "point card" they present to teachers throughout the day to get feedback on their behavioral performance, which enables teachers and schoolwide teams to monitor their behavioral progress frequently. Students who do not respond to the tier 2 program, or who clearly need more intensive interventions because they are students with significant behavioral challenges, receive intensive individualized or tertiary support (tier

3). The individualized support students receive in tier 3 is specified by a behavioral support team in a behavior support plan.

Adoption

Since its initial testing at select demonstration sites in the 1990s (Colvin & Fernandez, 2000; Taylor-Greene et al., 1997), SWPBIS has become a widely adopted disciplinary approach. Its dissemination in schools, districts, and state education agencies occurred largely through the Technical Assistance (TA) Center on PBIS, which has been funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs since 1998. In 2008, the TA Center on PBIS assessed the extent to which SWPBIS has been adopted and found that 30 states and the District of Columbia had statewide PBIS initiatives, and 46 states plus the District of Columbia were implementing SWPBIS in some of their schools. A total of 8% of all U.S. schools had implemented SWPBIS (Spaulding, Horner, May, & Vincent, 2008). In 2012, the TA Center on PBIS reported that 16,000 school teams had been trained in SWPBIS implementation (Sugai & Simonsen, 2012).

Presence in Educational Policy

True to its origins in the inclusion movement (Carr et al., 2002), PBIS is now firmly embedded in special education law, as its widespread adoption and efforts to increase its political visibility (Sugai et al., 2010) brought SWPBIS to the attention of policymakers. The 1997 Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) called for using PBIS to address inappropriate behavior among students receiving special education services. In the 2004 reauthorization of the IDEA, PBIS was retained as a strategy to support students with disability who exhibited challenging behavior.

In the wake of mounting evidence of racial disparities in disciplinary practices and an increased focus on finding ways to alleviate those disparities and associated disparities in academic outcomes, SWPBIS is being considered as a strategy to facilitate equity in student outcomes. For example, a bill currently before the U.S. Congress (S.1094, Strengthening America's School Act of 2013) is intended to help schools close the achievement gap and improve school environments, and SWPBIS is among the strategies it recommends using to achieve those goals. These policy recommendations make good sense, given the focus in SWPBIS on establishing safe, predictable, and positive school environments, as well as the large base of evidence supporting its beneficial effect on student outcomes.

The Evidence Base for SWPBIS

Abundant evidence links SWPBIS to a reduction in office discipline referrals, primarily in elementary schools (Horner, Sugai, & Anderson, 2010). The results of two randomized controlled trials, the gold standard for scientific evidence, support the benefits of SWPBIS. Horner et al. (2009) conducted a randomized controlled trial with 60 elementary schools and found that the implementation of SWPBIS was functionally related to improvement in adults' perceptions of school safety and gains in students' reading performance.

Bradshaw, Mitchell, and Leaf (2010) conducted a randomized controlled trial with 37 elementary schools and found that schools implementing SWPBIS had a lower overall percentage of students receiving ODR. A reduction in time spent on disciplinary incidents translates into increased instructional time—thus SWPBIS has clear benefits for students' academic outcomes as well as their behavior.

To assess the extent to which SWPBIS can alleviate racial disparities in disciplinary outcomes, a number of studies have examined the relationship between the implementation of

SWPBIS and disciplinary equity across students from various racial/ethnic backgrounds. It is important to keep in mind that disparities in disciplinary outcomes between racial groups can be expressed in different units of measurement. Rate differences indicate if the number of students affected by disciplinary events in one racial group is equivalent to the number of students affected by disciplinary events in another racial group. Odds ratios indicate if students of one racial group are more likely to be disciplined than students of another group. Ideally, both comparisons should be reported to arrive at a balanced interpretation of existing disparities. Unfortunately, few studies report both.

Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, and Leaf (2010) examined discipline data collected during one academic year in schools implementing SWPBIS and found that Black students had significantly greater odds of being referred to the office than White students. Kaufman et al. (2010) examined discipline data collected during 1 academic year in schools engaged in the implementation of SWPBIS and found that African American students had higher rates of ODR than their peers. On the other hand, Vincent and colleagues (Vincent, Tobin, Swain-Bradway, & May, 2011) compared 3 years of discipline data collected in elementary schools that implemented SWPBIS with discipline data collected in elementary schools that did not implement SWPBIS. In all schools, Black students were referred to the office at a higher rate than White students. In the schools that implemented SWPBIS, the disparity in the rates of Black and White students referred to the office was smaller at each time point and stayed approximately the same across the 3 years. In the schools that did not implement SWPBIS, the disparity in the rates of Black and White students referred to the office was larger at each time point and increased slightly across the 3 years. Examining equity in the multitiered continuum of supports provided through SWPBIS, Vincent, Tobin, Hawken, and Frank (2012) found that at

the elementary level Black students had higher rates of discipline referrals than their peers and higher odds of receiving secondary support (tier 2) in the form of a check-in/check-out program than White students. At the middle school level, Black students had more significantly higher rates of disciplinary referrals compared to their peers but lower odds of receiving secondary support than White students.

In sum, the extent to which SWPBIS is effective in reducing racial disparities in disciplinary exclusion is currently unclear, particularly at the secondary level, where racial disparities are most pronounced (Losen & Martinez, 2013). Though there are some promising outcomes, SWPBIS in its current form might not be sufficient to improve disciplinary equity; thus, modifications might need to be considered (Drakeford, 2004; Vincent, Randall, Cartledge, Tobin, & Swain-Bradway, 2011).

Because Oregon has a strong statewide PBIS initiative, and because racial disparities in disciplinary exclusion are greater and perhaps most consequential for the long-term success of non-White students at the middle school level, our research focused on examining whether SWPBIS in its current form has an impact on racial disparities in discipline in middle schools in Oregon. Furthermore, because American Indian students have very poor disciplinary outcomes and are often excluded from large-scale analyses due to their overall low numbers, and because Oregon has the 10th largest American Indian enrollment in the nation, we examined practices in schools with few disparities in disciplinary outcomes between American Indian and White students to see how those practices might guide necessary modifications to SWPBIS.

To assess the relationship between implementation of SWPBIS at the middle school level and changes in racial disparities in discipline, we provide a brief overview of our research project, its primary goals, and its outcomes.

Overview of the Research

We merged data from a randomized controlled trial designed to test whether SWPBIS can be implemented with fidelity in middle schools with data on disciplinary exclusion collected by the Oregon Department of Education. The fidelity of SWPBIS implementation was measured with the Prevention Practices Assessment (Institute on Violence and Destructive Behavior, 2008). The Oregon Department of Education's disciplinary data included in-school suspension (ISS), out-of-school suspension (OSS), expulsion (EXP), and truancy (TRU). The number of ISS, OSS, and EXPs were recorded as well as the duration of each exclusionary incident. Duration was measured in half-days; for example, a student could be suspended out of school for half a day, 1 day, 1 and a half days, and so on.

Our sample consisted of 35 middle schools in Oregon, which ranged in locale and size from rural schools with 65 students to suburban/urban schools with over 1,100 students. On average, the schools' enrollment was predominantly White (70%), followed by Latino (20%), American Indian (5%), Asian (3%), and Black (2%). Schools were randomly assigned to a treatment condition (full SWPBIS training schedule with ongoing coaching) or control condition (1-day annual workshop or consultation on SWPBIS). The racial distribution of school enrollments was approximately equal in the treatment group and the control group.

To examine the impact SWPBIS had on equity in middle schools, we first used statistical tests to determine whether the method can be implemented with fidelity in these schools. Descriptive analyses of discipline data focused on rates of disciplinary events per 100 students per day, as well as the percentage of days of instruction lost, based on 170 annual school days multiplied by each racial group's enrollment in each condition. To follow up on descriptive outcomes, we examined differences in ISS rate, OSS rate, EXP rate, TRU rate, and "percentage of student days lost" for each racial/ethnic group across the treatment and control conditions.
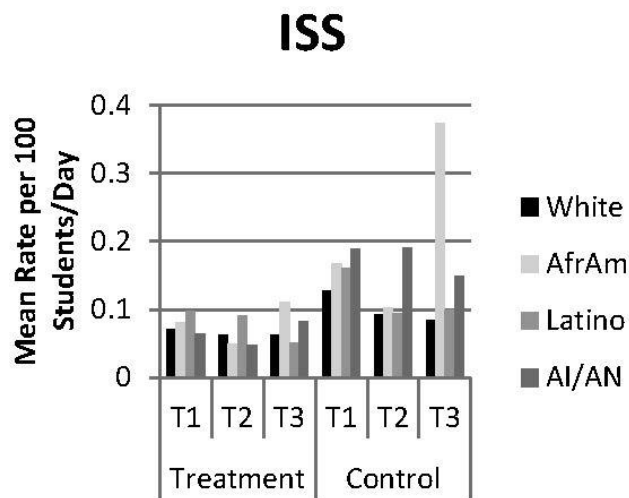
Can SWPBIS Be Implemented in Middle Schools?

Data on implementation fidelity showed that treatment schools made larger overall gains in the key SWPBIS practices across the 4 years of the project than the control schools. In treatment schools, the key practice "defining schoolwide behavioral expectations" increased from 23% implemented in year 1 to 66% implemented in year 4; "teaching behavioral expectations" increased from 17% implemented in year 1 to 70% implemented in year 4; and "reinforcement of expected behavior" increased from 10% implemented in year 1 to 49% implemented in year 4. Control schools increased their level of "defining schoolwide behavioral expectations" from 32% implemented in year 1 to 56% implemented in year 4, their practice of "teaching behavioral expectations" from 22% implemented in year 1 to 54% implemented in year 4, and "reinforcement of expected behaviors" from 16% implemented in year 1 to 26% implemented in year 4. According to our statistical tests, the differences in the implementation of SWPBIS between treatment schools and control schools was statistically significant.
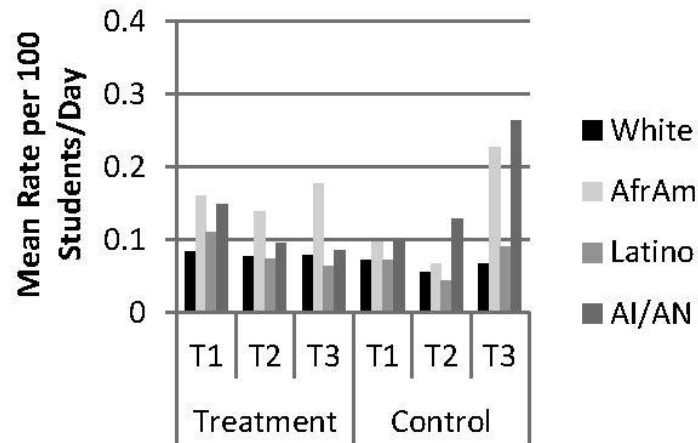
Was SWPBIS Implementation Associated With Reduced Inequities in Disciplinary Exclusions?

Figure 14.1 provides an overview of disciplinary exclusion rates by racial/ethnic group across time and treatment condition. We focused on African American, Latino, and American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) students because they traditionally experience the poorest discipline outcomes, and we included White students as the comparison group. Panels 1 to 4 show the mean rates for ISS, OSS, EXP, and TRU for each racial group across conditions. Panel 5 shows the mean percentage of student days lost across racial/ethnic groups and condition.
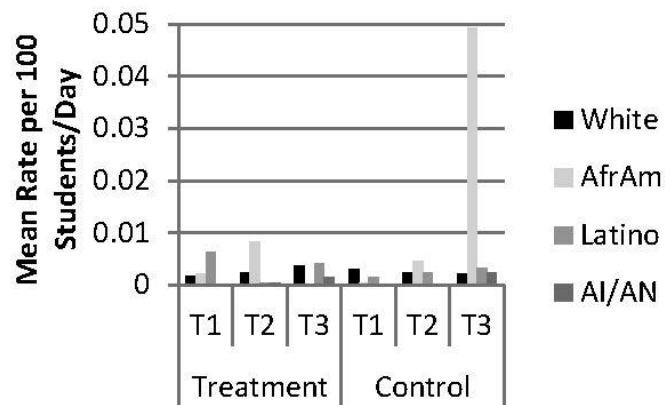
Figure 14.1. Mean Rates of EXP, ISS, OSS, TRU, and Mean Percentage of Student Days Lost Across Racial/Ethnic Groups and Conditions
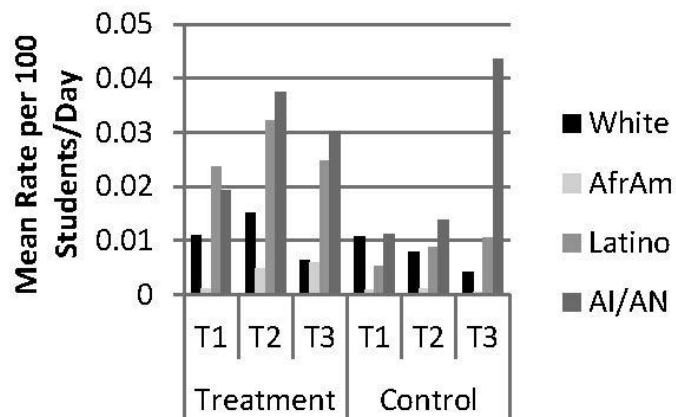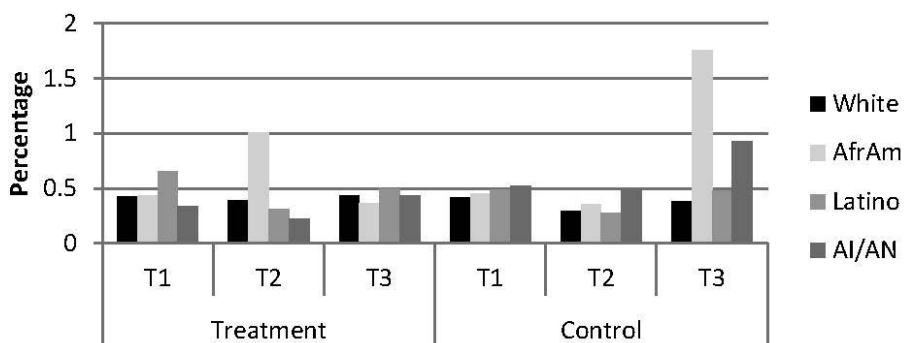
OSS

EXP

TRU

Percentage of Student Days Lost

Based on these outcomes, the implementation of SWPBIS in middle schools seems associated with (a) overall lower rates of ISS, the least severe form of disciplinary exclusion; (b) overall high rates of truancy, especially for American Indian and Latino students; (c) some reduction in disciplinary exclusions for Latino and American Indian students, but few for African American students; and (4) fluctuations in the duration of disciplinary exclusions for African American students. Statistically significant interactions among time, condition, and race/ethnicity indicated that changes in disciplinary exclusion across time differed not only by condition but also by students' racial/ethnic backgrounds; that is, race remained a predictor of trends in disciplinary exclusion despite the implementation of SWPBIS. Effect sizes for the interaction terms were extremely small, ranging from $\eta = .059$ to $\eta = .065$. (For study details, see Vincent, Sprague, & Gau, 2013).

Given the outcomes for American Indian students in our middle school sample—especially their high truancy rates, which appear consistent with national findings—we followed up with a supplementary analysis of the extent to which schools in Oregon implement recommendations from the Native American Community to reduce disciplinary exclusion and improve the academic achievement of American Indian students. If the Native American Community's recommendations translate into promising practices, they might provide guidance on how to

modify SWPBIS to make it more responsive to the behavioral support needs of American Indian students in particular, and perhaps of non-White students in general.

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE NATIVE COMMUNITY

To improve its students' school outcomes, the Native American Community recommends (a) improving teachers' cultural awareness through a focus on Native culture in pre-service and in-service teacher training; (b) enhancing the relevance of the curriculum by incorporating tribal traditions, customs, and languages; and (c) increasing Native parents' participation in school events and local policymaking (Chavers, 2000; CHiXapkaid et al., 2008; NCAI/NIEA, 2010). Unfortunately, our research indicated that limited efforts had been made to implement these recommendations. However, we also found that, in schools containing grades K through 8 or K through 12 (K–8/12) in our sample, the discrepancy in suspension rates between American Indian and White students was only .02 percentage points. Based on these findings, we took a closer look at these schools' schoolwide support practices.

Promising Practices to Improve
Disciplinary Equity for American Indian Students

One of the K–8/12 schools stood out with zero OSS for both American Indian and White students. In this school, teachers reported the highest use of Native culture in instruction and the greatest amount of staff development focused on American Indian issues. The school also had the highest number of teachers who identified as American Indian, and a Title VII Indian education coordinator. Parent involvement and strong community relationships were a feature shared by all schools with low OSS rates for American Indian and White students. One school actively involved parents by conducting an online survey asking them to rate whether their

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child's education was adequately challenging, whether homework assignments were meaningful, and whether they as parents felt well informed about school activities and felt welcome in the school.

The policies and practices of schools with low American Indian disciplinary exclusion rates seemed to emphasize the importance of relationships and how to nurture them carefully. Notably, two of the four schools with the lowest OSS rates for both American Indian and White students had implemented SWPBIS. Their behavioral expectations clearly reflected Native traditions, and their student handbooks emphasized exhibiting positive behaviors and parent involvement.

In sum, the schools with the lowest disparities in disciplinary exclusion between American Indian and White students clearly followed the recommendations of the Native American Community by focusing on staff development in cultural sensitivity, culturally relevant instruction, and strong school relationships with parents and families. In two schools, these practices were successfully merged with the SWPBIS model, which resulted in greater disciplinary equity. (For details of our study, see Vincent, CHiXapkaid, Sprague, & Tobin, 2013).

Limitations of the Research

Because the samples for our studies were relatively small and data often violated the assumptions of the statistical tests, our outcomes should be interpreted as purely exploratory. Moreover, both studies were limited to schools in Oregon. Replication in schools located in other states might provide additional important information.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

There is little doubt that SWPBIS has substantial benefits for schools. Reductions in ODR translate into less chaotic classrooms, less time spent by teachers and administrators on disciplinary issues, and more time spent on teaching and learning. Moreover, implementation driven by local school teams requires few additional resources, and the wide adoption of SWPBIS speaks to its appeal to school personnel who are strapped for time and resources. Its current limited effectiveness in reducing racial/ethnic disparities in disciplinary exclusion suggests that, in its current form, SWPBIS might have to be supplemented with other practices or be modified to increase its capacity to reduce disciplinary inequity. SWPBIS was not specifically designed to address disciplinary inequities but to create safe, predictable, and positive school environments in which students can succeed behaviorally as well as academically. It was developed approximately 3 decades ago, when fewer non-White students attended U.S. schools and less attention was focused on equity in student outcomes. Although it is intended to meet the support needs of *all* students, its current limited attention to cultural differences in the student population and potential differences in cultural backgrounds between adults and students within a school make SWPBIS vulnerable to criticism for not sufficiently reducing racial/ethnic disparities in discipline outcomes. However, our studies show that practices that appear to produce desirable outcomes for American Indian students could guide us in modifying SWPBIS to be more responsive to the support needs of culturally diverse students in general. Based on our findings, we make the following policy recommendations for improving the effectiveness of SWPBIS in reducing inequities in discipline practices.

Increase Accountability for Cultural Awareness
Within the SWPBIS Framework

Although the U.S. student population is becoming rapidly more diverse, the majority of school

personnel are still White (Toldson, McGee, & Lemmons, 2013). This means that cultural

discontinuities between students and teachers are becoming more common. Within the SWPBIS

framework, these cultural discontinuities might affect the extent to which adult-driven behavioral

support practices match students' support needs. To create greater cultural continuity between

students and teachers, we recommend professional development that focuses on cultural

awareness (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, & Leaf, 2010; Gregory, Allen, Mikami, Hafen, &

Pianta, 2013). The implementation of SWPBIS could be modified to include systemic support

for staff to increase their awareness of cultural differences, including professional development

opportunities, internal coaching, or holding regular forums for problem solving and the

discussion of discipline issues potentially related to cultural differences (Vincent, Randall et al.,

2011). Incentives such as grants to schools to implement these additional staff supports might be

useful in encouraging those implementing SWPBIS to enhance their accountability for cultural

awareness.

Increase Accountability for Basing Support Decisions Within the SWPBIS
Framework on Data Disaggregated by Student Race/Ethnicity

One hallmark of SWPBIS is data-based decision-making. Although fidelity in the

implementation of SWPBIS is assessed according to the extent to which schools continuously

collect and review discipline data, it is commonly not based on the extent to which those data are

disaggregated by students' race/ethnicity. Based on 3 years (2005–2008) of ODR data collected

using the Schoolwide Information System (SWIS), only 14% of SWIS users accessed the

ethnicity report (Vincent, 2008).[2] Disaggregating discipline data should be a matter of course for SWPBIS implementers. Making implementation fidelity dependent on the use of discipline data disaggregated by student race/ethnicity for decisions regarding students' support needs might encourage schools to engage in this highly recommended practice.

Triangulate Data to Capture Multiple Perspectives of School Discipline

In its current form, SWPBIS implementation is heavily focused on ODR data. Though these data are a valid index of a school's overall behavioral health (Irvin, Tobin, Sprague, Sugai, & Vincent, 2004), they might not be sufficiently nuanced to capture differences in teachers' disciplinary practices, students' perceptions of the discipline process, or parents' perceptions of how students should be disciplined. As our study of behaviorally successful schools serving American Indian students has shown, collecting data on parents' perceptions can promote mutual trust and meaningful collaboration that appears to be beneficial in reducing disciplinary inequities.

Furthermore, ODR data focus exclusively on behavioral violations, whereas collecting data on the extent to which students engage in appropriate social skills might add a decision-making dimension that is better aligned with SWPBIS's focus on positive school environments. Currently, the federal government has set aside funds for grant applicants to receive support for implementing PBIS. Thus grantees could be given incentives, such as in the application evaluation criteria, to link data systems to yield more nuanced information. For example, linking discipline and academic performance data might provide important information on students' overall school success. Teacher-reported data on student behavior could be linked with student self-reported behaviors to assess the extent to which teacher and student perceptions converge. Linking teacher data to parent data might also add important information on how behavioral

expectations in school align with behavioral expectations at home. This might encourage SWPBIS implementers to modify their practices to meet the support needs of culturally diverse students more effectively.

Merge SWPBIS Practices with Prevention-Oriented Student Codes of Conduct

Although SWPBIS relies on the proactive teaching of appropriate behavior and the frequent reinforcement of students who comply with behavioral expectations, research has shown that many schools that implement SWPBIS have student codes of conduct that are primarily punitive (Fenning et al., 2003). Student codes of conduct that focus on the consequences of behavioral violations appear to conflict with the overall prevention-oriented focus of SWPBIS.

Fenning and colleagues (2013) found that codes of conduct that prescribe disciplinary exclusion for relatively minor or subjectively interpretable violations might produce racially inequitable discipline outcomes, given that non-White students tend to be disciplined disproportionately for such violations (Skiba et al., 2011). Simply removing the option of excluding students from school for these types of offenses might reduce disciplinary inequities (Fenning et al., 2003).

These recommended modifications clearly align with the current SWPBIS framework. They focus on expanding existing staff support systems to include an emphasis on cultural awareness, on actively using available tools to disaggregate data, on expanding data-based decision making to include more nuanced information, and on redefining the severity of consequences for minor behavioral violations to prevent disciplinary exclusion. Taken together, these modifications could increase the effectiveness of SWPBIS in reducing racial disparities in disciplinary exclusion.

NOTES

1. See http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/naepdata/report.aspx.

2. See www.swis.org. SWIS is a data-collection system used by many schools implementing SWPBIS. It has the capacity to produce an "ethnicity report" showing discipline data by student race/ethnicity.

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