APBS President’s Update

This year the Association for Positive Behavior Support Board of Directors is increasing the amount of time dedicated to the action planning process. Usually, APBS full board meetings are held quarterly by conference call, with a full-day onsite meeting held the day before the March conference. This October 2011 however, the board made time for an additional full-day meeting dedicated to finalizing the action plan and fine-tuning the organizational systems that are being used to manage APBS activities. A key part of the discussion at this meeting focused on how to increase the ability of members to participate in APBS-related action plan activities throughout the year.

Jean Ramirez was appointed as Family Ex Officio at the October 26, 2011, planning meeting, and she attended the second half of the planning meeting. Jean will be fulfilling the Ex Officio role for the remainder of the 2011–2012 year. We are pleased to welcome Jean as a new Ex Officio for APBS!

At the October meeting, the board approved a new topical network titled School-wide Positive Behavior Support (SWPBS) Training Network. The purpose of this network will be to establish and promote a community of trainers to share materials, tools, and products. APBS members will be able to post material, share knowledge, and network with other SWPBS trainers via an online Wiki resource site. Key contacts for this new network are Susan Barrett and Lori Newcomer.

An additional half-day has been added to the March board meeting in 2012 to ensure that the board has time to finish all the tasks necessary to run this important association. The goal of the March meeting will be to place the finalized action plan within a project management system that will allow for more sophisticated evaluation and management oversight by the board. Another topic discussed by the board included changing the APBS newsletter mission so that it reports APBS evaluation data, indicates progress made on the APBS action plan, and highlights important networking activities taking place within the membership. Please thank your board members for all of their hard work this year on APBS-related activities!

A State Model for PBIS in Secure Juvenile Corrections: Planning and Early Implementation

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The successful outcomes observed for the implementation of PBIS in public schools,
as well as the poor outcomes experienced by youth in the juvenile justice (JJ) system, have created interest among JJ professionals and jurisdictions in the potential for using this framework to better meet the JJ system’s goal of rehabilitating youth in its care. Further impetus has come from litigation against various juvenile justice jurisdictions involving conditions of confinement, which has led advocates to seek alternatives to secure-care environments dominated by punishment.

Accurate information on the extent to which PBIS is being implemented in JJ settings is difficult to obtain. Implementation is occurring in one or more facilities in several states (e.g., California, Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky, Oregon, Washington), but to date no systematic outcome data have been reported. Statewide implementation has been attempted in JJ facilities in North Carolina and New Mexico, but the current status of these efforts is unknown. Texas also launched a statewide initiative when the state legislature mandated implementation of PBIS in all secure juvenile facilities run by the Texas Youth Commission (TYC). This article describes the implementation process to date, preliminary outcomes, and the impact of ongoing system reform within TYC.

Overview of Texas Youth Commission

TYC serves youth adjudicated to secure residential facilities in response to felony offenses. At the inception of the PBIS legislation, the agency ran 10 secure institutional facilities with internal schools, located in eight cities across Texas. At that time, nearly 1,600 youth resided in the facilities. In May 2011, the Texas Legislature passed legislation that will merge TYC with the Texas Juvenile Probation Commission (TJPC) to create one Texas Juvenile Justice Department. Pre-merger activities included the closure of three TYC institutions and consolidation of two units. Six facilities will remain, with budgeted capacities ranging from 132 to 340 and a total youth population of 1,372.

The average youth committed to TYC is 16 years old, in Grade 9, and has a Grade 6 reading level and a Grade 5 math level. In aggregate, 35.4% of youth are eligible for special education services, and 5.9% are English language learners. TYC schools offer a full curriculum aligned to state standards taught by certified, highly qualified teachers. TYC schools also offer a broad spectrum of vocational courses and industrial certification programs. TYC students also registered 165 college course completions during the 2010–2011 school year via videoconference distance learning.

Specialized treatment programs include a capital and serious violent offender program, alcohol and other drugs program, mental health program, and sexual behavior program. Specialized treatment programs run by specially trained or licensed staff are available to youth at a high or moderate level of intensity, depending on each youth’s individual needs. Other services include general treatment programming for all youth and emphases on skills building, mentoring, family involvement, and community service. The umbrella of services available is called CoNEXtions.

Implementation Chronology

In 2009, the Texas Legislature enacted HB 3689, requiring that TYC initiate a plan to improve youth learning and behavior in all its secure care facilities. Specifically regarding behavior, this legislation requires that: “[the TYC] shall: (1) adopt system-wide classroom and individual positive behavior supports that incorporate a continuum of prevention and intervention strategies.”

The first step in addressing this mandate was to form a TYC PBIS Leadership Team, composed of staff members representing the major programs in TYC (Education, Youth Services, and Treatment). An internal PBIS Coordinator (author Turner) was appointed. The agency also retained the services of two external consultants (authors Nelson and Wang) to coordinate training and evaluation, respectively. Sometime later, the Team agreed that external coaches should be employed to facilitate implementation, at which point TYC contracted with Texas State University, and a faculty member active in PBIS and ABA training (author Scheurmann) was retained to hire coaches and oversee all coaching activities. The authors constitute a “Planning Group” that provides consultative support to the PBIS Leadership Team.

During fall of 2010, facility PBIS teams were trained in three cohorts. Each team designated one or two internal coaches, who received additional training and technical assistance from the external coaches. Formal rollout of PBIS, defined as initial implementation of minimal features (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005) began in January 2011. The TYC PBIS Leadership Team determined that implementation would begin in facility education programs only and move to other settings in facilities when other criteria were attained, including successful fidelity assessments by external consultants and coaches. The Planning Group determined that the existing behavior reporting and analysis system was inadequate for PBIS needs and recommended adoption of a web-based data system developed by the Texas...
Region 13 Education Service Center—the Referral Assessment Management Portal (RAMP).

TYC PBIS Infrastructure Supports

TYC adopted a comprehensive system of supports for the PBIS initiative, including two groups of external coaches. The first group, PBIS coaches, consists of seven individuals who have graduate degrees or advanced coursework in PBIS and experience in assisting schools in universal-level PBIS training and implementation. PBIS coaches visit their assigned facilities monthly, at minimum. They also maintain close communication with internal facility coaches and facility administrators between visits. During their visits, PBIS coaches meet with PBIS teams, internal coaches, and administrators; observe in classrooms and other areas; assist with problem solving; and monitor progress on action plan steps.

PBIS coaches also provide training, and conduct evaluations using PBIS fidelity assessments: the Schoolwide Benchmarks of Quality (Kincaid, Childs, & George, 2010) and the Facility-wide Evaluation Tool (Nelson, 2009). Two assessments have been conducted: one prior to implementation and another after 6 months of implementation. PBIS coaches work with internal coaches to identify target areas to address in facility PBIS action plans, based on assessment results. PBIS coaches are also helping ensure that internal coaches will be prepared to carry on the responsibilities of PBIS leadership once the external coaches are no longer available by providing training, including on the use and analysis of fidelity assessments.

A second group of four coaches, Special Education coaches, provide services for youth identified as needing tertiary level interventions. Special Education coaches all have advanced degrees in special education and expertise in PBIS, and they either hold or are working toward Board-Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) certification. These coaches provide behavioral assessment and intervention support services for special education youth with the most disciplinary incidents at each facility. The coaches work with case managers and multidisciplinary teams to make intervention recommendations, provide consultative supports for teachers, and collect data to monitor intervention effectiveness.

Early Data: What Do We Know So Far?

Although data on the impact of PBIS are not yet available, pilot studies of pre-PBIS behavior incident data indicated that the rate and severity of behavior incidents varied by setting (e.g., dorm, school), facility, and over time. These analyses indicated that the proportion of youth with behavior incidents in school per month was very low (< 5% were removed from class for a behavioral incident). This shows that school behavior problems requiring classroom removal distribute similarly in juvenile justice and public school settings.

Anecdotal data indicated positive changes resulting from PBIS. External coaches reported that staff members are using more systematic, instructional, and positive approaches to preventing and managing challenging behaviors. For example, one PBIS team was asked for assistance because of youth sleeping in class. The team collected data on youth sleeping and then developed a plan to have correctional staff members move among students to keep them awake. They also referred youth to the clinic to determine if sleeping was medication related.

Other positive changes reported include implementation of classroom reinforcement systems by teachers, collaboration between PBIS teams and dorm staff to problem-solve youth behavior difficulties in dorms, and increased use of acknowledgment systems to highlight positive behavior in educational programs and in the dorms. Individual facilities are reporting reductions in disciplinary referrals; one facility reported a reduction in referrals from more than 21 per month when they began PBIS in January to near zero referrals by April.

Challenges and Recommendations

This initiative, though rewarding in so many ways, has not been without challenges. These challenges, and plans for addressing each, follow.

Time and Resources for Implementation. To date, the TYC PBIS coordinator has added PBIS to his other duties; there is no dedicated PBIS position. This is also true for the internal PBIS coaches and team members. Planning for future PBIS structure is taking into account the need for increased FTE for the state coordinator and possible release time for PBIS activities for facility coaches.

Training Needs. As implementation progresses, all involved personnel have realized the need for additional training in the data management system and PBIS. Planning is underway to address these training needs as part of annual personnel training. The PBIS coaches are developing training modules and scripts for future training activities, including an orientation module for new staff members and advanced PBIS training for current staff members.
Coordination with Treatment Program. One significant, overarching challenge has been coordination of PBIS and an existing module of the CoNEXTions program, the “Positive Behavior Change System.” Areas of commonality, potential conflicts, and possible redundancy need to be identified. Plans are underway for a committee of TYC and other personnel to conduct these analyses and to better align PBIS and CoNEXTions.

Communication and Coordination. In an agency the size of and as dispersed as TYC, clear and consistent communication about PBIS has been challenging, particularly with the number of personnel involved in this initiative and the rapid timeline for implementation. Solutions to enhance communication are being developed, including a PBIS page on the TYC intranet, a recurrent PBIS newsletter, and regular communications from the state PBIS leadership team.

Focus. TYC has been responding to a number of new mandates, the most recent being the recent directive from the Texas legislature to merge TYC with TJPC, and to close three secure facilities. Youth have already been moved to other facilities, and the merger will be completed by December 2011. These rapid and significant changes have posed challenges to maintaining focus on PBIS at both the facility and state leadership levels.

Future Directions
Change occurs frequently in JJ systems, and changes in policy, politics, and programming, as well as the unique characteristics of secure juvenile settings, require adjustments to the PBIS implementation process that has been successful in public schools. However, the key features of PBIS (a focus on desired outcomes, data-based decision making, supporting youth through effective practices, and supporting staff through an efficient organizational framework and ongoing technical assistance) are equally important for successful implementation in this system.

Future areas of focus include increased and improved use of data. TYC has large quantities of data in different data systems. Optimal decision-making will require integration of different data systems and new skill sets related to transforming data into more useful information and knowledge. Refinement of acknowledgment and reinforcement systems, combined with regular training for new and current staff members, will also be important for sustaining an enhanced internal capacity to prevent and reduce problematic behaviors. As TYC schools refine and systematize PBIS operations, the state PBIS team will consider a schedule for phasing in PBIS facility-wide. To the extent PBIS successfully reduces misbehaviors in this JJ population, more time on task will be available for educational achievement, and treatment groups can become more effective by avoiding some problematic behavioral distractions.

Planning for the pending merger of TYC and the state juvenile probation department is underway. The probation department does not run residential facilities, but it does provide funding, monitoring, and technical assistance to probation programs run by Texas counties, including Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Programs (JJAEPs). Assumptions about use of PBIS in JJAEPs or probation residential programs are premature, but the merger of TYC and TJPC will afford opportunities for information sharing about PBIS with these widely distributed operations.

References

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