This study examines a large, Midwestern urban school district in a community characterized by high levels of risk factors (Table 1). Urban schools characterized by gang activity, poverty, and violence may have many more students with moderate and high levels of inappropriate behaviors (Warren, et al., 2003; Guerra, et al., 1995). Two cohorts are examined in this study. Cohort 1, a middle school and a high school, implemented PBS for three years beginning in 2004-2005 (Year 1). Cohort 2, a group of elementary and middle schools, implemented PBS in the years two to beginning in 2005-2006 (Year 2). Early in the project it became clear that this research should include a study on the population of students in special education. This population seemed to be disproportionately represented in both size and discipline data in PBS schools in this district.

In the schools implementing PBS, reduction in suspensions was the primary goal. In their respective implementation years, students in special education in both cohorts 1 and 2 were suspended with more frequency (table 2). In Year 1, an extraordinarily high percentage of Cohort 1 suspensions were for low-level offenses (table 3). In Cohort 1 students were suspended for longer durations (table 4) than in non-PBS schools. Suspensions per student decreased dramatically for both cohorts. While non-PBS schools did decrease, both groups of PBS schools improved significantly more. This district uses a seven-level matrix to categorize suspensions. Low level offenses include wireless device use, disrespect and profanity. Fighting, minor theft and verbal abuse are mid-level offenses, and high level offenses include possession of weapons or illegal substances, and aggrieved assault.

A key implementation goal for PBS in this district was to reduce the number of suspensions that were assigned for low-level offenses. It was judged that instructional time for these low-level offenses was often an excessive response. Through the preventative measures and targeted interventions of PBS, the Cohort 1 achieved a significant reduction in low-level suspensions.

In Year 4 a district-wide intervention was implemented. Students in middle and high schools could be referred to an off-site bootcamp-style facility for varying lengths of time. This could be used as an alternative to suspension, in-school suspension, or expulsion. It was determined that Year 4 data for Cohort 1 was too severely affected by this new intervention to be comparable to the previous three years of study. Year 4 data for Cohort 2 may have been somewhat affected, but most school sites in Cohort 2 were elementary schools and did not utilize this intervention. It was determined that this data was usable. Further limitations include the reliance on group-level data supplied by the school system. In future study, access to student-level data would provide a much more detailed look at the impact of PBS on students and schools.

To address all three levels of students, systems are created with a team-based approach. Systems include a positively-worded statement of purpose, clearly defined behavioral expectations, procedures for teaching behaviors, for encouraging appropriate behavior, for preventing problem behavior, and for record keeping and decision making. Staff training and staff buy-in are essential for PBS effectiveness (Sugai & Horner, 2002; Luizelli, et al., 2005). Staff must implement relevant, consistent discipline outcomes guided by regular analysis of data (Warren, et al., 2003). (See Sugai & Horner, 2002, for an extensive literature review of PBS and the PBS implementation process.)

The school system of study adopted fairly standard PBS implementation strategies. An outside consultant was hired, and regional and school district officials provided focused and targeted training. Teams were created in each school, and faculty received ongoing training. New school discipline programs were designed around prevention and targeted intervention. An on-site counselling program was implemented for targeted students (i.e. the ‘top of the triangle’).

There are several factors to consider when examining the length of suspensions. The goal should be simply to shorten the amount of instructional time lost. However for this district, in the goal of reducing low-level offenses, an increase in length of suspension for Cohort 1 is not surprising. (Note for Year 3, Cohort 1 suspensions did include high outliers than in previous years.) For Cohort 2, the increase in length of suspension paired with the increase in percentage of low-level suspensions suggests that the implementation of PBS at these sites did not result in the expected outcomes.

Group 1 schools began the study with high levels of suspensions compared to similar schools in the district. Group 2 began the study with higher than average suspensions, though not as high as Group 1. In both groups, students in special education were suspended more frequently per student than the general population. Over each group’s three-year implementation period in the special education population and the whole-school average improved. These results reflect group trends and IDEA compliance. The initial implementation of school-wide PBS in this district resulted in favorable outcomes. Especially in Cohort 1, these outcomes support the hypothesis that school-wide PBS is an effective intervention for not just an aggregate student body, but specifically students in special education.

This research may have weighty implications for school districts and communities wherever outcomes for students in special education are of concern. Continued study of school-wide PBS may reveal whether dropout rates or academic outcomes improve for students who spend many (or potentially all) years of education in a PBS setting.

REFERENCES


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