

*Addressing Individual Perspectives in the
Development of School-wide Rules:
A Data-Informed Process*

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1. Introduction

Successful schoolwide positive behavioral interventions and supports require shared vision and collaborative effort among staff members (Liaupsin, Jolivet, & Scott, 2004; Nelson, Martella, & Marchand-Martella, 2002). To enhance school climate and reduce discipline referrals, staff members must agree about what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate student behavior (Duda, Dunlap, Fox, Lentini & Clarke, 2004; Fenning, Theodos, Benner, & Bohanon-Edmonson, 2004; Scott & Hunter, 2001; Sugai & Horner, 2008). Implementers of SWPBIS strive for 80% agreement among staff. This "80% rule" predicts that universal behavioral standards are likely to be effective if at least 80% of staff members agree upon them (Horner et al., 2004). The assumption is that reaching a majority consensus among staff in this way increases staff buy-in and support, which should in turn lead to more consistent staff responses to rule following and infractions.

Despite the importance of such consensus, specific strategies for reaching 80% agreement among staff are "not well elucidated in the SWPBIS literature" (Feuerborn & Chinn, 2012, p.220). Indeed, as SWPBIS facilitators, we have struggled to implement SWPBIS in situations where agreement about school rules was unattainable. Accordingly, this article outlines a process we developed to support consensus building concerning rule creation. First, we review reasons why consensus may be difficult to reach. Next, we describe a process for gathering, summarizing and using data from school staff members. Third, we present two case studies to illustrate this process before offering recommendations for practice.

2. Challenges to Building Consensus

Ideally, all members of a faculty would help to develop rules for behavior; yet with diverse groups and larger groups, consensus may be difficult to achieve (Scott, 2007). In fact, research has demonstrated that teachers often possess idiosyncratic standards for student behavior (Rimm-Kaufman, Storm, Sawyer, Pianta, & LaParo, 2006). Even within the same school, adults do not always have the same rules for students and may also disagree about consequences (Kerr & Zigmond, 1986, Lane, Wehby, & Cooley, 2006; Vincent, Horner, & Sugai, 2002; Walker & Rankin, 1980). Consequently, each disciplinary event is subject to the interpretations, motivations, standards, and skills of the adult(s) involved (Irvin, Tobin, Spague, Sugai, & Vincent, 2004). Thus, how educators perceive, attribute, and interpret student behavior could influence how fully they endorse and implement schoolwide systems such as school rules.

Furthermore, staff members' varied perceptions of behavior might undermine the effective implementation of rules that address behavior. As Feuerborn and Chinn (2010) noted, "tensions between teachers' perceptions of behavior and discipline may create an undercurrent of discordance that could interfere with staff cohesiveness and stymie the implementation of SWPBIS" (p.226). Simply put, a faculty divided over the school rules may react differently to students' display of positive behavior or rule violations. Because inconsistent rule enforcement is ineffective and may place students at risk for aggressive and oppositional behavior (Way, 2011), variation among staff with regard to addressing behavior is undesirable (Liaupsin et al., 2004). Conversely, individuals who agree with the rules may be more likely to reinforce positive behavior and address violations (via disciplinary response or teaching of the rules) than those who disagree with the established standards.

Scott (2007) argued that schools should integrate the opinions of their stakeholders when making "systemic decisions," to ensure that these decisions align with the values of those operating within the environment. He added that "valuing consensus via authentic participation is key to ensuring the dignity and independence of stakeholders that is necessary for consistent implementation" (Schott, 2007 p. 107). Accordingly, a methodology for integrating staff perception data into a system of school rules is likely to help SWPBIS coaches demonstrate that the personal dignity of their stakeholders is valued.

3. Reaching Consensus: A Data-Informed Process

While working as SWPBIS coaches in a large urban district, we observed many faculty discussions of proposed SW rules. Many resulted in lengthy, unfocused, and quarrelsome sessions. Consensus was sacrificed as individuals told their “war stories” about challenging students. Given the research on educators’ individualized perceptions of behaviors we thought it useful to unearth differences of opinions that might be blocking agreement on schoolwide rules. However, we did not want a time-consuming process requiring considerable external resources.

We ruled out faculty interviews because they could be arduous and would require additional staff not typically available to schools. Paper-and-pencil surveys also posed several disadvantages. Handwritten responses could be difficult to read or interpret; survey preparation (making paper copies distributing, collecting, and organizing them) and data collection (aggregating results) would be time –consuming; completed surveys might be misplaced or altered; and responses might not be anonymous if one recognized the handwriting. Accordingly, we opted for an electronic survey that offered anonymity, could be completed at home or at school, and resulted in quantifiable data that were automatically summarized.

Collecting staff perception data about school rules (a) respects and engages every staff member, (b) grounds the discussions in a contemporary portrayal of staff view (c) focuses the discussion effectively limiting the scope of the conversations and (d) saves time (a valuable commodity in any school), not only prior to establishing rules, but afterward. If staff can focus their discussions and agree on school rules, fewer revisions of the rules during the school year may be expected. Furthermore, surveys that can be completed anonymously allow each voice to be heard equally without regard to the seniority, educational status or popularity. In addition, reticent staff members who prefer not to speak in a large group can offer their opinions without fear of retribution or disparagement from peers or supervisors.

4. Summary

The case study examples at Gary Middle School and Snyder k-12 demonstrated a data-based approach for creating school rules that includes all school staff-members. Although the goal was to establish schoolwide norms for behavioral supports, we must always remember that the individuals within an organization must enforce and reward these norms. Horner (2003) noted that organizations do not themselves “behave”; rather, it is the individuals within an organization who engage in behaviors. Accordingly, we argue that any system of rules and expectations should account for varying experiences, perspectives, and skill sets of the adults in a school. Collecting perspective data and involving staff members in discussions centered on rule creation is one method to achieve this goal.

Perhaps the most gratifying result of this work was the staff members’ realization that they could indeed reach consensus regarding SW rules. Prior to this exercise, many staff members in both schools had resigned themselves to conflicts about how to address challenging behaviors, while others were unaware of the different perspectives present among their colleagues. By quantifying their disagreements and highlighting their many agreements, we provided them with a structured approach that allowed them to discuss their differences dispassionately and efficiently. When discussing the data, we also observed conversations in which staff members swapped ideas for addressing particular behavior problems—a welcome (although unintended) consequence.

Conclusions and Recommendations

To help build internal capacity to establish and maintain effective practices, SWPBIS coaches and facilitators often form school-based teams (Horner et al., 2004; Lewis & Sugai, 1999). These teams are designed to be representative of faculty, and are often charged with managing the establishment of systems of support along each tier of prevention (Lewis, Jones, Horner, & Sugai, 2010). Methods for communicating and discussing team decisions with the rest of the faculty are established, providing a sense of consensus and agreement regarding important, systemic decisions.

However, in large or diverse faculty groups where there is significant disagreement among staff regarding the school rules, it may be prudent to offer staff members more involvement in the process for reaching consensus regarding their school rules. While SWPBIS teams do most of the implementation work on-site, they are also directed to "actively recruit and incorporate feedback from the larger faculty at every step" (Simonsen, Sugai & Negrón, 2008, p.35). With this in mind, we sought to develop an efficient method to assess all staff members' perceptions before implementing SWPBIS.

Having now used surveys in many schools, we offer these recommendations to SWPBIS coaches and school-based implementers interested in the process.

1. In a short staff meeting, explain the goals of the survey and the rule-creation process. This explanation allows coaches to answer questions and clear up any misconceptions before the process begins.
2. Emphasize the anonymous nature of the survey. Sharing an example of how the data summary will appear (i.e., bar graphs) can relieve staff concerned that the facilitators will discount their individual views.
3. Bring copies of the data summaries to the meeting (or project them), so that participants have visual data to focus their discussions.
4. Designate cutoffs for acceptance or exclusion of rules based on the average staff ratings or rankings. How these cutoffs are established depends both on the nature of the survey (number of items, type of questions, etc.), as well as considerations based on the school culture. For example, in a survey wherein staff members rank behaviors on a 5-point scale, any behavior with a mean rating of 0, 1, or 2 could be excluded from the rules discussion, because staff members rate them unimportant. Conversely behaviors with means of four or above require rule development by the SWPBIS team. Behaviors with means between two and four constitute areas for additional group discussion.
5. If staff members still cannot come to consensus on a set of rules, it can be helpful to break into subgroups. Each subgroup then proposes several different solutions and posts them on the wall. When all groups have posted their solutions, the entire faculty can pursue options in a manner similar to a gallery walk (Kennedy, Mimmack, & Flannery, 2012) and vote on the rules using small adhesive circles.
6. If there is significant staff turnover, reissue the survey to garner the commitment of new employees who did not participate in the original process. Personnel changes bring new personalities and new opinions regarding the nature of student behavior and school rules. Any changes to the rules must be introduced and taught to students at the beginning of the school year. We also recommend that schools avoid frequent tinkering with the rules so as not to confuse students and staff. We suggest the schools reevaluate their rules every 2 years.
7. Consider that staff members who helped to create an original set of rules may form new opinions as they become more experienced or as their roles change. Accordingly, any set of rules established in the past may require reevaluation for fit within the current school environment.

In addition, one can adapt surveys to reflect the distinctive environmental and cultural needs present in different schools (Feuerborn, Wallace, & Tyre, 2013). This flexibility could allow district or state level coaches to provide targeted professional development based on the unique needs and challenges of each school. Items can be changed or reworded to fit the school configuration (e.g., elementary vs. high school). Coaches might ask school-based teams to pare down the number of items on a survey to eliminate extraneous items that may not be helpful in certain contexts. In smaller schools, survey designers might ask staff members to nominate rules of their own or offer behaviors in need of attention via a write-in option (we caution that collecting and aggregating qualitative data can be cumbersome in larger schools).

Seeking the perspectives of all staff members when implementing the SWPBIS framework can help foster a sense of unity and commitment (Feuerborn et al., 2013). Surveying staff about student behaviors is just one means to this end. We urge all SWPBIS coaches to continue their work with a keen eye toward increased collaboration and involvement across all members of a school community.