

# SEL and PBIS - Much More than Alphabet Soup

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IEPs, 504s, PBSPs, SPMs, SLOs, PSSAs, PASAs ... In the educational arena, there is certainly no shortage of acronyms. However, potentially lost in the shuffle of this seemingly endless alphabet soup are two conceptual frameworks that can have a substantial impact when integrated into a school system with one another. SEL and PBIS are two frameworks centered around students and their behaviors. Both SEL and PBIS have overlapping behavioral goals, however, they are often implemented in isolation (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011). While these programs can be successful on their own, there is growing research and preliminary evidentiary support to suggest an increased impact when integrated (Cook et al., 2015). As school leaders, it is important for us to understand the fundamentals of the two systems and how they can work in concert with one another to achieve better behavioral results. Before discussing the intersection of SEL and PBIS in a school setting, it is first important to understand the research and concept behind both systems.

## Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) was developed to help schools prevent mental health and behavioral problems by increasing students' prosocial and emotional competencies. The Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) categorizes these competencies into five domains: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills and social awareness (Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich & Gullotta, 2015). These five domains provide the framework and foundation of social and emotional programming.

CASEL advocates for direct instruction of these five domains by utilizing evidence-based SEL curriculums or programs that are implemented universally within the school. The SEL program must incorporate and encourage positive classroom relationships between teachers and students, whereas the lesson instruction must provide opportunities for the students to practice and model the skills that are being taught (CASEL, 2013). It is imperative that teachers not only incorporate direct SEL instruction but also embed and integrate the skills across the various academic learning settings and within the climate and culture of the building (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Skill integration should be reinforced in the home setting through continuous communication with the family unit. The programming should include ongoing professional development for staff, as teachers are the recommended disseminators of this instruction to further facilitate relationship building (CASEL, 2013).

The literature surrounding SEL illustrates that it can have a tremendous impact on the students and climate within a school system. Evidence supports SEL programming for increasing prosocial behaviors, emotional competencies, and academic achievement while decreasing conduct behaviors (Low, Cook, Smolkowski & Buntain-Ricklefs, 2015; Low, Smolkowski, Cook & Desfosses, 2019). These causal effects of SEL programming meet



the criterion for trauma-informed care and have a substantial benefit when considered concerning cost-benefit analysis (Payton et al., 2008; Belfield, et al., 2015). Further research suggests that universal implementation can have significant preventative and mitigating effects on more behaviorally challenged high-risk students, such as those with emotional support services (Duncan et al., 2017).

### Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is an additional conceptual framework designed for school systems to build their practice of establishing and sustaining a positive school culture with behavior supports to ensure student academic and behavioral success (Association for Positive Behavior Support, 2020).

The PBIS system was developed out of Applied Behavior Analytic (ABA) approach to intervention (Horner & Sugai, 2015). Under the assumptions of ABA, the system adheres to a data collection process that focuses on changing student and educator behavior based on school-wide policies and procedures.

After data on behavioral incidents are collected and analyzed, school systems utilize the implementation of a multi-tiered intervention model to prevent school problems and reinforce appropriate behavior and thus, improve school culture (Bear, Whitcomb, Elias & Blank, 2015). The framework for PBIS follows the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) model. MTSS is a continuum of supports that are grounded in evidence-based practices and data decision-making. It typically occurs within a three-tier system (Stoiber & Gettinger, 2016).

Tier-one intervention in a PBIS framework constitutes a universal preventive behavioral intervention. The main component of tier one is the use of positive reinforcers to promote expected school-wide behaviors to the entire school population (Bear et al., 2015). Generally, students who are found to meet the expectations of the tier one PBIS programming also coincide with higher aspects of overall positive behavior. Whether or not a student adheres to the expectations in tier one will affect if he or she will be recommended for further intervention in tier two (Burke, Davis, Hagan-Burke, Lee & Fogarty, 2014).

The second tier of a PBIS system can be used to target roughly 10-15% of students who are not successful in tier one. This second tier provides small group, educational experiences for students to learn expected behaviors in a positive and supportive fashion when participation in tier one is not sufficient for their long-term success. Tier two

has students focus on building social skills, mentoring, check-ins, and self-regulation and management (Horner & Sugai, 2015).

The third tier of the PBIS system is reserved for roughly 5% of the student population that does not respond to the first two tiers of support. These are generally students with an individualized education plan (IEP) to help support them behaviorally (Horner & Sugai, 2015).

These three tiers of a PBIS system function to positively affect student behavior, just as SEL does. While both share common goals and bear similarities, each system utilizes different strategies to ultimately achieve its goals (Bear et al., 2015).

### The Intersection of SEL and PBIS

Both SEL and PBIS advocate for evidence-based techniques to establish life skills that give students the ability to increase their capacities proactively in social competence and behavioral regulation (Bear et al., 2015). However, PBIS is viewed as more of a teacher-driven classroom

management mechanism as the teachers reinforce the student behaviors. The focus on immediate reinforcement for behavior leads PBIS to be viewed as an immediate short-term fix as it does not address the underlying root cause of the behavior (Plumb, Bush & Kersevich, 2016). Juxtaposed to the short-term fix is SEL which is student driven. SEL is viewed as a more long-term fix, in that it works to address the long-term root issues and challenges that plague the student (Plumb et al., 2016). In simple terms, SEL focuses on teaching the behaviors through a curriculum, whereas PBIS reinforces positive behavior expectations (Cook et al., 2015).

SEL and PBIS have a synergistic effect in that where one system lacks aspects, the other system will compensate. (Cook et al., 2015). By utilizing both programs simultaneously, students are exposed to various universal preventative supports both in instruction as well as reinforcement. SEL and PBIS stress positive approaches to behavior change rather than punitive, and both foster skills that can work with one another. SEL and PBIS programs work to establish a positive, supportive, learning environment that empowers students in their development of behavioral competencies (Osher, Bear, Sprague & Doyle, 2010).

To examine evidence pertaining to the importance of the integration between the two systems, a recent study examined this approach. The researchers found that while SEL and PBIS acting as stand-alone systems have signifi-

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cant effects on student behavior, the combined effect of both SEL and PBIS realized significantly greater behavioral improvements. The researchers argued that a singular or stand-alone approach would be shortsighted if the goal the programming is to address the diverse mental health needs of students (Cook et al., 2015).

### SEL and PBIS in Practice

Following this research, these two systems were integrated last year within my current school. Prior to the integration, the PBIS program had long been established with positive behavior reinforcements occurring regularly throughout the school. The systems and processes had been in place and were supported by the staff year after year. However, after the integration of the SEL program, there was a statistically significant reduction in the amount of office disciplinary referrals and further qualitative feedback supported the impact on student behavior. There was evidence of not only an impact on the general education population but also on students in the emotional support

subgroup. The qualitative results from the first year of implementation illustrate the positive impact on the school climate (Jablonski, 2021). This additional data further supports the recommendations for the integration of the two systems within a school setting.

### Conclusion

At times, school administrators are inundated with new initiatives to implement change within a building. Many administrators have had previous success with PBIS and do not see the need for SEL and vice versa. However, while the individual programs can have a positive impact on students and schools, utilizing both may provide a more comprehensive and complementary approach to help teach and reinforce behaviors. In this way, we can affect the positive climate of our schools while supporting students both in the short and long term. That is a recipe for good educational soup.

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