

# Integrating Bullying Prevention Into Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support

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Bullying is often defined as unprovoked aggressive behavior repeatedly carried out against victims who are unable to defend themselves (Smith, Ananiadou, & Cowie, 2003; Whitted & Dupper, 2005). Bullying can take many forms, such as physical aggression, threats, insults, spreading rumors, social exclusion, and mocking the victim's culture, disability, or sexual orientation (Olweus, 2003). Children and youth who engage in bullying behavior may have a physical advantage, higher social status, or power in numbers, whereas those who are targeted by bullies are likely to be solitary, smaller in stature, or members of marginalized groups (Craig & Pepler, 2007). Youth who bully their peers are skilled at discovering and targeting the vulnerabilities of their victims, which may in part explain the increased likelihood that children with exceptionalities will be victims of bullying (Heinrichs, 2003). Children with special needs may exhibit social skill deficits, verbal delays, and impulsive or anxious behaviors, all of which are characteristics of many children who are targets of bullying.

Across Canada and the United States, bullying is considered a widespread problem in schools. In a 2002 survey of 512 American youth, 52% of

students reported that they knew someone who was considered a bully (Rice, 2003, as cited in Fairholm & Mader, 2006). In addition, 61% of respondents revealed that they witnessed bullying one or more times per day, a substantial increase from the 37% reported in 2001. Nearly 30% of students surveyed in a 2001 United States national study reported being involved in bullying, as either a bully or victim (Nansel et al., 2001). In Canadian studies conducted throughout the mid-1990s, 20% of children in Grades 1 through 8 had been involved in bullying (Pepler, Craig, Ziegler, & Charach, 1994). According to a recent survey by the World Health Organization, Canada and the United States ranked 12th and 15th, respectively, out of 35 countries in terms of reported prevalence of bullying behavior (Craig & Harel, 2004).

The adverse consequences of high rates of bullying in schools are many. Targets of bullying may suffer greatly in terms of their social and emotional well-being, become anxious and depressed, isolate themselves from peer groups, and avoid school for fear of being bullied (Berthold & Hoover, 2000; Slee, 1994; Walker, Ramsey, & Gresham, 2005). High rates of bullying

may affect the entire school population as well, creating an environment of fear that disrupts academic learning (Whitted & Dupper, 2005). For children with exceptionalities, learning may already be a struggle, and the co-occurrence of a disability and being a target for bullying can lead to increased rates of academic, social, and emotional problems (Mishna, 2003). Researchers have suggested that children with learning, emotional, and physical disabilities are more likely to be bullied by their peers (Cummings, Pepler, Mishna, & Craig, 2006) and are more likely to experience severe and serious forms of victimization (Heinrichs, 2003). Children with learning and emotional disabilities are not only at a greater risk of being victimized, but may also bully other children themselves because of a lack of social skills or impulse control (Cummings et al., 2006).

Given the negative outcomes for all children and especially those with exceptionalities, reducing the prevalence of bullying is an important goal for school personnel. This article describes (a) common steps taken in schools to respond to bullying behavior, (b) why these steps may be less effective, (c) a promising approach of



integrating bullying prevention into existing schoolwide behavior support systems, and (d) a case study describing and showing outcomes of this integrated approach.

### **Typical Responses to Bullying Behavior in Schools**

Once school teams identify bullying behavior as a problem, the most common response is to implement a stand-alone, anti-bullying program. Such programs commonly include holding school assemblies with speakers who highlight the harmful effects of bullying and teach students how to identify bullies, then follow up with a focus on catching such students in the act and providing increasingly severe punitive measures (Rigby, 2002). Additional components may include conflict resolution, peer support systems, or working with individuals identified as bullies. Unfortunately, these practices have shown to be generally ineffective—they may actually be as likely to exacerbate problems as solve them (Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, & Isava, 2008; Rigby, 2002; Whitted & Dupper, 2005). There are three main concerns that have been identified with the typical stand-alone, anti-bullying program approach.

#### **Labeling and Attempting to Punish Bullies Can Increase Incidents of Bullying**

Stand-alone, anti-bullying programs and curricula are often based on the premise that bullying can be reduced solely by increasing supervision, identifying perpetrators, and punishing them until they no longer bully other students. However, a program based on such an approach was shown to *increase* the number of students who reported being bullied by 20% (Pepler et al., 1994). Students who engage in bullying may obtain social prestige or desired attention from their targets, and these rewards are often immediate and outweigh later consequences (Olweus, 1994). In addition, children who are labeled as bullies may draw self-confidence and self-identification from that label, which may, in turn, cause them to use such behavior more often. Moreover, school discipline pro-

grams that rely on zero tolerance policies and increasingly severe punishment procedures for offenders have shown to increase instances of aggression (Hemphill, Toumbourou, Herrenkohl, McMorris, & Catalano, 2006; Mayer, 1995; Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997).

#### **Anti-Bullying Programs Are Often More Reactive Than Preventive**

Often, anti-bullying programs are implemented as a response to an already significant bullying problem. However, aggressive behavior developed at a young age tends to endure and escalate as the individual moves into late childhood and adolescence (Berthold & Hoover, 2000; Kellam, Rebok, Ialongo, & Mayer, 1994). Once these patterns of bullying behavior become established in schools, intervention can be difficult. Schools respond to bullying by implementing more rules and applying more severe consequences, and if that does not work, the response is to make consequences more severe (Simonsen, Sugai, & Negron, 2008). Rarely does this escalation of negative interventions have the desired effect on student behavior. As is increasingly shown in the literature, prevention of bullying is more likely to result in the desirable outcomes (Rigby, 2002). And true prevention of bullying behavior involves both (a) teaching *all* students the skills needed to meet their social needs without bullying, and (b) changing aspects of the school culture that may promote aggressive behavior—two components often lacking in typical anti-bullying programs (Olweus, 2003).

#### **Stand-Alone Programs Are Difficult to Implement and Sustain**

Another major concern with stand-alone, anti-bullying programs is that they are often viewed as “add-ons” to the heavy workloads of teachers. Teacher adherence to bully prevention programs is related to their attitudes regarding the usefulness of the program—often teachers are not well prepared for the program and, therefore,

not as motivated to take part (Biggs, Vernberg, Twemlow, Fonagy, & Dill, 2008). As such, full implementation is challenging (Gersten & Dimino, 2001), and to be implemented, existing practices with proven effectiveness may be discarded to find room for new programs (Latham, 1988). Once a bullying program is in place, the program is unlikely to sustain beyond a few years because the program is often replaced when the next stand-alone program comes along (Adelman & Taylor, 2003; McIntosh, Horner, & Sugai, 2009; Slavin, 2004). Effective anti-bullying programs require schoolwide involvement and effort, and they need to be seen not as an additional topic or curriculum.

#### **Embedding Practices Into an Existing Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support System**

A promising alternative to the stand-alone, anti-bullying program is to include the anti-bullying program as part of a broader systems-level approach to preventing and addressing problem behavior. One such approach is Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support (SWPBS; Sugai, Horner, & McIntosh, 2008). SWPBS is a proactive, systems-level approach that provides the tools and practices to help support students and staff and promote positive social and learning environments (Simonsen et al., 2008). Randomized control trials have consistently shown significantly improved academic and behavioral outcomes for students in schools implementing SWPBS compared to control schools (Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010; Horner et al., 2009). A main feature of SWPBS is the focus on student outcomes; the fundamental goal of most systems is to provide supports to students to improve school achievement, social relations, and safety (Simonsen et al., 2008). Other elements incorporated into SWPBS include research-validated practices, collection and use of data for decision making, and systems change. The effectiveness of systems, such as instructional routines, program structure, administrative leadership, staff training, and the implementation

practices of teachers and other school personnel, play a crucial role in the sustainability of SWPBS (Sugai & Horner, 2006). Teachers and administrators who positively promote SWPBS and consistently apply their school's policies greatly increase the effectiveness of their programs (Smith et al., 2003).

Contributing to the effectiveness of SWPBS is the use of a three-tier approach that ensures the support of all students (Simonsen, Sugai, & Negrón, 2008). In the primary tier, the focus is on simple preventative strategies, such as establishing, teaching, and acknowledging positively stated school expectations, and using that language regularly during the school day.

Previous research has shown that the majority of students, sometimes as many as 80%, will respond to primary tier interventions that are implemented with integrity (Simonsen et al., 2008). Secondary and tertiary intervention strategies target those students who do not respond to primary interventions and need more targeted and intensive support (Fairbanks, Simonsen, & Sugai, 2008). Numerous studies demonstrate the effectiveness of individualized secondary and tertiary interventions on improving students' academic and social behaviors (McIntosh, Brown, & Borgmeier, 2008).

Implementation of SWPBS has resulted in an increased positive atmosphere in the school, more appropriate student behaviors, and more academically engaged time (Conroy, Sutherland, Snyder, & Marsh, 2008). SWPBS has also related to decreases in instances of aggression, discipline referrals, and crime in middle school students (Metzler, Biglan, Rusby, & Sprague, 2001). In terms of students with disabilities, schools with SWPBS in place refer students to alternative placements or special schools at significantly lower rates than schools without SWPBS, and students who return from alternative placements are more likely to remain in SWPBS schools (Lewis, 2007). Through a SWPBS approach, teachers spend less time acting as disciplinarians and feel more effective in

cultivating positive social climates for all students (McIntosh, Bennett, & Price, 2011; Simonsen et al., 2008).

The demonstrated effectiveness of SWPBS provides a logical framework for the integration of strategies targeting bullying behavior. Olweus (2003) presents four principles that are key to creating a safe school and reducing problem behaviors:

- Setting firm limits on unacceptable behavior.
- Ensuring consistent application of sanctions for violations of rules.
- Providing positive adult role models.
- Motivating staff to develop positive interest and involvement in the lives of students.

These principles are widely endorsed in bully prevention systems, but they require schoolwide support to be effective and sustainable. Effective integration of bully prevention programs involves incorporating a specific program or lessons into an existing SWPBS system. The focus on prevention and changing the environment to

encourage prosocial behavior provides a foundation for specific curricula. Because incorporated bully prevention programs are designed to fit within a school's existing system, they are less resource-intensive to implement and easier to sustain (Ross, Horner, & Stiller, 2008). Bully prevention programs within SWPBS focus on providing children and adults with clear guidelines regarding how to deal with a bullying situation. Teaching students specific skills and a plan when faced with a bully is more likely to decrease incidences of bullying than policies solely targeted at punishing bullies (Rigby, 2002). The goal of integrating bully prevention into SWPBS is to target bullying from within a proactive system, as opposed to a responsive one.

## **An Integrated SWPBS Bully Prevention Curriculum**

The Bully Prevention in Positive Behavior Support program (BP-PBS; Ross et al., 2008; available at <http://www.pbis.org>) was designed to decrease incidents of bullying behavior and teach appropriate responses to bullying for would-be victims, bystanders, and educators. A recent empirical study showed that the program is effective in reducing both bullying behavior and reinforcement for bullying, as well as improving perceptions of school safety (Ross & Horner, 2009). As this program is intended to be integrated into a larger SWPBS system, it emphasizes reviewing schoolwide rules and teaching a simple, explicit three-step response to bullying behavior: Stop, Walk, and Talk. Teachers demonstrate a schoolwide "stop signal" that students are to use when experiencing or witnessing bullying behavior. Students practice using the stop signal and discuss examples of when the signal would or would not be appropriate. Students are also taught what to do if someone shows them the stop signal; they need

to stop what they are doing, take a deep breath, count to three, and then go on with their day. This clear, visual response is much more straightforward and easy for students of all abilities to perform and identify than programs that teach a conflict resolution process that is complicated and difficult without adult intervention.

Sometimes using the stop signal will not be effective, and the problem behavior will continue. When this ongoing bullying occurs, students are taught to walk away from the problem. Walking away from the student who is engaging in bullying behavior removes reinforcement that the bully may be seeking—he is not eliciting the response he is looking for from the victim, and he does not have

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bystanders encouraging the bullying behavior (Biggs et al., 2008). Again, students practice walking away and discuss examples of when and when not to walk away.

The final piece of the student curriculum teaches what students should do when the stop signal and walking away have proven ineffective. When this happens, students should talk to an adult. A critical component of this discussion involves differentiating between “talking” and “tattling” in an attempt to solve the problem. Students discuss examples of talking versus tattling, and it is reinforced that students should only use the “talk” technique if they have tried the stop signal and walking away. Generally, this technique is the one that students utilize first, and after implementation of anti-bullying programs, office referrals increase dramatically (Leadbetter, Hoglund, & Woods, 2003). The talk technique is the last of the three steps because the goal of the program is not to report as many bullies as possible to adults, but rather to give students skills they can use to end bullying on their own.

Information for teachers and other school personnel regarding how to respond when a student uses the talk technique is included in the curriculum. Students are also taught what to expect from the adults: the adult will ask what the problem is, ask if the student used the stop signal and if they walked away calmly; and then ask what the behavior was, who it involved, and where it took place. The adult will then acknowledge the student for using the talk technique correctly.

An additional curriculum is provided for teachers, recess supervisors, and other school personnel. Adults should review the curriculum that the students are taught, so that they can recognize when to reward students who are responding appropriately to bullying behavior and help students who are struggling with implementing the stop, walk, and talk steps.

### **CASE STUDY: Implementing Bully Prevention Into an Existing Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support System**

École Central Middle School (CMS) is a Grade 6 to 8 school in Red Deer, Alberta, Canada. There are approximately 500 students attending CMS, with 50% of the student population enrolled in the French Immersion program. About 15% are enrolled in the district English as a Second Language (ESL) program, which is housed at CMS. Two special education programs operate at CMS, one for students who have been identified with mild to moderate cognitive delays and one designed to meet the needs of students identified with severe learning disabilities.

#### **Implementation of SWPBS at Central Middle School**

Beginning in the 2006–2007 school year, the school district identified character education as one of its key goals. CMS staff were interested in pursuing a character education program because time spent on discipline issues had increased in recent years. In addition, there had been a corresponding increase in the number of Out of School Suspensions (OSS). CMS staff and administration began to explore possible programs to help address concerns regarding student behavior. After much consideration, SWPBS was selected because it was seen as the most comprehensive program of its kind. The SWPBS system allowed the school to tailor a program to meet its unique needs, thereby providing support to students in a variety of ways. SWPBS was already in place and proving to be successful in a number of schools in the district, including CMS’s two main feeder schools.

At the end of the 2006–2007 school year, a SWPBS inservice was provided for all CMS staff. During this inservice, three general behavior expectations for students and a student behavior matrix were developed. A SWPBS leadership team was selected, which included an administrator, a French immersion teacher, a special education teacher, a general education teacher from the

English program, the school counselor, and two members of the school support staff. The team implemented the program at the start of the 2007–2008 school year.

SWPBS was seen as particularly attractive to CMS staff because of the high concentration of students with special needs within the school. Teachers from the school’s special education team welcomed the implementation of SWPBS. They anticipated that it would be effective for their students because expectations for student behavior were simple, easy to follow, and would be the same for all students. The focus on a consistent set of behavior expectations for all students in all areas of the school would allow for a more inclusive environment. One member of the special education team noted that before SWPBS was implemented at CMS, there were often several sets of rules and expectations for students in the school and a variety of behavioral expectations for different students depending on their program. SWPBS created a common language for all students and staff within the school. Although individual student support would vary based on needs, the language was the same for all.

#### **Implementation of BP-PBS**

##### **Initial Planning**

In November of 2007 the CMS leadership team attended a session at a provincial SWPBS conference that outlined the new Bully Prevention in a Positive Behavior Support (BP-PBS) program. The CMS team decided to pursue the implementation of this program. To ensure the success of the BP-PBS program, it was decided that consultation with many different school stakeholders (parents, staff, and students) would be necessary. It was also decided that the program would not be implemented until the following year to ensure sufficient planning and processing time.

Over the course of the next year the following steps were taken. The vice-principal presented the basics of the BP-PBS program to four Grade 7 classes in February 2008. Grade 7 students

were selected because they would be the oldest group in the school in the year of implementation and, therefore, would be seen as student leaders. If they did not buy into the program, it was unlikely to be implemented successfully. After being presented with the basics of the BP-PBS program, the student group provided staff with valuable feedback. The most important feedback the students gave was positive—they believed the program could work at their school. They felt that other students would buy in if the pro-

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gram was presented to them in the right way and that there would be a reduction in the number and severity of problem behaviors following implementation. The student group suggested that the program would work best if students were involved in every step of the program, from design to implementation. They suggested the formation of a student advisory group during implementation, which led to the creation of the student SWPBS leadership team. This team would provide feedback and ideas about all aspects of the program.

The second step in the planning process sought the opinion of the school staff. The SWPBS leadership team presented the basics of BP-PBS to school staff in June 2008. The staff was supportive of the program and agreed that it would help in reducing problem behaviors and enable the staff to deal with student conflict more efficiently. Unanimous staff support was given for the implementation of BP-PBS during the 2008–2009 school year.

**Student Involvement**

At the beginning of the 2008–2009 school year, students were invited to apply to be a part of the student SWPBS leadership team, and the school was overwhelmed with the

response. The makeup of the student SWPBS team reflected the diversity of students within the school; ESL, Special Education, French Immersion, and regular English programs were all represented. It was important to have all programs and students in the school represented in the student team. In addition, some members of the team had demonstrated bullying behaviors in the past.

Based on feedback from staff and students, the vice-principal presented a draft plan for implementing the BP-PBS

program to the student SWPBS leadership team. The student team reaction was that the program would work but some modifications were needed in terms of how it was presented to students. The first change the students suggested was that the presentations would have to be given by students. Otherwise, students would view it as being imposed on them by staff and “uncool.” The students were also specific that popular, Grade 8 students would be the best presenters as they would best be able to get older students in the school to respect the program. If the presenters were more socially accepted by their peers, the program would be more likely to be accepted. In addition, the students also gave advice on what the CMS stop signal should be for the stop, walk, and talk system to work.

Three Grade 8 students, two boys and one girl, volunteered to present the BP-PBS program to the school. The girl and one of the boys came from the general English program and the other boy was from the French Immersion program. All three were viewed by other students as popular within the school. Over the course of the next 3 weeks, the students met regularly with the vice-principal to plan, prepare, and

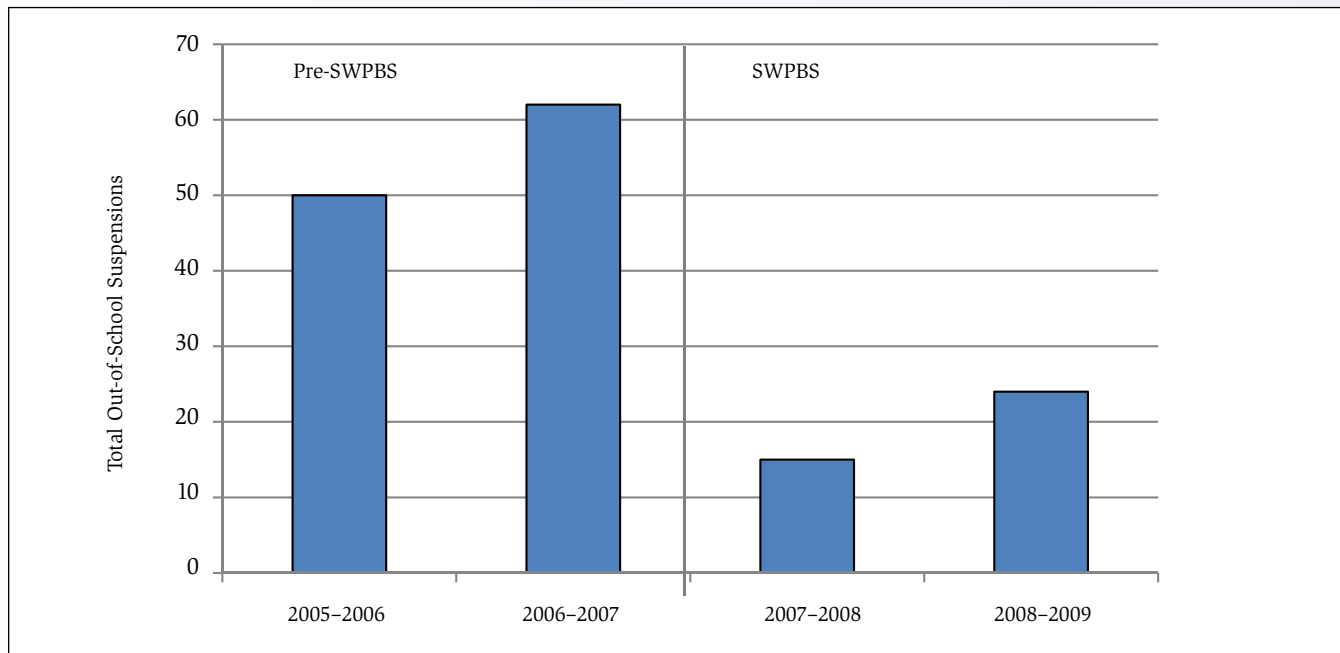
practice the presentation for the student body. The students also finalized the CMS stop signal. The CMS stop signal consisted of the students saying “too far” and crossing their hands in front of them. The main criteria the students used in selection was that it had to be perceived as socially acceptable and not “geeky.”

**Implementation**

Before the BP-PBS system was introduced to students, staff training took place. This involved learning about the system and the implementation process as well as the stop, walk, and talk process. Staff also were trained on what type of situations the stop, walk, and talk system may be used by students and how to react to it. The importance of the staff role in making this program work was stressed. Presentations to staff were given by the members of the SWPBS leadership team. A teacher and the vice-principal presented to teaching staff and the two support staff members of the SWPBS team presented to support staff.

In October, the three students presented the BP-PBS program (bully-proofing component of SWPBS) to all students in the school (the presentation is available at <http://bcpbs.wordpress.com>). On the first day, the program was presented to students from the English and special education programs, and on the second day, presentations were given to French Immersion students. The three student presenters did a masterful job of presenting, explaining, and selling the program to students. Their presentation focused on the fact that the stop, walk, and talk system was developed by students for students, and it was not something the teachers or administration were imposing on them. They stressed that if they used the program inappropriately, they would be letting themselves down. In addition, follow-up presentations were given to students in the special education classes. The teachers anticipated that BP-PBS would be particularly effective for their students because BP-PBS focused on building skills needed to deal with difficult social situations, as opposed to

**Figure 1. Number of Out-of-School Suspensions Pre- and Postimplementation of Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support**



traditional bully-proofing programs, which merely focus on identifying or reporting incidents. The stop signal, which included the crossing of the hands as a gesture, would be particularly helpful for students in special education and English as a second language programs, who often lack the verbal skills or confidence to use their voice. The gesture also gave staff something to “look out” for. If they saw a student using the gesture on the other side of the room or common area, they knew they needed to

move in the direction of the student involved.

The BP-PBS program also was presented to parents as part of the implementation process. The program was introduced at a parent council meeting, and parents were invited to ask questions. Parents were very supportive of the program and hopeful that it would be successful.

**Outcomes**

The effectiveness of implementing SWPBS and BP-PBS was measured through the number of out-of-school

suspensions preimplementation compared to postimplementation. When SWPBS was implemented, the school adopted a consistent system and definitions of office discipline referrals (ODRs). The BP-PBS program was measured by ODRs per month for physical and verbal bullying behaviors. As can be seen in Figure 1, the number of out-of-school suspensions decreased dramatically postimplementation. When compared to the pre-SWPBS data, out-of-school suspensions were reduced by 65%.

**Figure 2. Number of Office Discipline Referrals for Bullying Behavior per Month Pre- and Postimplementation of the Bully Prevention in Positive Behavior Support Program**

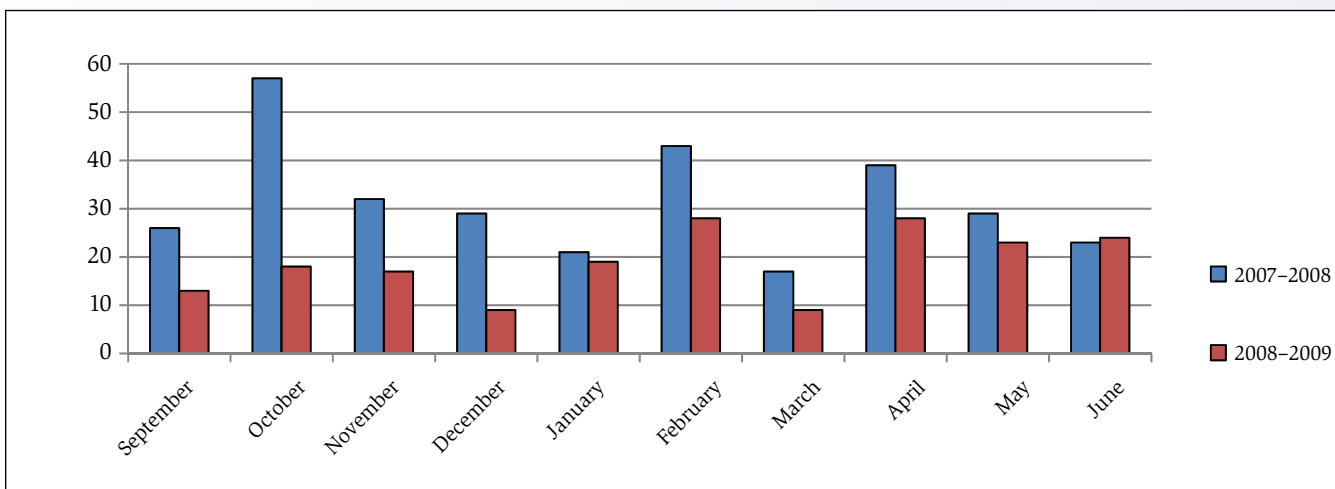


Figure 2 illustrates the number of bullying ODRs reported each month for both the 2007–2008 and 2008–2009 school years. After implementation of the BP-PBS program, ODRs for bullying decreased by 41%. Teachers of students with special needs noted that their students found that the implementation of SWPBS provided a more consistent and predictable climate across all settings, making it easier for students to feel safe and receive needed behavior support when mainstreamed. When BP-PBS was implemented, school personnel observed that students with special needs could use and respond to the CMS stop signal when needed, resulting in fewer incidents of both bullying and victimization for students in specialized programs.

## Conclusion

The implementation of BP-PBS at CMS has shown promising results, adding support to the idea that imbedding bully prevention programs into existing systems results in positive effects for both bullying behavior and problem behavior overall. Key components of the BP-PBS program involved teaching students different techniques that they could use when witnessing or being a victim of bullying, ensuring that all students and school staff were using the program appropriately, and regularly evaluating the effectiveness of the program. Over a period of 1 year, students at CMS reported fewer bullying behaviors, fewer students were suspended because of bullying behaviors, and students with special needs were supported more effectively across all settings. As shown in previous research, creating a school environment in which all students feel safe from physical and verbal aggression is more conducive to learning and positive social interaction. The results of this study highlight the significance and effectiveness of bullying prevention programs embedded in preexisting SWPBS systems.



## What Special Educators Can Do

Because of their specialized training and collaboration across the school faculty, special educators are in a strong position to guide SWPBS and bullying prevention efforts. The overarching goal of SWPBS is to cultivate a safe, positive, and successful school culture. Such efforts can support all students, but students receiving special education services, who are more likely to be involved in bullying interactions, may benefit the most, especially when inclusion is a school goal. School personnel can teach students clear expectations and use regular practice to provide feedback and ensure student success. Information on SWPBS and the BP-PBS manuals (which include lesson plans for elementary and middle schools) are available at <http://www.pbis.org>. Encouraging respect and preventing disrespect of all forms, including bullying, is a critical—and attainable—goal in schools.

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