

BRINGING PBIS ONTO THE SCHOOL BUS

Wausau School District, Wis.

Background

In 2008, the Wausau School District began phasing in Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), a multi-tiered student behavior system centered on data analysis, evidence-based practices, positive culture and systematic implementation. At the core of PBIS is the understanding that children are dealing with very different needs when it comes to social and emotional development. When behavioral interventions are needed, they have to be consistent to be effective. The district is part of the Wisconsin PBIS Network, which provides its members technical assistance: coalition building, needs assessment and data analysis. In 2013, the Wausau School District made a push to expand PBIS to its student transportation program. First Student began working in close partnership with the school district to help accomplish its goal.

Challenge

In 2013, Wisconsin PBIS Network's External Coach for the Wausau School District, Kathy Guthman, noticed a trend in student conduct data which sparked a discussion about the next major phase of the district's PBIS program. "Looking at their SWIS [school-wide information system] data for rural schools, I found the school bus to be the third highest problem area after the classroom and playground." And with a portion of the district's at-risk student population moving frequently within the district and between schools — sometimes three to four times per year — that data made sense to school staff. Wausau School District Chief Finance and Business Services Officer Bob Tess puts it another way, "If you think of a typical class period being 40 minutes, a child easily spends that amount of time on the bus in a school day. We had an untapped opportunity to make a positive impact." For the expansion to be successful, students and families would need to hear the same PBIS language, rules and expectations in the schools and on the bus.

Solution

When Bob Tess joined the Wausau School District in 2013, one of his earliest actions was to inquire whether PBIS was offered on the district's school buses. "I was very encouraged to hear that Kathy was talking about all of these things already." First Student assisted the district in forming a small transportation committee made up of school administrators, PBIS building coaches/teachers, First Student's location manager, a driver and a bus monitor. Together, they drafted the following vision



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statement to guide their work:

The vision of the Wausau School District Transportation Committee is a commitment to excellence in safely transporting students, encouraging respectful and caring behavior while supporting District Shared Key Interests. We strive to encourage collaboration between First Student and the Wausau School District in order to proactively communicate with mutual respect.

First Student brought in a regional PBIS instructor to give key staff their initial PBIS training. The school district, in turn, would provide ongoing trainings, or boosters, at future safety meetings; this afforded the district and driving team a forum for regular communication beyond the implementation phase. Both the Wausau School District and First Student quickly noticed the similarities between First Student's positive behavior reinforcement program, I Care, We Care and PBIS.

"That was really exciting to me because I saw in the I Care, We Care training video, a program that really sits well with the PBIS framework," says Guthman.

Working side-by-side, the committee developed program tools, including a standard communication flow and a jointly administered bus behavior acknowledgment system, Bus Bucks. They later formed subgroups to work on specific transportation-related projects and to develop new training tools.

Return

In the Wausau School District, drivers, students, parents and school representatives are developing stronger relationships through the positive culture that underpins an active partnership. "There's a direct line of communication between school staff, principals and drivers," says First Student Location Manager Ed Slany. Communication is a main ingredient in the Wausau program and that includes information exchange among drivers. For students who transfer buses, drivers support one another by giving advice and insight so students receive consistent behavior reinforcement, including from substitutes. Some drivers talk one-on-one with principals on their own time — and most often to share seemingly minor improvements that feel more like major breakthroughs. According to the district, although the number of behavior incidents has increased, that is due in part to a more effective reporting system; the principal response time on referrals has also improved.

The relationships built between the Wausau School District and First Student have been key to the success of Wausau's PBIS expansion to the bus. "The committee wouldn't be as strong if we didn't have our First Student bus drivers and monitors there," says Guthman. Further, Riverview Elementary School Principal Andy Place believes administrative presence is essential. "I was invited to a safety meeting and have not missed a safety meeting since." Place spent half a school year riding the bus alongside the driving team, going the extra mile to understand the experience of drivers and to work with students who were struggling to meet behavior expectations on one particular bus. "The conduct data on that specific



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bus shows we have good days and bad days. But we have a lot more good days, and the bad days are not as bad. That bus is not getting turned around anymore.”

Although student behavior challenges will always be present in any district, the Wausau School District is influencing positive progress through the PBIS program. “What I see is improved school climate, improved sense of belonging and sense of community. Strong, positive relationships have resulted from collaboration and working as a team,” says Guthman. At the school-wide level, she has also seen more data-based decision-making and increased time-on-task — the amount of time a student stays actively engaged in learning. She attributes these results to positive behaviors being reinforced consistently from the start to the finish of every school day.

