

# Understanding School Personnel's Resistance to Adopting Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support at a Universal Level of Intervention

Sharon Lohrmann

*Robert Wood Johnson Medical School*

Susan Forman

*Rutgers University*

Stacy Martin

*Robert Wood Johnson Medical School*

Mark Palmieri

*Rutgers University*

In recent years, a large number of schools around the country have implemented schoolwide positive behavior support (SWPBS; Sugai & Horner, 2006). Because of the increasing use of this model of support, research examining the factors associated with implementation is needed. The purpose of this investigation was to document and contextualize technical assistance providers' observations and perspectives about what factors influenced or explained school personnel's resistance toward implementing the universal level of SWPBS. Qualitative research methods were used to investigate the barrier conditions considered by technical assistance providers as influential on school personnel's resistance to adopting SWPBS at a universal level of intervention and the complementary strategies used to promote cooperation and commitment. Multiple interviews from 14 technical assistance providers suggest five barrier conditions that contribute to resistance and the complementary strategies used to promote cooperation and commitment. A detailed description of the five conditions and strategies is provided. Additionally, implications for practice and areas of future research are addressed.

**Keywords:** *intervention adoption; schoolwide PBS; universal-level interventions*

Concerns related to problematic behavior in schools have resulted in an increased awareness of the need for preventative and proactive schoolwide approaches to discipline (Sugai & Horner, 2002). Schoolwide positive behavior support (SWPBS) has been proposed in response to this need (Horner, Sugai, Todd, & Lewis-Palmer, 2005; Sugai & Horner, 2002, 2006). The SWPBS model provides a continuum of behavior support to the entire school population through the implementation of three intervention levels: universal, targeted, and intensive (Sugai & Horner, 2002).

The universal intervention applies to all students, all staff, and all settings. The focus of the universal intervention is to prevent problems by defining and teaching consistent behavioral expectations across the school while also recognizing students for expected and appropriate behaviors. The targeted intervention level provides additional support to those students who demonstrate patterns of behavior considered a precursor to more intensive and restrictive responses (e.g., referral to special

education, suspension, alternative education placements). These students require more support than provided by the universal intervention but not as much support as that provided at the intensive level. Targeted interventions are typically delivered in a small-group intervention format to provide additional skill instruction and practice related to social behaviors. The final level of support, intensive intervention, focuses on those students who require the most intensive behavioral support. At the intensive level, students receive individualized support, which typically consists of a functional assessment and comprehensive behavior plan that identifies areas for additional skill development and environmental modifications.

Research examining the effectiveness of SWPBS offers promising results, such as decreases in office discipline referrals and suspensions (Lassen, Steele, & Sailor, 2006; McCurdy, Manella, & Eldridge, 2003; Nelson, Martella, & Marchand-Martella, 2002; Scott & Barrett,

Action Editor: Don Kincaid

2004; Taylor-Greene et al., 1997; Taylor-Greene & Kartub, 2000) and increases in student instructional time (Scott & Barrett, 2004). For example, McCurdy and colleagues (2003) found a 46% decrease in office discipline referrals at an urban elementary school after 2 years of implementation of SWPBS. Lassen and colleagues (2006) also found improvements in school behavior through implementation of SWPBS at an urban middle school, with significant decreases in both office discipline referrals and suspensions across 3 years of implementation. It is therefore not surprising that there has been an increase in the number of schools implementing SWPBS, with reports that nearly 5,000 schools in more than 30 states are receiving technical assistance from collaborators of the National Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (Sugai & Horner, 2006).

To promote high-fidelity implementation, Horner and colleagues (2005) have provided prescriptive guidance about the factors needed for successful implementation (see also the Office of Special Education Programs Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports' [2004] *School-wide Positive Behavior Support Implementers' Blueprint and Self-Assessment*). Specifically, they recommend six critical conditions be met, including (a) team-based implementation, which consists of a representative schoolwide team that is organized and engages in problem solving and data-based decision making; (b) administrative leadership, which consists of consistent public support and active involvement in schoolwide team planning; (c) documented commitment to the education of all students and to improving the climate of the school; (d) adequate personnel and time for the planning and implementation of SWPBS; (e) budgeted support for activities associated with team planning, staff development, and necessary materials; and (f) information-system development for data management.

Although there is a large number of schools implementing SWPBS, there is little research examining the process of implementation and the critical features suggested by Horner and colleagues (2005). In particular, there is very little information about how SWPBS is being accepted and adopted by school personnel or what contributes to or inhibits sustainability. In a recent study, Kincaid, Childs, Blase, and Wallace (2007) investigated school personnel's opinions about the barriers to implementing SWPBS and the facilitators helpful in overcoming those barriers. Participants in this investigation were part of Florida State's SWPBS project and had experience implementing SWPBS for at least 1 year. Findings indicated that staff buy-in, data, inconsistency, and

reward systems were the top four barrier themes. District support, SWPBS project support, use of data, school-level trainings, and communication were the top five facilitator themes.

Kincaid et al. (2007) offers a starting point for documenting through empirical methods the barriers and enablers to successful implementation of the schoolwide model. Because the research on SWPBS is just emerging, it is helpful to look to other areas of education for lessons on implementation. For example, researchers have examined adoption and sustainability of both classroom-based practices, such as teacher use of instructional strategies (Boardman, Arguelles, Vaughn, Hughes, & Klingner, 2005; Brownell, Adams, Sindelar, Waldron, & Vanhover, 2006; Klingner, Vaughn, Hughes, & Arguelles, 1999), and schoolwide restructuring (Ferner et al., 2001; Furney, Hasazi, Clark/Keefe, & Hartnett, 2003; Sindelar, Shearer, Yendol-Hoppey, & Liebert, 2006). Findings from the research suggest that several factors are influential to the implementation of a new practice within education.

First, consistent with the recommendations of Horner and colleagues (2005), implementation research suggests that sustained commitment from the building administrator is essential to the adoption of new practices (Boardman et al., 2005; Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005; Furney et al., 2003; Klingner et al., 1999; Sindelar et al., 2006). One reason for a lack of sustained commitment may be a change in district or administrator priorities. For example, a shift in leadership focus from current practice to improving student scores on high-stakes assessments was reported as a barrier to the sustainability of new initiatives (Furney et al., 2003; Klingner et al., 1999; Sindelar et al., 2006). Boardman and colleagues (2005) found that over time, staff develop chronic frustration as a result of practices continually failing because of lack of administrative support. The implication of staff's not believing that an initiative will receive continued support from an administrator is that they do not take the time to become knowledgeable about and ultimately adopt new practices. Published research suggests that administrators can demonstrate their support in a number of ways. For example, one form of leadership support is ensuring that staff have the necessary materials and resources (e.g., time, funds) for implementation (Boardman et al., 2005; Ferner et al., 2001; Fixsen et al., 2005; Furney et al., 2003; Klingner et al., 1999).

A second factor that influences implementation is the different attitudes and beliefs that staff members hold toward the new initiative (Ferner et al., 2001). For

example, staff need to believe that the new practice meets their job needs (i.e., improved student learning) and is applicable and feasible for their individual situations (i.e., met needs of diverse learners in class) (Boardman et al., 2005; Brownell et al., 2006). Conversely, a disparity between staff beliefs and the new practice serves as a barrier to implementation (Brownell et al., 2006; Klingner et al., 1999; Vaughn, Klingner, & Hughes, 2000). For example, Brownell and colleagues (2006) found that teachers who did not believe that teachers were responsible for changing student behavior did not implement suggested classroom techniques that differed with that belief (e.g., actively teaching behavior and peer learning strategies). Teacher perceptions of student acceptance of the new practice were also found to be influential on teacher implementation, with teachers more likely to implement those practices that students enjoyed (Klingner et al., 1999).

Staff expertise is a third factor considered influential on the adoption and implementation of new practices. Staff need to have the necessary skills and knowledge to implement a new practice, as research shows that a lack of expertise can be a barrier to implementation (Felner et al., 2001; Klingner et al., 1999; Sindelar et al., 2006). Finally, the climate of the school can be influential on the success of implementation, with higher levels of implementation occurring in schools where staff feel safe and are not overly stressed (Felner et al., 2001) and where staff feel they are part of the decision-making process (Felner et al., 2001; Fixsen et al., 2005; Sindelar et al., 2006).

The above-mentioned factors provide some guidance to school teams; however, much more information is needed if SWPBS is to endure as a sustainable practice. Kincaid and colleagues (2007) provide initial guidance about implementation factors. However, triangulation of the Kincaid study with other empirical demonstrations is important to a complete a rich understanding of how to promote sustainable implementation of SWPBS. As Kincaid et al. note, SWPBS training models vary across states; thus multiple investigations involving different types of participants will be important in developing evidenced-based knowledge of implementation processes. Thus far, published research suggests that SWPBS can help schools experience reductions in reported discipline problems. This research is encouraging because students may benefit from increases in instructional time as a result of decreases in discipline problems (Scott & Barrett, 2004). Establishing efficacy is only one part of intervention effectiveness, however. Also needed are descriptions of the conditions that

maximize or inhibit the adoption of practices among personnel and, subsequently, the sustainability of the intervention.

Although SWPBS consists of the three intervention tiers, the universal intervention has the widest impact (i.e., all students are involved in the intervention versus a targeted group of students with the other levels of intervention) and requires the greatest number of staff to consistently participate. Ultimately, sustainability of the universal intervention rests with the willingness of staff to invest their time and effort into implementation. Therefore, understanding the barriers that inhibit school personnel from investing their time and effort is essential to preventing and transforming the resistance often encountered with new initiatives.

The current study was part of a larger investigation looking at two key aspects of implementing the universal level of SWPBS: (a) the barriers that impede school personnel's commitment to implementation and (b) how the leadership team works together to design and implement intervention components. The findings described in this article address the first issue, the barriers that impede school personnel's commitment to implementation. Specifically, the purpose of this investigation was to document and contextualize technical assistance providers' observations and perspectives about what factors influenced or explained school personnel's resistance toward implementing the universal level of SWPBS. This investigation was premised on the belief that if resistance could be understood and anticipated, targeted strategies could be used to promote cooperation and commitment among school personnel. Three specific conditions of meaning from the perspectives of technical assistance providers were explored:

1. the social context factors that created ambiguous, stressful, or unpleasant conditions that contributed to staff's skepticism about the universal intervention,
2. the personal belief factors that explained school personnel's motivation for resisting implementation, and
3. the complementary strategies used to promote cooperation and commitment.

## Method

### Participant Selection

Purposeful sampling was used to select participants for this study (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Maxwell, 1996). Technical assistance providers were recruited for this study because they witness barriers faced when implementing

SWPBS across schools and play a direct role in supporting schools to overcome those barriers. Four methods were used to identify potential participants for recruitment. First, the conference program for the Association of Positive Behavior Support 2004 conference was reviewed to identify both states that had SWPBS initiatives and people who were making presentations about SWPBS. Second, a hand search and electronic search were conducted of relevant journals (e.g., *Journal of Positive Behavioral Interventions*) to identify people who were publishing examples of SWPBS. Third, an Internet search was conducted to identify SWPBS project Web sites funded through state departments of education. Finally, national-level leaders within the field who were familiar with SWPBS and individuals serving as technical assistance providers made recommendations about state and university projects and people to contact. From these four methods of identifying possible participants, a total of 24 people were queried to determine their interest and potential match for participating in the study. For practical reasons, not all the people identified as possible participants were invited. Additionally, some attempt was made to have participants represent different states and areas of the country.

A total of 16 people responded to an initial e-mail expressing interest in participating. All 16 were sent a study packet that included a consent form and study description. The individuals then participated in a screening phone call with the first or second author, and all were determined eligible for the study, with 14 ultimately participating. To be included in the study, participants had to (a) report providing direct on-site technical assistance for SWPBS to at least one school they considered successful for a period of at least 2 years and (b) report providing direct on-site technical assistance for a period of 1 year to at least one school where implementation was hampered by barriers encountered.

## Participants

Participants were 14 educational consultants from 10 states. Participants ranged in age from 30 to 55 (average 38) with an average of 14 years experience in education (range 5 to 33 years). Eight participants held PhDs in school psychology, and two held PhD in special education. Four participants had master's degrees (school psychology, special education, and rehabilitation counseling). One participant was African American; the rest were Caucasian. Six participants (Courtney, Elizabeth, Mary, Michelle, Mike, and Laura) worked for regional resource centers through their state's Department of Education or

university-affiliated projects. One participant (Dan) was a self-employed consultant. Four participants (Allen, Deborah, Donna, Maryann) worked for private organizations using a fee-for-service model. Two participants (Melissa and Fredrick) were university faculty. Participants had an average of 7 years' experience with SWPBS (range of 3 to 10 years). The number of school teams participants worked with ranged widely, from 2 to 150 (with a median of 25). The role of technical assistance provision varied among participants. Some participants provided technical assistance on SWPBS to individual school buildings, whereas others provided districtwide support. All participants had experience providing direct support to school building leadership teams implementing SWPBS, which included training responsibilities, product development, and facilitation. Technical assistance consisted of both on-site (e.g., facilitation of SWPBS team meetings, presentations to school staff, meetings with administrators, conducting the School-Wide Evaluation Tool) and off-site activities (e.g., phone and e-mail consultation, product development). The frequency with which the participants provided on-site technical assistance varied, ranging from four times a school year to several times a week. The average occurrence among participants was monthly to bimonthly on-site technical assistance. All participants indicated they were always available to schools for e-mail and phone consultation.

## Data Source

To gather data, participants engaged in a series of three separate interviews each guided by a semistructured interview protocol (Seidman, 1991). During tape-recorded interviews, participants were asked to reconstruct their experiences supporting universal intervention implementation, to provide examples, and to discuss their observations and reflections. Interview 1 served the purpose of gathering background information about the participant, his or her experiences, and his or her beliefs about SWPBS. Interviews 2 and 3 served the purpose of having the participants concretely describe their observations and beliefs about school personnel's adoption of universal interventions (see Note 1). Interview 1 for each participant lasted an average of 58 min, with a range of 45 to 65 min. On average, Interview 2 for each participant lasted 111 min, with a range of 50 to 180 min. On average, Interview 3 for each participant lasted 84 min, with a range of 50 to 180 min. Interviews were typically spaced 1 to 2 weeks apart; however, on occasion, there were periods up to 6 weeks between interviews.



## Data Analysis

*Code development.* All interviews were transcribed verbatim with each line of the transcript numbered consecutively. To develop an initial set of codes, Strauss and Corbin's (1990) open coding method was applied to the first three participants' transcripts. To do this, the primary coder (always the first author) read the first participant's set of transcripts and labeled each line of text using a word or phrase that captured the passage's meaning. This process was repeated for the second and third participants' transcripts. After all three had been read and coded by the primary coder, the coded transcripts were read and coded by a consensus partner. The two coders reviewed the transcripts line by line for accuracy of codes, redundancy in codes, and disagreement in interpretation (Bambara, Gomez, Koger, Lohrmann-O'Rourke, & Xin, 2001; Hill, Thompson, & Nutt-Williams, 1997). The outcome of the consensus discussions was an initial list of codes and corresponding definitions.

The process of consensual agreement was repeated with each new participant and involved the three key steps previously described: coding by primary coder, coding by consensus partner, and consensus discussion. With each new transcript, new codes emerged, definitions of codes were refined, redundancies were eliminated, and codes were reorganized within and across categories. As new codes were generated or codes were redefined, resulting in a merger of codes or a split of codes, all previously coded transcripts were then recoded by the primary author and audited by a consensus partner. The final set of 35 codes and definitions was organized into thematic categories.

*Cross analysis and contextualization.* Following coding, an individual summary was created for each participant that summarized the key themes discussed in their interviews. As themes emerged, the data were interpreted to generate meaning that was contextualized across participants' descriptions of their experiences. Initially, data were grouped into three thematic domains: contributors, inhibitors, and strategies. Data were further subdivided into mutually exclusive categories (e.g., perceive a need). After all data were grouped, the next step was to interpret their meaning by questioning the prevalence of the data set, its relevance to the core purpose of the study, and its relevance to other emerging themes (Huberman & Miles, 1994). In the final analysis, data were organized into five sets of barrier conditions and the strategies used to promote cooperation and commitment.

## Participant Member Checks

A two-phase member check process was used to (a) check the accuracy of our data analysis and interpretation and (b) provide participants with an opportunity to react to the findings (Lohrmann & Bambara, 2006). During the first phase (individual member check), the participant reviewed a summary of his or her interviews. During the second phase (cross-participant member check), participants reviewed a summary of the findings.

*Individual member check.* Member checks were summaries of each participant's interviews and ranged in length from 14 to 27 single-spaced pages, averaging 20 pages. When a member check was returned, the first author reviewed the agreement pattern and revised the summary on the basis of comments and clarifications made by participants. Of the 11 returned summaries, 10 were fully reviewed, with participants cumulatively agreeing with 148 of 149 sections (99%), and 15 of 149 sections were marked with clarifying comments (10%). One summary was partially reviewed with a note that explained time constraints did not allow the participant to complete the review.

*Cross-participant member check.* After the cross-analysis process was complete, participants were sent a copy of the findings using the same format and procedures as the individual member check. Cross-participant member checks were sent to the 10 participants who completed the individual member check. The purpose of the cross-participant member check was to provide participants with an opportunity to react to the findings and indicate whether the interpretation of data reflected their experience as a technical assistance provider. Across the 10 returned member checks, participants cumulatively agreed with 97 of 98 sections (99%).

## Findings

All of the participants interviewed experienced some form of resistance while supporting schools to design and implement behavior support strategies at the universal level of intervention. In schools where resistance was insurmountable, participants observed that implementation struggled and often never came to fruition. Resistance occurred in many forms and for many different reasons. Participants viewed resistance as a symptom of a broader problem that, if understood, could be transformed. Many participants discussed how they tried to understand the reason for resistance, much like they would the function of a student's behavior. Said Mary,

I choose to try to learn and understand the factors the school community is dealing with given the complexities of school change and the challenges facing our neediest schools. It seems prudent to respect what presents itself as resistance as a protective boundary that in some sense is necessary for the school.

Supporting schools through resistance was not always easy. There were times when participants were not sure what to do and were frustrated by the inability to overcome the resistance they were encountering. Although daunting at times, resistance was, typically, not insurmountable. Through trial and error, participants found ways, in most cases, to break through resistance and promote cooperation and commitment in enough staff so that the universal intervention could take hold. Participants approached the selection of strategies with the intention of either preventing resistance altogether or transforming resistance into cooperation and commitment. Most often, they selected strategies based on a specific barrier they encountered and the resulting need for change. Across participants, five common barrier conditions were described along with the sets of strategies they used to transform resistance into cooperation and commitment. Table 1 provides a summary of the barrier conditions and the strategy sets that will now be described.

### **Lack of Administrative Direction and Leadership**

Participants believed that without administrative direction, planning and implementation activities would flounder and, ultimately, not sustain beyond technical assistance support. Said Elizabeth, "I've heard so many times staff saying, 'The principal won't support this.' And then they don't want to put themselves out on a limb. It has to be obvious that the principal supports this work." In the experience of participants, building administrators who did not make the universal intervention a priority typically did not (a) make public statements of support; (b) establish, written or otherwise, that implementation was a top priority; (c) motivate staff to take up the charge; (d) allocate resources; or (e) participate in process planning or implementation activities.

Implications of a building administrator who did not make the universal intervention a priority included staff's exhibiting a lack of awareness or familiarity with the universal intervention, increased technical assistance needs, increased difficulty in fading out technical assistance, and failure establishing the universal intervention. One proposed explanation for the failure was the inability of the planning committee to devote meeting time and

energy to planning the universal intervention because of time spent on complaining about the administrator or developing strategies to compensate for lack of administrative investment. In schools where the team was able to persist and implement components, participants reported that implementation would lose momentum and sometimes not sustain.

*Coach administrative direction and leadership.* To promote administrative presence and leadership, participants employed a number of different strategies. First, participants believed that there needed to be a basic trust or rapport between themselves and the administrator. The administrator needed to feel comfortable collaborating with an outside person. To do this, they spent time up front with the administrator, getting to know his or her priorities and the needs of the school and explicitly discussing roles and expectations. Most participants had an initial "pre-buy-in" meeting with administrators to discuss the type of commitment needed to implement the universal intervention. Said Dan,

It's important that when the work starts, you only meet with the administrator and explain the universal intervention and how it will help their school. It doesn't work very well when a teacher or counselor says, 'Our school needs this,' and the principal says, 'Sure, go ahead,' but isn't really invested in it.

Second, participants found it helpful to periodically touch base with the administrator through telephone calls, e-mails, and in-person visits. The purpose of touching base was to give a status update, provide reminders and words of encouragement, review basic commitment issues, and secure attendance at upcoming meetings and events. Said Deborah, "We do a lot of intermediary things between meetings because they're obviously expected to be at meetings, and if they're not, we will make sure that we touch base with them." Participants suggested giving administrators frequent small chunks of information to keep them updated. This was considered particularly important when the administrator was missing meetings and the participants wanted to pull them back into the process. Said Elizabeth,

I've had times where the administrator is embarrassed with their lack of involvement and they might be tempted to avoid me. So, I try to give the principal as much information as possible in small sound bites so then they feel more comfortable looking into a meeting or holding a conversation about it than if they feel like they are in the dark.

**Table 1**  
**Summary of Barrier Conditions and Strategies Use**

Barrier to Change	Assumption of Change	Used to Promote	Strategy Set
Lack of administrative direction and leadership	Coach administrative direction and leadership	Administrators making the universal intervention a priority within the school Administrative leadership needed to gain momentum and cohesion among staff	Spend time with the administrator up front to establish rapport and expectations Touch base with the administrator to provide quick updates, reminders, and encouragement Provide coaching to anticipate and handle specific situations
Skeptical that the universal intervention is needed	Build a case for change	Staff's belief that they have a need Staff's understanding of how initiatives are tied together and how the universal intervention is tied back to the school plan Staff's understanding of how behavior and academics are connected	Get to know the school and the priorities important to stakeholders Construct a profile of the school using existing data Share information and evidence about the universal intervention Present a logical rationale that includes a link to their specific needs, the connection between academics and behavior, and how the universal intervention is tied to school goals and other initiatives Hold a staff vote or conduct a survey to determine interest
Hopelessness about change	Show staff that change is possible	Staff's belief that their time and effort is worth investing in the universal intervention	Use local demonstration data Use testimonials to share success stories Individualize implementation to move at the school's pace and responsiveness
Philosophical differences	Find a conceptual common ground	Staff's understanding that preventative activities for all students are important and worthwhile Staff's comfort and willingness to adopt and integrate specific intervention components into their day-to-day routines	Have ongoing dialogue and discussion using examples, stories, empirical evidence, negotiation, and problem solving
Staff feel disenfranchised from each other, the administrator, or the mission of the school	Make people feel a part of the intervention effort	A more positive climate among staff by having them contribute to a common goal Help staff feel as though they have an influence on the intervention practices they will carry out	Build rapport with school staff Engage staff in activities that have staff design intervention components Frequently disseminate small bits of information through e-mails and daily announcements Provide staff with monthly updates about intervention status Provide opportunities for staff to comment on or approve plans and proposals Have focus or discussion groups to give staff a change to discuss, comment, raise questions, and dissent Use subcommittees to involve additional staff Provide staff with training

Some situations required participants to invest more time and effort into coaching administrative direction and leadership. Said Deborah,

We want to make sure that we've equipped the administrator with an expectation of what might happen and that we have a reasonable degree of certainty that they're able to pull it off. So we go in and work with the principal.

Participants tried to strike a balance between being up front and direct with the administrator and at the same time respecting their position as the building leader. It was important to participants that administrators clearly understood their role in the process and that their visible support was critical to staff's willingness to make a commitment. To encourage administrators to be visible and vocal leaders of the universal intervention, participants provided one-to-one training, problem-solving discussions, and coaching to anticipate and handle specific situations.

### **Staff Are Skeptical That the Universal Intervention Is Needed**

A second condition that created a barrier to implementation was the extent that staff were skeptical about needing the universal intervention. Participants observed three factors that contributed to staff's skepticism about need. First, at some schools, staff were satisfied with their building's climate and practices. When this was the case, the imperative to implement typically came from an outside influence (e.g., superintendent's direction). Because the desire to implement did not originate through a unified staff, the universal intervention was viewed as unnecessary to achieving personal agendas.

A second factor that contributed to staff's skepticism was that the number of initiatives implemented in schools can be daunting to school staff. Participants observed that the pressures on staff, particularly in urban or failing schools, to improve achievement were so great that even when behavior and discipline needs were acknowledged, there was still a lower priority on implementing the universal intervention. According to participants, the more initiatives present in a building, the greater the pressure was to keep up with changes and new practices, which ultimately created exhaustion and frustration in staff. As a result, participants observed that staff simply dismissed anything new as being unimportant or too much effort.

The third factor that contributed to staff's skepticism was a disconnection between behavior interventions and academic priorities. Participants reported that the increased focus on academic improvement sometimes resulted in resistance to the universal intervention,

because school personnel did not make an intuitive connection between academic achievement and problem behavior. Said Michelle,

Post-[No Child Left Behind], their district really came down on them for their test scores and so they didn't feel like they could commit their professional development time to PBS [positive behavior support] in place of reading supports. They didn't see the connection between behavior and academics.

At times, facilitators encountered staff who were frustrated by being asked to participate in the universal intervention. Said Gail, "Sometimes staff freak out and say, 'I only have time to teach academics. I don't have time to teach your expectations.' They don't see how the two are connected." This was perceived as an important connection to facilitators, because when school staff did not understand how implementing the universal intervention could help them to meet their academic goals, they were reluctant to invest their time, energy, and resources.

*Build a case for change.* When staff encountered resistance they believed stemmed from skepticism about the need for a universal intervention, they used strategies that built a convincing case for change. These strategies included assessing staff readiness, sharing information and evidence, presenting a logical rationale, connecting to things they already have in place, and using school data to support that there was a need. Most often, building a case for change was a two-step process. First, participants would gather information about the school to construct a profile of the school's needs based on existing data. In some cases, they gathered additional data, such as teacher opinion, through surveys. Several participants visited the school, walked around, conducted observations, and talked with staff in an effort to get to know the building and peoples' priorities.

The second step was to conduct an orientation for staff. Embedded within the orientation, participants would present a logical rationale that was connected back to the school needs and paired with descriptions, examples, and empirical evidence of how the universal intervention could help them to meet their specific needs. The orientation was more than just a description of SWPBS and the universal intervention. Rather, it was a case for contextual fit so that staff could recognize and agree that this was important to their school and a logical way to address their needs.

Five participants used a buy-in vote following the orientation, where through a raise of hands or survey, staff would indicate if they wanted to implement the universal intervention at their school. Said Deborah, "We assess



staff readiness by taking a vote. We won't go in unless 80% of folks say they want to do it. We basically get the faculty as a whole to give the team permission to move ahead." Although all participants agreed that ultimately the majority of staff had to have buy-in to implement, they did not all agree about when that buy-in had to occur and what it meant in terms of moving forward with the school. For example, Maryann contrasted Deborah's statement when she said, "Initially, I am willing to forego some of the staff buy-in. I know it has to be 80%, but we can get there through a shaping process."

### Hopelessness About Change

A third condition participants considered influential on the presence of staff resistance was a sense of hopelessness among staff about the possibility of improvement. Participants described staff who resisted, particularly veteran staff, as being jaded toward new initiatives because they perceived that nothing ever resulted in desired changes. In some situations, participants observed that staff perceived their circumstances as more difficult than in other places. For example, participants heard school personnel comment "You don't know our kids" or "This will never work with our kids." Staff who resisted for this reason appeared to participants as feeling helpless because they believed the source of problem behavior is out of their control and they cannot change the situation. Another explanation for staff's sense of hopelessness was that over time, school staff endured repeated disappointments following failed initiative attempts. Thus, hopelessness about change was reinforced by the lack of tangible outcomes resulting from implementation of initiatives in their school.

*Show staff change is possible.* When school personnel were resistant to implementation because they were skeptical that change was possible at their school, participants looked for ways to demonstrate that change could happen. Most participants used demonstration data to support that the universal intervention could make positive changes in their building. Demonstration data typically included local examples from similar schools. Said Mary,

Early on, teams needed to see schools that look a lot like them. That is a major piece that helps take people from those beginning levels of concern around change really happening or if this is another bandwagon to is this something that we ought to put time and effort into doing.

Half of the participants found it helpful to also include pilot data that showed successful small-scale efforts of

the universal intervention happening within the school. Pilots were considered helpful because in some cases, staff remained skeptical unless they saw it actually happening within their school.

Building on the idea of within-school success, participants had staff share testimonials of successful experiences to complement quantitative data. Said Courtney,

Stories from teachers are very powerful. It gets to how people feel beyond the numbers. That's important. I think some people are suspect of the numbers. You have to pair the office referral data with actual testimony of success stories.

Generally, participants observed that when staff began to experience success and saw firsthand that the universal intervention actually worked, they became more motivated to implement. Said Gail,

We've had people join the team later on because initially they weren't interested. But when they see the success and the positive things going on, they become a believer. I think that's the best way to change someone's beliefs is to plow ahead and focus on what is working and hope that the positive momentum will bring them around.

Four participants suggested that sometimes school staff have to see that the universal intervention is not a fixed program but rather that it is adaptable and flexible to the needs of a given building. These participants made attempts to individualize the universal intervention process for schools by adjusting time lines related to sequence and intensity of components implemented.

### Philosophical Differences With SWPBS

The fourth set of conditions participants reported as influential on staff resistance was rooted in philosophical differences with SWPBS and the universal intervention. Participants observed three typical philosophical differences with the universal intervention. First, when it came to responding to occurrences of problem behavior, participants found that school staff wanted to emphasize punitive responses versus proactive or instructional interventions. According to participants, school personnel believed, regardless of whether the data supported it or not, that punitive consequences should be effective and therefore were a logical response to problem behavior. This was particularly true when it came to students labeled as "high flyers." Participants found that some staff believed that if the high flyers were removed from the system, the school's problems would be solved. Staff expected administrative decisions to be quick, tough, and

applied uniformly across students. Said Mike, "I'll hear staff complain because kids are responded to differently. One kid got a 3-day suspension; another kid didn't get suspended at all. Staff get angry." Melissa complemented Mike's statement when she said, "Philosophically, many administrators agree with PBS principles. In practice, though, if they are not responding to kids that are the most problematic by excluding them, they're often perceived by staff as not doing their job."

Second, some staff believed that adults should not have to change for students to act appropriately. Said Mike, "Many teachers have concerns about behaviors in their classrooms or the school, but the fact that it might involve a change in practices on the part of the teacher is a hard pill for some to swallow." One reason for this is that behavior and discipline are very personal issues that are dictated by one's personal history. Whether perceived as infringing on teachers' way of doing things or stretching their practice beyond the bounds of believed responsibilities, the universal intervention meant having to change personal practices, and for some staff, this was not a welcomed idea. This notion of change extended to the belief that a teacher's job is to teach academic content and that it is the parents' responsibility to teach their children how to act. Much of the argument seemed to center on what teachers considered as responsibilities of educators and how different current teaching conditions are from when they started teaching.

Third, participants reported that staff believed students should be intrinsically motivated to behave and were philosophically opposed to providing any extrinsic motivation. It seemed to participants that staff believed students should have an intrinsic satisfaction for making appropriate social choices and that providing students with rewards would damage or inhibit the development of intrinsically motivated behavior. In addition to concerns about intrinsic motivation, participants recalled hearing school staff argue that in the "real world," adults do not get rewarded for doing their job or following the laws.

*Find a conceptual common ground.* When philosophical differences were at the heart of the resistance, participants found it particularly difficult to promote commitment and cooperation. Ideally, participants wanted to find a way to change people's minds about philosophical conflicts with the universal intervention. Most often, though, they were satisfied if they could find a common conceptual ground where school staff felt comfortable moving forward and the fidelity of implementation was not weakened. Participants openly expressed feeling frustrated by not having more persuasive means to stimulate change. Six participants attempted to change beliefs through ongoing

dialogue and discussion that respectfully challenged people's beliefs and offered alternative perspectives about how to look at the situation. In addition to providing training on the different intervention components, participants used stories, examples, problem solving, discussion, empirical evidence, and negotiation to stretch school personnel's willingness to think about behavior support in a different way.

### **Staff Feel Disenfranchised**

The fifth influence on staff resistance was the extent that staff were disenfranchised from one another, their administrators, or the mission of the school. Many participants viewed resistance as a broader social problem that was not specific to the universal intervention. In their opinion, staff needed a certain degree of comfort and security to be willing to risk making any kind of change. The building administrator's relationship with staff and his or her leadership style were described as contributors to the social climate of the school. Participants cited defensiveness, inconsistency, passivity, negative interactions with staff, noncollaboration, and resistance to looking at problems as examples of problematic leadership. In participants' experiences, poor leadership created a context where staff were closed off to or lacked faith in administrative direction to implement new initiatives. Ultimately, when the relationship between staff and the administrator was strained, typically the administrator was ineffective at leading the universal intervention.

In addition to the administrative leadership style, participants reported that negative staff-to-staff relationships were also influential on the planning and implementation process. In schools where there was conflict among staff, unifying them proved a challenging hurdle to overcome. A negative social climate among staff was seen by facilitators as potentially undermining the team's ability to gain staff buy-in and move the universal intervention forward.

*Make staff feel a part of the intervention process.* Participants addressed negative climate and personal autonomy issues by keeping staff informed and encouraging them to have an active role in the intervention design process. To do this, participants used a three-pronged approach. First, they encouraged teams to get information to staff. Typically, information dissemination occurred through monthly updates at faculty meetings, short weekly reminders (e.g., e-mails or daily announcements), and staff training. Information dissemination was to keep staff updated and "in the loop" of what was happening with the universal intervention. Participants suggested that information dissemination occurred frequently, in small bits, and in multiple ways. Said Fredrick,

“What makes communication with staff effective is that it is short, to the point, and comes at them from multiple directions.”

Second, participants encouraged teams to engage staff directly. Although information dissemination was helpful, staff were passively involved. Engagement strategies were designed to have staff take on a more active role in the intervention process. Strategies included having staff involved in developing intervention components (e.g., defining expectations or writing lesson plans), holding focus group discussions, using surveys for feedback, forming subcommittees, and having staff approve or comment on proposed plans. Engaging staff was considered crucial because participants believed staff had to be a part of creating the universal intervention to experience ownership, which was a crucial factor for successful implementation. Said Melissa, “If you don’t get teachers’ input and you don’t have them involved from the very inception if it, I think it has a low probability of working.”

Third, participants encouraged teams and administrators to recognize and celebrate staff members’ participation in planning and implementation activities. Participants described school personnel’s willingness to participate as a shaping process where staff needed encouragement and motivation to move forward. For example, in one of Michelle’s schools, “a teacher who was doing a really good job with PBS was spotlighted during faculty meetings.” Other examples included appreciation luncheons, staff raffles, and a public thank you from the principal for participating.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to document and contextualize technical assistance providers’ observations and perspectives about what factors influence or explain school personnel’s resistance toward implementing the universal level of SWPBS. Specifically, three conditions of meaning from the perspectives of the participants were investigated: (a) the social context factors that created ambiguous, stressful, or unpleasant conditions that contributed to staff’s skepticism about the universal intervention; (b) the personal beliefs that explained school personnel’s motivation for resistance; and (c) the complementary strategies used to promote cooperation and commitment. To this end, 14 participants experienced in providing technical assistance to schools on the implementation of the universal level of SWPBS were interviewed.

Participants’ observations about the barriers they encounter in schools is consistent with recent research examining factors related to resistance of educational

practices as well as published recommendations about implementing the universal intervention (e.g., Horner et al., 2005). In particular, the current study begins to triangulate Kincaid et al. (2007), who reported the perspectives of school personnel in Florida who were participants in a state project on positive behavior support. The consistency in findings across the Kincaid et al. study and the current study is promising, given that different types of participants (i.e., school personnel and technical assistance providers) reported similar obstacles encountered. Such consistency strengthens our ability to design and investigate effective intervention approaches to transform resistance into cooperation and commitment. The current study extends our understanding of the types of strategies that can be used to overcome resistance. The findings are most applicable for resistance encountered when implementing the universal intervention of SWPBS but may be effective when experiencing barriers associated with other school system change.

In response to encountered resistance, participants stressed the importance of being aware of and acknowledging that there was a reason, or function, for the occurrence of resistance. Participants did experience frustration, however, when they did not understand the reason for resistance or were unable to overcome the resistance. Nonetheless, they tried to understand and empathize with the school personnel’s conditions. Thinking about resistance in the same way they did problem behavior for students led participants to select strategies based on a need-for-change assumption. Thus, their strategies were tailored to the type of resistance they were encountering, essentially, a “function-based approach.” This approach seems particularly important because resistance can result in a failure of the universal intervention to endure. Participants described five sets of strategies they used based on the different types of resistance they were encountering and their goal of transforming that resistance. These included strategies to (a) coach administrative direction and leadership, (b) build a case for change, (c) show staff that change is possible, (d) find a conceptual common ground, and (e) make people feel a part of the intervention effort.

## Implications for Practice

*Understand the underlying reasons (or function) for resistance.* Resistance is simply a reality of current social and organizational conditions in education. It represents people’s fears, concerns, and skepticism about yet another new initiative. To effectively overcome resistance, an initial key step is to determine the source of the resistance. As seen in the findings of the current study,

understanding resistance may mean examining the broader social conditions of the school (e.g., relationships between staff and administrators) and the beliefs held by staff. The current study underscores the importance of technical assistance providers dedicating time and effort to understanding the function of resistance to the universal intervention. Additionally, the findings suggest that technical assistance should directly address organizational and social barriers to implementation as opposed to just knowledge and skills of positive behavior support. The barriers found in this study provide a framework that individuals delivering technical assistance can use to identify areas of resistance. Assessing barriers will be helpful when determining the amount of support a school will require. Activities can be planned in advance to circumvent resistance as well as in response to emerging resistance.

*Select strategies that match the reason for resistance.* As suggested by the participants, if you understand the source of resistance and the reason why it is occurring, you can do something to change the situation. A key implication indicated by participants is the importance of matching the motivation for resistance with appropriate strategies to transform resistance and shape cooperation and commitment. The strategies found in this study provide an initial pool of options for technical assistance providers experiencing resistance. However, much more information is needed about other strategies technical assistance providers can use to overcome resistance. In particular, the two barriers participants struggled with most were administrator resistance and philosophical differences staff had with components of the universal intervention. It was these two areas where participants reported having the least influence on change. Furthermore, most participants seemed resigned that there would always be a small portion of staff (20% or less) whose beliefs were not going to change.

*Differentiate technical assistance based on need.* Each school is a dynamic system that requires technical assistance providers to individualize support based on the unique set of needs the school presents, as one size does not fit all. The frequency, duration, and type of technical assistance provided depends on where the school is in the implementation process and the barriers they are facing at any given point in time. For example, a change in principal may require an increase in technical assistance during the transition period. Technical assistance models need to be agile enough to respond to an ever-changing set of circumstances that a school presents. Examples of technical assistance models are needed in the published

literature that illustrate how to provide differentiated technical assistance based on school building need.

## Cautions to Interpreting the Findings

The findings reported offer descriptive information about barriers that impede or explain school personnel's resistance to adopting the universal intervention level of SWPBS. It is important to point out that factors identified as influential on school personnel's resistance come from third-party opinion, the participants. Because no school personnel were interviewed, the findings must be interpreted cautiously, as they represent only the opinions of a small sample of technical assistance providers. To corroborate these findings, school personnel's opinions about the factors related to resistance of the universal intervention need to be explored. In addition, because only 14 people were interviewed, the findings reported cannot be considered inclusive of all possible variations. It is likely that continued exploration of these concepts will yield additional examples of social context and personal belief barriers as well as complementary strategies. Third, the findings cannot speak to any particular type of school (e.g., urban settings or grade levels), as participants were asked to speak about their experiences across the schools they supported. It would be helpful in future investigations to focus on specific types of schools to best understand what needs are unique to different settings. Finally, although a member-check process was used, not all participants responded to the member checks. One explanation is that the member checks were very extensive, and the time required was beyond what the participant expected or could give to the study. However, when member checks were returned, there was a high level of agreement with the research team's interpretations.

## Future Research Questions

The current study adds to the growing body of research supporting SWPBS. In addition to the contributions already discussed, the findings suggest a number of unanswered questions that will require continued investigation:

1. How influential and predictive are barrier conditions on (a) the type and amount of technical assistance that is needed and (b) the adoption and sustainability of the universal intervention?
2. What is the best way to measure resistance and determine the tipping point related to resistance and implementing the universal intervention?
3. What additional strategies would be beneficial for preventing and transforming resistance?



4. How do we best support our schools with the most need to implement and sustain SWPBS, given the multitude of risk factors they face?
5. How does the team work together in productive ways, even when they are faced with barrier conditions?

## Conclusion

The current study examined the barriers experienced when implementing the universal intervention of SWPBS and the strategies used to promote commitment. Findings indicated five barrier conditions to resistance and the complementary strategies used to promote cooperation and commitment. The specific barriers associated with each level were consistent with past research yet uniquely applied to the universal intervention of SWPBS. The identification of barriers to the universal intervention allows technical assistance providers to engage in proactive planning when facilitating the implementation of the universal intervention. Proactive planning should consist of an assessment process to identify possible sources of resistance to implementation and development of an action plan with strategies to transform resistance. Although more research is needed to support and extend these findings, the current study provides guidance to technical assistance providers about areas of possible resistance and strategies to overcome the resistance.

## Note

1. Interviews 2 and 3 also served the purpose of having participants concretely describe their observations and beliefs about how the universal leadership team works together to design and implement intervention components. The data related to this second purpose is not reported in the current description of findings.

## References

- Bambara, L. M., Gomez, O., Koger, F., Lohrmann-O'Rourke, S., & Xin, Y. P. (2001). More than techniques: Team members' perspectives on implementing positive supports for adults with severe challenging behavior. *Journal of the Association for Persons With Severe Handicaps*, 26, 213–228.
- Boardman, A. G., Arguelles, M. E., Vaughn, S., Hughes, M. T., & Klingner, J. (2005). Special education teachers' views of research-based practices. *Journal of Special Education*, 39, 168–180.
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (1992). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Brownell, M. T., Adams, A., Sindelar, P., Waldron, N., & Vanhover, S. (2006). Learning from collaboration: The role of teacher qualities. *Exceptional Children*, 72(2), 169–185.
- Felner, R. D., Favazza, A., Shim, M., Brand, S., Gu, K., & Noonan, N. (2001). Whole school improvement and restructuring as prevention and promotion: Lessons from STEP and the Project on High Performance Learning Communities. *Journal of School Psychology*, 39, 177–202.
- Fixsen, D. L., Naoom, S. F., Blase, K. A., Friedman, R. M., & Wallace, F. (2005). *Implementation research: A synthesis of the literature* (FMHI Publication No. 231). Tampa: University of South Florida, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, National Implementation Research Network.
- Furney, K. S., Hasazi, S. B., Clark/Keefe, K., & Hartnett, J. (2003). A longitudinal analysis of shifting policy landscapes in special and general education reform. *Exceptional Children*, 70(1), 81–94.
- Hill, C. E., Thompson, B. J., & Nutt-Williams, E. (1997). A guide to conducting consensual qualitative research. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 25, 517–572.
- Horner, R. H., Sugai, G., Todd, A. W., & Lewis-Palmer, T. (2005). Schoolwide positive behavior support. In L. M. Bambara & L. Kern (Eds.), *Individualized supports for students with problem behavior: Designing positive behavior plans* (pp. 359–390). New York: Guilford.
- Huberman, A. M., & Miles, M. B. (1994). Data management and analysis methods. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 428–444). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kincaid, D., Childs, K., Blase, K. A., & Wallace, F. (2007). Identifying barriers and facilitators in implementing schoolwide positive behavior support. *Journal of Positive Behavioral Interventions*, 9, 174–184.
- Klingner, J. K., Vaughn, S., Hughes, M. J., & Arguelles, M. E. (1999). Sustaining research-based practices in reading: A 3-year follow-up. *Remedial and Special Education*, 20, 263–274.
- Lassen, S. R., Steele, M. M., & Sailor, W. (2006). The relationship of school-wide positive behavior support to academic achievement in an urban middle school. *Psychology in the Schools*, 43, 701–712.
- Lohrmann, S., & Bambara, L. M. (2006). Elementary education teachers' beliefs about essential supports needed to successfully include students with developmental disabilities who engage in challenging behaviors. *Research and Practice for Persons With Severe Disabilities*, 31, 157–173.
- Maxwell, J. A. (1996). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- McCurdy, B. L., Mannella, M. C., & Eldridge, N. (2003). Positive behavior support in urban schools: Can we prevent the escalation of antisocial behavior? *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 5, 158–170.
- Nelson, J. R., Martella, R. M., & Marchand-Martella, N. (2002). Maximizing student learning: The effects of a comprehensive school-based program for preventing problem behaviors. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 10, 136–148.
- Office of Special Education Programs Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (2004). *School-wide positive behavior support implementers' blueprint and self-assessment*. Retrieved August 31, 2006, from <http://www.pbis.org/tools.htm>
- Scott, T. M., & Barrett, S. B. (2004). Using staff and student time engaged in disciplinary procedures to evaluate the impact of school-wide PBS. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 6, 21–27.
- Seidman, I. E. (1991). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. New York: Columbia University, Teachers College.
- Sindelar, P. T., Shearer, D. K., Yendol-Hoppey, D., & Liebert, T. W. (2006). The sustainability of inclusive school reform. *Exceptional Children*, 72(3), 317–331.

- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Sugai, G., & Horner, R. (2002). The evolution of discipline practices: School-wide positive behavior supports. *Child and Family Behavior Therapy*, 24, 23–50.
- Sugai, G., & Horner, R. R. (2006). A promising approach for expanding and sustaining school-wide positive behavior support. *School Psychology Review*, 35, 245–259.
- Taylor-Greene, S., Brown, D., Nelson, L., Longton, J., Gassman, T., Cohen, J., et al. (1997). School-wide behavioral support: Starting the year off right. *Journal of Behavioral Education*, 7, 99–112.
- Taylor-Greene, S., & Kartub, D. T. (2000). Durable implementation of school-wide behavior support: The high five program. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 2, 233–235.
- Vaughn, S., Klingner, J., & Hughes, M. (2000). Sustainability of research-based practices. *Exceptional Children*, 66, 163–171.

**Sharon Lohrmann**, PhD, is an assistant professor of pediatrics at the Elizabeth M. Boggs Center on Developmental Disabilities at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, Robert Wood Johnson Medical School. Her current research focuses on understanding the barrier conditions

that prevent adoption of positive behavior support and the strategies needed to transform resistance.

**Susan Forman**, PhD is a university professor and chair of the Department of Applied Psychology in the School of Applied and Professional Psychology at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey. Her current research focuses on implementation and sustainability of evidence-based interventions in educational settings.

**Stacy Martin**, PhD, is an instructor of pediatrics at the Elizabeth M. Boggs Center on Developmental Disabilities at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, Robert Wood Johnson Medical School. Her research interests include implementation of positive behavior support in schools, prevention of academic problems, and promoting home–school collaborations.

**Mark J. Palmieri**, PsyM, BCBA, is a doctoral candidate at Rutgers University and a predoctoral intern at the May Institute. His primary interests include classroom functional analysis, schoolwide positive behavioral supports, and behavioral interventions for students with pervasive developmental disorders.