West Virginia Safe and Supportive Schools Project

Year 2 Implementation Evaluation Report

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The 4-year federal Safe and Supportive Schools (S3) program supports targeted interventions to improve and measure conditions for learning at the high school programmatic level. In the S3 program, "conditions for learning" refers to *school climate*, defined as "the quality and character of school life" reflecting "norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures" within the school community.[1]

The National Implementation Research Network (NIRN) defines *implementation* as "a specified set of activities designed to put into practice an activity or program of known dimensions."[2] NIRN also describes implementation as a developmental process that occurs in discernible stages: *exploration, installation, initial implementation,* and *full implementation*. In addition to progressing through these stages, well implemented interventions tend to share common drivers, which fall into three categories: *competency, organization, and leadership*.[3]

Building on this conceptual basis, the WV Model for Positive School Climate (WVMPSC) serves as the framework for West Virginia's S3 project activities. The model provides a systematic, data-driven planning process that enables schools to identify and implement effective interventions to improve conditions for learning and ultimately to improve student outcomes. It involves strategic steps in these broad areas: (a) organizing, (b) assessment, (c) building support, (d) planning and implementation, and (e) monitoring and evaluation. For each strategic step, a set of core activities help schools carry out their school climate improvement process. Appendix A displays how the developmental stages, implementation drivers, and strategic steps function together (page 4). The WVDE Office of Healthy Schools enlisted and trained a cadre of school climate specialists (SCSs) to guide teams and leaders from schools selected for the program (S3 schools), through the components of the WVMPSC. Each SCS serves from one to eight S3 schools.

The S3 project has an evaluation component spanning the full 4 years of the project. For 2012-2013, the WVDE Office of Research focused on two evaluation questions: (EQ1) To what extent do participating schools implement the program with fidelity relative to the WVMPSC, and (EQ2) To what extent do program initiatives improve school climate and culture?

Methods

To assess implementation fidelity, we developed 4-point rubrics for each core activity with rating scales that ranged from *missing* to *strong fidelity*, but also included additional response options of *too early to tell* and *don't know*. The implementation fidelity assessments are completed toward the end of each academic year by two groups: the cadre of SCSs and school-based leadership teams in each S3 intervention school (S3 teams). SCSs submitted one assessment response for each school they served; members of the S3 teams collaborated to complete one consensus rubric for their school.

To assess school climate improvement, two approaches were taken. First, we compared overall school climate index scores for S3 intervention schools between the 2010-11 and the 2011-12 school years to assess change over time. Second, we added a question in the spring 2012 administration of the WV School Climate Surveys for students and staff. In the question, a series of items corresponding to 20 indicators from the school climate index were listed, and respondents were asked to indicate whether the items have changed compared to the previous year.

Ancillary analyses looked at how much support was provided by school districts and school principals, and how well schools crafted their behavioral norms and expectations, a key component of the WVMPSC.

Results

Fidelity of implementation

Overall the 15 (of 22) intervention schools for which fidelity assessment data were available in both 2011 and 2012 appeared to have done well in implementing core activities that align with the exploration and installation stages of implementation. Moreover, competency and organization implementation drivers tended to be largely in play during the first 2 years of the project as school-based teams were established, SCSs provided training and developed coaching relationships with school teams, and data systems to support decisions were employed through core activities (i.e., environ-mental scans and SWOT analyses). The use of other relevant data sources (e.g., school climate survey data) was initiated and sustained over the 2 years to support

school improvement decisions and planning. Across most core activities—aligned with all stages of implementation—improvements were made, moving from being altogether missing or implemented with weak fidelity in 2011, to being implemented at weak to moderate fidelity in 2012.

Both school-based S3 teams and SCSs indicated marked improvements relative to the strategic steps of the WVMPSC over the 2 years. SCSs tended to be more guarded in their assessments, however. For some core activities they indicated schools' implementation fidelity to be at lower levels than the school S3 teams rated themselves; this was likely due to the broader frame of reference SCSs have across schools. Statistically significant differences were found on seven WVMPSC core activities in 2012, compared to only three in 2011. The two groups differed—with S3 teams providing higher ratings—on two core activities in both years: (a) informing parents and community partners about the S3 initiative and securing their commitment, and (b) building understanding of S3 behavioral norms among school staff. The first of these is a challenge throughout the entire school system, whether involved in S3 or not. The latter is of critical concern because successful school climate improvement relies heavily on the awareness and understanding of expectations for appropriate behaviors, and execution of practices that reinforce those expectations in the day-to-day operations of the school.

A related activity on which the two groups differed in 2012 was defining school-wide procedural expectations for addressing student behavior. That SCSs assessed these activities at lower levels of fidelity than the S3 teams points to the need for competency-building opportunities for school team members and their colleagues, and for SCSs to coach them along.

Other core activities that SCSs rated at statistically lower levels than did school S3 teams involved the use of decision-support data systems. These activities included using assessment results to (a) identify factors contributing to school climate problems, (b) set priorities or plan activities, and (c) select appropriate interventions. Differences also were found for schools' efforts to review or analyze data on an ongoing basis to make project adjustments. It is not enough to simply identify problematic school climate issues. Achieving the best possible climate improvement also depends heavily on selecting and implementing interventions based on thorough assessments of factors contributing to those problem areas.

Leadership implementation drivers are not as explicitly described in the strategic steps of the WVMPSC as are competency and organization drivers. Two areas where SCSs provided limited data were the role and involvement of district S3 contacts and of school principals. SCSs reported that for most intervention schools, the district S3 contacts had at least some involvement in the S3 project at the school level, and for eight schools a fairly high level of involvement was

noted. For eight other schools, however, district coordinators were reported to have had little involvement beyond serving as the contact for the grant. There could be valid reasons for varying levels of involvement. In some cases, district contacts may be confident that schools have the capacity to carry out the grant with little assistance, while for other schools they may believe the opposite to be true, and thus gauge their involvement accordingly. It is not clear from the limited findings in this study if district contact involvement has a positive or negative effect on schools' success.

On the other hand, research has shown that in modifying a school's climate and culture, school administrators can play a substantial role in clarifying and consistently modeling the beliefs and values embodied in any proposed changes in the school environment.[4] They can create the conditions in which students and staff internalize new practices, similar to the behavior expectations established through the WVMSPC. Although it is not clear the specific roles of school principals among S3 intervention schools, SCSs reported that in a large majority of schools, principals had been very or moderately involved in the S3 project, which bodes well for the project as a whole. There were a small number of schools where principals were reported to be largely uninvolved, a possible substantial barrier.

Although no specific guidance is provided in the WVMPSC on the appropriate number of behavioral norms or expectations for a school, a similar framework suggests that three to five clearly stated norms/ expectations may be optimal.[5] They should be (a) stated clearly; (b) 1-3 words in length each; (c) positively stated to promote and support appropriate behavior; (d) comprehensive (apply to all students and staff, and all settings); and mutually exclusive. When asked to report on the behavior norms or expectations established through the S3 project, 21 of the 22 intervention schools responded. The number of behavior expectations listed ranged from two to 10 per school. While 13 listed five or fewer, eight schools listed from six to 10.

School Climate

As a group, S3 intervention schools showed significant improvement, with medium to large effect sizes in school climate as measured by the WV School Climate Index. Differences also were found for eight of the 20 indicators the Index comprises. It will not be possible to determine if the improvements in the Index observed in this year's study are genuine until data are collected for the full 4 years (including a comparison group of nonintervention schools).

Based on survey data, there appears to be a fairly wide gulf between students and staff in their perceptions of school climate improvements. Students were much more likely to report that conditions stayed about the same compared to the previous year, whereas staff were much more likely to report conditions had gotten better. Discrepancies between student and staff perceptions of school conditions are not

unheard of. One study found that although school staff were more likely than students to report having witnessed bullying in the school environment, they also were more likely than students to report feeling safe and a sense of belonging—both important constructs of school climate.[6] Another research study reported no association between student and staff ratings of overall school climate. Further, teachers' ratings of school climate may be more sensitive to classroom-level factors, such as disruptive behaviors, while students' perceptions may be more sensitive to school-level factors, such as student mobility, student-faculty ratio, and a change in principal.[7] With staff and students so far apart in their ratings of school climate improvement in the current study, there is a question about what factors may be driving the perceptions of both groups. Moreover, once identified, could these factors be targeted to further enhance schools' efforts in school climate improvement?

Recommendations

1. Based on the list of behavior expectations provided by intervention schools, schools should direct attention to establishing or refining behavior expectations with the assistance of the SCSs. Expectations should be five or fewer in number; 1-3 words in length; positively stated; comprehensive (apply to all students and staff, and all settings); and mutually exclusive. The findings from the fidelity assessment indicate that schools should place additional emphasis on efforts to build understanding of behavior expectation among school staff.

2. Schools also should consider expanding their approaches for communicating and teaching behaviors that align with their expectations. By articulating specifically what appropriate behaviors look like relative to the established behavior expectations, developing specific lesson plans to guide the process of teaching appropriate behaviors, and modeling appropriate behaviors throughout the school environment, they will enhance the degree to which expectations are integrated into day-to-day school experience.

3. Essential to obtaining the best possible climate improvements is selecting and implementing interventions based on thorough assessments of factors contributing to problematic school climate issues. That SCSs assessed schools at lower levels of fidelity in this area than did school teams points to a need to redouble schools' efforts to explore these contributing factors and adjust their interventions accordingly.

4. The gap between students' and staffs' perceptions of school climate improvement suggests an opportunity to cultivate a deeper understanding of the school environment from the perspectives of these two groups. Identifying and leveraging factors driving the perceptions of both groups could provide direction for further efforts to improve school climate.

Notes

1. National School Climate Center (n.d.). School climate. New York: Author. Retrieved from http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/

2. National Implementation Research Network (n.d.). Implementation drivers. *Learn implementation* (online publication). Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, FPG Child Development Institute. Retrieved from http://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/learn-implementation/implementation-drivers

3. Fixsen, D. L., & Blase, K. A. (2008). Drivers framework. Chapel Hill, NC: The National Implementation Research Network, Frank Porter graham Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina.

4. Beach, R. H., & Lindahl, R. A. (2007). The role of planning in the school improvement process. *Educational Planning, 16*(2), 19-43.

5. Algozzine, B., Horner, R. H., Sugai, G., Barrett, S., Dickey, S. R., Eber, L., Kincaid, D., Lewis, T. & Tobin, T. (2010). *Evaluation blueprint for school-wide positive behavior support.* Eugene, OR: National Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavior Interventions and Support. Retrieved from http://www.pbis.org/evaluation/evaluation_blueprint.aspx

6. Waasdorp, T., Pas, E. T., O'Brennan, L. M., & Bradshaw, C. P. (2011). A multilevel perspective on the climate of bullying: Discrepancies among students, school staff, and parents. *Journal of School Violence, 10*(2), 115-132.

7. Mitchell, M. M., Bradshaw, C. P., & Leaf, P. J. (2010). Student and teacher perceptions of school climate: A multilevel exploration of patterns of discrepancy. *Journal of School Health, 80*, 271-279.

Appendix A. Strategic Steps and Core Activities of the WV Model for a Positive School Climate Cross-Walk With Evidence Based Implementation Stages and Drivers

Strategic step	Core activity	Implementation stage	Implementation driver category	Implementation driver(s)
Organizing	Establish an S3 team and train team members on project design and components of the Positive School Climate Model.	Exploration/ Installation	Competency	Selection, Training
	Establish communication strategies among RESA, LEA, and school-based S3 team leadership.	Installation	Leadership	Adaptive
	Establish ownership and commitment for the project implementation process.	Installation	Organization	Facilitative Administration
Assessment	Establish data collection schedules and procedures.	Exploration/ Installation	Organization	Decision Support Data System
	Conduct an environmental scan to describe events, trends, and relationships in the school's internal and external environment to assist in planning for the desired school climate.	Exploration	Organization	Decision Support Data System
	Conduct a SWOT analysis to examine the school's internal strengths, weaknesses, environments, opportunities, and threats relative to the S3 project.	Exploration	Organization	Decision Support Data System
	Use data collected from behavior intervention or discipline referral forms, or other similar paper or electronic forms, for early detection, identification, and documentation of inappropriate behavior.	Installation	Organization	Decision Support Data System
	Conduct comprehensive needs assessment with all relevant data (e.g., student surveys, student discipline data, DP-1, SWOT, etc.) to describe current conditions and define a desired school climate.	Installation	Organization	Decision Support Data System
	Prioritize project goals based on the district needs identified in the assessment process.	Installation	Leadership	Technical
Building support	Inform school-level professional and support staff about the S3 initiative and secure their commitment.	Installation	Organization	Systems Intervention
	Inform parents and community partners about the S3 initiative and secure their commitment.	Installation	Organization	Systems Intervention
	Build understanding of S3 behavioral norms among school-level professional and support staff.	Installation	Competency	Training
	Build understanding of S3 behavioral norms among parents and community partners.	Installation	Competency	Training
	Define school-wide procedural expectations for addressing student behavior in a consistent and deliberate manner.	Installation	Organization	Systems Intervention
Planning and implementation	Use comprehensive assessment results (e.g., the environmental scan, student surveys, etc.) to identify factors contributing to school climate problems, set priorities, or plan S3 activities.	Installation/ Initial Implementation	Organization	Decision Support Data System
	Use contributing factors identified in the assessment process to select appropriate interventions.	Initial Implementation	Organization	Decision Support Data System
	Establish clear plans to integrate selected interventions school-wide.	Initial Implementation	Organization	Decision Support Data System
	Build capacity and train staff and parent/community partners to implement interventions with fidelity school-wide and in the community.	Initial Implementation	Competency	Training
	Implement project activities and selected interventions with fidelity school-wide.	Full Implementation	Organization	Systems Intervention
	Collaborate with families and community organizations to create or enhance asset building opportunities for students in school and community settings.	Full Implementation	Organization	Systems Intervention
	Collaborate with community agencies to create or enhance intervention and treatment referral systems.	Full Implementation	Organization	Systems Intervention
Monitoring and evaluation	Review or analyze data on an ongoing basis to make project adjustments.	Full Implementation	Organization	Decision Support Data System
	Establish plans and processes for ensuring long-term project continuation and sustainability.	Full Implementation	Organization	Systems Intervention