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Schoolwide positive behavior supports (SWPBS) is a culturally responsive set of systems, practices, and data-based decision-making features designed to achieve socially important behavior change. One important feature of SWPBS is the evidence-based practice of engaging families as partners in schooling. Statewide initiatives, early childhood education programs, and K-12 schools engaged in SWPBS can establish and use home-school partnerships as leverage for school improvement. How can schools foster family engagement in developing, implementing, and sustaining SWPBS? What are the challenges associated with such engagement? What barriers do schools face? What effective state- and school-level strategies enhance family engagement and home-school partnerships?

Creating Home– School Partnerships

by Engaging Families in Schoolwide Positive Behavior Supports

Our nation’s schools are faced with complex and deep-rooted challenges such as poverty, discrimination, weak school–family relationships, low student motivation, and high student mobility. These challenges must be overcome if children and youth are to meet their needs for belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990); experience social competence and academic achievement in school; and ultimately enjoy a high quality of life. To support families, schools must utilize evidence-based approaches to teaching and learning. Moreover, these approaches must be embedded in efficient systems that allow practitioners to implement them with fidelity and cross the research-to-practice divide, which historically serves as a deterrent to school reform efforts.

One promising approach to school reform that is gaining significant traction across the country is schoolwide positive behavior supports (SWPBS), a culturally responsive set of evidence-based interventions designed to achieve socially important behavior change and improve academic achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). SWPBS involves creating a set of universal behavior support features for proactively and systematically (a) identifying, teaching, and reinforcing

valued social behaviors and (b) identifying and responding effectively to challenging behaviors that undermine teaching, learning, and social relationships (Sugai & Horner, 1999). Using systems to support adults, practices to support students, and data for decision making, SWPBS arguably has grown in popularity like no other school reform effort in educational history (Sugai & Horner, 2006). Research and program evaluations have shown that schools implementing SWPBS with fidelity experience improvements in school climate; reductions in problem behaviors that would have led to office referrals, suspensions, and expulsions; increased opportunities for academic-engaged time; and gains in student achievement (Bradshaw, 2006; Horner, Sugai, Eber, Phillips, & Lewandowski, 2003; Muscott, Mann, & LeBrun, in press).

Barriers to Family Engagement and Home–School Partnerships

In *Playing Their Parts* (Public Agenda, 1999), a national survey of parents and public school teachers revealed that most parents considered their children’s teachers as accessible and caring, and teachers were more likely to be complimented than criticized. However, when it came to engagement in decision making, Public Agenda

found most parents uncomfortable in leadership roles and most teachers uncomfortable having parents in those roles. In fact, despite federal policy (the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, NCLB; Individuals With Disability Education Improvement Act of 2004, IDEA) that clearly mandates family and community engagement, most teachers and administrators “still think of themselves as individual leaders of classrooms, schools, or districts with little attention to the importance of teamwork and collaboration with parents and community partners” (Epstein & Sanders, 2006, p. 82). As noted by the National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors and the National Association of State Directors of Special Education, “Successful inter-agency partnerships make every effort to include family members in the decisions and actions that affect their own children. Parents and family members are the experts on their own children, and insofar as possible, they must be allowed, encouraged and supported to participate actively in every aspect of decision making regarding their families’ children” (2002, p. 25).

Major barriers include (a) one-side power relationships between schools and families (Nogera, 1999); (b) inadequate teacher preparation regarding establishing and sustaining relation-

Additional Resources

Alliance for School Mental Health. (2006). *PBIS school-family-community-partnership toolkit*. Long Island, NY: Author. Available from the Office of PBIS, District 75, NYC Public Schools, 400 First Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Beach Center on Disability. (2007). *Family research instruments and toolkits*. Available at http://www.beachcenter.org/families/family_research_toolkit.aspx

Bouffard, S. M., & Stephen, N. (2007). Promoting family involvement in middle and high schools. *Principal's Research Review*, 2(6), Reston, VA: NASSP. Available at <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/research/nassp.html>

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Kentucky Commissioner of Education's Parents Advisory Council. (2007). *The missing piece of the proficiency puzzle: Recommendations and a rubric for involving families and community in improving student achievement*. Lexington, KY: Department of Education.

National Center on School, Family and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University: <http://www.csos.jhu.edu/P2000/center.htm>

National Parental Information Resource Center Coordination Center: <http://www.nationalpirc.org/>

Public Education Network (2004). *School-parent compact: Action guide for parent and community leaders*. Washington, DC: Author.

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ships with parents (Epstein & Sanders, 2006); (c) limited time and material resources for engaging parents; and (d) pressure from underresourced national and state accountability measures. Finally, teachers' and administrators' attitudes about parent engagement are often shaped by the cultural filter of White, middle-class values, assumptions, and experiences and do not align with those of some families and the neighborhood (Henderson, Johnson, Mapp, & Davies, 2006). When these barriers cannot be addressed satisfactorily, regression to blaming and scapegoating is common, and the likelihood of disengagement increases significantly.

Families that are challenged by poverty, single parenthood, language and literacy barriers, and cultural differences are no longer likely to be dismissed outright by school personnel as dysfunctional (Leistyna, 2002). However, unless schools make concerted efforts, family engagement is more likely to occur with some families—those from more educated, more economically stable backgrounds—than with others—those from less educated, working class backgrounds (Sheldon, 2003). The result of such circumstances is predictable: parents who understand the system act on a sense of entitlement and make requests for scarce resources. In turn, teachers and administrators satisfy the active parents' requests to diminish the potential for confrontation, leaving the students of less savvy and empowered parents with fewer advantages.

Schools that answer the call to purposefully envision the role of parents in creating better learning environments for children strive to empower all parents—regardless of their educational or socioeconomic backgrounds—to be active partners in their children's school experience. Such schools productively channel the advocacy efforts of typically active parents and effectively mitigate feelings of marginalization, inferiority, or uncertainty in parents who have traditionally felt less empowered. In both cases, parents are recognized as important members of the school community, increasing the

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likelihood of improvements in academic achievement and social competence for all children.

Moving Toward a Partnership Model

Expanding the definition of “family engagement” is the first step for schools in creating more inclusive, productive places of learning for students and adults. Engagement is predicated on building trusting relationships with family members; that is to say, relationships in which teachers and parents respect one another, believe in each other’s ability and willingness to fulfill their responsibilities, have high personal regard for one another, and trust each other to put children’s interests first (Bryk & Schneider, 2005; Henderson et al., 2006). Relationship building is enhanced when schools use family-centered practices that respect the uniqueness and personal circumstances of *all* families (Keenan, 2004), including those who have children with disabilities (Muscott, 2002), and provide opportunities for leadership (Epstein, 2002).

Epstein (2002) provides an expansive framework through which educators must think deeply about how they support and facilitate parenting, learning at home, communicating, volunteering, participating in decision making, and collaborating with community. Schools on the path to meaningful inclusion of families recognize parents (and grandparents or guardians) as being engaged in their children’s educational experiences when they provide for their child’s basic physical and psychological needs, promote the child’s learning at home, volunteer in the classroom, advocate on behalf of the child with teachers and administrators, participate on decision-making committees, become active in community organizations that promote the work of

schools and the welfare of all children, or some combination thereof (see box, “Additional Resources”).

Many New Hampshire schools involved in SWPBS, via the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports-NH (PBIS-NH) initiative, have begun using Epstein’s (2002) framework to shift how teachers and families think about partnerships related to students’ academic and social-emotional growth (see box, “What Does the Literature Say about SWPBS?”). They do not assume that families who have traditionally been considered disengaged are making a conscious choice not to get involved in their child’s school experience. Rather, schools are recognizing that a range of challenges may prohibit well-intentioned families from effective engagement. As a result, they are embedding proactive and responsive systems and practices that address a wide range of needs and challenges.

Responsiveness to Family Engagement

Educators in PBIS-NH schools think about parent engagement in terms of Epstein’s (2002) framework and a multi-tiered approach that addresses responsiveness to family engagement through three tiers of support: universal, targeted, and intensive. Once schools identify the range of behaviors and actions that constitute engagement, the next logical step is determining what families need to know or access to “engage.” Thus, teachers and administrators implicitly recognize their responsibility to meet families at their own level with regard to engaging in their child’s education experience. Schools that perform a focused assessment of parents’ needs understand what strategies or supports will be necessary to (a) sharpen a wide range of parents’ basic skills, (b) establish consistent systems of two-way communi-

cation, (c) create a spectrum of volunteering opportunities, (d) teach families how to support students’ academic progress by exposing them to new academic and behavior content and skills, (e) expand the influence of families by sharing power in decisions about teaching and learning at their schools, and (f) tap into the resources and strengths available in the community.

Being responsive to all families requires that educators understand the range of readiness for engagement that exists and be able to match strategies to each family’s place on the continuum. Although engagement needs for most will be satisfied by universal strategies, some families will need more targeted forms of support. For example, most families might only need basic information regarding how they might engage in their child’s education effectively. For many of these parents, information provided through traditional communication systems

What Does the Literature Say About SWPBS?

SWPBS particularly emphasizes the relationship between school and home, making educators and family members prominent agents in transforming students’ educational experiences. Not surprisingly, SWPBS draws on a robust research literature to validate its emphasis on home-school partnerships. The literature suggests that such partnerships improve attendance, homework completion, and student achievement (Christenson & Sheridan 2001; Henderson, Johnson, Mapp, & Davies, 2006), particularly in urban areas (Nogera, 1999), and independent of family background (Keith et al., 1993). Family engagement has also been shown to decrease school violence (Boulter, 2004), improve graduation rates, and increase the likelihood that early adolescents will enroll in higher education (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005).

(e.g., newsletters, open houses, resource lists, and parent conferences) will suffice. However, for some families, a second tier of targeted supports may be required to support effective engagement in their child's education. These families may need information in their native language, provided by a translator, or personal contact by a school staff member with whom there is mutual trust and respect, rather than a mass e-mail or newsletter. Positive relationships hold the key to success.

At the intensive tier, a small number of families may be disengaged from their child's school because of, for example, their own failed school experiences, an ineffective relationship with their child, personal challenges, or previously compromised relationships. Unpleasant relationships or experiences promote escape and avoidance behaviors, which make school and family engagement difficult. In these cases, teachers and administrators must adopt a highly individualized and respectful

“ Before getting involved with the PBIS program, I found myself yelling, fighting and having no patience with my two daughters, Natalie, age 4, and Nicole, age 2. As a result of our involvement with the Black Bear Tracks program, my husband and I now work better with the girls. The girls now pick up their own toys, put their own dirty clothes away and we can sit down at the dinner table without them getting out of their chairs. One big improvement is that I am not always yelling and losing my patience and we have more bonding times together.

—Dawn Johnson
Parent, Lakes Region Child Care Center

approach that requires, at its core, an understanding of families' unique needs, fluency with specialized interaction and relationship-building skills, and knowledge and access to targeted resources and supports. These families may not feel they have the power or capacity to effect change for their children and see disconnecting from the school as the only viable option. Schools that operate with an approach

that is expanded, proactive, and organized along a continuum of intensifying parent support and engagement, however, are more likely to experience mutually beneficial outcomes associated with family-school partnerships (Keenan, 2004). For example, schools involved in the Mental Health and Schools Together: New Hampshire initiative (e.g., Peterborough Elementary and Littleton High School; see



www.nhcebis.seresc.net/family_engagement_article2008) have linked with local community mental health centers and developed a facilitated referral process to help families access appropriate and culturally responsive mental health supports in a timely fashion.

PBIS-NH and Family Engagement

Since the inception of the PBIS-NH systems change initiative in the fall of 2002, SWPBS has been systematically introduced and comprehensively supported in 141 public and private preschools and K–12 schools; the PBIS-NH initiative reaches more than 40,000 New Hampshire children, 98% of whom attend public schools. To date,

improvement in mean math scores on the New Hampshire state test. More important, 16 (59%) made gains in reading proficiency levels and 14 (52%) made gains in math proficiency levels.

PBIS-NH State-Level Practices for Family Engagement

By articulating concrete values, identifying evidence-based practices, establishing transparent linkages with area organizations, and outlining the specific criteria and expectations for school-based teams, PBIS-NH lays the groundwork for families and educators to develop relationships and cultivate productive partnerships. These exceptional partnerships, in turn, serve to bolster the mission of PBIS-NH to sup-

port the social-emotional well-being and achievement of all New Hampshire's students. We began our efforts by creating linkages with statewide family and youth leadership organizations (e.g., National Alliance on Mental Illness-NH, Granite State Federation of Families, Parent Information Center, Alliance for Community Supports, Main Street Academix) that resulted in state-level policy, shared trainings and presentations, and joint grant proposals.

school as a place where families (a) are informed of school activities in a variety of ways, (b) have access to information about how they can support their child's learning, (c) have access to information about how they can be involved in supporting learning in school through volunteering and assisting, and (d) know what resources are available and how to access those resources. As a second outcome, the group articulated a skill set for family members who serve on the universal leadership team (see www.nhcebis.seresc.net/family_engagement_article2008). The group also ratified the policy of the New Hampshire Center for Effective Behavioral Interventions and Supports that all ECE programs and schools be required to have at least one family member on their universal leadership team. Finally, the group agreed with the recommendation that schools regularly assess responsiveness to family engagement using the Family Engagement Checklist (Mann & Muscott, 2004) and develop an action plan to address any areas not fully implemented.

One type of activity involves helping parents become fluent in using PBIS strategies to create a home climate that is conducive to studying, completing projects, and doing homework.

PBIS initiatives are actively underway in 17% of New Hampshire's public schools, reaching 16% of public school students in the state; and teachers, administrators, and families in these schools are experiencing a number of important educational outcomes. For example, program evaluations reveal that PBIS-NH early childhood education (ECE) programs and schools experience decreases in problem behaviors resulting in less office discipline referrals and suspensions and increases in time for teaching, learning, and leadership activities, which result in improvements in academic achievement (Muscott et al., in press; Muscott et al., 2004; New Hampshire Center for Effective Behavioral Intervention and Supports, 2008). In school year 2006 to 2007, ECE and K–12 schools in multiple cohorts had 1,088 (7.2%) fewer office discipline referrals and 260 (16%) fewer suspensions than the previous school year. Of 27 elementary, middle, and multilevel schools analyzed over a 2-year timeframe, 24 (89%) showed improvement in mean reading scores and 11 (41%) showed

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These state-level partnerships produced consensus on a definition of a family-friendly school as a place where all families (a) feel welcomed, valued, and respected; (b) have opportunities for their opinions to be heard and their input known and acted upon; (c) have varied and authentic opportunities to be involved in activities of decision-making; and (d) feel satisfied with these elements (New Hampshire Family Engagement Work Group, 2004).

To operationalize these values, the Family Engagement Work Group identified the features of a family-friendly

PBIS-NH School-Level Family Engagement Practices

Engaging families through parenting and learning at home. Many New Hampshire ECEs and K–12 schools have developed engagement activities related to parenting and learning at home that are delivered at open houses or in more formal workshops. One type of activity involves helping parents become fluent in using PBIS strategies to create a home climate that is conducive to studying, completing projects, and doing homework. Another typical activity involves helping families design a behavioral matrix based on home routines that is consistent with the expectations used in the SWPBS system. For example, the Southern New Hampshire Head Start in Nashua was the first ECE in the PBIS-NH initiative to support parents with basic parenting skills using an adapted home matrix based on their Heads Up program (Be Safe, Be Kind, and Take Care of Our Things). Family workers visited families to help them create

positively stated, observable behaviors for home routines such as bedtime, mealtime, and peer play.

To enhance connections between school and home, the Lakes Region Child Care Services Center surveyed parents to assess interest and barriers, and partnered with another local agency, UpStream, to offer a five-part parenting series. Educators and family members involved in creating and delivering the “Parenting Series” considered the universal needs of the families by conducting surveys; providing training, materials, practice, and feed-



My children love this school—the school has been a phenomenal support for me and my kids. I can communicate with the school staff about anything. When you have the support you need, you succeed.

—Parent of a student
at South Meadow Middle School, Peterborough



back in natural settings; including parents in decision making and leadership; and emphasizing positive behavioral expectations (Be Safe, Be Kind, and Take Care). Results included high and consistent attendance, high graduation rates from the training series, continued participation after the training concluded, reports of improved family functioning, and creation of a community of leaders and learners. One father, for example, noted that the bedtime routine had become much more peaceful since they implemented the ideas: “We don’t have to fight with him at bedtime anymore, we just look at the matrix and know what to do.”

Engaging families through two-way home-school communication. Historically, schools have used unilateral forms of communication with families by disseminating pertinent information through irregular administrative letters, parent handbooks, newsletters, report cards, or infrequent phone calls. According to Epstein (2002), a defining element of school-home partnerships is establishing effective *two-way* communication systems. Through the reciprocal exchange of information, families are better equipped to engage

in school programs and understand their children’s progress—and schools become more aware of parental strengths and concerns.

Schools such as Mastricola Lower Elementary, Hillside Middle, and Dublin Consolidated Elementary (see box, “Additional Resources”), which we spotlight in this article, recognize the role that communication plays in creating partnerships with families. They created a number of universal communication systems, such as monthly newsletters with a write-in parent advice section, initial SWPBS activities

to introduce the program to parents, periodic open houses with aligned activities, an interactive Web site, and a parent liaison who solicits information from families and brings questions and suggestions to school meetings.

Mastricola’s monthly school newsletter features a SWPBS column to inform and engage parents, listing the upcoming “Behavior Skill of the Week” and offering suggestions for fostering common approaches in “The Big 3” (safety, respect, and responsibility; see www.nhcebis.seresc.net/document/filename/369/Mastricola_ES_Nov_newsletter_revised_highlighted.pdf). Every 6 weeks, members of Hillside Middle School’s parent-teacher organization (PTO) edit and print their *Beak Speaks* parent newsletter (see www.nhcebis.seresc.net/document/filename/365/Beak_Speaks_pages_combined.pdf). During the first year of the SWPBS initiative, the newsletter included articles about the adoption of the program and an explanation of what it would mean to students. Additional articles clarified the dress code, changes to the tardiness policy, details of the Hillside High-Five acknowledgment program, and data summaries.

The use of interactive rollout activities to introduce the SWPBS program to students and families and open houses to create ongoing, two-way dialogue about the program are typical in PBIS-NH ECE centers and K-12 schools. Dublin Consolidated School, a small, rural elementary school, used a consistent schedule of open houses to achieve two-way communication with families and creatively sustain the momentum for SWPBS implementation. During one such open house, *An Evening of ABCs*, families participated in four different activities that highlighted the important aspects of the program. According to Principal May Clark:

Fifth graders wrote and performed skits showing families how students exhibit the ABCs in three locations: arrival/dismissal, lunch, and physical education classes. A Jeopardy! game that had been used in a school activity with students was used to inform and assess families’ knowledge of the ABCs. The ABC song was performed by second graders and taught to families. Finally, students shared their responses to a writing prompt related to respect in four small groups so families had the opportunity to hear the work done by students of all ages. The open house was attended by more than 90 family members.

Viewed through Epstein’s (2002) framework, this form of engagement provided an opportunity for two-way communication within the context of a fun, interactive hour of activities. Events were made relevant by (a) using discipline data to identify the specific routines needing additional behavior support (i.e., arrival/dismissal, lunch, and physical education classes); (b) maximizing opportunities for students to design and perform at open houses; (c) emphasizing activities that actively involved parents and students; and (d) showcasing student products (e.g., written essays, posters) that highlighted the integration of academics with behavior support and contributed to a positive school climate.

Periodic and brief surveys are also a good way to gauge whether families

feel connected to the school and understand their child's experiences. Some families do not respond to paper surveys; schools might employ a second-tier attempt through a telephone poll. Volunteers with clipboards can also administer surveys at school events. Mastricola Elementary, for example, developed and distributed a survey to assess parent awareness of their "The Big 3" program. The leadership team used findings from the survey to develop articles for their newsletters. (See www.nhcebis.seresc.net/document/filename/366/Mastricola_ES_PBIS_Survey__05.pdf for surveys from Mastricola Elementary School.)

Family members who do not speak English, have limited reading skills, and/or lack educational resources at home may need additional supports and different communication mechanisms. Without adequate and accurate translators and translations, some children may misunderstand and/or miscommunicate school messages. Investments in computer-based translation systems, third-party liaisons, translated materials, automated phone messages, and so forth are worthwhile to bridge the language divide between educators and non-English-speaking families.

Engaging families through volunteering and shared decision making. Traditionally, parental involvement in schools has been unsystematic, voluntary, and limited (e.g., chaperoning field trips, participating in fundraisers, tutoring), and perceived by some educators as time-consuming and obligatory rather than helpful. Educators in PBIS-NH schools have moved family engagement toward Epstein's (2002) vision in which recruitment is systematic, opportunities for volunteering are available to all families, and family engagement is influential to student success.

When schools view parents as partners and engage them in decision-making processes that are mutually respectful, they realize higher levels of student achievement and greater public support. PBIS-NH schools are required to have at least one family member on the universal leadership team to attend trainings, participate in team meetings,

bring the family perspective to decision making, support rollout activities, serve as a liaison to family organizations, and encourage other family members to become active.

For example, Mastricola and East Derry Memorial actively recruit family members to serve as equal partners on SWPBS teams that make decisions affecting teachers, administrators, students, and families. At Mastricola, Maureen Tracy, the parent member, has

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done more than serve as a liaison for the team, PTO, and parent volunteer program. She has set up information tables during parent conferences, coordinated a SWPBS section in the annual Merrimack Christmas parade in conjunction with the student council, and developed a SWPBS Parent Hotline to provide answers and information for families. Similarly, Leah Manchester, parent member on East Derry Memorial's universal leadership team, takes her role seriously.

I was the outsider, the noneducator in the group, but I wanted to truly be part of the team. So, I try to attend all meetings and special events, and I offer to help in any way I can.

For the most part, my role as parent representative has been primarily as an information conduit, helping parents understand what SWPBS is and how [it] works. . . . At each PTA meeting, Vice Principal Lidia Desrochers and I provide an update of what behaviors the students are working on, their accomplishments, our celebrations and what to expect next. Our monthly PTA newsletter reaches a larger audience.

I am glad to part of the SWPBS team. We have made progress in helping families understand what we are trying to accomplish and how they can

use and reinforce the [program] at school, at home and in the community. Parents have found that the tenets . . . are helpful in enhancing parenting skills and creating a positive environment at home. Our goal over the next 2 years is to improve two-way communication and involve more families and the community in evaluating and measuring the success of the program. It will be wonderful to see that

opportunity expanded so that other parents and community members can participate. We believe that providing a wide range of family engagement practices will continue to be important as the [program] becomes even more a part of our culture in the next few years.

Although volunteers should not be involved in disciplining students, they can certainly receive training to participate in other aspects of the program, including teaching expectations and providing acknowledgment when students exhibit desired behaviors. However, family members, like staff, also should receive training on confidentiality, appropriate social interactions, handling conflicts, seeking assistance/advice, and so on. Mastricola Elementary's behavioral matrix supports the expectations that school volunteers exhibit safe, respectful, and responsible behaviors while in the school, further strengthening school climate and the idea that family members are role models for children even at school. The matrix is a part of the Volunteer Handbook and used during training (see www.nhcebis.seresc.net/family_engagement_article2008).

Looking Ahead

Educators in PBIS-NH schools are working diligently to create safe, successful, and satisfying teaching and

learning climates that support students' social competence and academic achievement. They purposefully work on establishing trusting relationships with families that form the basis for a wide range of engagement practices. No matter how well intentioned the effort, there are clear barriers to engagement between schools and families. Whether schools choose to acknowledge their role in mitigating the barriers will, no doubt, make a difference in the quality of a child's educational experience. Fortunately, empirical evidence suggests that educators and parents can overcome barriers that obstruct well-intentioned families from engaging in their children's educational experiences when schools choose to endorse and implement responsive, multi-tiered interventions and supports that address the wide range of engagement needs.

The family engagement strategies we describe give testament to the emerging power of reform efforts in New Hampshire using SWPBS to support adults, evidence-based practices to support students, and data-based decision making to assess effectiveness. The true test will be whether the effective family engagement practices being used in many PBIS-NH ECE programs and K-12 schools can be sustained with fidelity and ultimately expanded across the state. It is likely that increasing the engagement of families as authentic partners within the culture of SWPBS will significantly improve the probability that students experience increased social competence and academic achievement in school and ultimately enjoy a higher quality of life.

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