

PBL in practice

High school implementation

Research has shown that the implementation of school-wide PBL in high schools is associated with reductions in student dropouts, office discipline referrals, the numbers of students needing more intensive supports, as well as increased student attendance. However, reaching PBL implementation fidelity in high schools is likely to take longer due to the complexity and size of these sites, and will require adaptations to fit the secondary context.

This PBL in practice paper discusses the challenges and opportunities of implementing PBL in high school settings and presents contextually-fitting strategies for successful implementation.

References

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There are three unique contextual characteristics that influence the overall implementation of the PBL framework in high schools: size, organisational culture, and developmental level of the students.

Size

High schools are typically large, both in relation to student enrolment/staffing and physical layout. This size can impact on communication and consistency. It is important that all staff know about PBL status and current actions as well as what they are required to do as part of PBL implementation. Leadership for PBL in high schools involves multiple layers, including Heads of Department and Year Level Coordinators.

Culture

According to research, high schools tend to be more reactive in their approach to discipline and may not see the need to explicitly teach and acknowledge expected behaviours. Staff may need professional development in use of proactive practices which support student behaviour. A focus on building positive relationships with students will help establish a culture where students are comfortable asking for help and feel they belong.

Developmental level of students

Typically, high school students will be starting to seek autonomy and will increasingly place more importance on peer relationships. It is a normal part of adolescent development to increase risk-taking behaviours or to question authority. Involving students in decision-making and problem-solving provides students with opportunities for leadership and collaboration.

Strategies for establishing and sustaining PBL in high schools

1. Establish your WHY. Why is the school using the PBL framework? How will PBL help you to reach your goals?
2. Build PBL into strategic planning. Show how PBL aligns with current and future goals. Demonstrate to staff how PBL supports their day-to-day work.
3. Communicate about PBL to all staff. Not everyone needs to be on the PBL team, but everyone needs to understand their role in implementing.
4. Link PBL implementation to improvements in academic outcomes. Explain how PBL will help teachers to increase student achievement.
5. Choose a representative team that is also manageable and capable of making decisions. Having a team that is too big can hinder decision-making so consider having a core team and rotating working groups.
6. Establish effective PBL leadership. Staff will only invest their time and energy if PBL is prioritised by all school leaders, from the Principal down. It is important to establish communication loops and allocate time to PBL in all leadership meetings.
7. Share data with staff regularly. Spend time at first ensuring that data is entered consistently and accurately. Focus only on the data sets which directly relate to current goals.
8. Plan ahead for implementation by allocating time and resources in advance. Time will need to be set aside for meetings, staff professional development (PD), planning and resource development and coordination of parent and student input.
9. Intentionally collaborate with other high schools to share successes, problem solve common challenges and learn from each other.
10. Connect with the region. Take advantage of support, resources and professional development.

7 Essential features of PBL: High school adaptations



Essential Feature 1: Administrator support, participation and leadership

- Ensure all levels of leadership are involved.
- Heads of Department need to drive PBL in their areas.
- PBL is on the agenda in all leadership meetings.
- Establish formal communication loops.



Essential Feature 2: Common purpose and approach to discipline

- Take the time to secure staff commitment.
- Actively seek and act upon input from staff.
- Support teachers to adapt and change practices.
- Recognise staff for effective PBL implementation.
- Find ways to include non-teaching staff.
- Include student voice.



Essential Feature 3: Clear set of positive expectations

- Consider a graduated matrix (changing focus junior to senior).
- Include behaviours for academic and interpersonal engagement, positive mindset, learning processes, critical thinking and transition to work/further study.



Essential Feature 4: Procedures for teaching expectations

- Focus lessons may vary according to year level.
- Less need to tell/show/practise.
- Increased focus on independence and study/work skills.
- Greater need to remind, supervise and positively acknowledge.
- Students can be involved in developing and teaching lessons.



Essential Feature 5: Continuum of procedures for encouraging expected behaviours

- Focus on delivery of positive behaviour specific feedback.
- Involve students in developing the schoolwide acknowledgement system.
- Consider options to avoid or escape e.g., no homework tonight pass, skip a question card.
- Include options which build social responsibility and positive values e.g., accrued points go towards a charity donation made by a local business; recognition for community service.
- Link acknowledgement system to granting of privileges or leadership roles.



Essential Feature 6: Continuum of procedures for discouraging inappropriate behaviours

- Promote an instructional approach to behaviour (teach, practise, acknowledge).
- Explain the costs associated with punitive responses (negative outcomes for students/costs to society).
- Reserve suspension for serious misdemeanours.
- Build teacher capacity in responding to minor behaviours effectively.
- Provide PD and opportunities for peer coaching.
- Clarify difference between positive behaviour support practices and punitive or exclusionary practices (e.g., 3 strikes, names on board).



Essential Feature 7: Procedures for ongoing monitoring and evaluating effectiveness of the PBL system

- Use a range of outcomes data: attendance, behaviour, academic performance and school climate.
- Complete the Tiered Fidelity Inventory at least annually and use results for action planning.
- Plan for annual administration of Effective Behaviour Support (EBS) survey — think ahead to overcome potential barriers due to number of staff and the time allocation to complete.
- In large high schools it may be more efficient to summarise and analyse data by year level or sector.
- Use School Opinion Survey (SOS) data from students to evaluate school climate; other student surveys can be conducted to check on specific aspects of school climate (e.g., prevalence of bullying).
- Consider how concerns about internalising behaviours will be identified (e.g., teacher referral, screening, year level coordinator).