

Developing a Schoolwide Behavior Expectation & Acknowledgment System



An essential feature of MTSS-B is the creation of a schoolwide culture where prosocial behavior is clearly defined and acknowledged. Schoolwide positive behavior expectations are broad statements that describe the ways that all individuals in a school should behave to align with school and community values. Acknowledgment systems allow schools to recognize students when they engage in positive behaviors, usually through specific, targeted praise and some form of token economy or group contingency system.

Why teach schoolwide positive behavior expectations?

Rather than teaching students what *not* to do at school, schoolwide positive behavior expectations explicitly state the types of prosocial skills and behaviors that schools *want* to see from students. When developed and implemented with the input of school, youth, and family voices, schoolwide positive behavior expectations can benefit the whole school community by:

- ✓ Providing transparency for students, families, and school staff regarding expectations
- ✓ Increasing consistency in messaging across classrooms and settings within the school
- ✓ Integrating social, emotional, behavioral, and academic expectations across the school
- ✓ Focusing students and staff on expected, positive behaviors – rather than unexpected, negative ones

How do we establish and define positive behavior expectations?

In general, schoolwide positive behavior expectations should be:

- ✓ Broad enough to apply to all people across all school settings
- ✓ Aligned with and reflective of key social-emotional learning competencies
- ✓ Positively stated to highlight what people should do instead of not do
- ✓ Mutually exclusive (minimal overlap)
- ✓ Limited in number (usually 3 to 5) and easy to remember – or otherwise linked to acronyms and memory supports, like these examples:
 - Be Safe, Be Respectful, Be Responsible
 - Community, Accountability, Respect, Excellence (CARE)
 - Pride, Ownership, Wisdom, Excellence, Respect (POWER)

The process of establishing schoolwide positive behavior expectations may vary from school to school, but should always begin with soliciting input from students, teachers, and staff through surveys, classroom conversations, and staff conversations. A leadership team, such as a Tier 1 team or other team with representative leadership, uses this input to draft a set of schoolwide positive behavior expectations. The leadership team shares the draft for feedback through surveys, team meetings, conferences, etc. and then revises the draft according to feedback. The cycle of review, feedback, and revision may repeat several times as the expectations are refined and ultimately finalized.

Schoolwide positive behavior expectations must also be operationally defined to provide consistent language for and examples of the expected positive behaviors across different school settings. Operational definitions are often laid out in the form of a matrix and include the positive behavior expectation, locations or settings throughout the school, and examples of what the behavior may look like or entail in each setting. By clarifying how expectations are applied in different school settings, it promotes the generalization of learning without needing to be completely comprehensive. Explore examples in the **Sample Schoolwide Behavior Expectations** in the MTSS-B Toolkit.



How do we know if our school's behavior expectations are culturally relevant?

It is important to check the cultural and contextual relevance of schoolwide positive behavior expectations within the school and community, as expectations that are irrelevant to or misaligned with local culture will likely fall flat with students. Once a behavior expectations matrix has been established, it can be checked for cultural relevancy through a process such as the following:

1. Review the schoolwide behavior expectations and specific examples with students
2. Ask students to write down multiple examples of each expectation in their home setting
3. Ask students to write down multiple examples of each expectation when they're with friends or in their neighborhood
4. Ask students to share similarities and differences between the expectations across settings
5. Have students turn in their responses, and have staff review for themes (before returning the documents to students for their personal reference)
6. Hold staff discussions about the differences between behavior expectations for students in school and other settings. If a schoolwide expectation is different than what students experience in other non-school settings, explore whether the schoolwide expectation is necessary to support positive student development. If so, explicitly acknowledge how it diverges from the other contexts and provide additional support around teaching this expectation. If the "different" school expectation is actually not necessary for positive student development, explore how it could more appropriately align with expectations in the students' homes and neighborhoods.

How do we teach schoolwide positive behavior expectations?

The team who developed the schoolwide behavior expectations matrix should draft lessons for each school setting/location listed on the matrix. Draft lessons should be shared with staff for at least one round of feedback and revision. Once finalized, all staff should be provided professional development to understand the schoolwide behavior expectations, how to teach them, and how to acknowledge them appropriately.

Exposure to schoolwide positive behavior expectations should ideally happen before the school year officially starts, during student and family orientation. The first month of school should include opportunities for staff to teach all lessons within the behavior expectations matrix. Tips for teaching behavior expectations include:

- ✓ Teach social behaviors as you would academic skills – define the behavior simply, give examples, model, and allow time for practice
- ✓ Teach lessons in the natural context, when possible (e.g., lessons about behavior on the playground should be taught on the playground)
- ✓ Provide operational definitions of each behavior – including multiple examples and non-examples that involve students in the lessons – and emphasize why the expectation is important to their class
- ✓ Deliver lessons through grade level or classroom groups, center rotations, videos, staff or student skits, or other vehicles
- ✓ Provide prompts, reminders, corrections, and feedback in the natural context
- ✓ Collect feedback from students and staff after each lesson to understand lesson strengths and areas for improvement
- ✓ Schedule time in the professional development calendar to introduce and get feedback on rollout and lesson plans
- ✓ Schedule time in the school calendar for regular review, practice, and follow-up
- ✓ Develop procedures for identifying and supporting students whose behaviors do not respond to instruction (see **Designing a Schoolwide Behavior Response Plan** in the MTSS-B Toolkit)
- ✓ Develop plans to periodically reteach behaviors or deliver "booster" lessons before or after disruptive times of the school year (e.g., holiday breaks, spring breaks, statewide testing, etc.)



How do we implement an acknowledgment system for positive behaviors?

Positive behaviors can be recognized and reinforced through schoolwide acknowledgment systems. The team responsible for designing the schoolwide positive behavior expectation matrix and lesson plans can – with input from school stakeholders – also lead the effort to design a system for acknowledging students when they engage in positive behaviors.

Acknowledgment systems may involve combinations of the following:

- ✓ **Specific, targeted praise:** Opportunities to identify, communicate and publicly recognize excellence (staff-student, student-student, student-staff, school-student)
- ✓ **Token economies:** Staff can recognize positive behaviors by giving students tokens (e.g., stickers, tickets) that can ultimately be redeemed or exchanged for a reward
- ✓ **Group contingencies:** Opportunities to encourage positive student behaviors by offering positive social consequences
 - **“All for one”** – interdependent group contingency: each student’s behavior is required for the whole group to reach some specified level of performance in order to receive a reward (e.g., if everyone turns in their homework Monday through Thursday this week, there is no homework on Friday)
 - **“One for all”** – dependent group contingency: performance of an individual (or small group) results in a reward for the whole group (e.g., a student’s positive behavior during a grade-level assembly earns her homeroom a positive consequence)
 - **“To each his/her own”** – independent group contingency: the same goal is set for all learners in the group; however, consequences are delivered individually, based on the performance of each individual rather than the group (e.g., when each student finishes their quiz, they may take a break and read or draw quietly)

The acknowledgment system should be clearly linked to the schoolwide behavior expectations matrix, available to all students, and used across all school settings by all staff. It should also be age appropriate, easy and efficient for staff to deliver, consistent and predictable for students, and meaningful and/or valuable to students and staff. Acknowledgment systems can be gradually faded out over time as the school culture reflects adoption of schoolwide positive behavior expectations. See the **Sample Schoolwide Behavior Acknowledgment System** in the MTSS-B Toolkit for an example.

Where can I learn more?

In addition to reviewing Tier 1 tools in the MTSS-B Toolkit, visit these sites from the Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports (PBIS) for more information and resources:

- ✓ Teaching Expectations and Reinforcement Systems (presentation): <https://www.pbis.org/resource/teaching-expectations-and-reinforcement-systems>
- ✓ High School Acknowledgement Systems (practice brief): <https://www.pbis.org/resource/high-school-acknowledgement-systems>
- ✓ Creating a PBIS Behavior Teaching Matrix for Remote Instruction (practice brief): <https://www.pbis.org/resource/creating-a-pbis-behavior-teaching-matrix-for-remote-instruction>
- ✓ The Student/Teacher Game for teaching and reinforcing behavior expectations (PDF): <https://www.pbis.org/resource/the-student-teacher-game>

Freeman, J. (2020). *Practices to Support MTSS-B, Part 1 [PowerPoint slides]*. University of Connecticut. <https://tinyurl.com/2xm6xasb>

Freeman, J. (2020). *Practices to Support MTSS-B, Part 2 [PowerPoint slides]*. University of Connecticut. <https://tinyurl.com/7zd8mytj>