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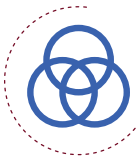
**PBIS**

Positive Behavioral  
Interventions & Supports

# HIGH SCHOOL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT SYSTEMS

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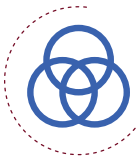


# High School Acknowledgement Systems

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## Introduction

**A** defining feature of PBIS is the creation of a school-wide social culture (e.g. the social antecedents and consequences affecting student behavior) where positive behavioral expectations are **defined and acknowledged**. A common lament, however, is that it is easier for faculty and staff to teach and acknowledge the positive behavior of elementary and middle school students than to establish an age-appropriate, effective system for acknowledging the positive behavior of high school students. The developmental level of teenagers, the organization of high schools, and the expectations that students and staff have for each other all make the strategies that are effective in younger grades a less comfortable fit in high school. The purpose of this practice brief is to focus on effective **ways to build an acknowledgement system that works in high school**. We start by suggesting why considering a formal acknowledgement system is appropriate in high school, and then review examples of strategies that have been demonstrated (descriptively or empirically) to be effective.



## Is it Necessary to Have a Formal System for Acknowledging Positive Behavior in High School?

Investing in a formal system for acknowledging positive behavior in high school becomes a worthy effort only if there is agreement that a need exists. There are four considerations we encourage any high school PBIS team (or faculty) to review as they evaluate if a formal acknowledgement system is needed:

### Is the Current Pattern of Student Social Behavior Acceptable?

If student behavior is acceptable then, investment in a formal system may be unnecessary. However, if the social behavior of students toward adults and other students is not promoting a positive social culture, then change is needed. One central element of that change is to define, teach and acknowledge the core social behaviors that should define a desirable social culture. If the decision is made to define and teach school-wide expectations, it will be important to include an ongoing acknowledgement system that will sustain and improve initial gains. The basic message is that if a need exists to improve the school-wide social culture, then a piece of the solution will be the design of an ongoing strategy for acknowledging appropriate behavior.

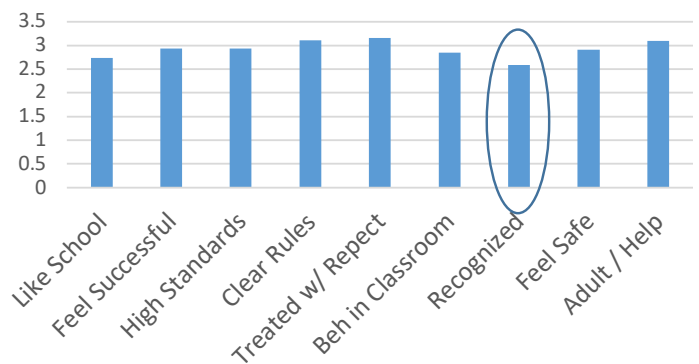
### Do Students Perceive Their Positive Behavior as Being Regularly Acknowledged?

Most students prefer a positive context where social and behavioral expectations are clearly defined, and positive behavior is acknowledged. Yet in 2017-18, when the students from 96 high schools implementing PBIS were asked to evaluate the social culture of their schools on 9 features of the *Georgia School*

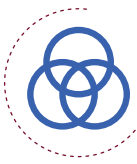


*Climate Survey: Students* (available at [www.pbisapps.org](http://www.pbisapps.org)), the feature rated **lowest** was “students are frequently recognized for good behavior” (c.f. Figure 1). Acknowledging appropriate behavior is noted **by students** as a deficit in many high schools.

**Figure 1: Mean ratings per survey item from high school students in 96 high schools implementing PBIS 2017-18. (Georgia School Climate Survey: Students). Available at [www.pbisapps.org](http://www.pbisapps.org)**



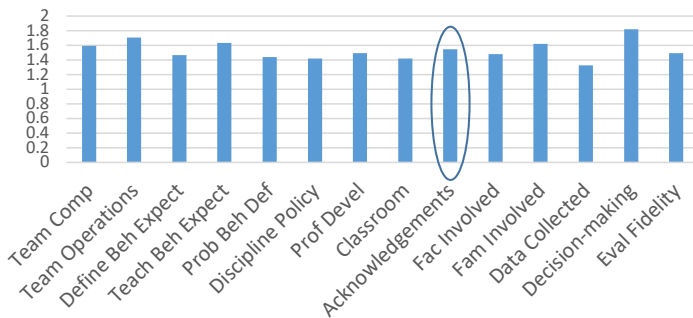




## Do Faculty and Staff in Your School Perceive that They are Already Acknowledging Student Positive Behavior Adequately?

Most high school faculty and staff want to support a positive school-wide social culture. Yet, when the PBIS teams in the 96 high schools surveyed above completed their evaluation of Tier 1 PBIS implementation (using the 15 items in the Tiered Fidelity Inventory: TFI Tier 1), the item focused on “Acknowledgement” of student behavior was one of the five core elements with the lowest score (c.f. Figure 2). High school faculty and staff often feel hindered in their options for acknowledging student positive behavior. The result is that not only do students report that their positive behavior is under appreciated, but adults in high schools indicate they are aware that they are not acknowledging student behavior.

**Figure 2: Mean ratings per Tiered Fidelity Inventory (TFI) Tier 1 Item for 96 high schools implementing PBIS in 2017-18**



## Do Students from Non-Dominant Populations Experience Acknowledgement for Their Positive Behavior?

A final consideration for high school faculty is the extent to which their commitment to equity is reflected in efforts to deliver positive feedback. Students who identify with a non-dominant status due to culture, language of origin, disability, sexual preference, or social standing are at special risk of missing some of the more nuanced positive messages from peers and adults. An overt system of acknowledgement that is reflective of cultural norms may be of critical importance for establishing the school as a welcoming and supportive environment that is inclusive of students from the non-dominant populations.

## Five Elements of a High School Acknowledgement System

If a school team reviews the information from the four data sources listed above, and decides that investing in school-wide social culture (and especially acknowledgement of appropriate behavior) is desirable, then we recommend considering that an effective acknowledgement system is more than a list of rewards. A system of student positive behavior acknowledgement that is effective, easy to manage, and likely to sustain typically has five core elements:

1. Schoolwide commitment and logic
2. Data system to guide decisions
3. A recognition rhythm
4. Faculty and staff acknowledgement of student behavior
5. Student acknowledgement of student behavior



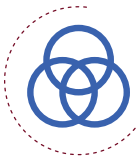
## 1. Schoolwide Commitment and Logic

School-wide systems to support positive school culture and student success start with school-wide commitment to implementing key practices. Your faculty need to agree that improving the positive school-wide social culture is both important for the social development of students, and a core feature of an effective learning environment. Encourage faculty and staff to emphasize not only their specific behavioral expectations, but the broader goal of making the school a “community” that supports the learning of all members. The staff in your high schools are highly focused on the students’ growth in their academic areas, so you need to emphasize that a positive social culture will increase the opportunities for successful learning.

The PBIS framework supports the concept that we need to teach the behaviors we want to see and that this teaching is as important as referring students for corrective consequences. One way we teach positive behaviors is to acknowledge them when we see them – telling the students, “Yes, that is what I expect.” This helps the high school students distinguish the nuances between different environments and different teachers/staff. This also improves generalization and precision of the behavior and reminds others of what is expected. If you think about it, this is likely one of the few times in their lives when the students have to adjust to different expectations every 45-90 minutes. Schools with clear school-wide expectations still have nuances among teachers.

Even with a staff commitment to develop a positive school culture, there can be some push back to the discussion about increasing acknowledgement of positive behavior. Often teachers and staff think the students should already know how to behave at school and therefore should not need to be acknowledged for demonstrating expected behaviors – only corrected following behavioral errors. We have found that the way an acknowledgement system is introduced to the faculty can make a difference in their acceptance. Suggestions when introducing the addition of an acknowledgement system in high schools include:

- **Acknowledgements are a part of a larger system.** Introduce acknowledgements as part of a larger package of practices focused on improving student behavior: (a) instruction on expected behaviors, and (b) corrections for problem behavior as companions with (c) acknowledgement of appropriate behavior. Keeping instruction, corrections and acknowledgements tied together increases acceptance of the acknowledgement system, and ensures your system doesn’t provide more attention to one of these than the others.
- **Discuss the use of acknowledgements broadly** – not just a formal “ticket” system. Your school culture should be one of recognition both formally and informally. Acknowledging successes helps to create a school culture that promotes pro-social behavior and invites positive support for one another. Explain how the stage must be set by the administrator and others in all we do and how we do it. (See 3 below).



- **Brainstorm and summarize what already exists.** Share with the school and have them help brainstorm how you already recognize students informally and formally (e.g., honor roll, athletic awards, student of the month). Helping faculty and staff draw a parallel between academics and behavioral acknowledgment systems can help them realize it is not a unique practice. Once staff has brainstormed, discuss whether or not these practices reach far enough to be certain all students (e.g. grade level, race/ethnicity, SWD, etc.) in the school have the opportunity to be acknowledged for both social and academic behavior.
- **Provide everyday examples.** Emphasize that we all are acknowledged for things we are “supposed to” or “know how to do”. Provide examples from your school when staff have been acknowledged for doing their job (e.g., quick note in mailbox for turning in timesheet on time, serving on a textbook selection committee...), or when we acknowledge ourselves (e.g., “I just spent my last couple hours cutting grass, so we should have pizza for dinner”) or when others use acknowledgement practices (e.g., coffee cards that are stamped upon coffee purchase, airline mileage programs). All of these acknowledge your behaviors and encourage you to continue them.
- **Use of acknowledgement as an instructional strategy.** Share the evidence behind using acknowledgement in the form of behavior specific praise as a powerful behavior change strategy. Discuss/model how to deliver behavior specific praise with developmentally appropriate language. Reinforce the idea that this is an instructional strategy that has applicability to both academic and behavioral skill development.

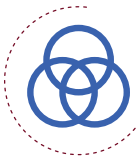


## 2. Data System to Guide Decisions

An acknowledgement system is much more likely to be implemented and sustained if the faculty and staff have regular access to data documenting an initial need, and improvement linked to their acknowledgement efforts. Two common data sets used by schools are a climate survey and a PBIS implementation fidelity tool.

### Use Climate Survey Data

If your district does not have a climate survey, there is one (for middle/high school) available at [www.pbisapps.org](http://www.pbisapps.org). These surveys provide a highly efficient way to measure both the overall school climate and



the extent to which students report that they are acknowledged for good behavior. We recommend that a high school organize collection of the school climate data from all high school students in mid-October and early February of each academic year. The data report provides perceptions of (a) all students, (b) students by grade level, (c) students by ethnicity, (d) students by gender and sexual orientation. The climate survey serves as a snapshot of student voice related to the social culture of the school.

### Use Fidelity and Walk-Through Data

Schools implementing PBIS should be using an implementation fidelity tool such as the Benchmarks of Quality (BoQ) or Tiered Fidelity Inventory (TFI) at least once a year. These tools have items specifically related to the establishment of your school's acknowledgement system.

Schools can also use the “walk-through” tool that is part of the TFI to look at the implementation of their acknowledgement system. While walking through the building, a person asks questions that focus on whether or not students and teachers have been acknowledged or provided an acknowledgement recently. This tool can be used outside of the standard administration of the fidelity tool. For example, a team can assign each member a hall and before the next meeting, require team members to ask 5-10 students and 5 teachers in that hall the “walk-through” questions. It will give you a quick set of data as to how individuals feel they are being acknowledged. Whether this is part of the formal assessment process or serves as spot checks, be sure to try and talk to

enough students and teachers to be confident that the data are representative. Finally, schools want to share their “walk-through” data with faculty and staff to help garner support.

High schools have also begun to track the delivery of positive referrals often using an existing system such as Google Forms and Autocrat to track positive referrals. Be sure to set up the system so that the team and administration can look at the positive referrals by subgroups such as staff, teacher, grade level, behavior gender, race/ethnicity.

### 3. A Recognition Rhythm

An effective recognition system in high schools is led by the building administration. The administrator sets the tone and highlights the expectations of a positive environment by regularly promoting the use of acknowledgments to all adults. Schools that are successful have a regular (predictable and rhythmic) schedule for recognizing examples of positive social behavior. This can be as simple as a 30 second message every week or fortnight about an example of a student (or students) who engaged in behavior that exemplified the school-wide behavioral expectations and helped promote a positive learning community. These announcements may be done with or without naming the student who is being acknowledged. The effect is achieved by describing (a) someone who demonstrated expected behavior(s), and (b) reminding everyone of the common commitment to contributing to a positive learning community. Examples of situations can come from staff, teachers or students. Even if not selected to be publicly read, the



administrator can provide the student with the shared description that was submitted. This again creates an opportunity for a positive interaction with that student.

- **Positive Referrals.** Assistant Principal keeps a list of all students enrolled at the school and highlights the student's name associated with receiving a positive referral. Weekly, the Assistant Principal identifies a few students that he knows have met the school-wide expectations but who did not receive a positive referral. He then emails the students' teachers prompting them to consider a positive referral for the student.
- **Reflecting on Respect.** Once every two weeks, the PA system will be used to ask all students at the beginning of the day to reflect for 30 seconds on at least one event during the past week in which (a) they were respectful of others, or (b) where others were respectful of them. The idea would be to provide a reminder, and to prompt a self-delivered reinforcer... and possibly to prompt discussion among students.

#### **4. Faculty and Staff Acknowledgement of Student Behavior**

Any successful acknowledgement system relies on the ongoing and regular efforts of the faculty and staff to identify and acknowledge positive behavior. Successful high schools typically do this in two ways:

##### **Regular Positive Interactions**

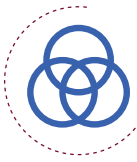
Regular positive interactions with students as a normal part of the school day that include acknowledgement of something the student did. This form of recognition is the most natural, and the easiest to adapt to the student, the moment, and the unique relationship between the adult and the student. This is what

most educators do naturally, especially around their academic content. They comment on what the student did right and what things they would like to see the student tweak or correct in order to improve an assignment or in-class answer. Discussion is often needed about expanding these to include social behaviors; in particular those behaviors that enable academic learning that we want to encourage (e.g., interactions, organization, prioritization, etc.). In the end, these behaviors make academic learning and success easier and this positive interaction helps build relationships with students and establishes school as a positive place to be.

One difference from what exists in your school might be the lack of a common language across adults. This allows the students to actually link the recognition from teachers, administrators and staff with the behavioral expectations needed to sustain a positive learning community. Provide teachers with some lead-ins (sentence starters) that are contextual and adolescent relevant. They can use such as, "You showed responsibility when...", and "I could tell you were frustrated but you used a respectful tone when sharing with me." This common language sets a culture in the school that the language used is relevant and important, eases communication, and helps with consistency.

Encourage staff to find a way to self-assess how they are doing at acknowledging all students and using positive acknowledgements. This can be as simple as printing out a class list at the beginning of each week or two and noting when you have made a comment to a specific student or a couple of students together about their behavior including acknowledging their





academic performance. These can be academic related such as persistence and follow-through or something that supports academic performance such as noting an increase in a student's organization. Mid-way through the week, encourage teachers to review their lists to identify which students they might have missed and still want "to catch" over the next few days. Sometimes those quiet students are overlooked and need the encouragement from recognition more than others.

### Formal Acknowledgement Systems

Formal acknowledgement systems in the form of distributing tickets, or offering tangible items is often what is thought of as the "acknowledgement system," but as you can see, this is only one part. In most instances, you are just extending any existing school-wide acknowledgement system to those students less skilled at receiving support from adults. A formal acknowledgement system can (a) make it easier for adults to extend a positive comment to any student because it is commonplace in the building, and (b) dramatically increase the likelihood that recognition from an adult will be received positively. Additionally, tickets serve as a visual reminder to adults to offer ongoing acknowledgement to students.

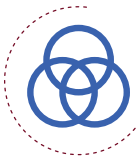
There are three important themes that guide the need for including a formal acknowledgement system: (1) The overwhelming message from students indicate that they perceive low and insufficient acknowledgement from adults; (2) All high schools include a significant proportion of students who arrive from troubled or traumatic environments where interactions with adults are confusing; and (3)

Recognizing students for demonstrating pro-social behaviors is not a standard practice in high schools. The use of a formal system serves as a prompt to the adults to look for and acknowledge these behaviors. A formal acknowledgement system should both increase the overall level of adult recognition of student behavior, and dramatically improve the effectiveness of adult acknowledgement for those students at greatest risk for school failure.

When building your "ticket" system make sure that it is efficient. If it is exhausting to manage, it will not be implemented well nor sustained. Consider the level, frequency, and format of distribution that your school can accommodate? Having a quarterly drawing and distribution of individual recognition items may not work for your school. Some schools focus their formal system on groups rather than individuals or some only engage in formal recognition quarterly. The group recognition includes grade or class level for specific behaviors and then delivers the reinforcer to that group (e.g., ice cream bars each quarter for students who received a positive referral; hot cocoa and cookies at end of advisory for classes who met the expectation of attendance).

### Some ideas to keep in mind when building your acknowledgement systems:

- Make the system visible by announcing the students who have been acknowledged. This can be through general announcements on the PA. One school developed "Wolf Awards" (aligning with their mascot) that were available for all students throughout the school year for displaying the Wolf expectations both on or off campus. Staff can recommend a student for a Wolf Award at any



time. Students received a certificate; their picture was taken with the certificate received, and posted on a bulletin board and the school's website.

- Tie the system to your schoolwide events and “swag” (e.g., theatre, sporting, coupons toward yearbook) in order to promote school and its values. One drama department purchased red velvet fabric, draped it over the front 4 seats during the school play calling them “box seats.” These seats were then raffled through the school's acknowledgment system; again, promoting student engagement. Building a focus on school events into your system provides an opportunity to engage students in school sponsored events that they might not otherwise attend. We know that school engagement is a key predictor of school completion and your acknowledgment system can be shaped to promote this.
- Use class competitions (group contingencies) to address a problem and reinforce a schoolwide expectation(s). In one school, the P.E. department saw a sharp decrease in students coming to class unprepared (not dressing out). In response, they staged a competition and acknowledged the class that showed the greatest increase in preparedness (dressing out).
- Another example of class competition was reported by several high schools who reported weekly results of the daily attendance and office referrals by grade level. Grade levels either competed with each other or each worked toward a goal that resulted in a grade level reinforcement (e.g. hat day). After each five-day increment with success, a grade level could advance to earn more desirable rewards. One year, the Senior class was so successful at meeting expectations that they earned a bowling trip.

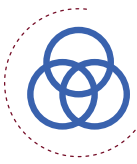
- Look for existing opportunities in the school day or activities that are interesting to the students. These often do not cost anything and include such things as VIP seating at school events, extension on class assignments, wearing a hat or hoodie to school, wearing ear buds during independent work, a minute early release to lunch/end of day, moving up in the cafeteria line, special parking places, and opportunities to shadow a faculty member (with faculty consent), administrator or staff member.

## **5. Student Acknowledgement of Student Behavior**

The social culture of a high school is driven by what students expect of each other, and how students respond to those around them. An effective acknowledgement system in high school will depend on all students being taught the expectations of the school and having a portion of that instruction come directly from fellow students. The orientation for all (a) new students and (b) start of the year should not only define the social norms needed to make the school a positive learning community but also the ways each student may support others. The message is that a successful community requires each individual both take responsibility for their own behavior and support the positive behavior of others. A few examples of student-to-student acknowledgements include:

### **Leave No One Behind**

“At \_\_\_\_\_ we are committed to the success of all students. In our school community, the expectation is that you will look out for those around you and reach out to provide help and support to others when you see the opportunity.” One school had little buttons



called “To Be Kind.” The Leadership Class developed the buttons and delivered them to students who were observed as being kind.

### Choose Kindness

Place a box in the school office where a student can complete a formatted card describing how someone was kind to them. Cards need to be signed and all content is held in confidence. Students who are nominated are contacted by an administrator and privately told that someone (undefined) nominated them for providing kindness to others. This acknowledgement could be attached to a tangible. Or, perhaps the act of being singled out and thanked by the administrator for being kind may be sufficient.

### Summary

Building a positive school-wide social culture in high school involves more than mandates, posters and policy. It starts with building a sense of community

among faculty, families and students. It involves recognizing that a coordinated effort is needed. Then, finding ways to combine selection, teaching, and **ongoing acknowledgement** of positive social behavior. Historically, high school teams and faculty have been challenged by defining ways that they can build a social culture where positive behavior is acknowledged regularly. This is similar to challenges faced in business, government and community settings. Honoring the developmental level of the students, and recognizing the complex roles within a high school requires attention to more than simplistic solutions. In this practice brief, we have tried to describe the core structure and examples of acknowledgement systems that have been successful in high schools using PBIS. We offer this not as a solution, but as a spark for consideration by teams and faculty committed to the quality of their school social culture.

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