

**Interconnecting PBIS and School Mental Health to Improve School Safety: A Randomized Trial**  
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**Abstract**

Bullying, fighting, and other forms of interpersonal violence occur frequently in elementary schools, and are associated with student distress, poor school functioning, and increases in aggression, delinquency, and other behavior problems. Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) is a holistic, multi-tiered, evidence-based approach for preventing and reducing aggression and other problem behavior in school. However, the majority of PBIS schools struggle with more intensive interventions, which many students who present aggressive and disruptive behaviors need. School mental health (SMH) offers promise for addressing these limitations in PBIS. However, SMH lacks an implementation structure resulting in students effectively needing to be at crisis level to be referred for services. Unfortunately, PBIS and SMH have operated separately limiting impacts of both initiatives. To address these limitations, the Interconnected Systems Framework (ISF) has been developed by leaders from national centers for both initiatives, providing specific guidance on PBIS-SMH interconnection through effective teams, data-based decision making, implementation support for evidence-based practices and ongoing quality improvement to assure responsiveness to school and student needs. We propose that the ISF will bring coherence to and increase positive impacts of efforts in schools to improve school climate and safety, reduce discipline problems and aggressive behaviors, reduce exposure to bullying and violence, and improve student mental and behavioral health

Involving partnerships with school districts and community mental health agencies in SC and 24 schools implementing PBIS with fidelity will be randomly assigned to the three conditions: the ISF, PBIS and SMH, or PBIS alone (8 schools per condition). Data will be gathered from school records, teacher and student reports, and PBIS teams. We will assess impacts of ISF compared to the other two conditions on school climate and safety; and student exposure to violence, problem behavior, and discipline problems, and their access to and quality of services. Multilevel analyses will be used to account for repeated observations of students and nesting students in schools, and cost-effectiveness analyses will be used to evaluate the economic impact of the interventions, with de-identified data archived. We predict the study will document advantages of the ISF as a foundation for promoting school safety and preventing/addressing school violence. Products will include an interim and final report and a full database usable by NIJ, at least five publications in high impact journals, the strengthening of a national webinar series, and at least 10 conference presentations to diverse audiences.