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# COACHING CLASSROOM PBIS TO SUPPORT EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS

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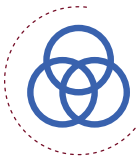
SPS = Southbridge Public Schools; UCONN = University of Connecticut

## Purpose

The second in a series of three evaluation briefs (Derian-Toth et al., April 2025; Aug 2025; & Sept 2025), this brief describes how a district in receivership (state takeover) invested in PBIS to (a) enhance their **systems** to support staff, (b) implement evidence-based **practices** to support students, (c) use **data** to guide their implementation, and (d) ensure equitable supports for all students, including students with disabilities, to experience improved **outcomes**.<sup>1</sup>

In this brief, we introduce Southbridge Public Schools, describe districtwide systems and data to support **classroom PBIS**, and highlight how these efforts enhanced educators' practice and supported students in the district's three elementary schools.

1. Descriptions of purpose repeat across briefs to provide consistent information.



## Introduction

When educators implement classroom PBIS practices, students can experience enhanced social, emotional, behavioral, and academic growth (Center on PBIS, 2025; Long et al., 2019; Riden et al., 2022; Simonsen & Myers, 2025; Sutherland et al., 2019). Therefore, the Center on PBIS (2023) recommends that district and school leadership teams prioritize classroom PBIS implementation by:

- Providing explicit **training** and ongoing **coaching**
- Using data to guide a **continuous improvement** of educators' implementation and students' experiences and outcomes

With support from the Center on PBIS, Southbridge Public Schools put these recommendations into action. In this brief, we examine the impact of their efforts and address a key **evaluation question**: Does training and coaching in classroom PBIS—guided by data for continuous improvement—result in improved and/or sustained (a) teacher practice and (b) student outcomes over time?

## The District Context<sup>1</sup>

Southbridge Public Schools (SPS) serves about 2,000 students, grades Pre-K through 12, across six schools in Massachusetts. The district is classified as “high needs” by the state. District data indicate:

- 80.6% of students qualify for state support (e.g., Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program,

### Key Takeaways

- Ongoing external and internal PBIS technical assistance enables **district and school leaders** to consistently prioritize systems, practices, data, and outcomes at the classroom level; **educators** to enhance their practice; and **students** to experience improved behavioral and academic outcomes.
- In contexts with complex challenges (e.g., state takeover, pandemic recovery, staff turnover), district and school leaders can use data to monitor and adjust implementation to enhance fidelity and outcomes through a **continuous improvement process**.

Department of Children and Families Foster Care Program, MassHealth/Medicaid)

- 27.5% of students are identified with a disability
- 20% of students transferred into or out of the district after the start of the school year
- 34.6% speak a first language that is not English, and 19.9% are considered English-Language Learners
- 65.9% of the student population identifies as Latino/a/e, 26.5% as White, 4.0% as Black or African American, 1.9% as multiracial, 1.3% as Asian, 0.2% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 0.3% American Indian or Alaskan Native

1. Descriptions of district context repeat across briefs to provide consistent information



In 2016, SPS was designated as underperforming and placed under receivership due to a poor accountability rating from the state, based on low rates of graduation, attendance, percentage of students meeting or exceeding academic standards, and other indicators. For example, in 2014-2015, the four-year graduation rate was 63% overall (24% students with IEPs).

Beginning in 2018, SPS partnered with the Center on PBIS to demonstrate the effects of Center technical assistance on the district's (a) **local capacity** to support high fidelity, sustained, and scaled PBIS implementation districtwide, (b) **implementation fidelity** of a full continuum of PBIS, and (c) **student outcomes** for all students (Freeman et al., 2020), including those with disabilities (Derian-Toth et al., April 2025).

## District Systems to Support Classroom PBIS

From the beginning of their partnership with the Center on PBIS, SPS established a clear focus on classroom PBIS practices. They leveraged their district and school leadership team structures to plan training and coaching supports. At the start of each school year, new and returning educators participate in back-to-school professional development to enhance their understanding of PBIS practices, and throughout the year they participate in ongoing training and coaching as part of the district professional development plan. See Derian-Toth et al. (April 2025) for (a) an overview of systems, practices, data, and outcomes to support educators and students and (b) a summary of district systems fidelity data. Over the years, SPS leaders have

refined and enhanced their approaches by prioritizing key classroom PBIS practices and routinely collecting and reviewing data on the fidelity and outcomes of classroom PBIS.

## District Prioritized Classroom PBIS Practices

Classroom PBIS includes a number of evidence-based and “high-leverage” practices (see Center on PBIS, 2025; Morris et al., 2024). SPS district leaders prioritized the following key classroom practices within their PBIS framework to explicitly train, coach, monitor, and enhance through their district supports:

- Teach positive **expectations** within predictable **routines** at the beginning of the year
- Provide high rates of **specific praise**
- Ensure a favorable ratio of praise to corrections (**+ to – ratio**)
- Deliver engaging instruction with high rates of **opportunities to respond**
- **Actively supervise** students in the classroom

## District Data to Support Classroom PBIS

To monitor implementation and outcomes of these classroom PBIS practices, SPS district leaders built routines for collecting data and systems for examining data on classroom practices. Specifically, district and school leaders began using the [Classroom Management Observation Tool](#)<sup>1</sup> (CMOT; Simonsen et al., 2020) to sample educators' implementation of key classroom PBIS practices during routine walkthroughs. District leaders regularly visited each school, observed



a sample of teachers each month, and completed the CMOT to document the degree to which each observed teacher implemented key classroom PBIS practices effectively (rating from 1-strongly disagree to 4-strongly agree). They also built a data system to examine CMOT data at various levels (district, school, and grade) and reviewed those data regularly (at least monthly) to monitor implementation and identify targets for training and coaching across the district and within each school.

During Spring 2024, SPS district leaders piloted an additional approach to enhance their data routines and systems by collecting frequency counts of (a)

specific praise statements (teacher practice) and (b) behaviors that interrupt learning and are contextually inappropriate (student behavior). Beginning Fall 2024, SPS scaled this pilot across their elementary schools. This brief highlights the implementation and outcomes of classroom PBIS in these SPS elementary schools. We summarize data from 2018-2019 through 2024-2025, where available. The COVID-19 pandemic affected implementation and data collection in the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years.

## SPS Elementary Schools

There are three elementary schools in SPS. Table 1 describes the student groups at each school.

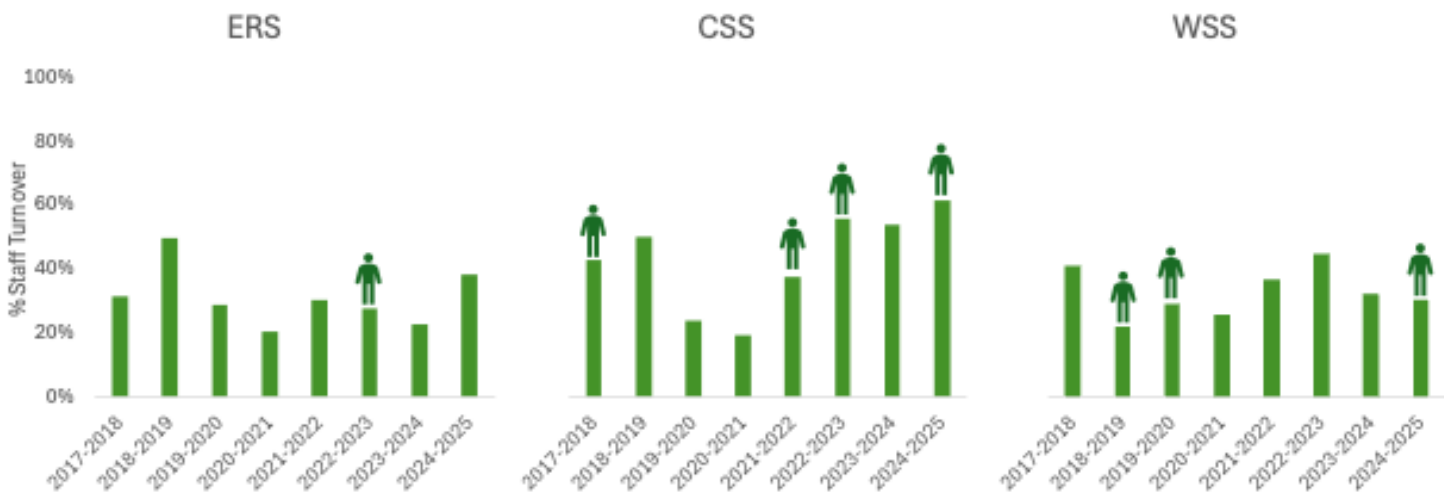
**Table 1. Demographics of Each Southbridge Elementary School**

Demographic		Eastford Road School (ERS): ~400 Students	Charlton Street School (CSS): ~290 Students	West Street School (WSS): ~320 Students
Grades		Pre-K – 1	2 – 5	2 – 5
Race/Ethnicity	Hispanic or Latino/a/e	65.5%	64.6%	72.4%
	White	26.2%	27.1%	21.4%
	Black or African American	4.3%	3.5%	4.3%
	Multiracial	2.5%	2.4%	1.2%
	Asian	1.3%	2.1%	0.3%
	American Indian or Alaskan Native	0.3%	0.3%	0.0%
Identified As “High Needs”		84.4%	92.7%	87.3%
Home Language Other Than English	English learners	21.2%	14.2%	23.8%
	First Language Other Than English	36.8%	29.2%	35.6%
Identified With a Disability		17.1%	35.4%	23.5%

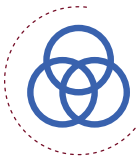


SPS experiences high turnover among principals and teachers. Across elementary schools and time, approximately one third of principals and teachers left SPS (Figure 1). For comparison, [16% of principals and 10% of teachers turnover](#),<sup>2</sup> on average, across the state of MA. CSS experienced the highest teacher turnover, and WSS experienced the most principal turnover—these changes may contribute to variability in data throughout this brief.

**Figure 1. Staff Turnover Rates Among Teachers and Principals in Southbridge Elementary Schools**

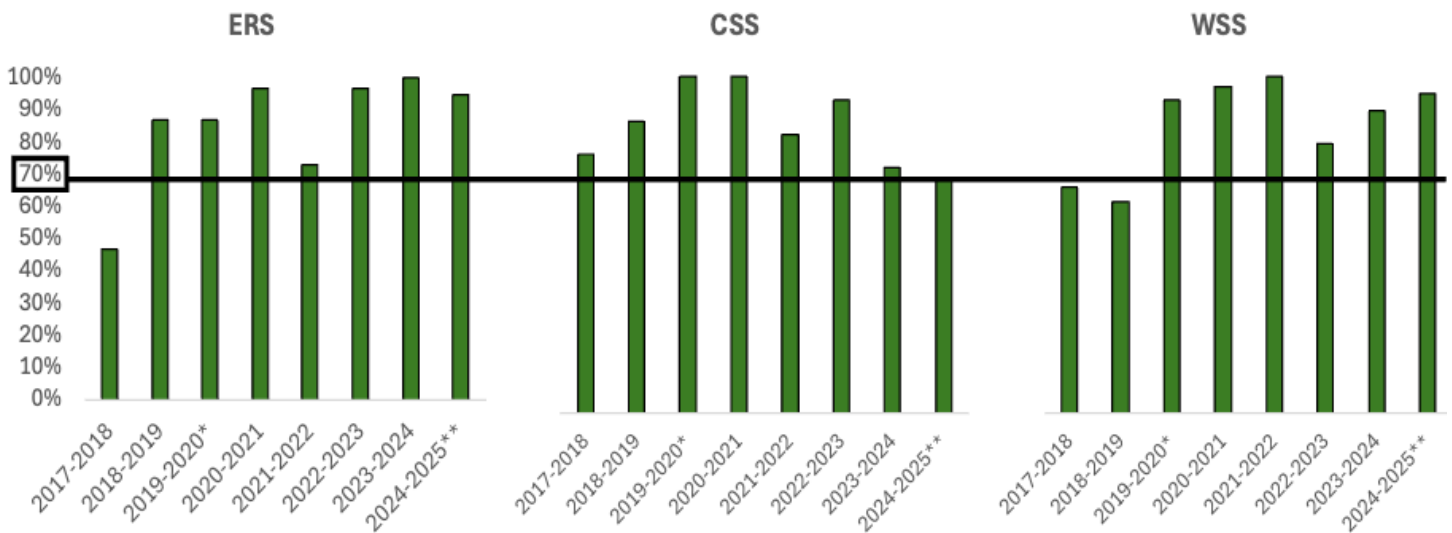


Note: Years with principal turnover are indicated by a person above the teacher bar for that year.



Given turnover, each school experienced variable implementation fidelity of Tier 1 PBIS, as measured by the [Tiered Fidelity Inventory \(TFI\)](#),<sup>3</sup> over time. Note that CSS had the greatest teacher turnover and the most variable fidelity. Changes in team composition may also have contributed to variability in scoring. Despite turnover and variability, all SPS elementary schools met or exceeded the 70% criterion for Tier 1 implementation fidelity since 2018 (CSS), 2019 (ERS) or 2020 (WSS; see Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Tier 1 Fidelity, as Measured by the TFI, by Year  
for Southbridge Elementary Schools**



\* The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted planned data collection in Spring 2020; teams completed the TFI for the prior school year in November 2020; \*\*Teams used the newly released TFI 3.0 in the 2024-2025 school year.



## Classroom PBIS in SPS Elementary Schools

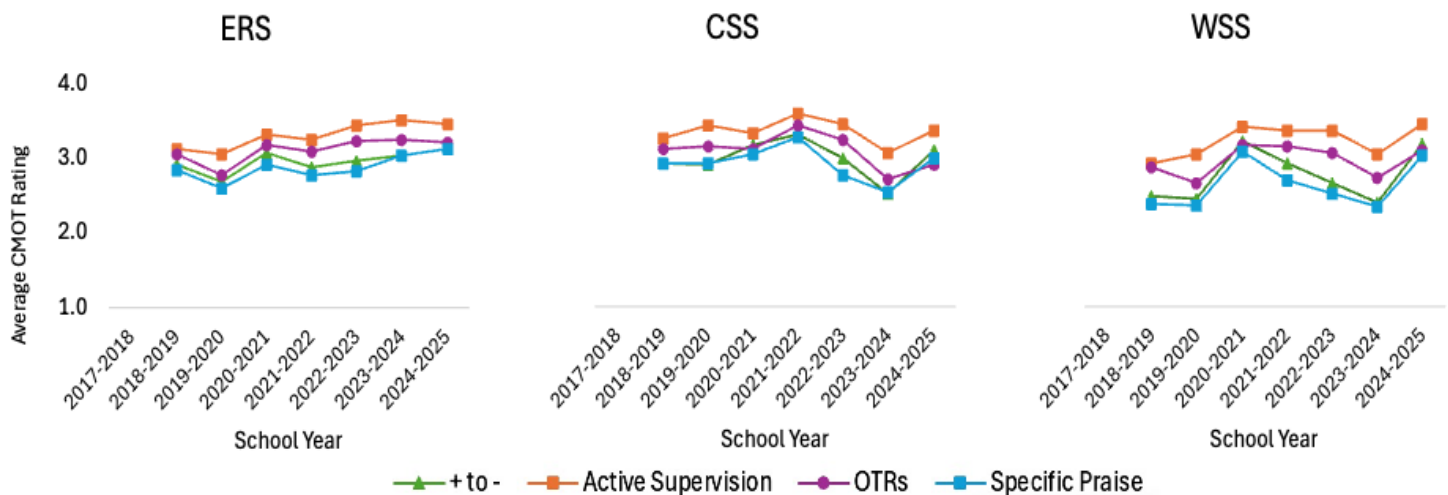
In this section, we share the story of how SPS established a sustainable model of classroom coaching to enhance teachers' implementation of classroom PBIS over time (from 2018-2025).

### Educators' Implementation of Classroom PBIS Practices

#### EFFECTIVENESS OF CLASSROOM PRACTICE IMPLEMENTATION

Since 2018, SPS Elementary Schools have monitored the fidelity of key empirically supported classroom PBIS practices: active supervision, opportunities to respond (OTRs), specific praise, and the overall positive to corrective (+ to -) ratio using the CMOT. District and school administrators completed an average of 323 (Range = 177 – 693) observations with the CMOT across elementary schools each year. CMOT data at each elementary school have demonstrated some variability, but ratings generally indicate that classrooms implement effective levels of core classroom practices (ratings >3; see Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Classroom Management Observation Tool  
Data Across Years at SPS Elementary Schools**



Note: + to - is the ratio of positive to corrective statements; OTRs is opportunities to respond (strategies to invite active student engagement). Data collected using the [Classroom Management Observation Tool](#)<sup>4</sup> (Simonsen et al., 2020).

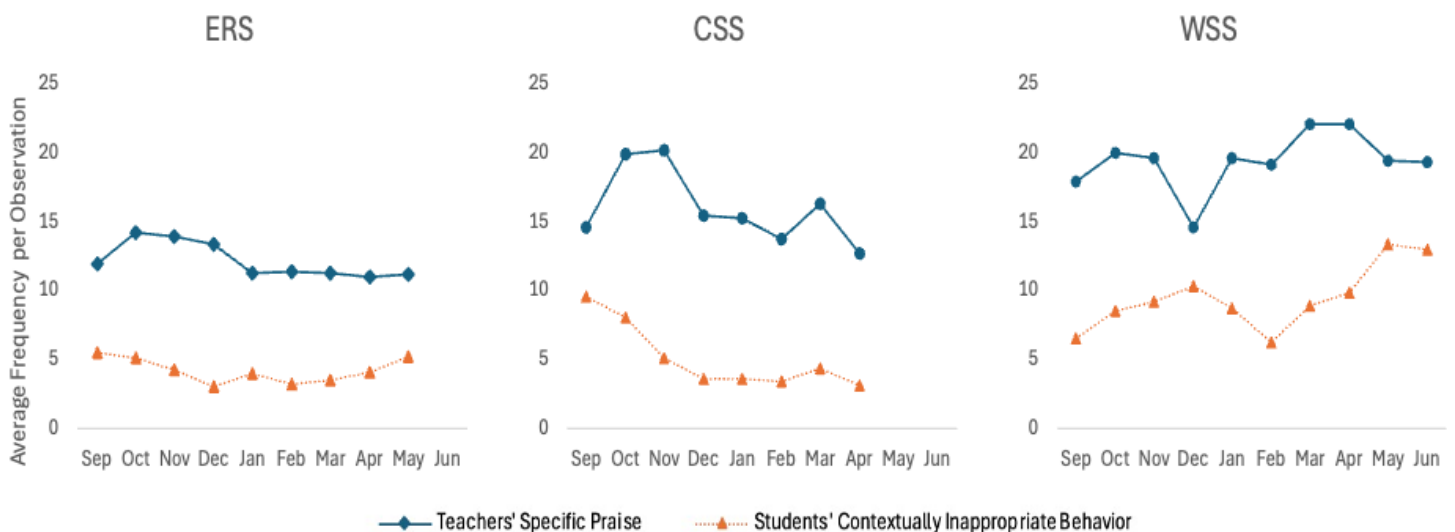




## RELATION BETWEEN TEACHERS' PRACTICE AND STUDENTS' CLASSROOM OUTCOMES

Teachers' Specific Praise and Students' Behavior over Time. As described, district leaders also collected frequency counts of teachers' specific praise and students' contextually inappropriate behaviors to guide their implementation of classroom PBIS in the three elementary schools, starting in 2024-2025 (see Figure 4). Across schools, district leaders conducted a total of 1786 observations, averaging 85 (Range = 3 - 210) observations each month at each school. Observations were scheduled for 15-20 min, with an average of 17 min.

**Figure 4. Teachers' Specific Praise and Students' Behavior During 2024-2025 at Each Elementary School**



After each observation, administrators shared feedback with teachers. In the absence of baseline data, we cannot compare these rates to the year before the focused pilot. However, CMOT data (Figure 3) indicated that educators in each school generally maintained (ERS) or increased the effectiveness of their specific praise during this year. Possible interpretations of these data are (a) these rates represent increases from the prior year and/or (b) the focused on specific praise rates may be associated with increases in perceived effectiveness as measured by the CMOT. The relation between praise and student behavior is unclear in these data.



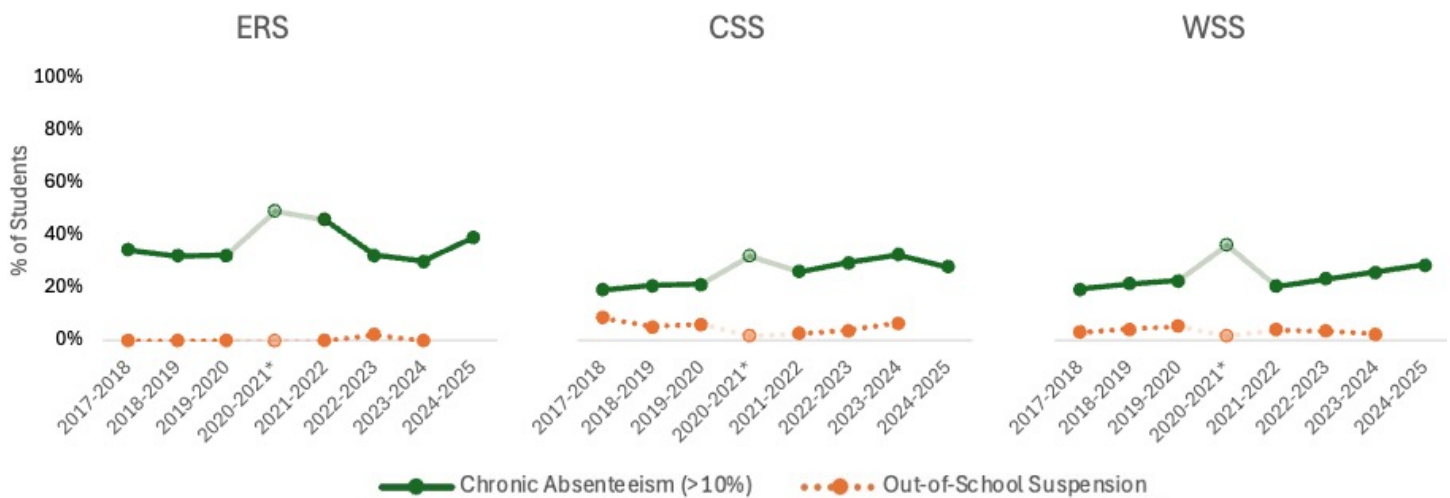
## Additional Student Outcomes

In addition to observed student behavior (in Figure 4), we monitored additional student outcomes, including attendance, suspensions, and growth in academic outcomes.

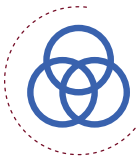
### TIME OUT OF SCHOOL: CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM AND SUSPENSIONS

Since 2018, the number of students with chronic absenteeism (missing >10% of school) spiked during the pandemic and has begun to stabilize; however, ongoing monitoring is needed to guide support for student attendance and engagement. Few students have experienced one or more out-of-school suspensions (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5. Chronic Absenteeism and Out-of-School Suspensions at Each SPS Elementary School**



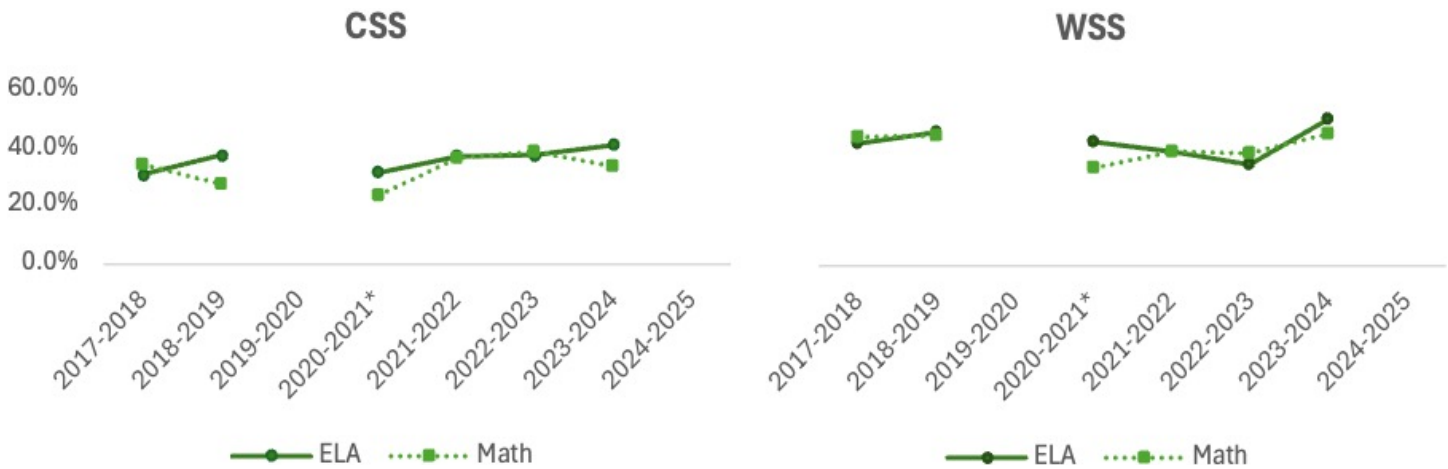
Note: The COVID-19 pandemic likely affected the use of out of school suspensions, as students were educated in remote (spring 2020) and hybrid (2020-2021) learning modes; indicated with light shading in the graph. Suspension data for 2024-2025 were not available at the time of this brief. [See definitions on the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education website.](#)<sup>5</sup>



## GROWTH IN ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

The two elementary schools that include Grades 3-5 (CSS and WSS) participate in the Next Generation Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) in Math and English/Language Arts. Although the overall performance of students has declined since the pandemic ([see school data on the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education](#)<sup>6</sup>), each school has supported students in making steady (Math) or increasing (ELA) growth (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6. Average Student Growth Percentiles (SGP) for Students in CSS and WSS**



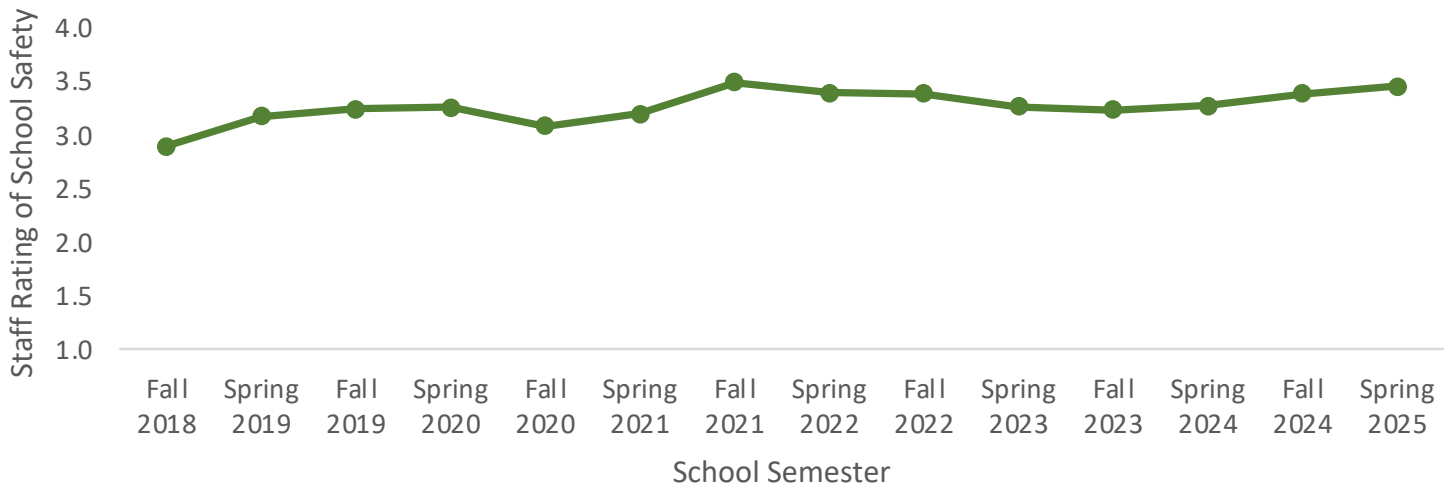
Note: The MCAS was not administered in Spring 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

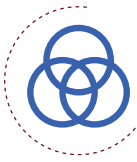


## Impact on Staff Perceptions of School Safety and Structure for Learning

Staff perceptions of school safety have grown to be more positive as measured by the School Climate Survey. ([More detail about the School Climate Survey is available at the PBIS Assessment website<sup>7</sup>](#)). Since Fall of 2018, SPS staff have completed the School Climate Survey every semester, rating each item on a 1-4 scale. The overall survey results are presented in [Scaling PBIS Districtwide to Support All Students, Including Students with Disabilities<sup>8</sup>](#). In this brief, we highlight staff perceptions of on the School Safety subscale. Staff average score of school safety started at 2.9 (out of 4) in the Fall of 2018 and it has grown to 3.5 in the most recent delivery of Spring 2025 (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7. Average Staff Ratings of School Safety Across Southbridge Elementary Schools**





## Summary

In this brief, SPS elementary schools demonstrate a clear commitment to supporting educators' classroom practice. Systems for data collection, classroom observations with feedback, and routines to monitor progress have created a solid infrastructure for implementing PBIS with fidelity. Although staff turnover, a global pandemic, and other factors have contributed to variability in data, the overall outcome data provide initial evidence of stabilizing and/or improving the learning environment. Students' observed behavior, attendance, suspension, and academic data have all shown positive changes. In addition, staff report increasing perceptions of school safety in the learning and work environment. SPS will continue to monitor and enhance their supports for educators and students through their PBIS framework.





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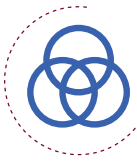
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## Embedded Hyperlinks

1. <https://nepbis.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/CMOT-5.1.20.pdf>
2. <https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/teacher.aspx?orgcode=00000000&orgtypecode=0&leftNavId=15619&>
3. <https://www.pbis.org/resource/tfi-3>
4. <https://nepbis.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/CMOT-9.27.19.pdf>
5. <https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/help/data.aspx?section=students#indicators>
6. <https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/analysis/nextgenmcas.aspx?orgcode=02770020&orgtypecode=6&compareorg=02770010&>
7. <https://www.pbisapps.org/products/scs>
8. <https://www.pbis.org/resource/scaling-pbis-districtwide-to-support-all-students-including-students-with-disabilities>