



2026 Hybrid Minnesota Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) Summer Institute Agenda

“Growing Together: Innovation, Collaboration, and Sustainability in Minnesota PBIS”

Wednesday, August 12, 2026, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.

In-Person Location: Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) Lower Level Conference Center

MDE is located at [400 Stinson Blvd NE, Minneapolis, MN 55413](#). The main entrance is on the east side of the building, facing Stinson Boulevard. Guests enter through the main entrance.

Virtual Platform: Zoom

Schedule

Session Times	Session	Presenter(s)	Location	Zoom Link and Passcode
8:30-9 a.m.	Registration	N/A	Lower Level Conference Center Reception Area	N/A
9-9:15 a.m.	<i>Welcome to Summer Institute</i>	<i>Sonia R. Smith, J.D., Director of Special Education</i>	Lower Level Conference Center, Room 103	Join Session on Zoom Link 1 Passcode: #1PBIS
9:15-10:15 a.m.	<i>Keynote—From Evidence to Impact: PBIS in Minnesota and Beyond</i>	<i>Nicholas Gage, Ph.D., Research Director, Co-Director of Special Education Policy and Practice (SEPP) Research</i>	Lower Level Conference Center, Room 103	Join Session on Zoom Link 1 Passcode: #1PBIS

Session Times	Session	Presenter(s)	Location	Zoom Link and Passcode
10:15-10:20 a.m.	Break	N/A	Lower Level Conference Center	N/A
10:20-11:10 a.m. Session 1	<i>Improving School Climate Through SW-PBIS: Statewide Outcomes and Implications for Practice</i>	<i>Nicholas Gage, Ph.D. Research Director, Co-Director of Special Education Policy and Practice (SEPP) Research</i>	Lower Level Conference Center, Room 103	Join Session on Zoom Link 1 Passcode: #1PBIS
11:10-11:30 a.m.	Break	N/A	Lower Level Conference Center	N/A
11:30 a.m.-12:20 p.m. Session 2A	<i>PBS in Action: Classroom Practices that Enable Student Success</i>	<i>Cheryl Cook, MS Curriculum and Instruction, Lead PBIS Trainer and Michele Wackman, School Psychologist Ed.S., Lead PBIS Trainer</i>	Lower Level Conference Center, Room 103	Join Session on Zoom Link 1 Passcode: #1PBIS
11:30 a.m.- 12:20 p.m. Session 2B	<i>Sustaining PBIS in a Middle School Setting</i>	<i>Leslie Poellinger, PBIS Coach, La Crescent-Hokah Middle School</i>	Lower Level Conference Center, Room 104	Join Session on Zoom Link 2 Passcode: #2PBIS
12:20-1:20 p.m.	Lunch	N/A	Lower Level Conference Center, limited outdoor seating on west side of building near food trucks	N/A

Session Times	Session	Presenter(s)	Location	Zoom Link and Passcode
1:20-2:10 p.m. Session 3	<i>Sustaining Exemplar Panel—The Long Game: Minnesota’s Two-Decade Commitment to Sustaining Schools</i>	<i>Faribault Jefferson Elementary</i> <i>Hidden Oaks/Twin Oaks Middle Schools</i> <i>Sauk Rapids-Rice High School</i>	Lower Level Conference Center, Room 103	Join Session on Zoom Link 1 Passcode: #1PBIS
2:15-3 p.m. Session 4	<i>Sustaining Exemplar Ceremony</i>	<i>Recognition Workgroup</i>	Lower Level Conference Center, Room 103	Join Session on Zoom Link 1 Passcode: #1PBIS

Chronological Session Descriptions and Biographies

Welcome to Summer Institute

Sonia R. Smith, J.D., is the Director of the Special Education Division. With more than 25 years of experience in education, Sonia brings a multistate perspective. She has worked in various capacities at the state, district, and campus level, serving as a special education director, school administrator, district coordinator, and school advocate-special education specialist. [Contact Sonia R. Smith, J.D.](mailto:sonia.smith@state.mn.us) (sonia.smith@state.mn.us).

Keynote—From Evidence to Impact: PBIS in Minnesota and Beyond

Over the past two decades, PBIS has become one of the most widely implemented school improvement frameworks in the United States. But what have we actually learned from the research? And where does the field go from here?

This keynote will synthesize lessons from PBIS research in Minnesota and across the nation, highlighting what evidence tells us about implementation fidelity, school climate, student behavior, attendance, and academic outcomes. Drawing on large-scale longitudinal studies and real-world implementation experiences, the session will explore both the successes and the ongoing challenges of scaling PBIS in diverse educational contexts.

The keynote will conclude by examining future directions for PBIS, including integration with mental health supports, equity-focused implementation, advances in data-informed decision making, and the evolving role of implementation science in sustaining meaningful systems change.

Dr. Nicholas A. Gage is a nationally recognized researcher, methodologist, and statistician whose work focuses on school-wide PBIS, the reduction of exclusionary and disproportionate discipline, bullying prevention, and outcomes for students with and at risk for emotional and behavioral disorders. He serves as a Research Associate at the University of South Carolina Bullying Prevention Center and as Statistician for the University of Florida Literacy Institute, and he is the founder of High Fidelity Research. A former professor of special education at the University of Florida and research director at WestEd, Dr. Gage has authored numerous peer-reviewed studies, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses examining the effects of PBIS on student behavior, academic achievement, and school climate. His research is widely cited for its methodological rigor and its practical implications for schools implementing multi-tiered systems of support with fidelity. He is a frequent keynote speaker and trusted advisor to educators and policymakers committed to equitable, data-driven practice. [Contact Nicholas A. Gage, Ph.D. \(gagenicholas@gmail.com\)](mailto:gagenicholas@gmail.com).

Session 1: Improving School Climate Through SW-PBIS: Statewide Outcomes and Implications for Practice

This session will examine the relationship between School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SW-PBIS) implementation and student-reported school climate outcomes across multiple years of statewide implementation. Drawing on longitudinal data spanning the COVID-19 pandemic and return to in-person schooling, the presentation will highlight findings related to school climate, student wellbeing, and bullying outcomes, with particular attention to the role of implementation fidelity and sustained Tier 1 supports.

The session will review current research on PBIS and student outcomes, summarize findings from a large-scale statewide study, and discuss implications for practice, implementation, and future research. Particular emphasis will be placed on how schools and districts can strengthen school climate and student support systems through sustained, high-fidelity PBIS implementation.

Dr. Nicholas A. Gage is a nationally recognized researcher, methodologist, and statistician whose work focuses on school-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), the reduction of exclusionary and disproportionate discipline, bullying prevention, and outcomes for students with and at risk for emotional and behavioral disorders. He serves as a Research Associate at the University of South Carolina Bullying Prevention Center and as Statistician for the University of Florida Literacy Institute, and he is the founder of High Fidelity Research. A former professor of special education at the University of Florida and research director at WestEd, Dr. Gage has authored numerous peer-reviewed studies, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses examining the effects of PBIS on student behavior, academic achievement, and school climate. His research is widely cited for its methodological rigor and its practical implications for schools implementing multi-tiered systems of support with fidelity. He is a frequent keynote speaker and trusted advisor to educators and policymakers committed to equitable, data-driven practice. [Contact Nicholas A. Gage, Ph.D. \(gagenicholas@gmail.com\)](mailto:gagenicholas@gmail.com).

Session 2A: PBS in Action: Classroom Practices that Enable Student Success

This session is designed to strengthen participants' knowledge and skills in implementing Positive Behavior Support (PBS) classroom practices. Grounded in research, PBS classroom practices create success-enabling experiences that serve as the foundation for student learning. When implemented collectively across classrooms, these practices provide all students with consistent, equitable access to strategies proven to improve outcomes. The session will begin with an overview of the evidence supporting PBS and why these practices are so effective.

Participants will engage in focused skill-building around two core strategies: Behavior-Specific Praise and Specific, Empathetic Error Correction. To conclude, we will explore how PBS practices can be seamlessly integrated throughout the school day. By the end of this session, participants will gain both clarity and confidence in applying PBS practices to consistently foster environments where all students can thrive.

Cheryl Cook is a recently retired school district leader. Over her 36-year career she served students in public education as an Elementary Teacher, Adjunct Faculty, Instructional Coach, PBIS Coordinator, and Professional Learning Manager. Cheryl was a part of Cohort 1 in Minnesota and has experience implementing PBIS as a teacher, internal coach, external coach, District Coordinator, MRIP Regional Coach, Certified School-Wide Information Systems (SWIS) Facilitator and Lead Trainer. She has worked with a wide variety of school settings with diverse populations of students and staff and is dedicated to supporting your school's unique implementation of the PBIS framework. Cheryl understands the implementation process from many perspectives and is passionate about helping your school's implementation of PBIS be successful and sustainable. [Contact Cheryl Cook \(pbis.cheryl@gmail.com\)](mailto:pbis.cheryl@gmail.com).

Michele Wackman, while in graduate school, worked as a special education paraprofessional in the Roseville Area School District #623 and was hired by district #623 as a school psychologist when she graduated. During her 25-year career as a school psychologist, she principally worked at Central Park Elementary School and has served as the district's lead psychologist for the last few years. In addition to working in Roseville, she went through Cohort 5 PBIS training in 2009, has been a certified SWIS facilitator for about a decade and a PBIS trainer. In 2019, she continued her deep commitment to PBIS by becoming a PBIS external coach. As an external coach, she's able to use the daily, hands-on experience from her own school and district to help support teams in other districts to engage in the important work of systems change. [Contact Michele Wackman \(michele.wackman@isd623.org\)](mailto:michele.wackman@isd623.org).

Session 2B: Sustaining PBIS in a Middle School Setting

Join PBIS Coach Leslie Poellinger for an engaging session focused on what it really takes to sustain PBIS in a middle school setting. Drawing from her coaching experience, Leslie will share practical strategies, real-world lessons, and effective approaches that have helped her team build momentum and keep PBIS meaningful for both staff and students.

Middle schools bring unique challenges and opportunities. This session will highlight how strong systems, intentional coaching, and team collaboration support consistent implementation over time. Whether you are refining your practices or looking to strengthen sustainability, you will walk away with actionable ideas you can implement right away.

Come ready to connect, reflect, and leave with tools to support PBIS success in your middle school community.

Leslie Poellinger, PBIS Coach at La Crescent-Hokah Middle School, is entering her 14th year in education and has spent her career teaching fourth and fifth grade students across all subject areas. She currently serves as the Middle School PBIS Lead at La Crescent-Hokah Middle School, a role she has held since 2022. Following the district-wide relaunch of PBIS, Leslie has helped lead and sustain implementation efforts that promote a positive, predictable, and supportive school culture. She is passionate about building systems that create staff and student buy-in and foster long-term success. During this session, Leslie will share how *The Lancer Way* has cultivated enthusiasm, consistency, and ownership of PBIS practices at the middle school level, along with practical strategies for sustaining implementation over time. [Contact Leslie Poellinger](mailto:leslie.poellinger@isd300.k12.mn.us) (leslie.poellinger@isd300.k12.mn.us).

Session 3: Sustaining Exemplar Panel—The Long Game: Minnesota's Two-Decade Commitment to Sustaining Schools

In 2005, Minnesota began statewide cohort training and added regional support to its teaming structures. With the launch of the Sustaining Exemplar application in 2014, these efforts expanded and created a stronger framework for long-term sustainability. This session will highlight three Sustaining Exemplar schools from across the state. Panelists from each region will share specific examples of how strong leadership, managing team turnover, building staff capacity, and re-engaging in PBIS help maintain implementation fidelity and sustain effective systems. Attendees will also have time to ask questions.

Nick Jurrens, now in his 23rd year in education, joined Jefferson Elementary as principal in the summer of 2022. He spent his first 12 years as an educator teaching 5th grade and coaching football, basketball, and baseball. The past 10 years he's served as an elementary principal. [Contact Nick Jurrens](mailto:njurrens@faribault.k12.mn.us) (njurrens@faribault.k12.mn.us).

Rachel Loftus and **Zach Haught** are Deans of Students at Hidden Oaks and Twin Oaks Middle Schools in the Prior Lake-Savage Area School District. Hidden Oaks and Twin Oaks are two schools across the street that operate together as one middle school campus. Serving roughly 2000 students, staff in both buildings work together to support a community wide PBIS program. Rachel is starting year 17 and has served various roles as a math educator. Zach is a 13-year educator who spent most of his career teaching middle school science. [Contact Rachel Loftus](mailto:rloftus@plsas.org) (rloftus@plsas.org). [Contact Zach Haught](mailto:zhaught@plsas.org) (zhaught@plsas.org).

Steve Wagner is an Assistant Principal at Sauk Rapids-Rice High School in Sauk Rapids, Minnesota. He has over 25 years of experience in education as a teacher, coach, and administrator. Steve serves as a PBIS trainer through the Minnesota Northeast Regional Improvement Project (NRIP), supporting schools in implementing and sustaining effective PBIS practices. At Sauk Rapids-Rice, he has helped lead the development of a comprehensive PBIS framework focused on creating a positive, predictable, and student-centered school culture. Steve is passionate about using data, collaboration, and relationship-building to improve outcomes for all students. [Contact Steve Wagner](mailto:steve.wagner@isd47.org) (steve.wagner@isd47.org).

Session 4: Sustaining Exemplar Ceremony

MDE is recognizing 97 schools and nine districts for their long-term commitment to PBIS, an evidence-based framework that promotes positive student behavior and strengthens school climate. These schools and districts have shown leadership in improving student achievement, reducing disciplinary incidents, and fostering welcoming learning environments. The ceremony allows us to celebrate schools across the state for their focus on investing in education and supporting effective, student-centered practices. Each school and district on this list is a success story in PBIS implementation.

Recognition Workgroup

This is a statewide team responsible for recognizing schools and districts sustaining SW-PBIS implementation with fidelity.

[Contact the Recognition Workgroup](mailto:mde.pbis@state.mn.us) (mde.pbis@state.mn.us)

Accessible Presentations

[Access the 2026 MNPBIS Summer Institute presentations on Google Drive](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/17zQutNRZa8LpvXpA34jEmTi9R07WK840?usp=drive_link)

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[Contact Minnesota PBIS Management](mailto:MDE.PBIS@state.mn.us) (MDE.PBIS@state.mn.us) with any questions.