

Eric Neal:

Hello, and welcome to the State Support Team 11 podcast. I'm Eric Neal. And today, we're joined by Tara Finton. How are you doing, Tara?

Tara Finton:

I'm great. How are you doing, Eric?

Eric Neal:

I'm doing well. I'm getting used to working from home, but everything's going okay. Everyone is well.

Tara Finton:

It's a new challenge.

Eric Neal:

It really is. Lots of meetings, Zoom meetings, Skype meetings like this. So I'm happy you could join us today.

Tara Finton:

Yeah. Well, thanks for having me today.

Eric Neal:

Of course. So why don't you tell us a little bit about the work you do here at the State Support Team?

Tara Finton:

Okay. Well, as the consultant with the SST, my main focus is primarily PBIS, which is Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support, and SEL, which is Social Emotional Learning. We offer trainings and coaching services to help support districts and community schools implementing PBIS frameworks and SEL practices. I also support schools and districts with continuous improvement and with universal design for learning.

Eric Neal:

That's a mouthful right there, lots and lots of stuff you do. Today, we're here specifically to talk about House Bill 318. Can you tell me about House Bill 318 and the impetus for the lobbying passed?

Tara Finton:

Yeah. Ohio rolled out their strategic plan for education and discussed the need for positive environments in the schools so that we could better serve students' wellbeing and success. And along with that, Ohio also enacted the SAFE Act, which is known as House Bill 318, to help address behavioral supports, to reduce disciplinary referrals. And I think that we're all aware that suspensions and expulsions are continuing to increase, especially disproportionately. So we're trying to help that resolve through the positivity in House Bill 318.

Eric Neal:

How exactly does a law address these challenges?

Tara Finton:

Well, House Bill 318 sets out requirements to implement a PBIS framework, along with regulations for suspending and expelling students, especially in pre-K through third grade, and then some training requirements as well. The key point is that buildings will be able to develop policies so that they can use supportive and restorative discipline practices before, when, and even after challenging behaviors occur. Again, House Bill 318 aims to reduce the amount of suspensions and expulsions given to students. And so by November, 2021, each school district and community school must provide professional development to staff in buildings that house or serve grades pre-K to three. And SSTs and ESCs are also offering those trainings to districts so that they're able to train their staff members.

Eric Neal:

Okay. So when you talk about suspensions, what does that cover?

Tara Finton:

House Bill 318 will prohibit students in grades pre-K to three to receive out of school suspensions or from being expelled except in limited situations. So the numbers of suspensions that are reported in EMIS for offenses that aren't included in the exception list must reduce each school year. So for the 2021 school year, that will be a 50% reduction. And then by school year '21, '22, there's going to be 100% reduction. And those excepted situations are bringing a firearm to school or to a school activity, possessing a knife capable of what they call serious bodily injury, and then either committing a criminal offense or making a bomb threat.

Eric Neal:

Okay. So there are some not loopholes, but some wiggle room in the law there for some of the things that go on in schools. I know a lot of schools tried to address the problem of students missing school time by having in-school suspensions. Does the law talk about that at all?

Tara Finton:

Yes. So we're seeing more changes in school suspensions as well. So in school suspensions, through House Bill 318, are supposed to be given to students and served in a supervised learning environment. So I've seen many schools revise how their in-school suspension rooms look and operate. So they're changing those in-school suspension rooms to intervention, where students are actually learning and practicing the skills that they're missing and what got them there in the first place. And instead, using restorative practices to help correct some of those behaviors.

Eric Neal:

Okay. Now, I know that those extreme incidents are few and far between, and the spirit of the law is to keep kids in school in a safe learning environment, but what can schools and districts do to put systems in place to help ensure that there is a safe learning environment for students?

Tara Finton:

Well, having a PBIS framework is most important. This means to have a multi-tiered systematic approach to create positive and safe culture in schools. And again, at a multi-tiered level, having supports at tier one, which are universal supports for all students in all settings, clear expectations, teaching those expectations, having acknowledgement and corrective systems. And then tier two is

about the supports that focus on at risk groups of students, who need a little bit more than what's provided to them universally. And this can include Check In Check Out, mentoring, social skill groups. And then tier three is about individualized and intensive supports for students who need even more support. And this can include functional behavior assessments, behavior intervention plans, wraparound services, making sure to include other agencies, but it's important to make sure that there's a framework in place.

Eric Neal:

Okay. It's funny. I've heard a lot of people that don't really know about PBIS describe it as this touchy feely, or just handing out trinkets, or not having consequences. Do you think that's really a fair assessment?

Tara Finton:

Well, so many say that PBIS is just that program that gives rewards to kids when they do something right. And it is, but it's so much more than that. We want to make sure that PBIS includes setting clear expectations, and then teaching those expectations. That's what's the most important factor is that we teach those expectations clearly to students. We want to make sure that we are teaching them what we want from them, what we expect to see, model, practice, reteach, model, practice, reteach, and then we can acknowledge them for following those expectations. And it doesn't have to be trinkets or tokens. It can also be through smiles, thumbs up, a shout out for being a positive citizen. We all like encouragement from what we're doing well. And especially when the energy is on the positive, you're going to get more of that and less time spent on discipline. But PBIS doesn't say that we have to get rid of those negative consequences either. It's important that we have a corrective system, but it's also important to focus on it being proactive and restorative as well.

Eric Neal:

Yeah. I couldn't agree more. I feel like if just punishing people into doing the right thing was a great strategy that you wouldn't need House Bill 318, and you wouldn't need PBIS, and this wouldn't just work, that people would've got suspended and thought, "Oh, I learned my lesson." I think just intuitively, as well as the research, it just makes a lot of sense to approach it from that positive aspect.

Tara Finton:

Yeah. You're right, Eric.

Eric Neal:

Yeah. So I've heard a lot also about social and emotional learning lately. How does this and other initiatives fit within the PBIS framework?

Tara Finton:

Well, we want to make sure that we're aligning all of the initiatives that we are using and adopting in our buildings. We want to make sure that we're braiding those together so that they're not competing or sitting independently. But in fact, PBIS, SEL, restorative practices and mental health are all supporting the same goal and vision that we have for our building and districts. An example is to set clear PBIS expectations, and then use SEL practices when we're teaching those expectations, and then using restorative practices when we correct the misbehavior. We also need to remember that we look at it through a tiered level of support. So clarifying what's happening at a tier one universal level to include

those PBIS practices, Ohio's new standards for SEL, and restorative practices. Then what does it look like at tier two and tier three? So again, it's important that these initiatives aren't sitting in separate silos, but that we weave them together with the common goals, resources, and activities that we're doing regularly.

Eric Neal:

Okay. That really helps clear it up, how that all fits together. How do we support the work around House Bill 318 and PBIS and all of that at State Support Team 11?

Tara Finton:

Well, as I mentioned at the beginning, we do offer training and coaching services to make sure that we're helping to guide districts on developing and implementing PBIS framework that fits their needs in the best way. We're also in our third year with CASEL to help support buildings and districts with SEL practices. So again, making sure that we're giving enough support to guide districts for what they need, to make sure they have the best implementation and trying to sustain that implementation as well.

Eric Neal:

Okay. It sounds like Ohio's dedicated to promoting this important work and improving outcomes for students through House Bill 318. And I really appreciate learning more about that. If anyone has any questions or wants to know more about the services we provide, how can they get ahold of you?

Tara Finton:

They can email me, especially when it's remote time, we can set up a Zoom meeting, but you can reach me through my email at tara.finton@escco.org. And ask me questions, concerns that you have, or we can, as I said, set up some meetings to chat.

Eric Neal:

Awesome. Well, that wraps up this episode of the State Support Team 11 podcast. Once again, I'd like to thank Tara for joining us today and sharing all of that great information about House Bill 318. If you'd like to contact me, you can reach me at eric.neal@escco.org. For more information about the State Support Team 11 and what we do, go to our website at sst11.org, or call us at (614)-445-3750. Or you can hit us up on Twitter at [SSTregion11](https://twitter.com/SSTregion11). until next time, I'm Eric Neal and thanks for listening.