



Tennessee Behavior Supports Project

at Vanderbilt University

Lessons from the Field: Planning Effective School-Wide Student and Staff Acknowledgement Systems

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This guide was produced by Tennessee Behavior Supports Project at Vanderbilt University – one of three projects across the state funded by the Tennessee Department of Education to provide training and technical assistance to schools as they address the behavioral needs of students. This brief was authored by Brooke C. Shuster, Lauren Magill, Benjamin Cabeza, Abbie Jenkins, & Erik W. Carter.



chools are called to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. These students come to school each day with a wide range of academic, social, and behavioral strengths and needs. To serve all students well, schools must create a systematic framework that

Acknowledgement Systems can be implemented within any multi-tiered system of supports. The goal of a multi-tiered system of supports is to proactively meet the behavioral and social needs and strengths of individual students in a unified framework based upon the school's values and community. One multi-tiered system of supports implemented in Tennessee is Response to Instruction and Intervention for Behavior (RTI2-B).

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supports the individualized strengths and needs of students.

Schools in Tennessee are using Response to Instruction and Intervention for Behavior to prevent behavioral challenges before they occur and assisting students who need additional support through targeted interventions.

Components of RTI²-B include establishing school-wide behavioral expectations, developing a Behavioral Expectation Matrix that lists specific expected behaviors by school setting, teaching students what expected behaviors look like through setting lessons, and

reinforcing students when they exhibit expected behavior. Many schools develop a school-wide acknowledgement system through the use of tickets (as well as a lottery or school-wide store) through which *all* students and school staff (e.g., administrators, teachers, custodians, food services, bus drivers, paraprofessionals) participate to reinforce behaviors delineated and taught in the school-wide expectation matrix. In addition to the school-wide student acknowledgement system, schools



create a school staff acknowledgement system where school staff can earn incentives for reinforcing students' expected behavior.

In this guide, we offer practical ideas for creating, distributing, and funding the student and school staff acknowledgement systems within the RTI²-B framework. We also share advice from schools throughout Middle Tennessee who have been successfully implementing a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS).

Designing Student and School Staff Reinforcement Systems

To have a successful school-wide acknowledgement system, your school should have basic agreements in place, such as:

- A team that oversees and organizes the RTI²-B plan,
- A school-wide agreement that positive behavior support practices will be used,
- An agreed-upon set of school-wide behavior expectations (e.g., Be Respectful, Be Responsible, Be Safe), and
- School-wide lessons to teach students what the school-wide expectations look like in each school setting (e.g., bus, cafeteria, hallway, classroom, gym).

With these pieces firmly in place, your school can develop a plan to reinforce students for expected behaviors.

One goal of the RTI²-B framework is to increase occurrences of appropriate student behavior in the school. To accomplish this goal, many schools use an acknowledgement system. Some schools choose to use a structured method to acknowledge students who

are demonstrating expected behavior by awarding students tickets for exhibiting behavior on the Behavior Expectation Matrix.

When using a ticket system, school staff provide tickets when students engage in expected behaviors. These tickets or points can then be exchanged for a menu of back-up rewards.¹ Schools commonly acknowledge appropriate student behaviors by awarding them a ticket (e.g., paper tickets, punch cards, points). When school staff provide tickets to students, they also deliver behavior-specific praise when students exhibit an expected behavior (e.g., "Johnny, thank

you for showing respect by waiting quietly for the rest of the class."). This links the ticket with the behavior the teacher would like to see frequently. School staff should award tickets to students for exhibiting the expected behavior—not just those behaviors considered to be "above and beyond."²

Ticket Design and Delivery

While varying colors and values can be used, the design of the ticket should be uniform throughout the school. In addition, the ticket should not be rewarding in itself, but should represent the opportunity for a reward within a school's particular acknowledgement system.³



Information to include on each ticket should contain the school-wide expectations (e.g., Be Respectful, Be Responsible, and Give Best Effort). You might also include the name of the educator providing the ticket, a picture of the school mascot, and/or the ticket name.

Some schools make each ticket the same value (e.g., each ticket is equivalent to \$1 value in the school store or lottery), while other schools give tickets with differing values. For example, school staff at one school can award yellow tickets (worth \$1) to students, while administrators, custodians, and bus drivers award green tickets (worth \$5). This helps increase the value of the tickets from administrators, custodians, and bus drivers with the goal of improving behavior in the hallway and on the bus.

Instead of tickets some schools choose to use points. Students can earn points for engaging in expected behaviors on the Behavior Expectation Matrix. School teams should consider the following questions if using a point system.

- How will the points be tracked across the school and student?
- How will teachers input points as students earn them?
- How will students be able to see the points (at least daily) to track what they have earned?
- How will points be exchanged for other rewards/activities?



Tickets can be prepared in many different ways. For example, schools have used pre-printed, tear off movie tickets bought online, or have created perforated tickets using colored cardstock or other paper materials.

To increase efficiency and effectiveness, the ticket system should be implemented consistently across all adults and locations in the school.⁴ Therefore, school staff will need to identify an efficient system for distributing and storing student tickets within the classroom.⁵

The best method for storing tickets will vary across grades. Early elementary school classrooms might have a pocket chart with a place for each student to store their tickets, or a pouch or carrier placed at their desk or other designated spot (e.g., cubby, locker, bulletin board). In middle or high school, students may

be required to keep their tickets on lanyards with their school identification. Having students keep track of their own tickets teaches important self-management skills since lost tickets are not replaceable.

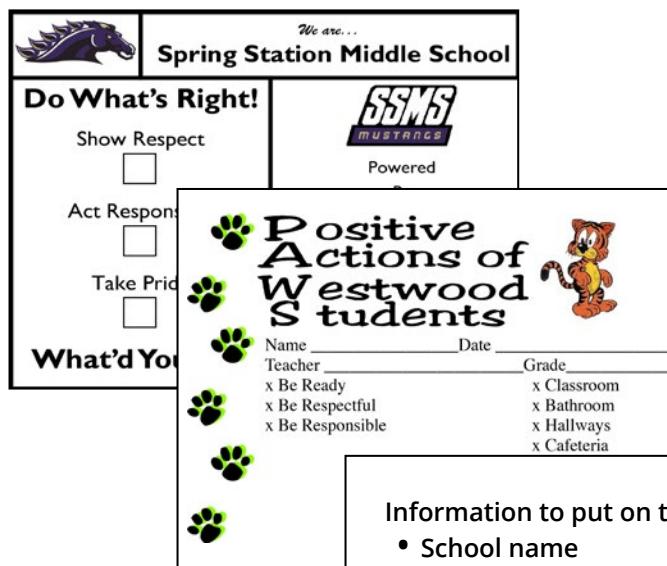
Steps for delivering, receiving, and storing tickets should be taught just like any other classroom procedure. The classroom teacher should explain and model the procedures and have the students practice filling out their tickets and storing them appropriately. The teacher should provide behavior-specific praise when students demonstrate the procedure effectively.⁶

At first, school staff should award tickets to students the majority of times students demonstrate the behaviors listed on the expectation matrix.⁷ As students begin to consistently demonstrate expected behaviors, tickets can be given

to students intermittently for exhibiting school-wide expectations.

Due to the hectic nature of the school day, it is easy to forget to award tickets. To help school staff remember, some schools have given staff a daily goal for the number of tickets they should give out to students.⁸ Visual reminders such as notes at the door or a stack of tickets in different locations in the classroom can help serve as reminders. Some teachers have even worn resetting, vibrating, interval timers set at 10-15 minutes to remind them to give behavior-specific praise and to distribute tickets.

Once earned, tickets should not be taken away for misbehavior. Instead, other consequences (as listed on your school's discipline plan) should be utilized.⁹



Ticket Design Examples

Ticket Storage Examples





Rewarding Expected Behaviors

In a school-wide ticket and acknowledgement system, tickets are exchanged for rewards at scheduled times throughout the school year. Schools can allow students to exchange tickets through raffles, stores, or celebrations. To design the back-up reward system, your school team should consider how frequently rewards will be distributed to students, how students can access those rewards, the cost of the rewards, and the types of rewards that can be earned.¹⁰

When designing your plan, consider the age of your students, the level of structure required in their classrooms, the resources available to the school, and the frequency with which students need to cash in their tickets for rewards. You should also consider how to reinforce and reward staff for their participation in the RTI²-B program. Some administrators provide staff with positive reinforcement for acknowledging students for expected behaviors, which can help increase the number of tickets awarded to students by faculty and staff and enhance staff buy-in of the program.

Reward Distribution

Each school will have different schedules for when students exchange their tickets for rewards. Schedules for ticket exchange will vary by student age, the frequency and type of student behaviors exhibited at school, and school climate. For example, when a school first starts using tickets to reinforce students for displaying the expected behaviors, they should allow students to participate in raffles or access the school store on a more frequent basis (e.g., bi-weekly vs. monthly).



“Every student goes to the first RTI²-B assembly. This allows them to see what they can earn for following the school-wide expectations. It helps to increase student buy-in to the school-wide acknowledgement system.”

~Middle School Administrator

If a school has a high number of students exhibiting challenging behaviors or numerous office discipline referrals, they might provide more frequent opportunities to exchange tickets for rewards. Schools with lower levels of students exhibiting problem behaviors can have students exchange their tickets for reinforcement on a less frequent schedule.

Many schools schedule celebrations during the year to highlight the RTI²-B plan. For example, students might use their tickets to purchase entrance into a monthly school-wide celebration, with activities like volleyball tournaments, cake walks, dance parties, watching a short movie, and participating in an art project. Many schools allow students to enter the event for a certain number of tickets and then students can use additional tickets to purchase entry into activities (e.g., karaoke station, bounce house, use of gaming systems).

Examples of school-wide celebrations

- Student vs. staff sport tournament
- Electronic game tournament
- Field Day
- Watch a movie during lunch

“Ticket economy management is so important. At the beginning of the year we need to inundate the students with tickets and then ticket delivery needs to slowly decrease so the students recognize the scarcity. Then in February, when the students are tired, school staff need to amp it back up and the students find tickets valuable. If the system goes on autopilot and you give too many tickets out, they have no value for students. If you give out too few, students don’t believe they exist.”

~Middle School Guidance Counselor



School stores provide students with a “sure thing,” as students can plan for a consistent time they can exchange their tickets for preferred activities or items.¹¹ Raffles allow students to “take a chance” to win higher priced or privilege items such as donated camcorders, iPads, or tickets to sporting events. At the high school level, students can use their tickets to enter a raffle for school dance tickets and different school sporting events so they do not have to pay for entrance.

“We have a Cub-Cash school store and monthly raffles. This allows students to make the choice between saving up for a ‘sure thing’ at the Cub-Cash store or to take a ‘gamble’ at the school-wide raffle.”

~Elementary School Teacher

Raffle	School Store
Provides students a way to “take a chance”	Provides students a way to earn a “sure thing”
A few students win larger priced items	Students have access to privileges & inexpensive items
Happens more infrequently (e.g., once a quarter)	Happens on a more frequent schedule
Students should be present when items are raffled off	A few students can shop at a time

How to Price and Choose Rewards

If a school team decides to create a classroom or school store, they must determine what items they would like to have for exchange and the price of each item.

Guidelines for Pricing Items on a Reward Menu¹²

- 1. Keep the initial ratio of tickets to rewards low (items should be less expensive at first!).**
- 2. As ticket-earning behaviors increase and ticket incomes increase, raise the cost of rewards.**
- 3. As student earnings rise, increase the number of “expensive” rewards.**
- 4. Increase the prices of necessary items more than those of luxury items.**

A crucial step in the ticket system is choosing rewards that are meaningful and valuable to your students. Rewards typically fall into two major categories: tangible and privileges. When developing a menu of reinforcers, make sure there are items or activities which fall in each

of the two categories so the full ranges of things that motivate students is captured. After all, the system only works if students value the items, privileges, or activities available as rewards.

Consider surveying students to find out what types of items or activities they are interested in earning. For example, some schools ask student leadership groups (e.g., student council, student advisory board) to generate a list of activities, privileges, and items they would like to earn.

Survey students, ask school staff, and keep track of what students are choosing. Some of the best ideas for rewards come from observing students’ choices!

Keeping the price of rewards initially low allows all students to have a chance to purchase and experience the rewards. Buy-in for RTI²-B program is higher when the majority of students are initially able to access reinforcement.¹³ As students become more fluent in following school-wide expectations and cashing in their RTI²-B tickets to earn rewards, the cost of each item can increase, or the number of expensive items can be



Example Reward Menu Ideas – Elementary School

Tangible	Privilege
1. Chew bubble gum in class 2. Special snack 3. Bubbles 4. Stickers 5. Silly bands 6. Markers/school supplies 7. School spirit wear 8. Pass to the zoo, aquarium, or museum 9. Book fair gift certificate 10. Inexpensive sporting equipment	1. Sit in a special chair 2. Nickname for the day 3. Technology helper 4. Pick your partner 5. Visit another classroom 6. Go to lunch with another class 7. Tell a joke to the class 8. Eat lunch with your favorite staff member 9. Conduct morning announcements 10. Choose where to work

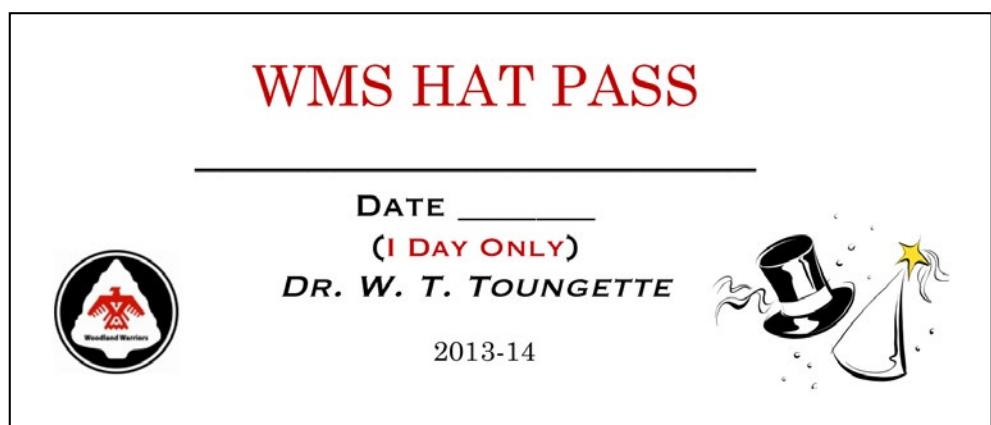
Example Reward Menu Ideas – Middle/High School

Tangible	Privilege
1. Tickets to school dance 2. Movie pass 3. Tickets to sporting events 4. Gift cards 5. Headphones 6. Monetary credit in the cafeteria 7. School spirit wear 8. Binder/school supplies 9. Preferred parking for a month 10. Carry-out lunch from a local restaurant	1. Homework pass 2. Pick 3 friends for a pizza party 3. Choose your partner for a project 4. Pick 5 problems to take off a worksheet 5. Front of the lunch line 6. Out of uniform/standard school attire 7. Designated parking spot for a week 8. Take all mail/messages to the office 9. Wear a hat in class 10. Listen to music during independent work time

increased because more students will have access to the items. For example, if students are buying rewards costing two tickets, the price could later be increased to three tickets. In addition to encouraging students to earn more tickets to purchase preferred items, this allows schools to maintain their inventory and avoid having to restock as frequently.

In addition to developing a menu of reward options for students, the RTI²-B plan should include a system for staff to earn rewards.¹⁴ Ideas used

Example of a non-tangible reward certificate (students can use this certificate on a designated day to wear their hats to school.)





by schools include gift cards, leaving a faculty meeting early, having an extra planning period, or getting out of arrival or dismissal duty. Including the name of the school staff member distributing the ticket makes it simple to choose school staff to reward for participating in the school-wide acknowledgement system. Tickets students have cashed in or placed in a student raffle can be compiled and used in a raffle to award school staff.

Fundraising for your RTI²-B Acknowledgements System

Creating and sustaining school-wide ticket and acknowledgement systems requires some financial expense. Most schools use some school funds to help with copying or printing tickets. However, schools have creatively identified different funding avenues to support school stores, celebrations, and raffles. For example, some schools have fundraisers such as lock-ins, bake sales, or other community pledge drives. One middle school took another approach and created wristbands with the school expectations, sold to staff and students.

"On Fridays, we try to cultivate positive school affiliation through RTI²-B. We believe that RTI²-B is the rudder which guides the school climate. Students and school staff can purchase a wristband that has 'Powered by Students' written on it for \$3.00. We have a strict dress code so on Fridays, if a student or teacher wears their wristband, they are allowed to wear jeans or athletic wear."
~Middle School Administrator



If your school has an active Parent Teacher Organization, ask them to donate funds to the school as well as volunteer time to print, cut, and distribute tickets. They can also help with organization and participation during the celebrations or staffing the school stores.

"One of the restaurants near our school has family pizza night twice a quarter. Ten percent of all proceeds from the evening will go to the RTI²-B team to be used for incentives."

~Elementary School Teacher

RTI²-B Fundraising Ideas:

1. Have a school-sponsored lock-in
2. Students can purchase wristbands to wear athletic wear or other non-standard school attire
3. Silent auctions
4. Community donations
5. Game Night at the school with a fee for families to participate

What Difference Might this Approach Make in your School?

When implemented well, a multi-tiered school-wide systems model can result in improved learning and behavioral outcomes for all students. School-wide ticket systems require careful planning and ongoing support to operate successfully. When the RTI²-B team plans for ticket delivery, reward menus, and reward delivery, it alleviates challenges in implementation. The examples and suggestions in this guide offer a starting point for your team as you make plans for your school.

For Further Reading

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Frequently Asked Questions

Is giving tickets the same thing as bribery?

The short answer is no. Bribing is defined as, "to promise, offer, or give something, usually money, to (a person) to procure services or gain influence, especially illegally."¹⁵ A ticket system reinforces behaviors taught by school staff and regarded as behaviors that successful individuals exhibit frequently. School staff do not gain influence by handing tickets to students. Instead, they reinforce students for behaviors listed on the school-wide expectations.

How can I remember to give out tickets?

Some teams give staff a daily goal for the number of tickets they should give out to students. Visual reminders such as notes at the door, an interval timer, or a stack of tickets in different locations in the classroom can all serve as reminders.

How many tickets should I give out each week?

The number of tickets given out each week depends on the time of year and the school's population. At the beginning of the year, tickets should be given out frequently when expected behaviors from students are seen. This allows students to see that they can earn tickets by displaying specific, expected behaviors. As the expected behaviors occur more frequently, tickets can be given out less frequently. If your school's population has few discipline problems, tickets can be given out on a less frequent basis than schools with frequent discipline issues.

Where should students store their tickets?

Students can store tickets in many different places. In elementary school classrooms, school staff have used small plastic bags attached to student's desks or cubbies. Some classrooms use pocket charts or library card sleeves placed on a wall. Middle and high school students can keep them attached to their school identification badges or in their lockers or backpacks in a plastic bag.

If I can't take away tickets, what do I do when a student is misbehaving?

Consult with school administration and make sure that you know what the procedures are for dealing with inappropriate behavior in the classroom and school. Although taking away tickets is not an available consequence for misbehavior, it does not mean that there are no consequences for misbehavior in a school practicing RTI^{2-B}.

Endnotes

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⁷FL PBS Project. (2002). *Increasing the effectiveness of school-wide recognition systems*. Tampa, FL: Florida's Positive Behavior Support Project, University of South Florida. Available at: <http://flpbs.fmhi.usf.edu>

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⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰Lane, K.L., Kalberg, J.R., & Menzies, H.M. (2009).

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¹²*Ibid.*

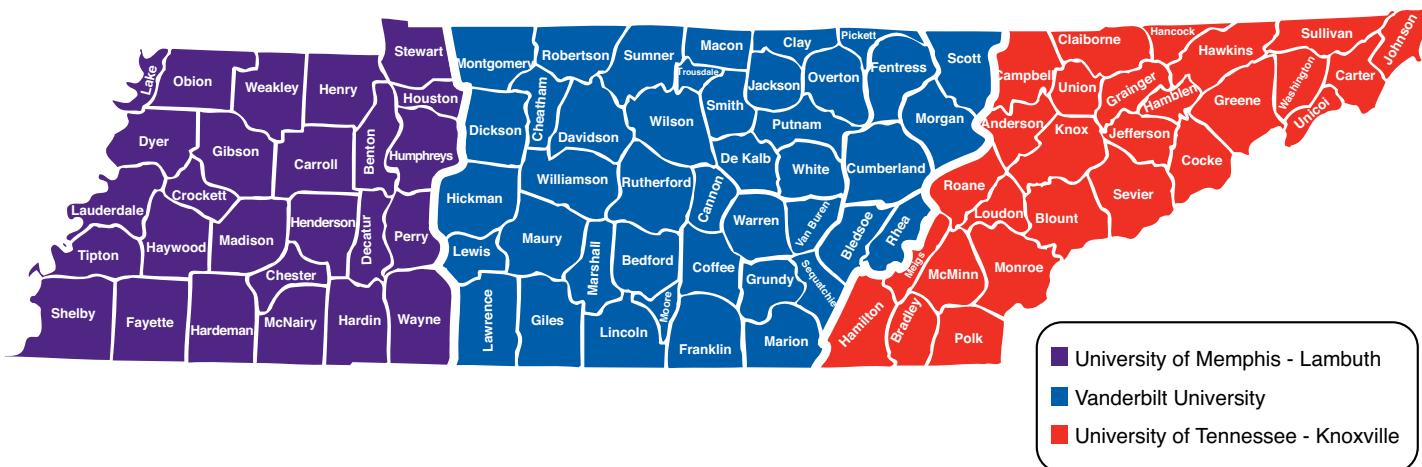
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Tennessee Behavior Supports Project by Region: 2016-2020



The Tennessee Behavior Supports Project (TBSP) is funded by the Tennessee Department of Education and consists of three regional support contracts: University of Memphis – Lambuth Campus, Vanderbilt University, and University of Tennessee – Knoxville. TBSP is responsible for providing training and technical assistance to schools as they address the behavioral needs of students through Response to Instruction and Intervention for Behavior (RTI²-B).

To locate the project assigned to your region, see below.



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