

What Every Administrator Needs to Know About:

**CREATING SCHOOL-WIDE DISCIPLINE PROCEDURES & ALTERNATIVE
DISCIPLINE CONSEQUENCES**

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Overview

Although “discipline” is often thought of as “punishment,” its roots actually come from the concept of “teaching”. The current system of school discipline typically relies on punishment, and in particular punishment which results in students being excluded from school such as suspension or expulsion. Punishment which involves removal from school has been found to be unreliably applied, to result in large variations in the way subgroups are treated, and to have little evidence that they are bringing about the desired change in behavior of students. In addition, recent laws such as the No Child Left Behind Act, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 have reinforced the idea that we should be implementing appropriate and effective interventions for behavior just like for academic instruction. Interventions for behavior should be implemented from a base which includes good academic instruction and appropriate behavioral supports. The specific interventions should be grounded in research evidence that they are effective in accomplishing the desired outcomes. Unfortunately, there is little evidence that the current system of discipline meets these criteria.

Although we may have much more to learn about the best and most effective ways to implement better practice in discipline, we do have sufficient evidence to take some major steps to overhaul our traditional systems of school discipline. We will go on to suggest ways that a school can establish underlying supports which will enable an improved school discipline system to be effective. If this happens, we have a chance to improve student behavior, and eliminate many of the problems in our current discipline systems.

It may be time for a major overhaul of school codes of conduct- to make them more sophisticated and permit more options for responses to behavioral situations. Many school's codes of conduct are antique documents which may have never been clearly conceptualized. As new "problem behaviors" have emerged in students (hooded jackets, cell phones, etc.) these have simply been added to a laundry list of banned behaviors. Moreover as new banned behaviors have been added, few new consequences have been added, and often the consequences are not matched in any way to the nature of the offense. There is no longer any semblance of "logical consequences" in this system. For example a student involved in a fight might be suspended, but one caught violating the school rule for chewing gum might be suspended, as well as a student who has been tardy too many times.

In order to make school codes of conduct effective we need to make them more sophisticated, and more responsive to the variety of situations and needs related to student behavior. We also need to move away from the traditional idea that these consequences are "punishment" and instead focus on our job to be effective in changing student behavior to teach new behaviors. We need to develop a "teaching" orientation to the consequences we employ. We also need to greatly expand the number and variety of consequences which are included. But equally importantly, we may need to organize and relate the consequences to the offenses. For example it is possible to imagine a tiered "Code of conduct" which identifies levels or categories of offenses, and which also has levels or categories of consequences which might be assigned based on the best judgment of the administrator or behavior team.

Alternative Discipline Consequences

However before a school can substantially reduce reliance on exclusionary consequences, most administrators are concerned about identifying "alternative" consequences- what would replace the "suspension" if its use was diminished. Many school systems may already employ some other options for disciplinary consequences. Historically these have included "detention" (having students stay after school for specified amounts of time), or Saturday school (having student come to school on a Saturday such as depicted in the movie "The Breakfast Club") for some schools. And certainly the "trip to the

principal's office" is itself a consequence. While these may be useful options, they are probably not in themselves adequate. What are some alternatives to suspension? How can they be identified?

It is possible for most administrative teams, particularly if they can involve a larger school-wide team, to identify lots of creative ideas for additional alternatives for discipline, and it is best if these emerge from the culture of a particular school. This will also build the support for these alternatives among teachers, staff, students and parents. The examples which follow are some promising examples of the kinds of alternatives a school might choose to incorporate and are not presented in any particular order of priority:

- **Mini Courses.** Schools could develop short self standing units or modules on topics related to various types of inappropriate behavior. These could include readings, videos, workbooks, tests and oral reports. These could focus on topics from inappropriate language, sexual harassment, to alcohol/drug use, conflict resolution, social skill development, and many more. Once created, students could be assigned to complete the appropriate modules based on their offense.
- **Parent Involvement/Supervision.** Parents can be invited to help school administrators to identify ways that they can provide closer supervision to their children while in school or be more involved with their child's schooling. One good example might be to suspend the student's parents if willing to sit with the student while the student remains in school. While this example may not always be possible for some parents, it could be a valuable option. But there may also be many other ways of increasing the contacts and communication between parents and school around student behavior.
- **Counseling.** For certain "offenses" students might be assigned to required counseling sessions with appropriately trained professionals (social workers, counselors, school psychologists, etc.) who can do problem solving with the student, identify areas of needed skill development (such as Anger management), and provide a chance for students to work through problems.
- **Community Service.** Students might be assigned community service tasks with appropriate supervision outside of school hours in helping programs or agencies. These might include other

schools, clean up crews, or community agencies. This might strengthen ties with the community, and develop positive community relationships for students with other adults.

- **Behavior monitoring.** A variety of strategies could be implemented to closely monitor behavior or a particular student. These could include teacher and parent behavior check sheets, charts of behavior, and feedback sessions for the student about behavior. As a result they might also foster appropriate positive feedback from teachers and parents when appropriate behavior occurs.
- **Restitution.** Students could be assigned to provide work which would repair or restore environments they may have damaged. This could include cleaning up graffiti, or repairing acts of vandalism. These could also include other related projects to clean or make attractive the school environment.
- **Problem Solving or Behavioral Contracting.** A defined procedure for behavioral problem solving and then creating a behavioral contract, including positive consequences for completion of the contract, could be created for specific students where this might be useful.
- **Alternative Programming.** For some students, especially at the secondary level, it may be possible to identify changes in the student's schedule, classes or program which would avoid problem environments or situations, but yet permit continued access to curriculum and school. This could include independent study, work-experience, or other creative programming alternatives.
- **Appropriate In-school Suspension.** When students are sent to an alternative in-school environment, it is important to have that environment continue academic or other instruction, but to also have a focus on solving the problem that resulted in the student being sent to this environment. All too often these environments permit students to "escape" without addressing the needed changes by both the sending teachers, and the student to actually address the problem.
- **Coordinated Behavior Plans.** Some students may need the coordination of having all of the adults in their environment "on the same page" regarding that student's behavior. Thus a behavior intervention plan, might provide a map of how a school will address this behavior.

While these types of plans are required for some special education students, there is no reason that they could not also be employed for other students as well.

Many more alternative consequences might be generated with the creativity of school based teams, but all should be within the framework of moving away from punishment, and providing alternatives which match up to student behavior and needs. It is only when a variety of these are implemented that they become valuable- any one is probably not all that helpful by itself.

School-wide Supports for Discipline Alternatives

In addition to these alternative consequences there are likely some other “prerequisites” which might make it more likely that these alternatives are effective. These are school-wide “supports” for behavior which may also play a role in preventing inappropriate behavior from occurring before it becomes a discipline issue. Many if not all of the following ten supports should be in place in order to make a more sophisticated discipline code effective:

- **Gather data on behavior which permits analysis and action.** Develop a school data system which permits administrators or a building team to examine and use data about student behavior. This could include office referral data, surveys of parents, staff and students, grade and academic achievement assessment data, and other indicators of student involvement in school (attendance, tardiness, drop out rate, rate of participation in school activities, etc.). Use this data to make and evaluate changes in policies and practices.
- **Create a caring and welcoming school environment.** Create a tone of belong, and valuing of individuals. Make everyone feel welcomed and valued at school. Make the environment clean, engaging and supportive of educational goals.
- **Create an explicit set of school values.** Establish a set of school values or character traits which are supportive of positive behavior and which are understood and used by all staff in their work with students. It is important to provide school staff with a language to be able to communicate these to students, and to encourage teachers in particular to find and provide support for

expressions of these values in their day to day work with students. Some character education programs might be one way to do this.

- **Provide conflict de-escalation training.** Train all staff, but especially teachers in how to de-escalate conflict, and avoid power struggles. This will help by keeping minor conflicts from getting to the point of being discipline problems.
- **Mediation programs.** Teach students and staff about non-violent conflict resolution strategies, and permit students and staff to use and experience these in school related to significant school issues. Peer mediation may be one example, but could be expanded to include mediation of some teacher-student conflicts.
- **Increase opportunities for positive reinforcement for appropriate student behavior.** The general level of positive reinforcement should be maximized. Increase the amount of positive reinforcement which occurs in the building for any type of appropriate behavior by students. Make sure that all teachers work hard to identify, acknowledge and strongly reinforce good behavior. Some schools have implemented positive office referral systems for good behavior, as well as special recognitions/awards for behavior, which are parallel to their academic recognition activities.
- **Build communication and involvement with all parents.** Expand and improve communication with parents, particularly parents of “at-risk” students. Explore multiple options and opportunities to build relationships with parents and involve them with school in multiple ways.
- **Provide opportunities for building adult student relationships.** Encourage staff to engage in conversations with students, to get to know them individually as people and to share their own stories and beliefs.
- **Intervene earlier when signs of behavioral issues first become apparent.** Proactively watch for warning signs that kids are in trouble, and then take action to explore and address the problems before they get to the point of being discipline problems. Devise ways to screen students for problems (declining grades, poor attendance, etc.) and then take action.

- **Bullying Prevention and Intervention Programs.** Provide specific training to school personnel about bullying, and provide guidance to all students about the problems of bullying and the need for it to be reported to school authorities.

These examples are not intended to be a complete list, but instead to illustrate the range of possible ideas which might be incorporated into a more sophisticated (and hopefully more effective) set of school wide supports for positive behavior. School teams might be able to add many more to these, and to tailor these ideas to fit the character of a particular school.

School Wide Discipline Programs

A variety of school wide discipline programs have been developed and are available which might also be adopted. These programs tend to make sure that a common terminology and consistent approach to behavior is in place across all staff in a school. Responsibilities related to behavior for all staff should be identified, school wide rules in place, and both positive and negative consequences understood and communicated.

Positive Behavior Supports (PBS)

Many schools have also implemented a system of positive behavioral supports which often includes gathering and using information about behavioral issues occurring in school, teaching appropriate behavior for various settings within the school, recognizing and reinforcing positive behavior, creating a climate where good behavior is expected, and much more.

Suggestions for Administrators

Many problems exist with our current school discipline codes, and the limited options and punitive rather than educational nature of these systems. Administrators can begin to change these systems to better reflect our goals, and thus to also better meet the needs of our students, and the learning environments we supervise. Administrators can begin the process of making student “codes of conduct” more sophisticated, and to have a broader and more useful set of consequences. Administrators can also establish supports in their building, which will enable discipline codes to be effective. In so doing we

may diminish the problems associated with the exclusionary discipline consequences of suspension and expulsion.

Administrators can implement common school wide discipline systems, and a system of positive behavioral supports in their buildings. These will insure better communication, access to and use of data in decision making, reinforcement of positive behaviors, and many other characteristics of good “discipline” we have discussed.

Finally administrators can also reflect good attitudes and practices related to discipline which are described in Curwin & Mendler’s (1997) “Seven Principles of Effective Discipline”:

- 1. Seek long-term behavior changes instead of short-term fixes.
- 2. Stop doing ineffective things.
- 3. Be fair, and don’t always treat everyone the same.
- 4. Adopt only those rules that make sense.
- 5. Model the behavior you expect.
- 6. Teach responsibility instead of enforcing obedience.
- 7. Treat students with respect and dignity.

These seven principles provide an excellent framework to implement better school discipline.

Resources and Links

- Curwin Curwin, R. and A. Mendler. (December 1997) *Discipline with Dignity: Beyond Obedience*. Education Digest. 63(4), 11-13.
- Peterson, R. (Spring, 2005). Ten Alternatives to Suspension. *Impact*, 18(2), 10-11. (Impact is a publication of the College of Education & Human Development, University of Minnesota.). <http://ici.umn.edu/products/impact/182/default.html>
- Peterson, R.L., Miller, C, & Skiba, R. (Spring, 2004). A Framework for Planning Safe and Responsive Schools. *Beyond Behavior*, 13(3), 12-16.
- Ryan, J.B., Katsiyannis, A. Peterson, R. & Chmelar, B. (2007). IDEA 2004 and disciplining students with disabilities. *National Association of Secondary School Principals Bulletin*, 91(2), 130-140.
- Skiba, R., Peterson, R., Miller, C., Ritter, S. & Simmons, A. (2004). The Safe and responsive schools project: A school reform model for implementing best practices in violence prevention. Chapter 40. Submitted to the *Handbook of School Violence and School Safety: From Research to Practice*.
- Skiba R. J., Peterson, R. L. & Williams, T. (January, 1999). The dark side of zero tolerance: Can punishment lead to safe schools? *Phi Delta Kappan*, 80(5), 372-381. Condensed and republished in Education Digest.
- Skiba R. J., Peterson, R. L. & Williams, T. (August, 1997). Office referrals and suspension: Disciplinary intervention in middle schools. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 20(3), 1-21.

Web Resources

The American Bar Association Juvenile Justice Committee Report on “Zero Tolerance Policy”.
<http://discussions.abanet.org/crimjust/juvjus/zerotolreport.html>

Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota. A variety of brief articles are available on this website. <http://ici.umn.edu/products/newsletters.html>

Institute on Violent and Destructive Behavior, University of Oregon. <http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~ivdb/>

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. A technical assistance project to support positive supports for behavior in schools. www.pbis.org.

The Safe and Responsive Schools Project, University of Nebraska-Lincoln/Indiana University. For more information about how to employ a building-wide planning strategy to address improved discipline, as well as a variety of fact sheets addressing many related topics see the materials at each of the Safe and Responsive Schools Websites: <http://www.unl.edu/srs> and <http://www.indiana.edu/~safeschl>.