Web Exclusive
Principal
March/April 2009

Empowering Misbehaving Students

An effective schoolwide discipline plan must consistently support learning and instruction.

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The 21st century principal has a clear mission: to be the instructional leader of his or her school. Myriad research and best practice seminars continually emphasize professional learning communities, effective assessment, aligned curriculum, and strong instruction. However, even the most instructionally driven principal can succumb to a perennial challenge that has faced teachers and administrators since the start of formal education—school discipline. Research tells us that schoolwide discipline issues impact the quality of instruction that students receive. Teachers who leave the profession have consistently cited a lack of school discipline support from administration (Ingersoll et al., 2003; Johnson et al., 2006).

While research provides an array of best practices and theories regarding classroom management issues and strategies, one characteristic of discipline in elementary schools remains unchanged: When students misbehave, they often end up in the principal's office. This can be a challenge for even the most competent elementary school principal, who usually does not have a full-time assistant principal to share the burden. Often, the task of dealing with misbehaving students falls squarely on the principal's shoulders.

Finding a Solution

At Woodbrook Elementary School in Charlottesville, Virginia, it became apparent that "at-risk" students disproportionately represented the bulk of our office referrals, which often translated into vast amounts of time merely sitting in the office. Students, parents, and staff alike were often frustrated because classes were being disrupted and disciplined students were falling behind in their learning.

Although Woodbrook was considered to be a high-achieving school, we realized that many of our efforts, such as after-school remediation and enrichment programs, were often voided by students missing wide swaths of instruction due to office time-outs (where little to no learning was accomplished) or out-of-school suspensions (where some students reported completing the latest PlayStation video game). We decided that change was in order and necessary if we were going to continue to succeed as a Distinguished Title I School.

The principal proposed a new model for in-school suspension that would provide support without negative perceptions. The idea was to emphasize the restorative, responsive nature of empowering misbehaving students to learn from their errors. In 2007, we initiated our support center model in a trailer that regularly houses small reading groups, science project activities, conferences, and, perhaps most importantly, students who simply need a time-out from the classroom setting. A trained, full-time teaching assistant oversees the support center, which requires two multifaceted components to translate into success.

1. Build a Strong Classroom Community

Encourage healthy classroom relationships. We emphasized responsive approaches to student behavior, such as class meetings, "safe spots," or time-outs within the class or grade-level team, and strong, ongoing communication with parents. We read together Ruth Charney's *Teaching Children to Care* (2002), which emphasizes turning "respectful, friendly, academically rigorous classrooms into a reality."

Be consistent. We discussed steps to take when office referrals became necessary, including sending along work to be done, and being clear in our expectations.

Use data. The support center teaching associate completes a daily log that records each student's name, date, time in and out of the support center, and reason for being sent there. As a Title I school of 330 pre-K-5 students, we averaged two visits per day to the support center, with each visit approximately one hour in length.

2. Be Restorative and Redemptive

Create a positive climate in the support center. We have posted positive "can do" posters and messages in the support center, and we do not shout at, demean, or act punitively toward students who have been sent there. While we certainly do not want students to try to get sent to the support center, we do

not want the center to be a dungeon. Rather, we have created an atmosphere where students first recognize why they are there (by writing or drawing a brief reflective statement), discuss what they should do differently (and perhaps plan an apology), and then complete work in lieu of the class time that the student is missing.

Welcome back the returning student. It is essential to make returning students feel welcome in the classroom, including those who may have thrown a pencil, cursed on the playground, or yelled at the teacher. Although we do not excuse or condone such behavior, we also realize that these students must be given second, third, and fourth chances if necessary.

Communicate with parents and colleagues. We encourage every teacher to make regular, positive phone calls to parents. Then, when a more negative call is needed, the parent will be familiar with the teacher (or principal) and there will be a working relationship built on trust. Teachers should also use the opportunity during faculty meetings to share best practices and effective strategies for student discipline.

Positive Outcomes

The support center model has had enormous success at our school. During the past two years of implementation alone, our out-of-school suspensions dropped more than 80 percent with the addition of our support center. Substituting the support center's in-school suspension has resulted in increased classroom instruction, decreased parent frustration, and an investment in the belief that misbehaving students should feel empowered to learn and achieve. A safe school does not require many out-of-school suspensions. Instead, a healthy relationship of trust must be cultivated in the classroom and among staff, expectations must be clear, and communication should be ongoing and strong (Tschannen-Moran, 2004).

The support center approach is not a silver bullet or a cure-all for behavior issues. But, hopefully, we may be able to answer affirmatively the question raised by Phillip Schlechty (2002): "Is there evidence that, over time, the level of authentic engagement has increased and the amount of rebellion, retreatism, and passive compliance has decreased?"

Through a schoolwide student discipline plan that consistently supports learning and instruction in the classroom, we not only have seen improvement in student engagement, but we are also seeing unexpected results in teacher retention—none of our teachers has requested a transfer and none has resigned as a result of discipline issues. By maximizing the amount of time that disciplined students are engaged in learning, today's principal will grow and succeed as an instructional leader.

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