

A Schoolwide Approach to Discipline

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Firmness, fairness, and consistency are the keys to an effective discipline program.

A schoolwide approach to discipline that is focused, proactive, and consistent is more likely to be effective than the classroom-by-classroom approach used by many schools, since it “sets in motion a culture of recognition that reduces the risk of students slipping into situations where they misbehave to get attention” (Brownell and Walther-Thomas 1999).

IN BRIEF

A schoolwide discipline program is more likely to be effective than a classroom-by-classroom approach. Effective programs are developed to fit the needs of the school and to promote positive behavior rather than enforcing rules.

However, a schoolwide approach needs active participation by the entire teaching staff, which may require changes in classroom management procedures in some classrooms. Ideally, a schoolwide approach begins with conversations among teachers about ways to encourage positive behavior rather than punish misbehavior. The emphasis should be on discipline as a preventive measure intended to ensure the safety and sense of security of students and staff, and to create an environment conducive to learning.

Elements of an Effective Schoolwide Approach

An effective schoolwide approach to discipline requires more than a list of rules. Clearly stated expectations, understood by everyone in the school, form the bedrock for schools to deal effectively with student behavior. Fager and Boss point out that “students need to perceive discipline as being fair, consistent, and clear. Disciplinary policies... need to be age-appropriate, clear, and repeatedly communicated to students and parents” (in Pacific Resources for Education and Learning 1999).

Research also highlights the importance of involving all school members in developing rules and consequences consistent with a school’s philosophy of education and learning goals (Schimmel 1997; Gaustad 1992). Scott and Hunter (2001) point out that “when the entire school staff is involved in determining and agreeing upon schoolwide expectations, policy, and consequences, staff consistency and resulting student success are far more likely.”

Effective programs also recognize the need to plan ahead for a range of student behaviors. For while most children are able to successfully make the transition from home life to the rules and routines of school life, some students require more direct instruction (Warger *et al.* 1999). These students often require special instruction, support, and supplemental services—and it is important that school discipline planning addresses these needs.

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Developing a Schoolwide Discipline Plan

Assessing a school’s discipline needs is the first step in developing a schoolwide plan. For example, the staff might begin by discussing behavior issues, determining where their collective strengths and weaknesses lie in terms of discipline, and exploring how current policies help or harm the overall school climate. The principal can help by focusing the discussion and asking probing questions.

Miles (1999) suggests that schools interested in revising their approach to discipline begin with a “behavior audit.” Staff, and, in some instances students and parents, are asked simple questions such as:

- How do we believe students should behave in our school?
- What are some of our problems related to behavior?
- What do we currently do to help students behave appropriately?
- What are some ways we need to improve?

In his view, “the behavior audit is also a powerful exercise for students, and their beliefs about what is acceptable in a school will surprise most adults.... Students are also unbelievably accurate in their diagnosis of what works and what needs to be improved” (Miles 1999).

Simply discussing these questions can help to increase understanding among staff members and to begin the move toward a unified approach to discipline. For example, teachers with varying views on hallway disruptions should attempt to come to consensus on the elements of acceptable versus

unacceptable behavior (Avellar-Fleming 1994).

Reviewing data on past discipline problems can also be helpful. Specifically, are most of the problems occurring in the cafeteria, on the playground, or in particular hallways? Schools have found that focusing on a few problems at first is often more effective than a more general approach.

Avoiding the Traps

Developing an effective approach to schoolwide discipline is a complex process. Horner *et al.* identify traps to avoid while designing an effective disciplinary system:

Getting tough is enough. It is simply not enough to get tough without a proactive system for teaching and supporting appropriate behavior.

Focusing on the difficult few. Although an effective disciplinary system must address the small number of students who engage in chronic and intense disruptive behavior, a discipline plan must build schoolwide social competence.

Looking for the quick fix. Building an effective schoolwide program takes time. A reasonable period to design and establish an effective disciplinary system is three to five years.

Finding one powerful “trick.” Schoolwide discipline is not achieved through a single strategy. It must include components for defining and teaching behavioral expectations, and provide appropriate levels of support for students who display disruptive behavior and those with high-intensity behavior problems.

Believing someone already has the solution. An effective system must be designed to meet a school’s specific needs, as identified through active self-assessment, and must be continuously evaluated to meet changing needs and goals.

Believing that more is better. Instead of accumulating a number of sometimes inconsistent programs and approaches to deal with disciplinary problems, it is more effective to eliminate practices that are not working and to carefully match new practices to specific school needs (Horner *et al.* 2000).

The Role of the Principal

Developing an effective approach to discipline requires planning, collaboration among staff members, educating students and staff about possible solutions, attention to detail, and ongoing evaluation—all of which require effective leadership by the principal.

Research and practice have consistently demonstrated that a disciplined school climate that conveys order, a sense of community, and higher expectations for behavior for both staff and students has a positive effect on student learning. The principal can be a strong force for creating this type of environment. Gaustad sees the successful principal as a “highly visible model... engaging in ‘management by walking around,’ greeting students and teachers, and informally monitoring possible problem areas....Effective principals are liked and respected, rather than feared, and communicate caring for students as well as willingness to impose punishment if necessary” (Gaustad 1992).

Principals successful in addressing the need to foster high levels of appropriate student behavior, rather than developing lists of rules dealing with misbehavior, understand that the task should be broadly defined. They:

- Communicate high expectations for students to both teachers and students;
- Are visible in classrooms and halls, showing interest in everything that goes on;
- Get to know students as individuals;
- Encourage teachers to handle all classroom discipline problems that they reasonably can—and support their decisions;
- Provide opportunities for teachers to learn about effective management strategies;
- Work with teachers and parents to help students assume responsibility for their actions;
- Accept responsibility for identifying and addressing problems that act

as barriers to developing and maintaining an orderly school climate; and

- Model prosocial behaviors—such as respecting others and working together to resolve conflicts—on a daily basis. This is one of the most basic, yet most essential tasks of the principal (Cotton 2001; Greenlee and Ogletree 1993; Hartzell and Petrie 1992). ■

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WEB RESOURCES

Public Agenda provides an executive summary of its survey of teachers and parents, "Teaching Interrupted: Do Discipline Policies in Today's Public Schools Foster the Common Good?" The full report also is available with free registration at the Public Agenda Web site. www.publicagenda.org/research/pdfs/teaching_interrupted_exec_summary.pdf

The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory has made a brief summary of *Schoolwide and Classroom Discipline*, a research-based study, available for downloading. www.nwrel.org/scpd/sirs/5/cu9.html

The Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice (CECP) has posted the complete text of *Prevention Strategies that Work: What Administrators Can Do to Promote Positive Student Behavior*. www.air.org/cecp/preventionstrategies/prevent.pdf

The Johns Hopkins University Department of Special Education supports a site devoted to the PAR (Prevention, Action, and Resolution) model, a comprehensive schoolwide approach to discipline. Available for download are a manual and a guide to developing school-based rules. www.parproject.org