Reducing Discipline Referrals in Middle School

You see them every day in middle schools: students who seem to spend more time in the office than they do in class. In Florida, middle school students are more likely than elementary or high school students to be suspended, according to the Florida Department of Education (2001). While many adolescents go through their middle school years relatively unscathed by the stress of this developmental stage, many others fail to achieve the intellectual capacities and coping skills they will need to meet the demands of adult life (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development 1989). Students who fail to develop these skills usually manifest emotional stress and express it by creating classroom disruptions that often lead to them being sent to an administrator, and the incidents documented as referrals (Bernreuter et al. 1999).

When a review of referrals at Haile Middle School in Bradenton, Florida, revealed that a relatively small portion of the school population—13 percent—created the majority of classroom disruptions (Bernreuter et al. 1999), the school’s administrative team decided to target those students for a program designed to facilitate a change in their behavior.

The program was designed by Greg Robinson, a member of the administrative team, with administrative and logistical support by the author, who was principal of Haile Middle School at the time, and assistant principal John Bernreuter. The program received a grant from the Florida Council for Educational Research, which provided resources for instructional materials and supplies.

Applying Group Therapy

The program consisted of a class structured as a group therapy session led by Robinson, with participants selected from a pool of students who had received three or more discipline referrals. The students attended a two-week class, which met for 20 minutes at the beginning of each day. The program, using materials drawn from Rational-Emotive Behavior Therapy, based on the work of psychoanalyst Albert Ellis. The program focused on helping students identify negative behavior patterns that resulted in poor decision-making, which in turn led to the students getting sent to the office and receiving referrals. It was felt that if the students could identify their negative behaviors, they could replace them with more positive choices.

The program used an approach that employed peer coaching, role-playing, identifying “hot buttons” that set students off, and support groups. It was not enough to show the students what was wrong with their belief systems. There was also a need for strategies to change beliefs and behavior, as well as the ability to recognize behavioral conflict during difficult situations and to substitute positive responses.

At the end of the two weeks, parents and school officials were invited to a program celebration, in which participating students made brief presentations on what they learned in the class. These students then became eligible to be mentors for a new program class. An added benefit of the program was the students’ development of a relationship with the instructor as a trusted advisor. The establishment of a bond with at least one adult supports recommendations by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989).

Making It Work

While a few of the program participants continued to receive referrals, most were able to reduce or eliminate referrals and overall discipline referrals were reduced. Based upon feedback from parents, teachers, support staff, and students, we have found the following guidelines helpful in successfully implementing such a program:

- The leader must be committed, knowledgeable, and possess excellent interpersonal skills.
- The leader can be a paraprofessional, teacher, counselor, or administrator.
- The leader should monitor progress of the participants throughout the school year.
- Parents should be involved from the beginning of their children’s participation.
- Parents should be allowed to opt their children out of the program.
- Groups should be kept small, from eight to 10 students.
- Appropriate recognition should be provided for all, including adults.

For many youths 10 to 15 years old, early adolescence offers opportunities to choose a path toward a productive and fulfilling life. For many others, it represents their last chance to avoid a diminished future (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development 1989). This program provides an opportunity for students struggling with behavior difficulties and diminished academic performance to learn the coping skills necessary to make better choices and improve their future.

References


Ronald K. Hirst is principal at Dan Nolan Middle School in Bradenton, Florida. His e-mail address is HirstR@fc.manatee.k12.fl.us.