A Discipline Plan that Works

In the 1990s, while a middle school principal, my teachers and I designed a schoolwide discipline program that empowered teachers and gave principals time for instructional leadership. We were pretty excited about our system, which reduced disciplinary referrals by more than 75 percent. It called for teachers to accept responsibility for trivial student misbehavior, for our counseling staff to intervene early in response to behavior problems caused by abuse and neglect, for peer counseling, and for parents to be informed every step of the way.

I am now an elementary school principal, and over the years I have come to realize that what made our discipline plan so exceptional was not the plan itself but the process that was used to create it.

The Process

Organize a faculty advisory committee. If you don’t have a faculty advisory or leadership committee, organize one. I have always thought that teachers should elect their own leaders, but I always warn them that working on a faculty advisory committee is a serious job that requires a lot of time and effort.

Allow time to meet and discuss. Arrange for some significant time for discussion and feedback among committee members. Ask them to consult with other teachers to find out their concerns regarding discipline in the school.

Learn and share the latest practices. Get up to speed on the latest thinking about discipline. When you find something of interest, share the information with your committee and invite committee members to share their information with you.

Develop a vision. Most teachers wish that all their classroom experiences involved disciplined children who are eager to learn. Unfortunately, real life intervenes and we must help teachers define and share what their well-behaved school will look like.

Define classroom rules. Try to limit these rules to four or five. It’s easier to enforce a handful of rules that everyone knows than to have so many rules that no one can remember them all.

Define school rules. The committee at my current school developed rules for behavior in the halls, bathrooms, playground, and lunchroom after observing that misbehavior in these areas often had negative consequences in the classroom.

Define positive consequences. You should reward good behavior. At my school, the committee and I have developed some cool things to do with children, like our quarterly Academic Pep Rally where we recognize excellence, award prizes, and have a great time.

Define intolerable behaviors. There are some behaviors that teachers should not be expected to tolerate, such as drugs, fighting, and harassment. These behaviors must be clearly defined for immediate and stern action by the principal.

Outline the process for teacher consequences. This is the “meat and potatoes” of an effective schoolwide discipline model. It describes the steps teachers should take before referring students to your office. For example:

1. Have a private conference with the student to discuss the problem.
2. Contact a parent or guardian to discuss the problem.
3. If a student who misbehaves has a significant problem he or she needs to discuss with an adult, refer the student to a guidance counselor and inform the parent.
4. Impose a consequence, which may be some sort of in-school suspension or detention.
5. When all else fails, refer the student to the principal’s office with documentation of the occurrence and the progressive timeline of the steps taken.

I don’t spend too much time on discipline at my school. In fact, I will go days and weeks without seeing children for disciplinary issues. It works for us because we have a disciplinary system built on a process that reflects a covenant with the teachers and lets me have more time to work with them on curriculum, instruction, and effective classroom practices.

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