

Disciplining Other People's Children

"I am done with you. I shouldn't have to put up with you. Get out of my class."

We have all heard frustrated educators say similar things to students. The truth is, some children are just harder to teach than others. Unfortunately, every principal has seen teachers lose their cool and say things that exacerbate the situation. Nowadays we've developed some odd notions about our role as educators. Some of these beliefs place us at odds with the families we serve. In fact, what some schools assume is "best practice" may actually fuel the problem.

What if the crux of this disconnect between families and schools is progressive discipline policies? You would never implement a rigid multistep strategy at home that would lead to your disowning your own children. Casting out your child after a series of poor choices seems ludicrous. Yet, many schools implement this very strategy. The message to parents and children: be good, or we'll get rid of you. Do we really want to suggest that some children are disposable?

Effective Discipline Plans

What would happen if schools became committed to implementing an *effective* discipline plan, rather than a progressive one? One that tells students: We won't allow shenanigans, but at the same time we are committed to you? What if we treated other people's children as if they were ours? What if we worked to bring children and families closer to us rather than drive them away?

Good discipline helps most students to understand the consequences of their choices. I am certainly not suggesting that we abandon these systems. However, we know some students are indifferent to "normal" systems. These students require something unique.

So, how does "unique" look in practice? When children and families engage in counterproductive behaviors, schools must be willing to teach new, more productive replacement behaviors. Simply allowing students to progress through an escalating series of punishments makes no sense if the behavior doesn't improve.

Principals must be willing to abandon the notion that to be fair, you must be equal and uniform. Not all children need equal things. Some children need more than others.

"Your degrees are meaningless if parents don't believe you care about their children."

Cultivating Relationships With Parents

Schools, particularly those that enroll disadvantaged families, must stop asking parents to do things they're ill-equipped to do.

Parenting is an imperfect practice. While some parents know exactly what to do when the principal calls, others are clueless. For most educators, we expect parents to respond appropriately to the school's declaration of their child's offense. The parents of children with behavioral struggles tend to get called often. But many of these parents are left to wonder, "What do you want me to do?"

How often has a parent told you, "She behaves like this only at your school"? We hear an accusation, yet that parent is probably right. After all, how often are there 28 other children in the house, and how often must


children sit quietly with their hand raised, waiting to be called on, so that they can use the toilet at home? School is abnormal. So, of course the child acts differently in school. Educators know this, yet we expect parents to know this intuitively.

We must willingly invest the time to help parents understand the rules and rhythms of school. We must willingly clue parents in about how they can support their child's teachers. We must stop assuming parents know what to do. Schools must understand the strengths and limitations of the families they serve. The tacit message cannot be "figure it out, before we get rid of your child."

But there's a catch. No one wants to take advice from the enemy. The only way to get parents, particularly those who as children had poor school experiences, to hear and to trust you is to build strong relationships.

Show Parents You Care

Principal preparation programs focus almost exclusively on technical competencies and knowledge of laws and principles. You might have a wealth of knowledge about the educational process and a mastery of the rules and regulations, but your students' parents generally don't care. Parents want a competent principal, but your degrees are meaningless if parents don't believe you care about their children.

It is essential to personally communicate to the families of your most at-risk students that you care about them as people. Principals who can effectively convey love, compassion, and aspiration to children inevitably win the hearts and minds of the parents. Once you do that, parents are ready to hear what you have to say. Your words are heard not with suspicion, but rather as the efforts of someone who wants to help. 

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