

Rethinking School Discipline

As mounting research shows the limitations of zero tolerance policies, new methods of school discipline are creating safer schools and more productive opportunities for youth to learn appropriate behavior.

Beyond Zero Tolerance

Schools have routinely relied on traditional punitive disciplinary practices, specifically zero tolerance policies, in an attempt to control student behavior and create a safe school environment. Zero tolerance policies advocate strict consequences for specific rule violations with no respect for the circumstances surrounding the offense. According to the American Psychological Association's Zero Tolerance Task Force report (2008), zero tolerance policies have not achieved the intended goal of creating an effective school discipline system. Instead, research-based prevention practices are more likely to assist in managing student conduct, creating a safe school environment and providing productive opportunities for youth to learn appropriate behavior.

Punishment & Control

Punishment and exclusion in the school setting are used to send a strong message to youth that certain behaviors will not be tolerated. This message also assures the school community and public at large that order and civility are being maintained and that schools are safe. As a result, the underlying theory behind the use of zero tolerance policies is that severe and unyielding consequences will deter students from committing acts of aggression or disruption (Skiba & Knesting, 2001). Unfortunately, the overemphasis on punishment and control has led to the use of law enforcement models to address student conduct. Within this framework, what was once considered "normal" youth behavior and misbehavior is now used as a justification to criminalize youth behavior and exclude noncompliant students from the school community.

Meeting the Developmental Needs of Youth

Ultimately, teaching appropriate behavior may be a more powerful strategy for improving student behavior, creating a safe school environment and attending to the development needs of youth.

Meeting the developmental needs of youth may be a better alternative than exclusionary discipline practices that do not teach youth appropriate behavior and do not allow students to develop self-control. Research suggests that attending to the social and emotional needs of youth reduces problem behavior and improves students' attitudes towards school (CASEL, 2007). These outcomes are important factors in helping students take ownership of creating a safe school environment and learning skills to self-regulate their actions. Likewise, disciplinary practices that allow students to problem-solve, dialogue and build positive adult-youth and peer-to-peer relationships help build resiliency and fulfill the development needs of adolescents (Hamilton, 2008). The external assets that address a youth's need for support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, as well as the internal assets that address a youth's need for commitment to learning, positive values and social competencies,¹ may be better addressed in an environment that seeks to nurture youth as they experiment, learn and grow into mature adults. Such an environment is not present within exclusionary, punitive disciplinary practices.

According to Brendtro & Larson (2006), resilience is the process of overcoming difficulties and developing strengths to solve problems. The authors contend that when students are provided opportunities to acknowledge and exercise their power, they are more likely to use that power for positive versus negative goals. Students need opportunities to learn from their mistakes and develop skills to thwart further behavioral infractions. Likewise, powerful youth possess the confidence to ask for assistance, make informed decisions and determine their life path. Ultimately, promoting kids' autonomy and personal power is a more effective strategy for teaching youth responsibility.

A Different View of School Discipline

Despite the use of punitive, exclusionary disciplinary practices, research suggests that effective strategies for creating a safe school should use discipline as a tool to teach acceptable behavior (Hamilton, 2008; Skiba & Peterson, 2003), include an array of options for addressing challenging student behavior (APA, 2008), establish procedures to ensure that disciplinary processes are fair and consistent (Kajs, 2006) and involve restorative justice strategies that focus on restoring the harm caused by a wrongdoing (Amstutz & Mullett, 2005; Morrison, Blood & Thorsborne, 2005).

A student-centered approach to school safety and school behavior may be more effective in creating a productive school disciplinary system. This reconceptualized approach to school discipline will require that schools change from an authoritarian model to an inclusive model with youth and relationships as the focal point of the school community. Within this framework, schools must create meaningful, authentic opportunities for youth to be active participants in making decisions and resolving conflict (Varnham, 2005).

Utilizing restorative justice in school disciplinary matters may also allow school administrators to develop a problem solving approach to student behavior and may serve as an alternative to zero tolerance policies (Morrison, 2005). By utilizing restorative justice practices, specifically Circles, educational institutions may provide the intervention needed for youth to learn new behaviors and apply them to solve problems and succeed in school. Stinchcomb, Bazemore and Riestenberg (2006) contend that restorative justice practices can provide the school community with an inclusive method of administering discipline aimed at instructing students in positive behavior and reducing future behavioral infractions. Moreover, the use of restorative justice practices provides youth an opportunity to learn social responsibility (Macready, 2009). Finally, restorative justice practices are meant to supplement traditional forms of discipline and increase the school community's options for responding to student behavior and creating a safe school environment.

Conclusion

Schools are entrusted with the task of providing students with a safe, productive learning environment with the necessary resources to succeed. However, zero-tolerance may not be the answer to the problem of managing student behavior and creating a safe school environment. A policy that uniformly and rigidly excludes students from the educational setting may not ultimately maintain school discipline and order (APA, 2008; Reyes, 2006) nor does it address the developmental needs of youth. Ultimately, teaching appropriate behavior may be a more powerful strategy for improving student behavior, creating a safe school environment and attending to the development needs of youth.

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