

## Inside Education

### Part 3 Discipline: What can schools do to reduce disciplinary problems?

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“The key to greater learning begins with knowing how to manage a classroom.” What must be added is “how to manage a school” and “how to manage a school district.” Solving disciplinary problems cannot be done in the classroom alone. Reigning in disciplinary problems must begin with leadership at the school and district levels.

What’s reassuring is that there is no need to “reinvent the wheel.” All of the “how-to” has been developed by a variety of experts and confirmed by numerous studies. One such example is Schoolwide and Classroom Discipline developed by The Northwest Regional Laboratory. It provides an abundance of practical solutions, has pages of references, and it’s free.

According to Harry K. Wong, How to be an Effective Teacher, the most common mistake teachers make in disciplining is that they don’t do classroom management—“they present lessons, and if something goes wrong, they discipline.” There is nothing mystical about classroom management. Simply stated, classroom management is the practices and procedures that allow teachers to teach and students to learn. Aren’t teachers trained in effective classroom management techniques? No! That’s why discipline is rated the number one problem by classroom teachers, and it’s the reason why classroom management seminars are so popular.

In one such seminar conducted by Fred Jones, who has written three books on classroom management, a teacher asked a rather profound question: “Why weren’t we given this information about classroom discipline 20 years ago?”

So the first task for a school leader—the principal—is to provide on-going professional development in classroom management strategies and techniques; and the first task for central office administration is to make sure that such training is mandated and supported. In addition, training must be consistent and the goal must be to develop a single district culture for student behavior—this is critical--and the emphasis has to be on prevention not disciplining. Isn’t this what schools do? Again, no! Discipline is haphazard and left to teachers, administrators and individual school buildings—there is no singular disciplinary culture. Needless to say, few school districts have developed or even think about such a singular culture of behavioral expectations and consequences. Vital to this approach is informing students (and parents) that behavioral expectations and consequences are the same in each school and in the district.

No, it is not easy to do because today, more than ever before, schools face an undaunting task in dealing with so many diverse needs of students, as well as, the unrealistic societal expectation that schools can do alone. It also takes a great deal of time and effort to develop a singular culture of expectations, but the payoff can be very dramatic.

One large district making such an effort is Palm Beach County, Florida, consisting of a very diverse student population of over 152,000 speaking 27 different languages. Since the single culture effort began two years ago, one high school has seen office referrals drop by 50%, and in another high school there hasn’t been a single fight so far this year--two rather dramatic results for such a diverse system.

In Milwaukee, Wisconsin—a school district with one of the worst records in America for black students—more astounding results can be found at the Clarke Street school: 90% of fourth-graders are scoring proficient or better in reading and 89% proficient or better in math—both scores are almost 50 percentage points higher than the district as a whole and well above national averages. One of several factors leading to this really remarkable achievement is discipline that is “tight and strongly enforced.” Other factors included high standards, clear goals, pushing the basics, teamwork, a demanding structure, and strong leadership. Oh, they have their critics who see the culture as “mindless obedience.” Obviously, the critics (they are found everywhere) do not

find rationale actions that produce results as relevant or meaningful even though they have been confirmed as sound and effective by numerous research studies.

Another key component of the “single culture” concept involves communicating--clearly and consistently--the philosophy to the parents and the community so that they can become supportive partners in any such effort.

Of course, other approaches can be tried. In San Diego, the power to suspend students is given to teachers—it’s part of the teacher contract: “A teacher may suspend any pupil...after the failure of other forms of discipline.” It takes no genius to conclude that the same misbehavior must be treated differently not only in the same school, but probably by the same teacher depending on the class, time of day, and teacher disposition. The message this gives to students and parents has to be one of absolute befuddlement.

According to Howard Seeman author of, Preventing Classroom Discipline Problems: A Classroom Management Handbook, another common mistake teachers make in disciplining students is a “miscall.” A miscall occurs when a teacher treats a situation or an incident as a discipline problem when it is not. It would be interesting to analyze the suspensions in San Diego to see how many miscalls may have led to suspensions.

What really must be understood about this very critical issue of discipline is that research studies show that, “approximately one-half of all classroom time is taken up with activities other than instruction, and discipline problems are responsible for a significant portion of this lost instructional time.” Just imagine the payoff for increased instruction and learning if the time devoted to disciplinary matters is reduced by even half!

Clearly, reducing disciplinary problems does not require desperate actions; in fact, it’s rather simple: high academic and behavioral expectations, effective instruction, intolerance of conditions which inhibit learning, a warm school climate, a visible and supportive principal, and close ties to the community. Supporting such an effort requires an aggressive and proactive (prevention) school and community based mental health component.

Would the same approach--high expectations, strict “no excuses” discipline, and a loving environment--reduce behavior problems in the home? Absolutely! Does this sound like traditional (old-fashioned) parenting? Yep, it does! According to Dr. John Rosemond, a family psychologist and columnist, recent research confirms that this is how to raise well-behaved and well-adjusted children; and, this is also how to develop successful students and effective schools.

**What will be of interest to all readers is that the first three parts were published in 2004 when I was doing an educational column for several newspapers although I did add one updates relating to the number of districts allowing for corporal punishment. During that time to now, changes have occurred firing up the discipline problems.**

**Next Week Part 4—How things have changed 2004-2021**