
Fair Schoolwide Discipline

The word *discipline* is a strong word for most of us. It carries with it some preconceived descriptive words such as “weak,” “strong,” “good,” and “bad.” It is a word that has serious ramifications for all those who are engaged in the field of education. Having “good” discipline is a goal of every classroom teacher. Principals never want the reputation of having “weak” discipline at their schools. The public demands that schools be places of effective discipline that create environments where teachers can teach and students can learn.

DEFINING THE GOALS OF SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

What do we mean by the term *discipline*? Surely, it means more than a series of descriptive adjectives. Without a clear definition of the term, how do we recognize good discipline when we achieve it? *Webster's New World College Dictionary* (1996) defines the term as follows:

Discipline: From the Latin term *disciplina*, meaning: 1. A branch of knowledge or learning; 2. Training that develops self-control, character, orderliness or efficiency; 3. Strict control to enforce obedience; 4. Treatment that controls or punishes; 5. A system of rules.

It is interesting to note that the definitions of the term suggest that discipline can have quite different implications for schools. The component of the definition that relates to teaching seems much more positive than the components that include the negative expressions such as *punishment* and *strict control*. Those elements that involve exercising “obedience” seem more akin to what we expect while training animals than it does to

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working with children and youth. The definition does provide an interesting framework for discussing the role of discipline in schools.

As a Branch of Knowledge

School discipline is not usually thought of as a branch of knowledge. The study of a subject like physics, history, biology, or philosophy is a more likely example of a “discipline.” Branches of knowledge usually contain research, empirical data, a certain amount of theory, and a great many experts. Most of the expertise relates to classroom rather than schoolwide discipline. Schoolwide discipline differs from classroom discipline because it focuses on practices that relate to the total operation of the school rather than a single classroom. There are few books and even fewer contemporary experts on schoolwide discipline as a research study.

The best experts in the area of schoolwide discipline are practicing school administrators. The environment in which schools operate changes so quickly that it is difficult for theorists to keep up with contemporary problems of discipline. Issues related to substance abuse, weapons, sexual harassment, dress codes, and compulsory attendance seem to change continually. Problems in schools in one part of the nation are not the same as those in other sections of the country.

Consequences for misbehavior vary according to the community in which the school is located.

As Training to Develop Self-Control

Philosophers and educators of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries wrote and taught about discipline of the mind as though it were similar to discipline of the body. In early schools, history, science, languages, and grammar were taught as mental disciplines that required memorization, drill, practice, and, above all, dedication to the subject. The scholar acquired knowledge by stamina and diligence. Moral character was closely related to the ability of the individual to discipline himself or herself and to become “a good person” through mastery and control of urges and appetites. According to these scholars, the value of education lies not in the content of the subject being taught, but in the process of acquisition. “Through dedication and hard work, the educated person can apply the principles of self-discipline to every needed body of knowledge” (Monroe, 1918, p. 263).

Some people in our contemporary society believe that these early professors of pedagogy had a point. Perhaps the reason test scores are so low in some parts of the country is related to lack of discipline. Perhaps we need more drill and practice in addition to experiential learning. Some types of learning are hard work. There is no easy way to memorize periodic tables, conjugation of verbs, poems, or the capitals of the nations. Although modern psychology teaches us the mind is not a muscle, humans are more productive when they are able to discipline their emotions and

appetites and to concentrate on a given task for a certain amount of time without interruption. Perhaps concentration and a degree of disciplined learning are areas that need to be reemphasized in schools.

School discipline can play a key role in character education. Older youth must learn that things are not always black and white, and that sometimes the good of society must be considered before the interests of any single individual. Younger children must learn that when you are living in a group, it is not always possible to get your own way. All students must learn to understand how other people feel when they are treated unjustly. Students need to be taught that they must abide by the rules if they want to receive the benefits that society has to offer.

Children and youth develop skills of socialization and moral reasoning in part through discipline practices. Child psychologists tell us that setting limits helps children feel secure. Discipline provides the modeling, rules, limits, and moral framework within which the individual develops his or her sense of adjustment to society. Without discipline, individuals have no boundaries and are left to wander aimlessly in a moral wilderness. Absolute freedom may be acceptable for philosophers but not for students who have to learn to live in the real world.

Too much has been made of "Whose moral values would you teach?" types of arguments. There are many moral values on which most people can agree. Examples are honesty, nonviolence, empathy, responsibility for our own actions, tolerance, respect for authority, respect for oneself, and loyalty to family and country. Most of these basic moral principles are taught by good teachers in their classrooms on a daily basis. We talk about teaching values as if they were something new when actually, good teachers have been teaching moral values for generations.

The word *teaching* can be directly related to the word *habits*. It is through the formation of habits that most humans are trained. There are a number of "habits" that can be internalized through school discipline practices. These basic habits include not throwing trash on the ground; arriving to work on time; not using improper language in a social setting; and showing common courtesy toward others. These may seem very elementary, but anyone visiting a modern public school will notice examples of students who have not learned or have not acquired these basic habits.

Certainly, social habits such as courtesy, punctuality, proper language, and cleanliness should be learned and emphasized in the home and are not the primary responsibility of the school. The fact of the matter is, however, that a great number of students come to school without the so-called social graces. The school is the most likely institution to fill the gap of appropriate training in social skills. The school disciplinarian has the responsibility of leadership in ensuring that all members of the school staff play a role in the daily reinforcement of appropriate social habits. It is a difficult assignment that takes patience, determination, and skill. Yet it is already being done in thousands of schools across the nation.

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As Strict Control to Enforce Obedience

There is no doubt that someone needs to be in charge of our schools. As long as schools are composed of hundreds or thousands of students who are required by law to reside in an institutional setting for several hours a day, several times a week, there must be someone in control. Control does not mean being a warden at a prison. It means maintaining order and discipline. One needs only a short time at a school campus to determine whether or not someone is in control. Someone is in control of a school when

1. Students are where they are supposed to be at any given hour of the school day.
2. There are few interruptions of class time.
3. The campus is clean and free of graffiti.
4. Campus visitors are screened and required to wear a visitor's badge.
5. Communication devices are visible and readily available.
6. Supervisory personnel are visible.
7. Students, teachers, and administrators have a good working relationship.

As Treatment to Control or Punish

The terms *discipline* and *punishment* are often used in a manner where one supposedly requires the other to exist. This is not necessarily the case. The term *punishment* is usually related to some type of suffering or deprivation. Discipline is related more to teaching and self-control. To be realistic, we must admit that punishment exists because of the expectations of society. This is particularly true in schools. When students misbehave, adults expect them to be punished. The degree of punishment may depend on the community in which the school is located. For example, in the southern part of the nation, corporal punishment is much more acceptable than in other parts. In 1993, there were 613,514 instances of paddling reports in the United States. Most of those paddling cases occurred in southern states. Corporal punishment is still legal in 26 states, but there has been a 32% decline in corporal punishment in schools from 1991 to 1992, and most of that decline was in eastern and western states (Richardson, Wilcox, & Dunne, 1995). Corporal punishment may not only be accepted but expected in the Deep South, but in Rhode Island, administrators can lose their credentials if they strike a student for any reason.

Social psychologists have been telling us for decades that rehabilitation and not punishment changes negative behavior. Unfortunately, the courts and the community at large still do not see it that way. The number of men and women in prisons and jails in the United States in 1995 climbed to 1.6 million, nearly double the rate imprisoned in 1985. The United States

has more people in prison than any other industrialized nation (U.S. Department of Justice, 1995).

Punishment in our culture is tied primarily to supporting the norms of the majority of persons who abide by the rules. Schools suspend students not so much to improve the behavior of the students who do not follow the rules, but to reinforce the norms for proper behavior set forth by the adult community.

When we enforce norms, we must be sensitive to both what we are and what we are not doing. Enforcing social norms through punishment may be necessary to protect the majority from the actions of sociopaths, psychopaths, and moral misfits. Punishment, however, may not be the best way to teach self-discipline. What we are after in self-discipline is not fear of retribution but, rather, a habitual response pattern. This response pattern is formed through modeling, demands, restrictions, and limitations. We want students to behave not because they are frightened, but because they respect authority and desire to belong. Students need to believe that being a member of the student body of a specific school is a good thing. It is something they want to do; they want to belong. This is an especially powerful drive for most teenagers. Excessive punishment can negate and confuse some of the positive goals we are trying to achieve. It can emphasize that the school and the world at large is a negative place.

It is important to stress that students cannot learn self-discipline if they are removed from the very environment where instruction is to occur. There is some research that indicates that punishment actually stops the learning process. Excessive punishment may create a situation in which the offender holds such a grudge against the institution that anger can supersede any need to belong (Bandura, 1973). We know that suspension is a common punishment used in schools when students fail to abide by rules, but there is little research to support out-of-school suspension as an effective deterrent to misbehavior (Moles, 1990; Stevens, 1983).

As a System of Rules

Rules are crucial for good discipline. It is wonderful to imagine a utopia where rules would not be necessary in the society—and certainly not in schools—because of the degree of self-discipline shown by those who live there. If students are to transfer their school experience to living in adult society, they must learn to live with rules and laws. There are many kinds of rules and laws to which students must attend. Chapter 2 of this book is devoted entirely to rules and the ways that effective school administrators have used rules to teach justice in their schools.

PROVIDING LEADERSHIP FOR FAIR AND JUST DISCIPLINE PRACTICES

Webster's definition helped us think about what the term *discipline* means to us in terms of goals and objectives. If the objective of discipline

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for a school is strictly control, then perhaps school boards should employ police officers as school disciplinarians. Their training is probably more conducive to control, and they probably can do a better job. If the objective of school discipline is instruction, then educators have a legitimate and logical role to play. The formation of rules, the isolation of socially acceptable habits, the enforcement of certain acceptable community moral standards, and the implementation of practices that demonstrate our system of justice require the services of a professionally trained educator.

As a group, administrators responsible for school discipline are doing an excellent job of administering our schools. Most are skilled in the profession and find the role of school disciplinarian to be challenging and one of the best jobs in education. They can be exhausted at times by petty trivia. They can also be frustrated by teachers and parents who do not do their jobs. It should not be their responsibility to be a classroom disciplinarian. Parents and teachers must fulfill their roles so school administrators can provide leadership and direction for schools. School disciplinarians, especially, have the opportunity to be leaders of justice and fairness, a task that takes time, total school involvement, and a great deal of energy.

USING A JUSTICE ISSUES SCHOOL CHECKLIST

Form 1 (Justice Issues School Checklist) at the end of this chapter provides school administrators with a way to evaluate where their leadership may be needed with regard to discipline practices. The form identifies 25 school discipline practices and fairness issues. The form can be distributed to teachers, student councils, and parent groups. The results should be collected and scored by a special committee appointed by the school administrator in charge of discipline. Those areas rated "Almost never" and "Some of the time" by at least half those who complete the survey need to be the focus of the committee. Some schools call the committee the School Justice Task Force. The committee needs to meet on a regular basis to find ways to improve identified areas of concern. The committee might establish one school year as the time needed to improve the situation. A second survey can be taken at the end of the year to determine how much progress has been made. The school administrator in charge of discipline is responsible for providing the leadership in the areas of concern, but the involvement of the entire school community is necessary to make real change.

Form 1 Justice Issues School Checklist**Justice Issues School Checklist**

Use the scale to rate your school in each of the school justice areas described.

<i>Almost all the time</i>	<i>Most of the time</i>	<i>Some of the time</i>	<i>Almost never</i>
4	3	2	1
1. Boys and girls receive equal treatment by teachers.			_____
2. Girls and boys receive equal consequences for the same offense.			_____
3. The consequences of disobeying school rules are distributed in writing to students and parents.			_____
4. School rules are periodically reevaluated for clarity and appropriateness by a committee of administrators, teachers, parents, and students.			_____
5. Grading practices are fair.			_____
6. Classroom discipline practices are fair and consistent.			_____
7. Students with disabilities receive fair and equal treatment.			_____
8. Students speaking limited English receive fair and equal treatment.			_____
9. A reasonable attempt is made to keep drugs and weapons off the school campus.			_____
10. Students have an opportunity to express themselves at school board meetings.			_____
11. The opportunity to attend school is not restricted because of race, religion, ethnic group, or physical disability.			_____
12. Student searches comply with school district, state, and federal laws.			_____
13. Persons who do not belong on the school campus are kept off.			_____
14. School facilities are safe and clean.			_____
15. Students understand their rights under the law.			_____
16. Students and parents feel free to question school rules and district policies.			_____
17. School compulsory attendance laws are enforced.			_____
18. Students are not discriminated against because of their race.			_____
19. Students are not discriminated against because of their religion.			_____
20. Students are not discriminated against because of their gender.			_____
21. Students are not discriminated against because of their ethnic origin.			_____
22. Students are not discriminated against because of their clothing or appearance.			_____
23. School officials make a sincere attempt to communicate with parents and guardians when necessary.			_____
24. Staff assigned to campus security are well informed about school discipline and treat students fairly.			_____
25. Students involved in suspension or expulsion proceedings are given an opportunity for a fair hearing.			_____

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