

Building a Case for Alternative Discipline

"A STUDENT STRUGGLING TO READ IS NOT SENT HOME AND EXPECTED TO RETURN READING FLUENTLY, SO WHY IS IT THAT A STUDENT STRUGGLING TO BEHAVE IS SENT HOME AND EXPECTED TO RETURN BEHAVING DECENTLY?"

The first known use and origin of the word *discipline* dates back to the 13th century from the Latin word *disciplina*, meaning teaching and learning. Today, some define discipline as training that corrects, molds, or perfects the mental faculties or moral character; others define discipline as a verb that means to punish in order to gain control or enforce obedience. While many would disagree on the meaning and purpose of discipline, it remains one of the most commonly stated reasons for not having enough time for effective implementation of school or classroom programs/initiatives. While true, however, using a reactive discipline approach actually takes more time in the long run than a preventive approach. Effective discipline should be designed to improve behavior, rather than dismissing it for a few days through suspension and hoping the student returns to school "fixed." This requires thinking beyond the traditional method of sending students home and hoping that either (a) their parents will teach them not to do it again, or (b) being home from school will teach them not to do it again. In fact, the research demonstrates the contrary. We will begin making our case by comparing the evolution of both academic and behavior systems in schools.

Prior to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004, the traditional method of deciding whether a struggling student receives

extra time and support through special education was with the *discrepancy model*. Under the discrepancy model, action would not take place until there was a discrepancy between a student's expected achievement and their actual achievement. Simply put, a school had to wait for a student to fail before providing the supports necessary to accelerate learning. Under this model, as McCook (2006, p. 1) states, "It must be the child's fault, or the problem certainly must be the child. Why else would the child have such a discrepancy between expected achievement and actual achievement?" The "wait to fail" model produced a large number of students misidentified as requiring special education services and a disproportionate number of racial minority students misdiagnosed with a learning disability. The introduction of 2004 IDEA allowed schools to use the response to intervention (RTI) framework for identification purposes, which means only after students have failed responding to a series of timely, systematic, increasingly focused, and intensive research-based interventions will a student be considered for special education services. RTI allows schools to identify the kinds of support struggling students need and provide individualized support when it's needed.

Exclusionary discipline practices are equivalent to using the wait-to-fail approach in academics; both are reactionary, not preventive. Having a solid, preventive tier one behavior system in place (see *PBIS Tier One Handbook*, Hannigan & Hauser, 2014) coupled with an innovative response to students who misbehave (this book) does to behavior systems what 2004 IDEA and RTI were designed to do for academic systems.

The traditional mindset about student learning shifted from being the "child's fault" in a discrepancy model toward a belief that all students can and will learn. With this belief, every resource and support is exhausted to provide a student with the resources needed to support learning. However, when it comes to behavior, do we believe that every student can and will behave? Do we exhaust every resource and provide every strategy to support a student in his or her behavior, or do we use suspension as our only means to "teach" a student how to behave? Using suspension is the reactive wait-to-fail model for behavior. Is behavior RTI (preventive discipline) visible on your campus? Or does your system respond to behavior today with the same approach schools responded to academics 15 years ago?

Over the past few decades, methods of disciplining K–12 students have transformed significantly when compared to traditional practices, however, still not to the level it should be.

Specifically, there have been shifts in methods such as corporal punishment, zero tolerance, and use of exclusionary practices such as suspensions and expulsions toward creating positive behavioral environments in schools with the focus on improved student achievement both academically and behaviorally. In analyzing over 20 years of research on discipline approaches, researchers found that out-of-school suspension and zero-tolerance approaches to discipline do not reduce or prevent misbehavior and correlates with lower achievement (Irvin, Tobin, Sprague, Sugai, & Vincent, 2004; Losen, 2011; Mayer, 1995; Skiba & Peterson, 1999; Skiba & Rausch, 2006). In fact, this form of traditional discipline does not make the school feel safer and results in negative outcomes for the child and the community (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). Similarly, Balfanz and Boccanfuso (2007) found that students who were suspended and/or expelled were more likely to be

held back a grade or drop out of school. Furthermore, the likelihood of being involved in the juvenile justice system is increased significantly for students addressed with a traditional discipline approach (Leone et al., 2003; Wald & Losen, 2003). Perry and Morris (2014) found that higher levels of exclusionary discipline within schools over time generate collateral damage, negatively affecting the academic achievement of nonsuspended students in punitive contexts. Chard, Smith, and Sugai (1992) summarized discipline practices in education by stating that, "there is one burden that consumes more time, energy, and attention than any other . . . school discipline" (p. 19). Therefore, it is not a surprise that when problem behaviors occur in schools, common practice has been to react in a stringent manner, which has not demonstrated to be successful for all (Chard et al., 1992).

Although there is an abundance of evidence demonstrating the negative effects of suspension, it continues to be the most commonly used method of discipline throughout the nation. We understand choosing alternative forms of discipline will be more challenging and time-consuming in the beginning. Here are some common oppositional messages we hear as we present our approach on discipline. Do any of these messages sound familiar?

But . . .

"I had to make an example out of him."

"I don't have time to do it the other way."

"I want my teachers to know I support them."

"We need to inconvenience the parents."

"I don't want the other parents to feel that nothing was done."

"We need a break from this student."

"Alternatives require more work and are more time-consuming."

"There is no way we have the time or staffing to do this."

"Why not just suspend?"

If you believe it takes too much time to use alternatives and is quicker to send a student home than teach them correct behavior, consider this: A typical major referral takes approximately 45 to 60 minutes of an administrator's time. Suspension does not correct the behavior and will likely repeat, leading to multiple 45- to 60-minute occurrences. Using the incident as a teaching opportunity will reduce the likelihood of a repeated incident, consequently, leading to fewer referrals and significantly decreasing the amount of time spent disciplining.

If preventive and effective discipline is a priority, you will make it a primary initiative at your school. To make this work, it is critical to intentionally create a system designed to support alternative discipline. Here are seven actions to consider to successfully make time for effective discipline:

Belief. As educators, we approach instruction with the belief that every student can and will learn. With this belief, we exhaust every resource and support necessary to improve learning. As an administrator you have to

question your own beliefs about discipline. Do you believe every student can and will behave decently? Is every resource and strategy exhausted to support a student in their behavior, or is suspension used as the only means to “teach” a student how to behave? If you believe what you are currently doing is working, there is no compelling reason to change. If you do not believe in preventive discipline, it will not be an expectation nor a priority in your school.

Invest in Preventive Response to Intervention (RTI) Systems for Both Academics and Behavior. Invest in building your school staff’s understanding around creating effective systems for responding to students school-wide, targeted/at-risk groups, and individualized both in academics and behavior. Investing here will give you more time to focus on a preventive model rather than reactive. Initial best teaching and best classroom management will support approximately 80% of your students in both academics and behavior. It is also imperative to organize your school’s targeted/at-risk and individualized interventions for students who are not responding to the school-wide approach. The PBIS Champion Model is one research-based RTI model that can help you do this at your school.

Visibility and Active Supervision. As an administrator, it is critical to be out of your office and visible to students and staff to build effective relationships and make meaningful connections with students. Active supervision requires an intentional focus on movement, scanning, and positive interactions during supervision; this is essential and needs to be modeled by the administrator. Taking the time to train your staff on visibility and active supervision will save you the time of responding to behavior incidents due to deficiencies in supervision from staff.

Invest in Gaining Faculty Commitment. Take time to educate your staff on alternative discipline approaches. Make it a priority to share school behavior data, gather input from the staff, and work with staff on discipline so they feel part of the process. Share effective discipline success stories with the staff. If you take the time to do this and make yourself available to have difficult ongoing conversations around beliefs, you will see more ownership with staff when handling minor discipline and increased buy-in on major administrator-handled discipline. Communication is also key for staff to understand the logic behind conducting behavior in this structure. In addition, discipline will become a team effort to supporting a student, rather than something only executed and monitored by an administrator.

Create and Nurture a Behavior Team. It is critical for every school to have a behavior team designed to set behavior goals, establish and monitor behavior interventions, and to support preventive systems work. An administrator who provides a team the opportunity to meet on a regular basis to discuss school-wide, targeted/small group, and individualized behavior data and trends will benefit. This allows for data to be used to provide interventions for students by name, by need, instead of after they’ve escalated to the next level of discipline. Make sure the social-emotional experts on campus, such as a school counselor or

school psychologist, are an active part of the behavior team. Designate this time with your behavior team; use a monitoring tool to ensure data is used to identify and monitor the progress of focus students. The emphasis here is to get to the students before they get to you.

Create a Toolkit of Effective Discipline. Organize preventive discipline ideas in a toolkit for future reference. As you conduct discipline in this manner, you will begin using a set of actions you tend to assign; therefore, if you have another similar incident, you can reference your toolkit to help save time. The alternatives in this book are designed to give options and examples of alternative forms of discipline used to correct misbehavior. As you see how students respond to alternatives, you will think of other innovative alternatives to use. In the event of another similar-type incident at the school, the administrator can reference their toolkit for consequences/interventions instead of creating another.

Supporting a System for Alternatives. Make sure the alternative discipline you assign is implemented with fidelity and effectively communicated to all stakeholders. Understand that establishing this will require time and human capital to implement and monitor with success. Although it may be challenging to allocate so many resources for one student, the ultimate goal is to help the student learn and change his/her behavior. Without an intentional focus on alternatives, the student will continue taking away time from your staff throughout the school year with continuing behavior challenges, since the function of the student's behavior was never addressed. Teaching desired outcomes through alternatives to suspension will reduce the frequency of repeat offenses, thus creating less time dealing with discipline than using suspension alone.