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Fair and Effective Discipline for All Students: Best Practice Strategies for Educators

Disciplining students, particularly those with chronic or serious behavior problems, is a long-standing challenge for educators. They must balance the needs of the school community and those of the individual student. At the heart of this challenge is the use of punitive versus supportive disciplinary practices. Though increasingly common in recent years, reliance on punitive approaches to discipline, such as “zero tolerance” policies, has proven largely ineffective, even counterproductive. This holds true both for general education students and those with disabilities. Current research and legislation offer alternative “best practice” strategies that support the safe education of *all* students. Such effective discipline practices ensure the safety and dignity of students and staff, preserve the integrity of the learning environment, and address the causes of a student’s misbehavior in order to improve positive behavioral skills and long-term outcomes.

Punish-Based Discipline Does Not Improve School Safety, Learning or Behavior

In recent years many schools have adopted a zero tolerance approach to school discipline that usually entails the expulsion or suspension of students as an automatic consequence of serious acts of misconduct, particularly the possession of weapons or drugs. Unfortunately, an increasing number of schools apply a zero tolerance approach to behaviors that do not necessarily threaten the safety or welfare of others. Furthermore, harsh consequences are invoked automatically, irrespective of the severity of the misbehavior or the circumstance involved, and without consideration of the negative impact of these consequences on the welfare of the offending student or on the overall climate of the school.

Research repeatedly has demonstrated that suspension, expulsion and other punitive consequences are not the solution to dangerous and disruptive student behaviors. In fact evidence, indicates that dangerous students do not become less dangerous to others when they are excluded from appropriate school settings; quite often they become more so. Youth who are not in school and not in the labor force are at exceedingly high risk of delinquency and crime. Each year’s class of dropouts drains the nation of more than \$200 billion in lost earnings and taxes every year. Billions more are spent on welfare, health care and other social services.

Zero tolerance policies as usually implemented:

- Do not increase school safety.
- Rely too heavily on suspension and expulsion, practices that neither improve school climate nor address the source of student alienation.
- Are related to a number of negative consequences, including increased rates of school drop out and discriminatory application of school discipline.
- Negatively impact minority students and students with disabilities to a greater degree than other students—studies have shown that these students constitute a disproportionately large percentage of expulsions and suspensions.
- Restrict access to appropriate education, often exacerbating the problems of students with disabilities and achievement difficulties, and thereby increasing the probability that these students will not complete high school.

Positive Discipline Strategies Improve Safety and Outcomes for All Students

Positive discipline strategies are research-based procedures that focus on increasing desirable behaviors instead of simply decreasing undesirable behaviors through punishment. They emphasize the importance of making positive changes in the child's environment in order to improve the child's behavior. Such changes may entail the use of positive reinforcement, modeling, supportive teacher-student relations, family support and assistance from a variety of educational and mental health specialists.

Research has proven that *positive discipline strategies benefit all students* because:

- Opportunities to forge relationships with caring adults, coupled with engaging curriculum, prevent discipline problems.
- Discipline that is fair, corrective and includes therapeutic group relationship-building activities with students reduces the likelihood of further problems.
- Strategies that effectively maintain appropriate social behavior make schools safer. Safer schools are more effective learning environments.
- Positive solutions address student needs, environmental conditions, teacher interactions and matching students with curriculum.
- Reducing student alienation through such efforts as "schools-within-a-school" or peer relationship programs can dramatically reduce acting out in schools, especially in large settings.
- When students are given an appropriate education in a conducive environment, they improve behavior and performance.
- Appropriately implemented, proactive behavior support systems can lead to dramatic improvements that have long-term effects on the lifestyle, functional communication skills and problem behavior in individuals with disabilities or at risk for negative adult outcomes.

IDEA promotes research-based practice. The importance of evidence-based discipline policies is highlighted in the IDEA Amendments of 1997 that govern services to students with disabilities. To support students with disabilities who exhibit challenging behaviors, IDEA requires the consideration of "positive behavior interventions, strategies and supports" when a student's behavior "impedes his or her own learning or that of others." The amendments apply not only to direct implementation of supports for *individual* students, but also address the broader issues of school safety and climates conducive to learning for *all* students. Systemic changes in a school's or district's approach to discipline and behavioral intervention, including collaboration with families and community agencies, can significantly impact school climate and student learning. Schools implementing effective strategies have reported reductions in office discipline referrals by 20-60%; this results in improved academic engaged time and improved academic performance for all students. ***All students, both with disabilities and without, can benefit from proactive behavioral support systems.***

Research indicates that effective implementation of proactive behavioral supports includes:

- ***Culturally competent, family-friendly*** behavior support.
- A focus both on ***prevention*** of problem behaviors and ***early access*** to effective behavior support.
- Implementation with ***sufficient intensity*** and scope to produce gains that have a significant and durable impact on behavior.
- For individual students, an assessment, including a ***Functional Behavior Assessment***, conducted when the problem behavior is first observed or as a ***proactive*** activity.

Examples of effective proactive behavioral strategies. There are a number of research-based approaches to providing proactive systems of behavioral support in schools, including Positive Behavior Support (PBS), violence prevention programs, social skills instruction and school-based mental health services. These strategies include:

- **Violence prevention:** The most frequent components of a violence prevention program include a prevention curriculum; services from school psychologists, counselors or social workers; family and community involvement; and implementation of effective school-wide discipline practices. Some examples of proven programs include: Second Step and Promoting Positive Thinking Strategies (see below).
- **Positive behavioral supports and social skills training:** Interventions that help students with emotional/behavioral disorders and social skills deficits have potential to significantly improve school-wide behavior and safety. Effective programs include: Stop and Think (Project ACHIEVE) and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS).
- **Early intervention:** Interventions that target low levels of inappropriate behavior before they escalate into violence can significantly reduce the need for harsh consequences later. Examples of proven practices include First Step to Success (kindergarten) and Positive Adolescent Choices Training (developed for African American youth).
- **In-school suspension,** when focused on continuing the curriculum, while therapeutically debriefing to identify and eliminate the root cause of an acting-out episode, provides an alternative to exclusion.
- **Adult mentors** work with students to help to improve self-concept and motivation to engage in appropriate behavior.
- **Teacher support teams** (or “Intervention Assistance Teams”) evaluate both class climate and student needs, and provide support and strategies to engage difficult students as a prevention effort.

Alternative Educational Settings Support Academic and Behavioral Success

Not all significant behavior problems can be adequately addressed through proactive behavioral support strategies, given the range of causal factors and more immediate concerns for student safety. However, removing students from needed educational services through suspension or expulsion is not the answer. Students who need to be removed from the regular education setting for even a short time should have access to appropriate instruction. The IDEA regulations specify an alternative to discontinuing the educational services of students with disabilities through implementation of Interim Alternative Educational Settings (IAES). An IAES is a *temporary, short-term* setting, and must: (1) enable the student with disabilities to continue to progress in the general curriculum, although in another setting, and to continue to receive those services and modifications that will enable the child to meet the goals set out in the IEP; and (2) include services and modifications to address the behavior (e.g., possession of a weapon or drugs, the threat of injurious behavior) and prevent its recurrence. IAES can only be implemented through the Individualized Education Team process, in certain circumstances, following procedures established by IDEA regulations (Bear, Quinn, & Burkholder, 2001).

Characteristics of effective alternative programs, identified through research, include:

- Low staff to student ratio with highly trained, culturally diverse staff
- Strong component of parent and community agency involvement
- Use of nontraditional instruction, adapted curriculum and flexible staff roles
- Sufficient funding and resources to implement program
- Sensitivity to individual and cultural differences
- Clear program and student goals
- Onsite counseling services
- Multidisciplinary case management
- Research-based interventions
- Formative and summative program evaluation

Resources

Bear, G., Quinn, M. & Burkholder, S. (2001). *Interim alternative educational settings for children with disabilities*. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

National Association of School Psychologists—www.nasponline.org (see fact sheets on Positive Behavior Supports; Zero Tolerance; IDEA and Discipline)

Safe and Responsive Schools Project—www.indiana.edu/~safeschl

Sugai, G. & Horner, R. (2001, June). *School climate and discipline: Going to scale* (The National Summit on the Shared Implementation of IDEA, Washington, D.C., June 2001). Available at: www.ideainfo.org

Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (University of Oregon) www.pbis.org

Effective Proactive Behavioral Support Programs

- Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (University of Oregon) www.pbis.org
- First Step to Success (Sopris West) www.sopriswest.com
- Positive Adolescent Choices Training (937) 775-4300
- Project ACHIEVE www.coedu.usf.edu/projectachieve
- Promoting Positive Thinking Strategies www.drp.org/paths.html
- Second Step Curriculum www.cfchildren.org

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