

PROACTIVE & INCLUSIVE SCHOOL DISCIPLINE STRATEGIES

dis-ci-pline

noun \ˈdi-sə-plən\

: control that is gained by requiring that rules or orders be obeyed and punishing bad behavior

: a way of behaving that shows a willingness to obey rules or orders

: behavior that is judged by how well it follows a set of rules or orders

In this Brief, we review the limitations of “traditional” obedience-oriented, punitive approaches to school discipline and describe a range of innovative alternatives focused on cultivating students’ self-regulation through positive behavior supports and interpersonal relationship building among students and between students and staff.

Traditional Approaches

School discipline has traditionally been conceived of as a set of rules and related consequences for undesired behaviors that is written and adjudicated by adult school governors, including school boards, district administrators,

and school building administrators. Traditional discipline practices were based on the assumption that punishment would reduce undesired behaviors, thereby improving school safety. School discipline tended to be reactionary and punitive—adults responded to undesired behaviors with punishments (e.g., detention, suspension) that excluded students from social and learning opportunities. These discipline strategies were generally considered ‘effective’ if they improved adults’ perceptions that the school was functional and orderly.

Why move away from traditional discipline philosophy and strategies?

Innovative school leaders have moved away from reactionary, punitive school discipline approaches because they generally do not work to reduce the problem behavior for which they are applied and, more often, they have unintended negative and counterproductive consequences for both disciplined students and their peers. Exclusionary, reactive discipline practices are associated with increases in problem behaviors, reductions in students’ sense of wellbeing and emotional safety, impairments in relationships with school adults,

What Works Briefs summarize state-of-the-art practices, strategies, and programs for improving school climate. Based on current scholarship in education, school psychology, and other related disciplines, each *What Works Brief* provides a number of practical recommendations for school staff, parents, and community members. *What Works Briefs* can be used separately to target specific issues, or together to address more complex, system-wide issues. All *What Works Briefs* are organized into three sections: Quick Wins: What Teachers & Adults Can Do Right Now; Universal Supports: School-wide Policies, Practices, & Programs; and, finally, Targeted Supports: Intensive Supports for At-Risk Youth.

and reduced school achievement.¹ Zero Tolerance—the philosophy, policy, and practice of responding to school infractions with automatic, exclusionary punishments regardless of context—is roundly criticized for its lack of evidence for improving school-, community-, or student-related school climate, safety, and academic outcomes; its spurring of schools’ reliance on the juvenile justice system; and its lack of consideration for the context of adolescent development.²

Although discipline practices demanded unconditional compliance from students, punishments for misbehavior were often inconsistently applied. In particular, a preponderance of research evidence has shown that punitive, reactionary discipline approaches are often unfairly applied to minority youth and youth with disabilities. Children and youth with disabilities, students who are learning English, and Black, Hispanic, and American Indian youth have been disproportionately suspended from school for minor infractions, such as dress code violations.

This systemic bias in school discipline practices contributes to the disproportionate number of minority youth, English Language Learners, and youth with disabilities who become disconnected from school over time, a cycle which ends all too often with drop out.³

What is innovative school discipline?

In response to the evidence demonstrating the adverse effects of punitive, reactionary discipline practices on

youth, practitioners and researchers have partnered to develop a number of innovative school discipline strategies. The philosophy undergirding these novel strategies represents a departure from traditional concepts of discipline—that youth must follow rules set by adults or face punishment—to one that accounts for the adolescent developmental need for autonomy and that supports youths’ interest in attending a school where they and their friends can learn and build friendships. Innovative strategies such as the ones described in this What Works Brief emphasize students’ active role in crafting and adjudicating the school rules not for the purpose of demanding obedience, but for building community norms that preserve learning time and support healthy, positive relationships among students and between students and staff. These school discipline strategies promote self-discipline by explicitly teaching students expected behaviors; motivating students to commit to school rules by noticing and encouraging students who follow them; and addressing underlying conditions that provoke students to break school rules by providing opportunities for feedback and pro-social skill building.

Because they reduce distractions in the learning environment and improve students’ sense of safety and belonging at school, proactive, inclusive, and restorative discipline practices are a hallmark of schools with positive climates.

1 For review, see American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force (2008).

2 Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera (2010); Losen (2011); Sullivan, Van Norman, & Klingbeil, (2014).

3 For review, see Rumberger (2011).



QUICK WINS: WHAT TEACHERS & OTHER ADULTS CAN DO RIGHT NOW

Quick Wins are strategies and activities that school adults can implement on their own, without coordinating across other individuals, school departments, or community agencies. Quick Wins are meant to provide school adults with inspiring ideas for immediate action.

The District Role: Use Data, Write Smart Policy & Identify School Leaders

- » Select school leaders who articulate an innovative philosophy on the purpose and practice of school discipline.
- » Reconsider Zero Tolerance policies. Zero tolerance policies and practices should be applied to only the most severe behaviors that risk the safety of students and staff. Seek to keep all students in active learning environments, even if those environments are separated from the general student population.
- » Regularly examine school discipline data with careful attention to disparities across subgroups (e.g., race, gender, disability, language learner status).
- » Include policy standards for involving Student Voice in school discipline policies (e.g., a representative group of students will be convened to provide input on any proposed new school discipline policy).
- » Focus on prevention. Consider what skills students need to acquire in order to reduce the need for undesired behavior. Adopt curricula and strategies designed to build and reinforce social and emotional skills. Build time into school days to allow teachers to provide instruction on social and emotional skills.
- » Identify district personnel responsible for helping school adults move from traditional discipline philosophies and practices to innovative ones. Teachers need instruction and coaching in order to make sustainable changes to classroom management practices.
- » Identify funds and resources needed to implement effective, innovative discipline practices, including funds for professional development and ongoing coaching.
- » Train staff in principles and procedures of Threat Assessment.

School Leader Role: Communicate, Motivate & Empower

- » Communicate clearly and regularly a vision for innovative discipline practices.
- » Enlist all members of the school community, including staff, students, and families, in the process of writing just and equitable school rules.
- » Build a team of motivated students and school adults to review discipline-related data; critically examine school discipline policies; and provide recommendations for improvement that are consistent with an innovative vision.
- » Administer consequences for infractions fairly and consistently.
- » Carefully log all infractions into student information systems software to ensure that data represent a clear and accurate vision of how discipline is administered in the school (i.e., by student demographics (gender, ethnicity, disability, language learner status), by teacher, and by location).
- » Prioritize innovative behavior management practices as a topic for staff professional development.
- » Observe teachers and school staff regularly and systematically to ensure that innovative behavior management practices are being applied as intended. Provide feedback immediately and add additional supports (e.g., coaching) as needed.

The Teacher Role: Build Trust, Establish Community, & Engage Students

- » Engage students in developing ‘classroom norms.’ Explain that norms are ways that we agree to behave in a group. Classroom norms help ensure that everyone feels like the classroom is a safe place to learn and to build friendships.
- » Develop ‘classroom agreements’ by asking students what they think other members of the classroom community, including you the instructor and they the students, should do when an established classroom norm is broken. Encourage students to think of breaks in norms as opportunities for learning.
- » After classroom norms are developed, enforce these agreements every time a norm is broken. This gives students the impression that you are fair and consistent and lays the foundation for trust.
- » Avoid reprimanding students in public. Find ways to talk with students privately about their behavior, thinking carefully about what skills (e.g., controlling anger; managing conflict) the student may need help building.
- » Give the benefit of the doubt to students by listening carefully and avoiding reactionary impulses.
- » Allow students to reflect on their behavior and articulate better ways they might have handled a conflict.
- » Help students ‘restore’ the community by offering opportunities for repairing harm (e.g., apologizing, repairing or replacing property).
- » Send postcards home or call parents when students make exceptional contributions to the classroom community.
- » When problem behaviors arise, inquire in a professional appropriate way about challenges students may be experiencing outside of school. Knowing about your students’ lives helps you understand their behavior in your classroom.
- » Provide authentic praise to students for exceptional contributions to the classroom social and physical environment.
- » Establishing trusting, warm relationships is paramount. For additional ideas on building relationships with youth, review *What Works Brief #1: Caring Relationships and High Expectations*.
- » Provide authentic opportunities for students to contribute to the school environment, thereby decreasing the need to behave in counter–normative ways. For additional ideas, review *What Works Brief #2: Opportunities for Meaningful Participation*.



UNIVERSAL SUPPORTS: DISTRICT– & SCHOOL–WIDE POLICIES & PROGRAMS

Universal supports for innovative school discipline target the whole student population, rather than any single at-risk group or individual. Because they generally require more planning across people, programs, or communities, universal supports for school discipline may take longer to implement than Quick Wins.

School-wide Positive Behavior Supports

Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support (SWPBS) is an increasingly popular framework for reducing disruptive behavior and increasing positive, prosocial behavior in youth. Key elements of the SWPBS framework include ongoing universal screening and use of discipline-related data to measure key student outcomes (i.e., office referral rates, suspensions, and academic performance indicators); the implementation of a continuum of evidence-based social and emotional, behavioral, and academic programs and interventions to prevent escalation in undesired behaviors; and improving school organizational systems (i.e., team-driven decision making; use of student discipline tracking software) to support the reduced need for punitive discipline approaches.

The US Office of Special Education Programs supports a national technical assistance center for Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), currently the most prevalent positive behavior supports framework, that hosts a variety of resources to support the implementation of PBIS. www.pbis.org

Restorative Justice in Schools

Restorative Justice in Schools (RjIS), also referred to as Restorative Practices, refers to multi-tiered classroom and school-based strategies that emphasize the importance of the relational needs of the community in fostering student accountability for behavior (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). RjIS strategies are based on the premise that individuals and/or groups in conflict benefit from working together to find resolutions and repair the resultant damage caused to their relationship. RjIS programs focus on the relationship between the perpetrator of the crime (i.e., incident requiring disciplinary strategy) and members of the school community, including victims, bystanders, and their families. Replacing reactionary, punitive discipline practices with RjIS contributes to school climate in a variety of ways, including: involvement of all parties in conflict resolution through a fair process; a focus on repairing relationships and trust, rather than on retribution or punishment; and a focus on sharing views and experiences and developing empathy for others in the school community (McClusky, et al., 2008). Several high quality research studies are underway to examine the effects of implementing RjIS, and promising evidence suggests RjIS implementation reduces suspensions and exclusionary punishments.

Key RjIS Resources:

- » *Restorative Practices: Fostering Healthy Relationships & Promoting Positive Discipline in Schools: A Guide for Educators* | The Advancement Project | Download: www.advancementproject.org/resources/entry/restorative-practices-fostering-healthy-relationships-promoting-positive-di
- » *Implementing Restorative Justice: A Guide For Schools* | Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority | Download: www.icjia.state.il.us/public/pdf/BARJ/SCHOOL%20BARJ%20GUIDEBOOK.pdf
- » *Handbook of Restorative Justice Programs* | The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime | Download: www.unodc.org/pdf/criminal_justice/06-56290_Ebook.pdf

School-wide Classroom Management Practices

Complementing school-wide discipline practices are comprehensive approaches to classroom management. School-adopted classroom management practices provide common methods for structuring the classroom environment to prevent behavior issues and common expectations for effectively managing challenging student behaviors when they arise. Using a standard protocol for coaching—including modeling, observation, and feedback—helps teachers surmount student behavior-related issues that might otherwise undermine job satisfaction. What is more, expectations for the use of common classroom management practices help reduce inconsistencies in the use of office discipline referrals across teachers.

Key Classroom Management Resources:

- » Transformative Classroom Management | www.transformativeclassroom.com
- » Discipline in the Secondary Classroom, Safe and Civil Schools | www.safeandcivilschools.com

Promoting Positive School Climates and Culture

All three of these approaches—School-wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, Restorative Justice in Schools, and School-wide Classroom Management Practices—will be more effective when implemented as part of a comprehensive school-wide commitment to fostering a safe and developmentally-supportive school climate and culture, as described in other What Works Briefs.

SINGLE SCHOOL CULTURE (SSC) provides a framework, including standardized processes and procedures, for organizing a school around shared norms and expectations and integrating innovative discipline approaches into a common strategy for overall school improvement. SSC provides protocols and procedures for writing behavior expectations as a school team, and enforcing those expectations consistently across classrooms and other shared spaces. SSC's process produces consistency in administrator and teacher behavior expectations and consequences, thereby improving the predictability of the school environment for students. www.palmbeachschools.org/ssci/WhatIsSSC.asp



TARGETED SUPPORTS: INTENSIVE SUPPORTS FOR AT-RISK YOUTH

Targeted supports include those resources that are provided to meet the specific needs of students who have not responded to universal supports. In the case of school discipline, this refers to students whose behavior has escalated beyond what can reasonably be handled in the classroom or by day-to-day, school-wide strategies.

YOUTH COURTS used in school settings are intended to empower youth to solve problems occurring within their school communities by holding their peers accountable for behavior that interferes with learning and safety. Youth Courts may be used as natural extensions of the school discipline continuum, wherein youth are entrusted with all or most elements of the discipline process, typically for more minor offenses made by first time offenders. Several models for Youth Courts exist; some give all roles to students (e.g., judge, lawyer, jury) while others provide final ‘sentencing’ responsibilities to school adults. ‘Sentences’ are generally restorative in nature, and may involve community service, oral or written apologies, or specific skill-building education requirements.

Key Youth Court Resources:

- » National Youth Court Guidelines | www.youthcourt.net/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/guidelines.pdf

- » National Association of Youth Courts | www.youthcourt.net

THREAT ASSESSMENT is a set of principles and procedures whereby schools determine the credibility and seriousness of a threat of harm or violence. Threat Assessment is typically conducted by a trained team of professionals, often including administrators, members of school and local mental health professionals, law enforcement personnel, and social services providers. Implementing a well-organized Threat Assessment process helps reduce the need for Zero Tolerance policies that do not account for context, such as mitigating circumstances or personal history.

Key Threat Assessment Resources:

- » Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates | United States Secret Service & United States Department of Education | www.secretservice.gov/ntac/ssi_guide.pdf
- » National Association of School Psychologists PREPaRE Training | School Crisis Prevention and Intervention Training | www.nasponline.org/prepare

ADDITIONAL HIGH-QUALITY RESOURCES

- » National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, US Department of Education | safesupportivelearning.ed.gov
- » Supportive School Discipline Webinar Series | Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention State Training and Technical Assistance Center | juvenilejustice-tta.org/events/ssdWebinarSeries
- » School Climate and Discipline Guidance Package, US Department of Education | ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/index.html
- » The School Discipline Consensus Report: Strategies from the Field to Keep Students Engaged in School and Out of the Juvenile Justice System: | The Council of State Governments Justice Center | csgjusticecenter.org
- » The Climate Connection Toolkit (2nd Edition) | California Safe and Supportive Schools | californiaS3.wested.org/resources/ClimateConnectionToolkit_2ndedition.pdf
- » The California Healthy Kids Center website (www.californiahealthykids.org) maintains a lending library with a number of high-quality school discipline materials, including: www.californiahealthykids.org/product/S84

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