Effective School Discipline Policy and Practice: Supporting Student Learning

Effective school discipline is critical to promoting students’ successful learning and well-being. Effective practices ensure the safety and dignity of all 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. Specifically, effective school discipline:

- is viewed within the context of a learning opportunity and seeks to teach and reinforce positive behaviors to replace negative behaviors;
- is clear, consistent, and equitably applied to all students;
- employs culturally competent practices;
- safeguards the well-being of all students and staff;
- keeps students in school and out of the juvenile justice system; and
- incorporates family involvement.

In contrast, purely punitive “get tough” approaches such as zero tolerance policies do not work. They simply suppress unwanted behavior temporarily while increasing negative consequences, such as reduced perceptions of safety and connectedness among students and the perpetuation of the school-to-prison pipeline. While the robust research on the negative effects of overly harsh discipline has grown exponentially in recent years, it has been known for decades.\(^1\)

One evidence-based approach that has demonstrated broad success in many different school contexts across the country is positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS). The PBIS approach operates within a multitiered system of supports (MTSS) framework that encompasses universal prevention and skills building, early identification and intervention, and targeted supports for learning and behavioral concerns. This approach has proven instrumental in enabling schools to shift from ineffective punitive discipline to more effective positive discipline that functions in concert with efforts to support students’ mental health and promote positive school climate and safety.

Fair and Consistent Discipline

- Consistent enforcement of school discipline and the availability of caring adults are associated with less bullying and victimization, suggesting that discipline practices should not be polarized into a “get tough” versus “give support” debate because both contribute to adolescents’ healthy functioning.\(^2\)

- Students who perceive greater fairness and clarity of rules in their schools exhibit less delinquent behavior and experience less student victimization.\(^3,4\)
Students view teachers as reacting to classroom misbehavior by increasing coercive discipline, which inhibits the development of responsibility in students. More school rules and higher perceived strictness predict more disruptive behavior in school—not less, and more severe punishments generate defiance among certain youth.

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

- School-wide behavior management that is implemented by supportive leadership and dedicated and collegial staff can help minimize the risks for youth delinquency.
- Positive behavioral interventions and supports have been shown to significantly reduce student suspensions, office discipline referrals, tardiness, unexcused absences, bullying, and feelings of rejection among students, while improving academic performance.
- School-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports are associated with more equitable discipline practices among students from all racial and ethnic backgrounds.
- The more family and community involvement activities are implemented, the fewer students are disciplined by being sent to principals’ offices or given detention or in-school suspension. Thus, creating more connections and greater cooperation among the school, family, and community contexts helps schools to improve student behavior and school discipline.

Social and Emotional Development

- Students who participate in school-based social and emotional learning programs show significant improvement in social and emotional skills, caring attitudes, and positive social behaviors, and a decline in disruptive behavior and emotional distress.
- Social and emotional learning programs have significant preventive effects on rates of aggression, social competence, and academic engagement in the elementary school years.

School-Based Mental Health Services

- School-based mental health services are integral to students’ success because mental health directly affects children’s learning and development.
- School-based mental health services in elementary schools have been found to reduce special education referrals and improve aspects of the school climate.
- Reduced absences, discipline referrals, and conduct problems are evident in children with severe emotional and behavioral difficulties when school-based mental health services are available.

School-Employed Specialized Instructional Support Personnel

- More support personnel are needed to support teachers, who cite student discipline problems, lack of student motivation, and issues with workplace conditions or the administration as reasons for leaving the profession—issues that specialized instructional support personnel are trained to address.
- School psychologists work with teachers and administrators to collect and analyze data on risk and protective factors related to student outcomes, and there is evidence that addressing these factors in schools promotes children’s well-being and resilience.
Data from nearly 500 studies indicate that the impact of promotion and prevention interventions is at least two to three times higher when programs are carefully implemented by qualified personnel who have expert knowledge of the relevant issues being addressed.  

Zero Tolerance Policies

- Zero tolerance policies strengthen the link between schools and prisons, and they negatively impact a disproportionately large number of minority students.
- Empirical evidence has not shown zero tolerance policies to be effective in reducing violence or promoting learning. In fact, they can inhibit academic achievement and increase problem behaviors and dropout rates among middle and secondary school students.
- Zero tolerance policies ignore adolescents’ lapses in judgment—a normal part of their development, potentially resulting in more severe punishment than is warranted and exacerbating the normal challenges of adolescence.

Suspension, Expulsion, and Office Disciplinary Referrals

- Student discipline is increasingly viewed by American schools as a crime control issue, with many states criminalizing student misbehavior and referring students to the juvenile justice system for infractions that were once handled in the schools.
- In Texas, more than 275,000 nontraffic tickets are issued to juveniles each year, the vast majority for common school-related misbehavior. And tens of thousands of Texas students have been placed at least once in juvenile justice alternative education programs.
- Suspension and expulsion are often administered unfairly and they increase the likelihood of students’ poor academic performance and dropping out of school, while having no measurable deterrent effect or academic benefit. Even worse, there is a direct link between suspension and expulsion and the likelihood of being sentenced to prison.
- More than 3,328,000 students were suspended and more than 102,000 expelled from public elementary and secondary schools in 2006. Overall, more than 29% of all public school students in grades 9–12 in 2007 had ever been suspended or expelled.
- Referring students to the juvenile justice system can actually increase their involvement in serious delinquency.
- Disciplinary actions are harsher and employed more frequently with minority students. In 2007, 49% of Black students and 27% of Hispanic students were suspended or expelled, compared to 15% of White students. Black students are also more than twice as likely in elementary school and nearly four times as likely in middle school to be referred to the principal’s office for problem behaviors.

ENDNOTES


Ibid.


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