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RECALIBRATING CLIMATE, CULTURE, AND DISCIPLINE

To Be Effective, You May Have to Change “Gears”

By Carol Miller Lieber and Michele Tisiere

Students, teachers, administrators, and communities all over the country are seeking to create innovative plans for reducing discipline problems in schools. With secondary school principals playing leading roles, these stakeholders are seeking alternatives to ineffective and inequitable disciplinary policies and practices that result in the use, overuse, and disproportional use of punitive exclusionary sanctions that adversely impact real students.

Since the problems surrounding school discipline have a long and protracted history, secondary schools need to recalibrate how they address discipline and create models that are respectful, fair, accountable, restorative, and viable.

Climate, Culture, and Discipline

To tackle the discipline problem, we must recognize that schoolwide discipline and student support live within the larger domain of school climate and culture. School “climate” is related to the collective perceptions, mood, and morale of the staff and students; it reflects the degree to which the learning environment feels safe, supportive, respectful, and disciplined. School “culture” permeates schoolwide discipline and student support systems because it incorporates the beliefs, values, norms, and shared practices that schools communicate. In a school culture where a schoolwide discipline system is dysfunctional, it is challenging to harness the good will of staff, students, and families to create a school climate that feels stable and cohesive, inspiring and engaging, and welcoming and affirming.

Qualities of an Effective Discipline Model

Recalibrating a schoolwide discipline model to secure every student’s right to an education in a safe and caring community takes relentless commitment from principals, school leaders, teachers, staff, and parents. Leaders who embed the five essential qualities into their discipline and student support programs (respectful, fair, accountable, restorative, viable) counter the list of complaints and grievances that surround more traditional models of school discipline. Many schools capture some of these qualities in their discipline policies and practices, but most schools do not capture them all, nor do they make all five of these qualities transparent to everyone in the school community.

One principal who is working relentlessly to recalibrate her school’s approach to discipline is Maiysha Etienne of IS 217 School of Performing Arts in the Bronx, NY. She shared her experience: “Our work this year made us realize that it is not enough to have a guided discipline plan articulated on paper. Instead, it must be aligned to our school mission, and our staff has to commit to its consistent implementation. This year, teachers have seen firsthand the benefits of restorative practices and approaches and have shared these practices as colleagues. We have also seen a significant decrease in the number of students referred to the dean and suspended.”

The Gears That Make the Model Work

Efforts to improve discipline must be implemented at the whole school and classroom levels. A school’s efforts to improve schoolwide discipline and student support are dependent on efforts to implement parallel policies and practices in classrooms. What people see, hear, and do in the larger school community must be aligned with what people see, hear, and do in the classroom. We have identified eight system components and important shifts that help schools recalibrate a schoolwide discipline and student support model in ways to maximize students’ success in school; foster students’ academic, social, and emotional development; and maximize adult effectiveness in supporting all students. We call the system components “gears.” Each gear is an essential component of the whole model, and all of the gears are interdependent.

1. School Vision

When working with principals and administrative leadership teams, we often ask: To what extent do your school’s vision, mission, beliefs, and values provide direction for your schoolwide discipline and student support model? How do your goals for discipline align with your vision? A foundational step for any school looking to improve upon its discipline practices is to start by examining and articulating beliefs around discipline and ensuring that disciplinary practices are aligned with the school vision.

2. Code of Conduct

One of the three key principles in the federal guidance for improving school climate and discipline centers on the development of a “schoolwide discipline policy that sets high expectations for behavior; provides clear, developmentally appropriate, and proportional consequences for misbehavior; and uses disciplinary incidents to help students learn from their mistakes, improve their behavior, and meet high expectations.” (U.S. Department of Education, 2014, p. 3) When there are

MAKING IT WORK: TIPS FOR RECALIBRATING SCHOOLWIDE DISCIPLINE

- Identify a school-climate-discipline team that oversees the work over a yearlong process.
- Survey faculty to identify urgent issues and recommendations.
- Agree on the goals for discipline and student support.
- Use disaggregated data to assess the effectiveness of current policies, structures, and practices intended to improve student behavior.
- Identify what is ineffective.
- Use the eight “gears” as a checklist for developing and implementing specific changes.
- Use an inclusive process to discuss a rationale for change and implications for all staff.
- Provide training for administrators, teachers, and student support staff to implement shifts in practices.
- Create a thoughtful “launch” plan for staff, students, and parents to understand your recalibrated model of discipline and student support.

gaps in clarity and content in district codes, schools need to ensure that their policy handbooks include goals for discipline; student, parent, and staff rights and responsibilities; and consequences and interventions that are aligned with clear descriptors of behavior concerns and violations.

3. Essential Teams

Our work in schools has revealed the necessity for establishing four distinct teams that drive the work involved in implementing effective policies and practices related to discipline and student support. They are 1) the administrative team; 2) the school climate-discipline team; 3) the student support team; and 4) the school (or grade level) intervention team. Each team has clearly delineated roles and responsibilities and uses high-structure protocols to organize and manage the work of the team.

4. The Right Data

Collecting, disaggregating, analyzing, and using an identified set of data is an essential step to improving school climate, assigning the right consequences and delivering the right interventions, and ultimately improving students' overall behavior and academic performance. Data must also be integrated in ways that capture a holistic portrait of each student with the capacity to generate weekly individual student reports. Equally important is making data transparent and accessible, with particular attention to indicators that reveal overuse of exclusionary sanctions and disproportionality among various student groups.

5. Schoolwide Initiatives

An effective discipline and student support model focuses more time and effort on promotion and prevention measures than it does on reactive responses to discipline incidents. Schoolwide initiatives that promote activities and practices that increase student voice; maintain a safe, orderly, and attractive physical environment; and foster caring and civil communication among and between adults and young people are critical to the model.

6. Parents and Adult Allies as Partners

Schools, especially middle and high schools, need to become more proactive and more strategic in their efforts to engage parents in supporting students' academic progress, their health and well-being, and their aspirations for the future. Administrators, school staff, and even parents themselves vastly underestimate the power of parental influence on students' performance in school and their postsecondary aspirations.

7. Classroom Practice

Teacher practices impact school climate and culture and play a critical role in schoolwide discipline. This gear highlights the importance of all teachers implementing some core universal classroom practices that align with the school's goals for discipline, create orderly and engaging classrooms, support students to develop greater self-discipline, prevent most discipline problems, and use restorative processes to intervene when behavior concerns persist.

8. Interventions and Case Management

A notable change in the federal guidance creates a much stronger push for schools to develop more articulated supports and interventions and increase the numbers and the capacity of school-based behavior and mental health specialists to meet the needs of students who are experiencing academic, behavioral, and mental health challenges. This requires a comprehensive case management structure that enables schools to identify students at-risk, intervene early, provide long-term interventions when needed, and monitor students' progress regularly.

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