



## Education

# When punishment doesn't work, a school changes course

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This is the first of three columns about the benefits of improving disciplinary practices.

When Elizabeth Legault first became principal, Calcutt Middle School, in Central Falls, was a miserable place for teaching and learning. Kids' misbehavior was out of control. Fights erupted. Fed-up teachers threw students out of class so often, long lines snaked outside the principal's and assistant principal's doors. The miscreants in those lines, waiting to be punished for their classroom behavior, often got into it with one another, compounding their original offense with yet another hallway fight.

Calcutt averaged about 1,000 suspensions every year, for a student body of 800-plus students.

Suspended students often went home, got their bikes and came back. They'd ride up and down the sidewalks outside, hollering for their friends to come to the windows to admire their freedom. It was cool to be bad. Which only infuriated the teachers more.

Legault says, "When I first came, we always anticipated something bad would happen any minute. The place was like a Crock-Pot with sweat dripping down its sides, always cooking, always hot, hot, hot."

Like many schools, Calcutt's philosophy about disciplining bad behavior relied on the assumption that adults can punish a child into compliance with the rules. Actually, punishment does not improve behavior, because it does not cultivate cooperation or respect. Trying to rule over kids by threatening them with a nasty consequence invites rebellion and resistance. Punishment might work as a last resort. But in general, its costs outweigh the benefits.

So Calcutt was caught in a cycle of retributive discipline. Adults punish the kids. Kids found obnoxious ways to punish the adults. And so it went. Miserably.

Furthermore, the city of Central Falls is one square mile of concentrated poverty. The housing stock hasn't changed, but the population continues to grow, with low-income families doubling and tripling up in tenement apartments to share Rhode Island's high rents. Many residents are new immigrants. Others are native-born but with limited education and dim prospects for economic stability.

These parents can't always stay with a child after bringing him home when he's suspended from school. And much as everyone wishes parents would take better care of their kids, many Central Falls families lack the skills, time or authority to discipline the child themselves. They, too, need help. And one could argue that the children already feel punished by life's circumstances. So Calcutt's harsh discipline policies only added insult to injury, confirming, if anything, how little the school cared for the kids. The kids fought back hard.

I asked Dr. Harsh Trivedi, Bradley Hospital's director of adolescent services, what he thought about the powers of punishment. He said, "Especially with middle-school children, the adults have to help them understand why we're concerned with their behavior. Most of the time schools end up over-using consequences [punishments] because consequences are easier than dealing with the behavior. It takes time to understand the child, what skills are lacking, and how to help them get the skills they need. People often mistake a child's behavior as 'he did it to spite me,' or 'he's being mean.' Actually, the kids we see don't know what are appropriate behaviors. They don't have appropriate boundaries. So, we ask, is it a social skill they don't have? Or are they having trouble regulating their feelings?"

Ah, but is it the school's job to consider these questions? School staff often resent that kids increasingly come to them with no manners, little respect for authority, and sometimes atrocious social habits.

"But," as Legault says simply, "suspension doesn't work; detention doesn't work; punishment doesn't work. When I was a kid, I was never punished. My parents were both teachers. I was redirected." In other words, she was either distracted with something engagingly productive to do, or taught how to behave in acceptable ways, as Dr. Trivedi suggests.

Legault says, "I believe that if you give respect, you get respect."

Mutual respect is fine in theory. But if students aren't punished, the adults can feel they're being asked to spoil the kids, letting them get away with misbehavior.

Legault told the staff, "We own these students. They're ours, and they will always be our clients. They can't learn if they're not in school.

We have to keep them in school.”

As one of several strategies to win the teachers’ trust, Legault began relieving teachers of discipline issues altogether. Non-teaching staff remove disruptive kids immediately on request of the teacher. Teaching and learning continue. Teachers had more opportunity to be successful.

Mind you, Legault firmly believes that teachers must model the behavior they expect from the students. “If a teacher is not organized, the students model disorganization. We’ve found that the best discipline is teachers with effective lessons that are well-organized. First thing in the morning, our teachers have their lesson plans on the board. The students know exactly what to expect.”

With classrooms more focused on teaching and learning, Calcutt’s assessments scores have been consistently rising.

But what happens when the child is removed from class? Are there no consequences for jerky behavior? During the next two weeks we’ll examine how Calcutt reengineered two commonly used punishments into opportunities to help kids manage their own behavior.

Now Calcutt is a pleasant and productive place for teaching and learning. Kids no longer fight in the long, white hallways but walk to their next class in a manageable burble of giggles, chit-chat and pre-teen energy.

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