



Education



Education Watch: Columnist Julia Steiny discusses a school that transformed the way it handled student disciplinary problems

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This is the second in a series of three columns about the benefits of improving disciplinary practices.

When Georgeann Lewis, a behavior specialist, came to Calcutt Middle School nine years ago, the place was a disciplinary nightmare. Fights broke out in the hallways. Teachers were angry. Students were angry. Lewis rolls her eyes and says, "It was pure chaos."

Through a grant, the Central Falls School Department began hiring behavior specialists from Gateway Healthcare. The two at Calcutt came originally to calm the kids' volatile behavior at the troubled school. They're trained to handle emotional outbursts and teach kids how to behave appropriately and manage their feelings.

But back when Lewis first arrived, the school's administrators wanted her only to get disruptive kids out of the classrooms and escort them to the principal's office. That was all.

"They were very punishment-oriented," she says. "The whole system was reactive and a colossal waste of time. We just cleaned up messes, which is not an effective discipline strategy. Kids were being suspended from school for not being prepared in class, for not working, for being disrespectful. Teachers would say: 'This is my class; you're 5 minutes late. Get out.' They could have said: 'Nice to see you; you owe me 5 minutes of class time. Pay me back after school today.' No, at that time, everyone wanted the kid punished. 'I want him to have detention. I want his mother called. I want, I want, I want....' It was a miserable place to be."

Then, four year ago, the new principal, Elizabeth Legault, took Calcutt's helm, knowing she badly needed to raise the school's dismal test scores. She asked Lewis to help her redesign the discipline policies so kids would actually want to be in school. Neither woman believes you can punish a kid into staying in school or into behaving appropriately.

Their first target was the in-school suspension program. In most schools, in-school suspension is a room, sometimes called the "focus" room, where bad kids get parked. They sit in social ostracism, expected to do school work, but usually they are just bored. At least it's better than out-of-school suspension, which gives the kid a vacation.

At Calcutt, this room became the "In-school Student Support" (ISS) center.

After the classroom teacher has exhausted his tricks for reengaging students, he calls the office on an intercom and quickly one of the behavior specialists shows up. Once in the ISS room, a certified teacher tutors the kids through assignments, and helps them complete academic work. When kids don't have work in hand from the classroom teacher, the ISS teacher has grade-appropriate lessons for them. ISS is a quiet room, focused exclusively on academics.

Interestingly, when I was in Calcutt's office, a teacher called to say that so-and-so wanted to speak to Miss Lewis. Sometimes kids are just having a wiggly day and need a place to cool off or pull themselves back together. ISS is not punishment, so any kid can get a little attention from Lewis and then chill quietly and get academic help in ISS.

It's on the trip from the classroom to ISS that Lewis works her magic with disruptive or troubled kids. They start with a little walk, and sometimes end up in the library or her office for a more extended talk. Kids always need to vent first. But when the storm has passed, the two of them examine the misbehavior and brainstorm about what other choices were available. Lewis is all about teaching kids how to get what they want for themselves by making good choices.

She says, “Most of the stuff I deal with is normal, typical pre-teen drama. They don’t want to do what they were asked to do. They get frustrated and start swearing. We don’t tolerate swearing, so together we problem-solve about what else they could have done.” When the child is clear about what she should do next time — or has gotten attention for the troubling problem — she goes to ISS.

Sometimes Calcutt’s low-income, uneducated families just don’t know how to teach their kids the values and behaviors that will help them be successful at school. Lewis says, “Parents tell their son or daughter that if someone disrespects them, they have to stand up for themselves. So they fight. I say, OK, but here in school we do it differently, and that has to be the rule.”

Far too often, schools give students and parents thick discipline handbooks, filled with rules that justify the school’s right to punish specific behaviors. But the reasons for the sometimes senseless rules are not explained to the kids. Nor does the school teach the expected behaviors to those who haven’t mastered them.

Central Falls’ Supt. Fran Gallo says, “Teaching students how to interact more effectively with each other and their teachers goes a long way toward improving teaching and learning. And then you get great PR in the neighborhood because the parents are thrilled with their children’s improved behavior.”

Not every teacher is completely sold. Alan Cabral, a 33-year veteran and reading teacher, says, “I’m not that happy about the amount of time the kids spend in the ISS. The consequences obviously aren’t strong enough, because they’re not really changing the behavior. We should see more permanent changes in the kids. But,” he concedes, “the response time is excellent. They take the kids immediately. So I’ll take that small victory, because it is so much easier to teach the class.”

Those small victories are adding up. Calcutt’s attendance rate is now 97 percent, among the highest in the state. Kids want to come to school. Suspensions went from 1,000 per year to about 25, and those suspensions are largely for a handful of students with some really troubling behaviors. Truancy Court referrals have plummeted. During Legault’s tenure, the percentage of students reading below grade level has fallen from 67 to 42. And Calcutt has had healthy increases in its state test scores for the last three years.

Even so, last year the school leaders decided the improved ISS wasn’t enough. Teachers were still having major problems with kids cutting class and not doing their work. So Calcutt reengineered afterschool detention too. Next week we’ll see what that looks like.

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