



Education



Education watch: Afterschool detention can be a chance to learn better behavior

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

Six boys schlep into a second-floor classroom at Calcutt Middle School for what would have been afterschool detention in any other school. At Calcutt, it's afterschool re-engagement.

The boys are all mumbling complaints, but young Edwin grouses his head off. "This is like the Training School [a state prison for youths]. You have no right. This is really stupid."

Georgeann Lewis, the school's behavior specialist who runs this program, asks, "What's your name?"

Edwin, a very funny kid, flashed her a poisonously dirty look.

Stifling a laugh, Lewis cajoles, "Humor me. Not everyone in the room knows who you are."

Edwin spits out his name.

"Thank you," chirps Lewis, "now get rid of the coat and the complaints." Edwin turns his griping down, but not off. The boys get settled.

Only one of the boys has been to re-engagement before. He skipped his first detention. You skip one — you automatically get two.

Most secondary schools use afterschool detention as one of several ways to punish misbehavior. If a student gets detention, he or she has to stay after school, usually for a couple of hours, sitting in silence with a book or doing homework. The day of detention, he or she can't play afterschool sports, hang with friends or go to drama-club rehearsal.

"Bad" kids who get a lot of detention don't bother with sports or drama because they'll get thrown out of the activity for repeatedly failing to show up for practice or rehearsal.

In the past, Calcutt used standard punishments for misbehavior, such as detention and in-school suspension. But the more its low-income, Central Falls students got punished, the more they bucked the rules. The school had become a war zone. Teaching and learning took a back seat to dealing with discipline.

Then four years ago, the new principal, Elizabeth Legault, decided the school would no longer punish kids for misbehavior. She and her staff changed the discipline practices so that the responses to all wrong-doing are mandatory opportunities to learn better social and emotional skills. For example, in-school suspension became in-school support.

But a few problems remained intractably persistent — mainly cutting class and blowing off required work. So this year the school turned afterschool detention into a two-hour lesson, with reading and writing assignments, that teach social and emotional skills.

Lewis says, "My mantra is that a mistake is an opportunity to learn. I throw the academics into re-engagement because that's what we're doing here at school."

Much as in an Alcoholics Anonymous group, each kid introduced himself and stated his offense. These boys mumbled their offenses so inaudibly, they all had to repeat them at least once. In the course of the confessions, Lewis realized that three of the boys are friends who get into trouble together. This time they ganged up and "disrespected" a certain teacher, which I assume meant they had insulted her.

Lewis gave a mini-lesson on making your own choices and resisting group-think, especially when the group is having a stupid idea.

The boys were surprisingly attentive and nice to Lewis. She was an ace at joshing and play-fighting with this age group. Her recurring theme was “You give respect, you’ll get respect.”

With each boy she brainstormed how to prevent future afterschool re-engagements. One sixth-grader was kicked out of class when, for the umpteenth time, he didn’t have his homework. With comic exasperation, Lewis asked how he might fix that. “Do the work,” was the wide-eyed concession. “Do you think you can do that?” Lewis asked. The boy nodded and seemed contrite. “Brilliant. Good idea. Let me know how it works out.”

After working on the specific offenses, she got the boys to help her define the words “reputation” and “character.” When they were done, she made her point with an example:

“Edwin’s character is that he runs fast, is a really good football player, and he’s very, very funny.”

At this happy description of himself, Edwin puffed up and performed a little victory dance in his seat. We all laughed.

Lewis held out her two hands, weighing each description. “His reputation, however, is that he’s a pain in the butt, and he doesn’t do his school work. Take a look at that. It sounds like two completely different kids. People know your reputation before they know your character. How do you want to be known?”

The kids got that dazed look of pre-teens trying to process important information.

The boys then answered three questions in writing, including, “What do you struggle with?” Lewis will read them later for clues as to what might be going on with each boy.

Then she spent the final hour reading them a terrific memoir about bullying, called *Rowing the Bus*, by Paul Logan. Together they stopped often to discuss the behavior of the characters in the story. At least for me, the time flew.

As she dismissed them, one boy asked if he could come back. Lewis smiled and promised to connect with him soon, but hopefully not in re-engagement. Lewis didn’t consider it counter-productive that he’d like to come back. She was not trying to make them hate re-engagement, and it was great that they wanted to discuss their behavior. However, she was making a mental note that he and another boy seemed quite bright and probably needed more challenge, a subject she’ll take up with their teachers.

Explicitly teaching kids how to behave is a huge favor to them and everyone around them. In return, the kids reward Calcutt with high attendance, no problem with graffiti, upward-trending test scores, and a strong sense of school pride.

Calcutt is doing a bang-up job of preparing their inner-city kids for success.

Punishment does not prepare any kid for success.

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