

BACK TO CLASS

A new approach to discipline referrals keeps students (and principals) in the classroom

Kurt Hatch

Director of Principal Support, Middle Level Programs, and Diversity & Equity, AWSP

PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

Creating a Culture, Ensuring School Safety, Improving Instruction, Closing the Gap

I had many sleepless nights trying to puzzle-out which first steps would be most helpful for the school I was soon to take over. I'd been hired three weeks prior to the start of the school year to lead an 800-student, Title I elementary. A complex setting with a large developmentally delayed preschool, all-day kindergarten, ELL and deaf education programs. Like all schools, it needed a principal who was present, accessible and visible in classrooms.

In order to lead the culture, systems and learning, it's critical to be in classrooms observing and supporting excellent instruction and developing relationships with students and staff. However, an average of 22 major office discipline referrals (ODRs) per day on record for the previous three years meant there was a 100 percent chance of getting bogged down in behavior.

It was customary for students to collectively spend hundreds of hours per year out of class and in, you guessed it, the principal's office. I did not want students (or myself) in the office throughout the day, knowing the best place for all of us to be is in classrooms. So, in addition to launching the first phase of an equity-centered system-change, I selected two specific strategies to implement.



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The result was a reduction in ODRs to an average of less than two per day and the discontinued use of suspensions.

PBIS: AN ALL-IN APPROACH

The equity-centered system-change is something principals are increasingly becoming familiar with and is known as Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). Successful implementation of MTSS requires a multi-year commitment, so as a staff, we began the first phase of the Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS) Tier I model right away.

Reaping the full benefits of PBIS requires an all-in approach. All staff, all day, every day. Following the well-articulated, prescribed implementation protocol for PBIS is critical. In order to deeply impact the culture, systems and learning of a school, you cannot do “PBIS lite.” And, when it comes to an equity-centered approach to leading a school system, PBIS is one of the best first steps.

GETTING STRATEGIC

The implementation of PBIS has an immediate, positive impact on a system. However, I needed strategies to also “stop the bleeding” in terms of the sheer number of daily ODRs. The strategies had to support the theory and practice of PBIS and be relatively quick and easy to implement. Right away I set my sights on the first of two, although I was nervous about both. They were bold steps changing the status quo...always a bit risky.

Strategy #1: Using a collaborative approach, I stopped having staff write major ODRs. We went from a decades-old system in which any and all of the 98 staff (teachers and paras) were writing ODRs for a variety of student-behaviors to only two people: myself and the dean of students.

Let's stop here for a moment to consider all of the possible outcomes for implementing this strategy. It might be helpful to make a list of the possible negative outcomes and see if you can come up with a plan to mitigate each one. If you get stuck on a possible negative outcome,



unsure how to make it work, give me a call...seriously. I might not have all the answers, but I'd love to provide support because this strategy is tremendously impactful. I'm more than happy to help you make it happen in your setting.

A DRASTIC ALTERNATIVE

The second strategy was even more nerve-racking to initiate than the first. It took some nuanced leadership moves as well as a good deal of contingency planning, two-way communication and sustained effort but, it was totally worth it.

Strategy #2: No more sending students to the office for discipline reasons.

WHAT!?!

Yep...seriously. Just let that idea sink in for a minute. Can you hear the learning-time ticking away as students meander toward the office, unsupervised and unaccounted for, mentally rehearsing their stories for why Mr. Jones kicked them out of class for "no reason"? What would it be like to recoup those hundreds of minutes per year?

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So, what is the alternative to having teachers send students to the office?

The alternative is a well-articulated protocol where teachers contact the office and request support for a student when his/her behavior has reach an agreed-upon frequency and/or intensity. Soon after the call comes in, a well-trained adult, with proven relationship skills and familiarity with student behavior plans, goes to the classroom to provide support. Deans of students, assistant principals, counselors, you. It really doesn't matter who responds as long as the staff member has baseline training in behavior modification strategies and can follow behavior plans. Once the adult arrives to the classroom, one of the following options should be exercised in order to minimize the impact on both the teacher-student relationship and the student's opportunity to learn:

1. The adult supervises the class while the teacher takes the student into the hall to engage in a clearly articulated and brief behavior reset protocol.
2. The teacher remains in the class while the adult takes the student into the hall to engage in a clearly articulated and brief behavior reset protocol.
3. If a cool-down period is needed in order to allow the student to regulate his/her emotional state, the adult takes the student to a separate location and allows the student to calm down before engaging in a clearly articulated and brief behavior reset protocol. Then, to minimize the loss of learning time, the adult returns the student to the classroom as soon as the protocol is completed.

If more intervention is needed or if the behavior plan needs tweaking, the teacher follows up with the adults directly involved in monitoring the student's success (parent, counselor, school psychologist, special education staff, administrator etc.).

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An important aspect of Strategy #2 is to provide dedicated training on the concept of behavior itself and which behaviors typically call for additional adult help. The training must focus on examining unintended bias and understanding how the environment we create and our interactions with students drive the majority of behavior. Lastly, it is critical to develop a collective understanding that all behavior, whether positive or maladaptive, is simply a way for students (and adults for that matter) to get their needs met. As straightforward as that concept sounds, it is foundational for leading a paradigm shift away from using isolation and punishment as teaching tools.

SHIFTING SCHOOL CULTURE

Teaching pro-social behavior is complex and time-consuming. There are no shortcuts to extinguishing and replacing negative behaviors. It takes time to create well-articulated behavior plans with incremental goals, incentives and nuanced protocols. In fact, preventing and responding to maladaptive behavior is one of the more challenging things we do in schools. It requires a patient, positive and proactive team approach. Kicking students out of class, however, typically happens as a result of running out of patience. It is not a proactive strategy and unintentionally communicates very negative messages to students such as:

- This environment is not emotionally safe enough for you.
- I am willing to disconnect and relinquish the power of my relationship with you.

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- It is OK for you to behave your way out of (math, P.E., etc.).

In addition to avoiding sending these messages to students, there is a substantial positive impact on several other school environments when students are no longer sent to the office for behavior. Consider the impact on your administrative support staff, parents and community members (and you) if students were no longer seen (or heard) in the office for discipline reasons.

There were a number of important technical changes necessary to make Strategy #2 function well. However, most important to the implementation were the leadership moves involved in shifting the school culture to match the following values and beliefs:

- The classroom is the best place in the school for all students to learn.
- Our systems must ensure students spend as much time in class as possible.
- Teacher-student relationships must be prioritized, promoted and protected at all times.

Are there rare incidences when a student's behavior requires an extended removal from class? Yes. However, it is important to remember removing students for a predetermined time frame, without taking into account whether they're ready to return to class (e.g. "You're out for three days."), is not an intervention, it is a punishment.

Absent a holistic, research-based approach to behavior modification, punishments are an ineffective teaching tool and have a negative effect on relationships and school-culture.

As you continually seek ways to reduce your ODRs, eliminate the use of suspensions and minimize the time spent reacting to student-behavior, give serious consideration to initiating Strategies 1 & 2. In addition to implementing MTSS, they will help reclaim hours of learning time. Also, check out the helpful resources [see below] and feel free to give me a call. I'm happy to help you find solutions that will keep students (and you) in classrooms. ■

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Begin examining unintended bias by leading a book-study using *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People* by Dr. Anthony Greenwald and Mazarin Behnaji.

For all-things MTSS, contact Andrea Cobb, Executive Director of the Center for the Improvement of Student Learning (CISL) and Kelcey Schmitz (kelcey.schmitz@k12.wa.us), Program Supervisor for Integrated Student Supports at CISL. They are fantastic resources for all-things MTSS.

Tricia Hagerty at the Pacific PBIS Coaching Institute provides excellent district & school-based implementation of PBIS, Check and Connect, SWIS and TIPS. tricia.hagerty1@gmail.com.

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