

# ESTABLISHING AND PROMOTING DISCIPLINARY PRACTICES AT THE BUILDING LEVEL THAT ENSURE SAFE, EFFECTIVE, AND NURTURING SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS

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We came together at this forum to explore ways to ensure safer, more effective schools for all students. I would like to describe a school-wide innovation that resulted in the eventual elimination of seclusion time-out and physical restraint in a day school for children and youth with emotional disturbances. Key features of the school-wide innovation included a reinventing of the program's beliefs and assumptions about how we can best intervene and assist students with emotional disturbances; establishing a vision that was grounded on those beliefs and would carry us into the future; assessing the school climate; implementing numerous positive activities as alternatives to punishment; and deploying adequate resources to get the job done. Information we collected during the course of the intervention suggests that the disciplinary practices put into place contributed to a safer, more effective, and nurturing school environment.

## Beliefs

According to Webster's dictionary (1993), beliefs are the tenets or body of tenets held by an individual or by a group about truth and reality. Beliefs are powerful motivators of our actions. We often act in certain ways because we believe that our actions will make a difference. The same is true in special education programs; it is the philosophy of the program or its set of core organizational beliefs that dictates the types of practices we employ and the outcomes we will achieve (Grosenick, George, & George, 1990).

As special educators, we need to recognize that our beliefs surrounding the notion of emotional disturbance have a powerful influence on school policy and practice and play a major role in how we behave toward our students. It is our beliefs about students and their

capabilities that guide the goals we erect for them, the interventions we devise for them, and our overall perceptions of them as learners and social individuals.

Research has shown that beliefs can also create barriers to student success (Rosenholtz, 1989). Indeed, some of the beliefs we harbor about students with emotional disturbances may condemn them to failure even before we begin working with them. And when students fail, so do we, to some degree.

Some of the potential harmful beliefs in our field include the following:

- Children with emotional or behavioral disorders (E/BD) come from bad homes, and since we cannot change the homes, we cannot succeed with the children in our schools.
- Children with E/BD are incapable of controlling their behavior or regulating their emotions, and it is up to us, the professionals, to control them.
- Most children and youth with E/BD are so aggressive and violent they can be educated only in very restrictive settings.
- The more serious the misbehavior of the children and youths under our care, the more intrusive and severe our methods must be in treating them.
- Seclusion time-out and physical restraint are necessary interventions for the most serious and intractable of these youths.

Few of us enter our chosen field with these beliefs in mind. It is only later, as we interact with others and try to construct meaning for our work (Rosenholtz, 1989), that some professionals come to espouse these types of beliefs. When the methods and techniques that we use on a daily basis fail to produce positive results, some

perhaps come to believe in the irreversibility of E/BD. They give up before the process of education begins.

The question I pose is this: How do our beliefs guide our practices and methods? One example is the use of punishment with children and youths who have emotional or behavioral problems—specifically the use of seclusion time-out and physical restraint in day school programs. The two practices often go hand in hand. The very intrusiveness of the procedures proscribes experimental studies on their effectiveness. Yet these methods continue to be employed because many in the field believe them to be effective a priori. Like other forms of punishment, however, seclusion time-out and physical restraint may have some rather nasty side effects: fear, resentment, anger, resistance, feelings of hate (Axelrod & Apsche, 1983), and even death (Rabasca, 1999).

At Centennial School, a day school for children and youths with emotional disturbances in the eastern region of the United States, there were 1,064 episodes of physical restraint with the 76 students enrolled during the 1997–1998 school year. According to the school's policy manual, "the use of physical restraint was reserved for those situations when a student's behavior was harmful to himself, herself or to others . . . and was never to be administered as punishment" (Centennial School, 1997, p. 31). It is likely that the practices at this school mirror practices in many other special education day schools around the country, although information on the prevalence of physical restraint is admittedly hard to find. Nearly all episodes of physical restraint at Centennial resulted in periods of seclusion time-out, a practice that had been in place for many years.

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## Vision

Establishing disciplinary practices at the building level that ensure safe, effective, and nurturing school environments begins with a vision of a desired state, something that is preferable to the present state of affairs. We ask ourselves: What is it we hope to achieve? and What is achievable? Answering those questions can sometimes be difficult. Most of us readily know what we *don't* want. For example, we don't want kids to scream and run in the hallways. We don't want kids to use violence to resolve disputes. We don't want them to curse. But what do we want instead, and what would that look like?

Creating a vision of the future forces us to articulate exactly what it is we would like to see occur. If students are not cursing, screaming, and running in the hallways, what will they be doing instead? Shouldn't they be actively engaged in the learning process? Shouldn't they be taught to communicate their feelings of frustration with polite words and make good judgments in

social situations? Can they be taught to use an anger management strategy independently and on demand? Can they be guided to accept responsibility for their behaviors? Our vision is tied to our values and what we believe is achievable given the conditions around us (Hunt, 1999). If we believe that students can make positive changes in their lives, we will take the time to teach them to do so. Conversely, if we assume they cannot manage their own behavior, we will control them. Our vision is necessarily grounded in the beliefs we hold and the assumptions we make about the students we serve.

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## Assessment of the School Climate

A vision of the future begins with a thorough understanding of what is currently in place (Hunt, 1999). At Centennial School, staff were challenged to examine their beliefs about current practices and encouraged to question whether the use of seclusion time-out and physical restraint was making a positive difference in the behavior of students in the program. The assessment involved interviews of key school personnel and students, a review of school policies and procedures, and information collected through direct observation.

Reasons for seclusion time-out and physical restraint, elicited from staff interviews, centered primarily on the severity of the students' misbehaviors as well as a concern for the safety of the student population and faculty. Most interesting were statements of beliefs held by the staff and the powerful influence those beliefs had on practice. For example, while most staff voiced concern about their safety in the absence of physical restraint, the concern was not supported by extant data. An examination of workers' compensation claims from the previous year showed that physical restraint was the leading cause of injuries to school staff. In fact, 82% of all injuries to staff were incurred from episodes of physical restraint. Moreover, there was little evidence that the practices of seclusion time-out and physical restraint were having a positive effect on decreasing violent and dangerous student behavior. In the first 20 days of the following school year, staff had already conducted 112 physical restraints with the 84 students who were in daily attendance, a rate that would have resulted in well over 1,000 physical restraints had it been sustained throughout the remainder of the year. Clearly, the need to employ physical restraint was undiminished by its frequent use. Violent and potentially dangerous student behavior remained at high levels despite the ongoing use of those practices.

In our meetings, we discussed alternative explanations for why students might behave so violently. Could it be that the use of seclusion time-out and physical

restraint were contributing to the high frequency of violent misbehavior? Was the violent misbehavior a function of the methods and techniques we were using or a reflection of the severity of the students we were serving? Perhaps, we hypothesized, students were using aggression because they didn't have meaningful alternative ways of behaving or communicating when they were angry or upset. Perhaps they didn't know and had never been taught how they were supposed to behave in school.

### Shared Vision and Teamwork

A vision of a desired state is critical for creating unique school cultures, but it is not sufficient in and of itself (Sergiovanni, 2000). Leadership is important, as is the contribution of others in the workplace. No single person can change a school culture; others must embrace and come to share in the vision for the future (Parker, 1990). Moving away from a reliance on seclusion time-out and physical restraint would require everyone to work together and pull in the same direction. A commitment to a shared vision among staff permits everyone in the workplace to understand clearly not only what the future holds, but also the role each individual is going to play in getting there.

Through an examination of assessment information and an ongoing dialogue, our administrative team was able to establish a goal that would guide us into the future. The goal incorporated our vision of the school culture and stated clearly what we wished to see happen: to make the school a safe place where students and staff want to be. To accomplish this goal, we established three objectives that were similar to those proposed by U.S. Secretary of Education Riley at the First White House Conference on Mental Health (1999): (1) to develop an engaging and stimulating curriculum; (2) to create a safe, civil learning environment; and (3) to include parents as partners in their children's education (see Figure 1). Finally, we established a standard against which to measure our success. We would verify that we were reaching our goal by collecting data that showed a decrease in the episodes of seclusion time-out and physical restraint.

### Resources

Having a vision allows for the focused distribution of human, fiscal, and physical resources. Resources are the tools we need to get the job done. When school staff share in a vision and understand the direction for a school program, the job of resource allocation becomes much easier. People are more willing to make sacrifices when they see how their sacrifices contribute to the common good. Deploying adequate resources conveys

#### Engaging and Stimulating Curriculum

1. Raised academic expectations
2. Scheduled all allocated time with instruction
3. Reworked school schedule using Premack Principle
4. Reduced the number of lesson preparations for teachers each week
5. Introduced daily planning periods for teachers
6. Developed alternative curriculum for low-functioning students
7. Ordered new curriculum materials and supplies

#### Safe and Civil Learning Environment

8. Improved modeling of appropriate behavior
9. Strengthened the school-wide Token Economy
10. Redesigned point cards
11. Implemented school-wide expectation, rules, and interventions
12. Introduced uniform expectations and procedures for classrooms
13. Established a clear set of consequences for rule-violating behavior
14. Initiated problem-solving procedures to resolve conflicts
15. Introduced daily social skills instruction
16. Developed a staffing procedure for conducting functional assessments and individual interventions
17. Opened a school store
18. Developed a close working relationship with law enforcement officials

#### Parents as Partners

19. Hosted a parent dinner and open house
20. Developed daily written reports
21. Committed to phoning parents weekly
22. Developed a monthly newsletter
23. Dedicated physical space in the school as a "parent corner."

Figure 1. Innovation Activities by School Objectives.

the message that (a) an innovation is important and (b) staff will be supported in their efforts. It gives them hope. Conversely, poorly deployed or insufficient resources present a major barrier to the success of school-wide interventions (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1995).

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## Innovation

At Centennial School, we employed a number of initiatives and sustained them over the course of the school year. There is no single path to school improvement (Sergiovanni, 2000; Skiba & Peterson, 2000). Figure 1 shows the activities we implemented to achieve the three objectives described earlier. We placed emphasis on techniques and interventions that were designed to prevent student behavior from reaching crisis levels. These included teaching prosocial responses through social skills lessons, rewarding appropriate behavior, and taking a school-wide approach to discipline. We also committed to reducing "down time" among students, placing a renewed emphasis on academics, effective instruction, and goal-oriented behavior. School staff were provided with training in a number of areas, including school-wide expectations, positive behavior support, immediate feedback to students, management of low-level misbehavior, and ways to handle crises nonviolently.

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## Outcomes

### Students

There were 327 episodes of physical restraint for the school year in which the school-wide innovation was implemented, with only one instance of physical restraint during the last 40 school days. That represented a 69% decrease in the number of physical restraints from the previous year. The number of minutes of seclusion time-out also decreased, from a high of 15,774 during the first 20 days of the school year to 3,627 during the last 20 days of the school year, a reduction of approximately 77%.

We also collected information on the number of behavioral outbursts—that is, the number of instances secondary students were directed to leave the classroom due to misbehavior during the school year. Like physical restraints and minutes of seclusion time-out, behavioral outbursts decreased steadily throughout the year, from a high of 117 in October to a low of 9 in May. I should note two interesting pieces of information about students during the year of the school-wide innovation. First, 83% of the students who were in attendance during the year of 1,064 restraints (1997–1998) were in attendance during the year of the school-wide

innovation (1998–1999); second, overall student attendance rose by 9% during the year that episodes of physical restraint were decreasing.

### Safety

Are school staff safer with the removal of the control strategies of physical restraint and seclusion time-out? The answer appears to be yes. An examination of workers' compensation claims showed that the total number of injuries to staff was down slightly (i.e., three fewer than the previous year), but that the proportion of the injuries due to episodes of physical restraint dropped to 55% (as compared to 82% the previous year). Moreover, physical assaults against teachers dropped by 37.5%, or from 16 the previous year to 10 during the year of the school-wide innovation.

### Follow-Up

Data collected from September through mid-February of the 1999–2000 school year show there were no episodes of physical restraint and no minutes of seclusion time-out. Only two workers' compensation claims were filed, neither due to a restraint situation, and there was only one physical assault against a teacher during that time period.

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## Conclusion

We know from the literature that school improvement must be managed. It begins with the notion that something is not working as well as it should be. Optimally, the need for change is affirmed through a thorough evaluation of the entire school program, including the program's philosophy and beliefs—especially those guiding beliefs and assumptions about how to best intervene and assist children (Dwyer, Osher, & Warger, 1998; George, George, & Grosenick, 1990; Grosenick et al., 1990).

We can teach children and youths to manage and control their own behavior, even when they are frustrated and angry (Carr & Durand, 1985; Durand & Carr, 1991; Horner & Carr, 1997). But to do so, we need procedures and methods of intervention that reflect our belief that they can do so. If we show children that it is permissible for us to use aggression when all else fails, then they, too, will use aggression when they exhaust their sometimes rather short list of prosocial behavioral and emotional responses. On the other hand, if we establish expectations and interventions that convey our belief that students can and will exercise and maintain control over their behavior, they will do so.

Today, Centennial School no longer has any seclusion time-out rooms. One is now used for storage of school supplies, and the other has been turned into the

school store, filled with candy, trinkets, notebooks, paper, pencils, pens, nutritious snacks, toy models, and other items that students may earn for good behavior. Placing the school store in a former time-out room is symbolic of how far the school has come in the past 2 years toward establishing and promoting disciplinary practices that ensure a safe, effective, and nurturing school environment.

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