Alternative Discipline Structures: A Comprehensive Approach to Changing Behavior
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Abstract

School violence and poor morale is prevalent in many schools. Although Zero Tolerance policies and character education have become every day practices, schools still struggle with student behavior. Research points to disproportionate discipline consequences among racial groups therefore new approaches to intervention are needed. A high performing elementary school in Central California has taken a comprehensive approach to addressing student behavior with promising results. With the implementation of a combined structure of socio emotional learning, school-wide positive behavioral supports, character education and leadership structures, one diverse campus of kindergarten-6th grade students has kept it positive in lieu of a punitive only discipline model. Valley Oak has developed an alternative discipline system, choosing to use suspension and punitive measures as a last resort, not a first response.

Each Wednesday, a kaleidoscope of faces and colored shirts pass by to an all school assembly. Building Wildcats of Character is the number one focus at Valley Oak Elementary, in Central California. Weekly our campus purposefully focuses on developing students while defining what desired student behavior looks like for over 550 kindergarten-6th graders. Each grade level wears a specific color of the rainbow, every Wednesday, to represent the 6 Pillars of Character and the varied and beautiful background each child brings to school daily. Although school violence, and low morale is reported in many public schools, this campus proudly comes together to address social concerns in a comprehensive and targeted manner. The staff at Valley Oak has found that it is possible to create a safe and successful environment with a systemic approach to teaching desirable student behaviors. Valley Oak has developed an alternative behavior system, choosing to use suspension and punitive measures as a last resort, not a first response.

The Failure to Stop School Violence

Schools throughout the United States have enlisted many strategies to help improve student behavior. Character education has experienced a surge of popularity over the past two decades as a reaction to societal factors. As the principal of a high performing, yet diverse school, I have witnessed that character education is not sufficient to continue the trajectory of academic performance or to combat student conflicts. The National Center for Education Statistics noted that during the 2009-2010 school year, there were "1,396 homicides among school-age youth ages 5-18, of which 19 occurred at school" (Robers, Kemp & Truman, 2013). Even with the increase of character education, violence continues.

As we delve deeper into school violence, the NCES states that during the 2009-2010 school year "39% of public schools took at least one serious disciplinary action against a student for a specific offense" (Robers, Kemp & Truman, 2013). The NCES categorizes serious as: attacks or fights, distribution, possession or use of alcohol or drugs, use or possession of a weapon or explosive device. Within the 39%, there were 74% of students suspended for 5 or more days. Although 18% of the schools that took this action were elementary, often behavioral patterns begin to manifest within these formative years. Many school districts have responded with Zero Tolerance policies. Zero Tolerance laws in education stem from drug enforcement policies from the 1980's (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). By 1993 school boards and districts adopted policies to dole out harsh punishments for drug or weapon possession, gang activity or for students that cause disruption (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). When analyzing national school data, educators should question whether reactionary policies toward serious discipline, have been sufficient to stem the tide of school violence.

Student Demographics & Discipline

There is a substantial amount of research highlighting disparity in student suspensions by race. In 2010, research outlined trends and considerations for educators in reference to disproportionate discipline consequences among racial groups (Gregory, Skiba and Noguera, 2010). Numerous studies have identified specific racial, poverty and gender factors that show that poor, males of color have higher suspension rates than others. Preliminary studies support the use of alternative strategies to reduce behavior problems on campus. The Center for Evaluation and Education Policy (2004) stated that few studies exist looking at the effectiveness of interventions to help with the disparity in suspension for various racial groups (Skiba and

Rausch). Due to the overrepresentation of some students in suspension data, further studies are imperative. On my own campus, suspension data is analyzed and new practices are implemented accordingly. Multiple systems have been implemented to explicitly teach desired behavioral outcomes, reward appropriate behaviors and help overall school climate.

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Alternative Discipline Practices

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Finding alternative solutions to shape student behavior has become a battle cry in education. Valley Oak has implemented a proactive alternative system to teach and reward desired student outcomes. Through these structures we have created an environment that is conducive to sustaining high academic achievement and a family oriented atmosphere. Valley Oak is a diverse community with our student population consisting of: 45% white, 33% Latino, and 10% Asian (Ed Data). Not only is Valley Oak culturally rich, we have 10% of our students designated in Special Education programs and 24% designated as socioeconomically disadvantaged (Educational Results Partnership). Celebrating of our differences while outlining expectations, has made us strong.

Recent research discusses the implementation of school-wide positive behavioral supports (SWPBS) and utilizing social emotional learning (SEL) to address school discipline (Osher, Bear, Sprague & Doyle, 2010). Can these types of alternative discipline structures help create an environment where there is less student conflict, disruptive behavior and less student removals for extended periods of time?

Osher, et al. (2010) outlines 3 possible structures to help improve school discipline. "Ecological approach to classroom management" or help create a quality, interactive environment lends itself to natural compliance. This type of learning goes beyond cooperative activities where students are taught to interactively, embedding self-discipline and mutual respect. On further reflection, Valley Oak began the implementation of more project and inquiry based learning three years ago. The success of the classroom environment is based on a system where teachers explicitly teach desired academic and social behaviors. These specific behaviors become imbedded when staffs agree to what they want students to know and be able to do. Such an agreement was made with the implementation of a school-wide behavior support system called, Time to Teach (Dahlgren & Hyatt, 1994).

Time to Teach (T2T), is a school-wide system that is a 5 step process used to shape behavior and create a positive learning environment. Three years ago the staff went through program implementation after viewing other sites that use the system. T2T focuses on: student mood awareness and teacher response, explicitly teaching expectations, Thinkery or refocus process to avoid multiple warnings, positive student-teacher relationships and the evaluation of the physical set up and management of the classroom. Throughout implementation, meetings with all stakeholders took place to garner feedback and students had opportunities to further explain the expectations. At the end of the year staff made further adjustments based on input.

A positive behavioral support system is defined as a systems approach to teach and communicate expectations while rewarding students that follow them (Simonsen, Sugai & Negron, 2008). This system can be established in different ways with key components being: meaningful student outcomes, establishment of a school-wide system, selection practices for implementation and use of data to make decisions (Simonsen, et al, 2008). Our staff has done that with an agreed on list of student behaviors that are taught at the beginning of each year. Expectations for appropriate behaviors found in and out of the class are explicitly taught with Power Point lessons (Teach To's) for every 2nd-6th grade class and reinforced in school-wide

gatherings. Examples of common lessons include: lining up after the bell, entering and eating in the cafeteria, assembly behavior, restroom behavior, and others. Not only has the Valley Oak staff structured common behavioral expectations, they have common academic objectives by grade for reading, academic vocabulary and grading practices. The more predictable the instructional setting, the more stable the learning environment becomes, lowering anxiety and helping to reinforce a supportive environment for all.

Another approach is to incorporate social and emotional learning (SEL). Character education permeates the campus with a monthly focus on one of the six character traits of the national program, Character Counts. Our school weaves different activities throughout the year such as: monthly awards for character traits, writing contests, videos, assemblies and activities focused around the traits. Trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship are highlighted throughout school in order to promote core ethical values. Valley Oak has utilized character education as one proactive approach to help shape student behavior.

Monthly school-wide competitions are used as a change agent as well. Each classroom participates to see which class can earn the most rewards. This responsibility system is called PAWS (Positive Actions by Wildcat Students). PAWS are earned for appropriate cafeteria behavior, attendance, clean campus, classroom music behavior and returned library books which are all monitored and measured weekly. At the end of the time period, the class with the most rewards receives a gift for demonstrating the desired outcomes. The staff believes that in order for students to be successful adults: reading, writing, problem solving, character and appropriate behavior must all be taught and learned.

Learning Through Leading

At Valley Oak, student engagement with active involvement on campus is another method used to develop student behavior. Application of learned skills helps solidify understanding and perpetuate positive morale. Upper grade students serve as leaders through: student government, peer mediation, leading intramural sports, and cross age tutoring in reading, math and technology. Over 50% of the upper grade students are involved in some type of leadership project or group to help support giving back. The use of student leaders has served two fold for Valley Oak: application of principles and the development of all students as leaders. Staff seeks to actively engage students and provide application for concepts taught about character and behavior. By building leadership capacity in all students, the foundation is established for future expectations and involvement at the secondary level which leads to greater school connection. The current percentage of 5th & 6th grade students involved in a co-curricular, extra-curricular or athletic activity on campus is approximately 95%. We believe, the more actively involved a student is on campus, inappropriate student behavior will diminish creating a positive environment for staff and students!

The partnership between home and school is crucial and parent involvement is highly encouraged on our campus. Parents help model service opportunities by volunteering on campus in both traditional and non-traditional roles. Some serve in the classroom, front office or library. Others are art or garden docents. Parents give science or math lessons in our outdoor learning garden or volunteer with our multicultural group, SPECTRUM. Annually, SPECTRUM has cultural presentations by parents and sponsors other activities that celebrate the cultures represented on our campus. The motto of our school is "It's All About We!" This mantra helps reinforce student application of expected behaviors and teach universal concepts in relationship to everyday school occurrences.

A Comprehensive Approach

Changing student behavior is a complicated based on social, cultural, linguistic and emotional backgrounds of children and adults. The ultimate goal at Valley Oak is for all students to be active and successful in and out of the classroom. By taking a targeted and closely monitored approach, our school has reduced the number of discipline referrals and cut the number of suspensions by 50% in the last three years. Site administration monitors teacher and student implementation through classroom walk-throughs and daily visibility on campus. Student, parent and teacher feedback is sought annually through surveys and small group meetings. This input is used to continually analyze data in a triangulated manner to improve the system and ask ourselves if we are getting the results we desire.

The goal of many discipline systems is to change behavior however, with the inclusion of character education, Zero Tolerance policies and student removals, these practices have not substantially changed violence on campus. Since 2009, the SED (Socio Economically Disadvantaged) student population on our campus has almost doubled. The student population has grown by 8% and two additional Special Education programs have been added this year. As the population changes the staff continues to be committed to helping all students achieve. Valley Oak has experienced a great changes these last five years however have been able to remain a high performing school with an API in the 940's. The use of a SWPS, SEL, and targeted character and moral development has improved student behavioral outcomes. The desire to create a family friendly environment has been reinforced with the implementation of social and emotional learning, as well as school-wide positive support systems. Valley Oak's Building Wildcats of Character is a systemic and comprehensive approach to build the leadership capacity and character development of all students for life.

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