

Why Not Just Suspend? 5 Strategies for Conversations About School Discipline

Communicating alternative school discipline effectively can be a laborious task for administrators. Prior to giving an alternative to a student, the beliefs of the administrator must support it. If the administrator cannot articulate the significance of why the alternative is important, nobody on that campus will believe it to be important. There is an art to assigning appropriate discipline while working with the stakeholders (parents, teachers, students) and deciding consequences that are appropriate for a child that will change behavior. We want to be clear; the message simply isn't to NOT suspend. The message is: This student is returning to your school regardless, so what are you doing to teach and ensure these behaviors are not repeating on your campus?

Students would prefer to go home for a few days than deal with the alternative consequences given, as highlighted in our previous article, "[Suspensions Won't Work](#)". When approaching discipline in this way, one of the most common questions you will hear is, "Why didn't you just suspend this kid?" Here are five strategies that will help guide difficult conversations around alternative forms of discipline:

1) Listen to the stakeholders.

Allow the stakeholders to vent and hear them out so you can rationalize what they are saying. They've just experienced the behavior that led to the referral and aren't in a place to listen to an alternative. Allow them to cool down so you can talk them through. Provide them with a safe opportunity to honestly share what they feel. If you do not do this, they will not buy in and the conversation will continue in the staff lounge without you.

2) Communicate in a timely manner.

When a teacher sends a student to the office on a referral, they are expecting the behavior to be addressed and a consequence handed out. If the teacher sees the student return to class shortly thereafter, their impression of the outcome will be that the administrator simply said, "Don't do that again, now go back to class." This is comparable to the parent who calls to complain about an incident that happened during break/recess where their child reported misbehavior to an adult on supervision "but nothing was done about it." Similarly, a teacher who is not communicated with will feel it was dismissed and not handled. It is essential to make it an expectation for yourself to communicate the consequence in a timely manner (same day).

3) Involve the teacher in the alternative and use it to teach.

When time permits, involve the teacher in creating consequences. It will empower the teacher as an authoritarian in the eyes of the student and someone who levies consequences. It will also bolster the teacher's beliefs around using discipline as a means to teach behavior. Additionally, it will allow them to see how much time and effort goes into doing discipline in this fashion. If they are given the opportunity to be part of this process, it will increase buy in and support from the teacher.

4) Liken behavior to academics – Behavior RTI/Academic RTI.

It is important to articulate the relationship between how adults respond to students who struggle to learn with how they respond to students who struggle to behave. When stakeholders hear the rationale behind why teaching academics is similar to teaching behavior, they are more willing to shift their thinking about

how the discipline should be handled. For example, a student struggling to read is not sent home for a few days and expected to return reading; likewise, a student struggling to behave needs more support to change behavior rather than suspension. It is also critical to have a solid tier one academic and behavior system in place at your school. A school-wide system of supports for behavior is necessary to respond effectively. *The PBIS Tier One Handbook* is a guide to organizing RTI behavior at your school to allow this to take place.

5) Question beliefs.

Be prepared for tough conversations about discipline and beliefs. It is important to get to the core belief of the teacher in order to help them work through and support an effective alternative consequence. One method that is helpful is sequential questioning to help peel the onion and get to the root/function of the problem behavior and possible solutions.

Take a look at this possible conversation between administrator and teacher:

Why do you want this student suspended out of your class? He is being defiant.

Why is he being defiant? Because I told him to stop talking and complete his assignment and he didn't.

How did calmly giving him directions trigger the defiance? I yelled it out in front of the class because I was frustrated.

Why have you not asked for help with this child? I didn't want it to seem like I don't know how to handle my class.

Why do you think suspending him from your class today is going to change his behavior when he comes back tomorrow? I don't. I needed to make a point and show him who's boss.

Do you think you made your point? No, actually, I don't. I just needed a break.

Let's work together on a long-term consequence/intervention so you do not have to continue feeling this way.

Using this strategy will help you help the teacher or stakeholder get down to the symptom of the problem. If we are not forced to question our beliefs about school discipline, we cannot get to the level of accepting alternative school discipline in place of traditional methods.

In our next article, we will provide a case study showing an alternative to suspension that works.