

Reduce School Violence and Classroom Disruptions: Create an Orderly Climate Conducive to Learning

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ABSTRACT

Violence and classroom disruptions are increasing in our schools. In this article, I discuss two important ways to reduce school violence and classroom disruptions: establish and emphasize goals and establish and implement rules and procedures.

Several authors suggest ways that schools may be able to reduce school violence and classroom disruptions by creating an orderly climate conducive to learning (Bulach, Lunenburg, & Potter, 2008; Drolet, 2011; Lezotte, 2011; Melvin, 2012; Otten, 2011). According to these authors, research has indicated two important differences between schools that create an orderly climate for learning and those that fail to do so. Schools that create an orderly climate conducive to learning (a) establish and emphasize goals and (b) establish and implement rules and procedures.

Establish and Emphasize Goals

In schools that emphasize academic goals, students are more engaged in schoolwork; that is, they spend more time on task (Locke & Latham, 2012; Lezotte, 2011; Marzano, 2010a). Teachers in these schools have higher expectations for their students and tend to have more positive interactions with them (Lunenburg & Irby, 2000). These student and teacher characteristics make it more likely that students invest more time and energy in academic goals rather than in a peer culture that might sanction violence and disruptive behavior. Studies reveal that school violence is much more likely to occur when students feel that grades are punitive or impossible to obtain (Martin, 2011; Marzano, 2010b; Teach for America Staff, 2011) and if the school curriculum is irrelevant (Ornstein, Pajak, & Ornstein, 2012; Wiles & Bondi, 2011). Also, the level of violence increases with class size and the total number of students taught per week (Reeves, 2010). Moreover, a higher incidence of aggression against teachers occurs if the class consists largely of behavior problem students, low achievers, or minority students

(Benbenishty, 2011; Bynum, 2010; Heitmeyer, 2011; Hoffman, 2012; Vaughn, 2011; Yell, 2009). This is one of many reasons for the elimination of tracking (Ansalone, 2011; Campbell, 2010).

Specific areas of the school program, related to school violence that should be evaluated include the curriculum and the instructional setting. With respect to the curriculum, the following questions should be asked: Is the curriculum relevant? Does it meet the needs of students (Ornstein, Pajak, & Ornstein, 2012; Wiles & Bondi, 2011)? Regarding the instructional setting, significant questions include: Is the class size and total students manageable for effective teaching (Reeves, 2010)? Are the instructional materials and procedures appropriate (Darling-Hammond, 2008; Marzano, 2010c)? Are grades attainable and fair (Marzano, 2010b)? Are the students tracked by ability or other factors (Buckelew, 2011; Hoerr, 2011)?

An effort should be made to improve the achievement of all students in schools (Coyne, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Howard, 2011; Paige, 2011). And schools must expand teaching beyond the basic skills to include citizenship (Leighton, 2012), effective decision-making (Delgado, 2012), conflict-resolution skills (Keane, 2011), cooperation (Cain, 2011), and courtesy (Nelsen, 2012). The art of compromise should be modeled and practiced by teachers and students alike. Students need to learn that these are acceptable ways to deal with their conflicts and to meet their individual needs.

The need to reach children in the early years is important (Allen, 2012; Nutbrown, 2012). Programs that provide support for young families should be enhanced (Bloch, 2012). Head Start, Follow Through, day care, and after school care for children of working or student parents should be funded (Scott, 2012). School districts must become involved in early childhood education by providing facilities and staff. Teachers need to be trained to work with infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. Parents may require assistance in acquiring parenting skills.

Establish and Implement Rules and Procedures

Students and teachers feel safe in schools which have clear discipline standards that are enforced firmly, fairly, and consistently (Hauserman, 2011; Lindeen, 2012). This can be accomplished through the development of a comprehensive student handbook that identifies expectations for student behavior and outlines the consequences for students who violate the rules (Knoff, 2010). Student handbooks should outline clearly student rights and responsibilities. Suspension and expulsion procedures should be explained carefully and the appeals process also should be fully described. Because of the frequency of gang activity in schools, the handbook should include sections on dress codes, search and seizure, graffiti, beepers and pagers, and school design (Kentley, 2011; Lane, 2011; Soliz, 2010; Thompson, 2011).

Establish Dress Codes

School boards should consider policies establishing dress codes for students and teachers. For example, the Oakland (California) Board of Education banned clothing and

jewelry denoting identification with a gang; expensive jogging suits often worn by drug dealers; and all hats and clothing designating membership in non-school organizations. The Detroit (Michigan) Public Schools have implemented a ban on expensive clothing and jewelry. The Baltimore (Maryland) Public Schools are experimenting with school uniforms. The Dallas (Texas) Board of Education has adopted a policy that opposes clothing and grooming that is considered distracting or disruptive. School principals have been given the discretion to determine what is inappropriate (National School Boards Association, 2010).

School boards may enact reasonable regulations concerning student appearance in school. Appearance regulations have focused on male hairstyles and pupil attire. Student challenges to these regulations have relied on First Amendment constitutional freedoms to determine one's appearance. The U. S. Supreme Court has consistently refused to review the decisions of lower courts on these matters (*Karr v. Schmidt*, 401 U. S. 1201, 1972). Generally, courts tend to provide less protection to some forms of expression (e.g., pupil hairstyle and attire) than to others (e.g., symbolic expression). Nonetheless, awareness of constitutional freedoms place limits on school principals to regulate student dress, excluding special situations (e.g., graduation and physical education classes). Pupil attire can always be regulated to protect student health, safety, and school discipline. In short, the extent to which school principals may control student appearance depends more on different community mores and on "the times" than on strict principles of law.

Use Search and Seizure Cautiously

The introduction of drugs, weapons, and other contraband in schools has placed school principals in the position of searching students' person or lockers, and students claim that such acts are a violation of their Fourth Amendment guarantees. A student's right to the Fourth Amendment's protection from unreasonable search and seizure must be balanced against the need for school principals to maintain discipline and to provide a safe environment conducive to learning. State and federal courts generally have relied on the doctrine of *in loco parentis*, reasoning that school principals stand in the place of a parent and are not subject to the constraints of the Fourth Amendment. In 1985, in *New Jersey v. T.L.O.*, 469 U.S. 325, 1985, the U. S. Supreme Court held that searches by school officials in schools come within the constraints of the Fourteenth Amendment. The court concluded that the special needs of the school environment justified easing the warrant and probable cause requirement imposed in criminal cases, provided that school searches are based on "reasonable suspicion."

Pay Attention to Graffiti

Attention to symbols is an important way of controlling misbehavior. Graffiti is a form of vandalism (defacing school property) and frequently serves as gang symbols. Immediate removal of graffiti sends a message to students of the school principal's opposition to vandalism and gang symbols. It also prevents conflict over potential gang territory. And it tells students and staff alike that the principal cares about personnel safety and that she is taking appropriate steps to protect everyone's safety.

Ban beepers and Pagers

With the exception of students who have severe medical problems or those who are members of rescue units, beepers and pagers should be prohibited on school grounds. Law enforcement officials maintain that frequently students with beepers and pagers are involved in drug trafficking. Undesirable behavior is less likely to occur when beepers and pagers are banned from schools.

Reconsider School Design

School design and facility use can encourage undesirable behaviors. School policy should restrict student congregation in "blind spots;" recommend random spot checks of problem areas, such as restrooms, locker rooms, and parking lots; and increase physical security with fences, lights, and metal detectors. The least costly security measure is faculty supervision. When principals and teachers are visible throughout the buildings and school grounds, disruptive behavior is less likely to occur.

Conclusion

Several authors suggest ways that schools may be able to reduce school violence and classroom disruptions by creating an orderly climate conducive to learning. Schools that create an orderly climate conducive to learning (a) establish and emphasize goals and (b) establish and implement rules and procedures.

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