

Chapter 10

Middle School Discipline Practices: The Realities of Middle School Discipline and What Actually Works

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the challenges middle schools face when dealing with extreme behavior issues and provides real-world examples of one administrator's experience in the face of these situations. Looking at the newest trends in discipline strategies, including those of social-emotional learning and restorative practices, the authors provide an overview of their school-wide implementation. The authors also provide recommendations for educators who are facing similar situations and how to develop practices that support lasting cultural changes within schools and districts.

INTRODUCTION

"In a chaotic environment, principals can't lead, teachers can't teach, and students can't learn." – Lawrence W. Lezotte & Kathleen M Snyder

Mr. Nelson hears his walkie sound just before he walks into a sixth grade classroom for a routine observation. "Mr. Nelson, Ms. Smith needs your help again! It's Timmy. She says he is being aggressive, and she needs help." Mr. Nelson immediately turns around and walks towards the fifth grade hallway. As he arrives at Ms. Smith's door, he sees Timmy running toward the back of the classroom. He walks over to Ms. Smith who is trying to work with other students. "He is manic today, I'm not sure what to do with him. He's been running around the classroom and he is making it impossible for the other students.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-6315-4.ch010

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Earlier he smacked several kids in the back of the head while he walked around the room and then he started screaming something I refuse to repeat in front of the students, so I called for help.” Mr. Nelson is not shocked; this isn’t even that unusual for him. He says okay, walks over to the student and leads him toward the office.

In the office, Mr. Nelson has to repeatedly ask Timmy to sit back down as he attempts to call his mother. Being in the office is not new to Timmy. He ends up there several times per week, often to give his teachers and peers a break from his constant disruptive behavior. He is already in special education, as are his two older siblings. It is only February and he has already been absent 35 days this year. The teachers have serious concerns about what happens when the kids are at home. Despite those concerns, Mr. Nelson calls Timmy’s mother and has him speak to her. She does not have a car and cannot come to the school, but he wants to keep her informed and hopes it will get him back on track for the time being. Mr. Nelson listens while Timmy speaks to his mother. He can hear her raise her voice over the phone. Timmy listens, but it does little to change his behavior. When the conversation is finished, Mr. Nelson walks Timmy to get some food. Timmy eats in the office and within the hour he is back in class.

A few years ago, this student would have spent the day in In-School Suspension (ISS), been suspended (OSS), or even expelled from school for this type of chronic behavior. However, many school districts have begun to move away from exclusionary discipline practices. According to Kline (2016), years of research shows that exclusionary practices have done little to change student behavior and can lead to outcomes that are more negative for students. This is especially true for students of color and students who receive special education services.

In light of this new research, school districts have begun to implement new programs with a more inclusive, social emotional approach. These approaches include but are not limited to the explicit teaching of social emotional skills through curriculum integration, the implementation of restorative practices, and a trauma informed response to behavior. While research studies have shown these new approaches to be more successful at changing student behavior, challenges remain. School leaders and classroom teachers need and want strategies to help them handle serious discipline issues that remain in the wake. This chapter will provide the perspective of school principals who have implemented school-wide changes in discipline strategies, discuss specific strategies for teachers who are looking for new ideas, and focus on solutions to discipline in middle school settings. This chapter will accomplish this by highlighting the firsthand accounts of Mr. Nelson, from the vignette above, and in an attempt to personalize real issues encountered inside of schools. These firsthand accounts will be inserted into the overall narrative of the chapter through short vignettes. We spent several hours observing, interviewing, and gathering data that they hope will help other educators who are struggling to improve school discipline practices.

THE NEED FOR NEW DISCIPLINARY STRATEGIES

According to Hulvershorn and Mulholland (2018), in the 1980s concerns about school violence led to an increase in the use of exclusionary discipline practices and the implementation of zero tolerance policies. These policies can be pre-determined and have an automatic punitive consequence attached. School leaders hoped these responses would be harsh enough to prevent future misbehavior and create safer school communities. Despite the optimism around these policies, Hulvershorn and Mulholland (2018)

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