

Discipline

I want to start off with a point that I brought up in a post the other day. As a quick reminder here is the snapshot of an event which occurred at my school this past year. A male student has been charged with 3 counts, of which, one was an assault on a law enforcement officer charge while another was assault on a school board employee. I brought it up then because it connected to the lack of respect being given to the employees of Pasco County Schools; in this case on two fronts: the assault and on the issue of how a zero-tolerance policy announced by our superintendent is apparently not so zero tolerance, because this student's case will not be brought forward to an expulsion hearing. Now it is obvious that we had an incident that needed to have disciplinary actions taken which connects to the topic for today. Before I start today's post, I would simply point out that any disciplinary plan is ineffective, at best, if it is not always administered fairly and consistently. In fact, as a teacher of 27+ years, I will say an unfair, inconsistent discipline plan is as dangerous as not having one at all. Case in point- which actually happened to me, we have within the district a tardy policy. And for fear of overcomplicating it, in most cases, a tardy, simply means arriving after the designated time, and specifically we are going to talk about the start of a class period; not a student arriving 30 minutes late, etc. A passing period can fluctuate from 3-5 minutes across our county, so this a separate issue that I will not be addressing. It so happens that PHS adopted a 4-minute passing period this past year. My rule, and it was common at my previous school and amongst several teachers within PHS, is that if you aren't in the room at the tardy bell, you are tardy. Not really a big deal. I don't make a big production, simply note the tardy on attendance and move along. After so many tardies, 3, we are to notify the student that there are consequences... 4, the parent... 6, the office.... etc. Many teachers, especially at PHS, stretch this a little because our campus is so large, an administrator actually walked it with a student and determined that 4 minutes was not adequate enough time to get from one side of campus to the other without using a slight jog, that if "a student is making an attempt to get to the class, they will count it as not being tardy. Hope this makes sense. To get to the point, I followed these steps, pretty religiously. In fact, my partner, with whom I coteach, dubbed me the tardy czar. An administrator commented that I was writing too many referrals. So, we can't have a discipline plan if we aren't enforcing it. And mind you, students can get passes from pretty much any teacher, for nearly any reason, and the tardy would be excused and not count on the student's record. So very long story to get to my first real point... discipline can only be controlled if we allow the rules and the tools put into place to be utilized. If we are afraid of the permanent record issue because a referral has been entered, create a new form that isn't stored in the permanent record.

My second complaint, and I'm sorry teachers this one is on us, is lack of supervision. And I know we are between a rock and a hard place here. We have been instructed to teach bell to bell... we need to get to as many of the standards as we can.... We need to monitor students... we need to be at our doorways and our duties.... The list is endless. And having been a teacher for as long as I have what appears to be an excuse by outsiders is just an inevitable consequence of trying to milk every last second, reach every last student, get a chance to answer questions, oh and at some point, make a pit stop in the restroom between the classes. But we must be supervising all areas at every opportunity. For schools with inside corridors having staggard

supervision might work; instead of having ever teacher at the door every passing period, maybe the school can function with 1/3, so that the others can use the restroom in some sort of prearranged system. But for schools like PHS with many outward facing classrooms, and hundreds of nooks and crannies and staircases, we must have supervision. And I am stuck on this issue for a few reasons. 1. A voter reached out to me earlier this week; I did not get permission to share his story, so I will conceal his identity, but he shared two videos involving fights on campus. In both cases there is a good minute where a faculty member is nowhere to be found. And in one, the lack of urgency by one faculty member to intervene, and I am not encouraging teachers from getting in between fights, in fact we are told not to, was startling. No one was worried about crowd control, no one was on a phone or walkie-talkie. And we are tired and overworked, but the moment we let our guard down, or the moment we stop enforcing the rules is the day we will lose the safety of our schools. We must be there. We must be present and we must be active.

This leads me to my next point consequences. The one thing my competitors and I agree upon is that there must be consequences. Without getting into specifics, I know several candidates, one in District 1, who wants to bring back work detentions: scraping gum, pulling weeds, etc. and corporal punishment (the paddle). Along with many other 1950s style ideas, they are proposing to regress, not improve our schools. Our discipline issues are also only as strong as the resulting consequence is fair, immediate and effective. The consequence of zero-tolerance for fighting and an automatic expulsion, only works if it actually happens. What many do not understand is that expulsion is usually for a school site, not the district. A person expelled from PHS can't attend PHS, but they could be sent to ZHS; although, the more likely location would be Eastside Educational Center (formerly known as James Irvin). However, at some point this movement of students just kicks the can down the road. Eventually too many disciplined students end up in the same place. And we really haven't solved the problem, and in fact we've created another, possibly bigger one. The consequence for tardies shouldn't be eventually to send the student home for ISS; think about it, the punishment for not going to school is to not go to school. Does this make sense? And before you ask, I do not have all of the answers, but I am not afraid to ask the questions. As I will talk about in a future post, part of the solution can be found in creating community-centered schools which foster partnerships with the community and its resources. Maybe sending the child home on ISS can be replaced with meeting with a local official and shadowing that person for the day. Instead of a working lunch detention, where the student is cleaning tables and sweeping, they eat lunch with a local student leadership/advocacy specialist. Maybe that punishment is educational as well as punitive. By utilizing this strategy, we are linking the student to a caring adult, and in some cases it might be the relationship that gets them back on track. Some of these students just need another ear, another body to be present. Also, this shadowing ideas could spark interest in a career or path that had never been opened to them. It didn't happen often, but as I have stated previously, I grew up around education. My mom was a teacher my aunts were in education. Education was promoted and with that focus on education, I was introduced to other likeminded adults and students. Too often, our students are not exposed to this environment. They see the job, not the career. They see the struggle, not the experience. What I am proposing is to provide hope, connection, not just punishment. There will still be records. School events (prom, homecoming, parking passes, etc.) can be restricted, but if we have learned anything the recidivism of the prison system, isolation and confinement don't lead to safer streets.

In fact, I would argue that in many cases those that our most common rule breakers have underlying issues that need to be resolved if we are to break the cycle. Case in point #2. Again, I will withhold names to protect the innocent. But in 2020-21, I had a student in my class that had one of those proverbial discipline files that you see in movies- you know the one that is thicker than a dictionary. The student was labeled as an 11th grader, but his credits, and other factors really made him a freshman. The biggest issue was that he had what I estimate was a 4th grade reading level and he was being forced to use texts that were written above the 12th grade level, to honor the “rigor” that our district was mandating. Now put yourself in this child’s shoes... he has been socially promoted because of his size and his record. After 4th grade there is no real retention... even for failing grades. The system, which I will also talk about in another post isn’t working for you, you can’t understand what is being discussed.... The teacher has 28+ other student with a variety of other issues and needs... and you’ve learned to work the system. “I can’t let my peeps know that I can’t read or write, so I’ll gain their respect by being the meanest dude around.” Street cred is more valuable than educational cred. And this gets me back to discipline. We can write this child up, fill his file some more, pressure him to hate the system, give up, dropout... but that system is a failing system. Our district failed that child, and thousands like him. Because the consequence did address the real problem. He was in the wrong level, being given the wrong curriculum forced into the wrong hole.

So, I digressed a little. My point was that consequences must fit the offense. They must be timely and they must be effective. To do this, we need to understand the causation. Completely odd example here, but I think it will be effective. For those of us who are lucky enough to be parents I want you to image that you have a school-aged child that has an issue wetting the bed. You have a few options here (for the sake of time I will only address two to make my point): one being raise your temper and yell that you spent lots of money on nice sheets and a mattress that they have just ruined; or you talk to them, maybe bring in an expert to see if the bed wetting is rooted in some other issue... maybe you find that there is a bullying issue... My point is the consequences should be based on the causation more than actual event. Back to education, in most cases, discipline in schools looks like the first option. We “yell” that they are wasting their opportunity, we take away devices and privileges in an attempt to punish and correct behavior. But have we? Ask any teacher, and in most schools, it is a handful of students getting a majority of the discipline concerns. If they are still breaking the rules, the punishment and/or consequences aren’t working. And I know that there will be people who would point out that there are kids who just like the chaos, or who are “bad kids”. To them, I would argue that in my years of experience those kids are the exception not the rule. As students age up to the secondary level, we, the system, have hardened that attitude. We need to utilize intervention strategies much earlier. Those interventions I mentioned earlier, like utilizing community resources, like All Pro Dads and mentoring programs, can work. Placing students in the right level, course and path is extremely important.

What I have learned through my experiences is that these issues which I will try to address are linked. Fixing one requires fixing comments of others. By retaining the experienced educator who has seen many of the discipline issues before and respecting their insight by bringing them to the discussion, we can fix these issues. Please don’t mistake what I am saying as that I think we need to go easy on students. Corporal punishment was not the answer in the past and it is not the answer as we progress to the future. We need to create interventions that deter students from going down the path that leads to one using physical violence. Not that I want to go down this rabbit hole, but it is the same argument I used when I protested the bill to arm teachers several

years ago. The message that is being sent is that we correct behavior, we persuade, we intimidate with threat, fear and violence. What has been lost is the ability to talk, listen and reason. Our discipline plan needs to involve more of the latter and less of the former. We need a discipline plan that improves behavior, because a majority of our students do the right thing consistently. Where we have issues is when the consequences are not equitable, when they are not fair and when they are not enforced day to day.

In the end, I believe that we have a handful of issues: tardies, dress code, skipping, cheating, smoking or vaping, etc. that are issues at every level. Although they can occur at any school, we have studies and documentation that identifies where those issues are of the greatest threat. We need to utilize intervention strategies there. For the other issues mentioned at the top of this paragraph, we need consistent enforcement. We need punishments that do not remove the child from the educational setting. We need to determine why the student is missing a particular class and fix the problem at the source. Returning the schools to a bygone era is not the solution. Yes, students need to be held accountable for their decisions, but that accountability should include solutions to prevent it from recurring, not incentivize the missing of school, violence or the upkeep of schools. We should create an atmosphere where the gum isn't under the desk to be scraped. Where student see the importance of the class they are taking because it is linked to the future they envision. And finally, we need to look at the entire situation.

And this brings me to the one area that I haven't even mentioned yet- the district's matrix. This is the guide that we must follow when making disciplinary decisions. It is laid out in the student code of conduct. Everyone has an opportunity to review it. Students sign a statement that they have seen it each year. But to save you the trouble of going to look for it, I linked it [here](#).(p 38 in the document). A quick summary... This matrix lays out possible and mandatory interventions and steps that can/must be taken for a given disciplinary infraction; i.e. selling drugs must be reported to law enforcement, wearing clothing that isn't appropriate, the student gets another outfit etc. Of course, like any other matrix, infraction #1 has the least severe consequence, and a student should face more consequences with multiple infractions. Skip class once, you have lunch detention (just an example), skip 3 times now we are talking ISS/OSS, etc. Pretty simple thing to follow. But what this system does, is it removes the why. It removes the conversation that allows us to get to the root of the problem. Now I am not suggesting that a school officials call the student down... they look at the menu on the matrix and say here's the consequence... take this paper and go to the next step. I believe most school personnel do their very best to talk about the situation, gain insight, try to get to know the student and the situation. But a simple matrix, or a zero-tolerance policy does allow it to become very transactional, even thoughtless. We cannot remove the human element. I want to return to the parent who contacted me earlier this week who shared the two videos. He asked me if I could spot the differences and project what consequences may have been handed out. To be clear, I mentioned that there is much more than watching a video that needs to go into the decision: there are statement to review, conversations to be had, the camera does not catch all. However, to me the second video which showed two girls absolutely beating each other up was far worse than the other incident. In fact, in one video, you can clearly hear another student using racial slurs. Now I did not get all of the facts, I did not check his account, but this parent stated that the two girls and the one that used a racial slur received little to no consequences. This is where our discipline matrix fails. A kid who retaliates, and I am not suggesting that we should promote retaliation, but kids won't make the best choices all the time, should not be expelled simply because he lost control when his race was being insulted. And two young ladies should not get less punishment because their fight

didn't lead to hospitalization. We must do better. We must use the matrix as a tool, a guideline, a starting point and not a finishing line.

Finally, let me circle back to my 4th grade reading level student. All-to-often discipline issues are caused by students who have been failed by the system. Over the past decades there has been a push to force every student to be college ready, and on the surface, it is not a bad idea.

However, in practice it leaves way too many behind. I would argue, and my experience would support this, that we need to offer opportunities to get some of these students into programs that prepare them for work. And yes, Pasco County has many opportunities for certifications and career focus electives. But, as I have stated in previous conversations, and it is a hill that I will defend- these programs are not available to many of the most needy students. Because this student had referrals, poor grades, etc. he wouldn't be considered for any of these placements. Instead, we discipline the student out of education. Too many referrals, too many days out of school, and the gap between school and this child's life because too great to bridge. As I stated earlier in this piece, and it's a point I will defend till the end, we must make sure that we have students placed in the appropriate programs. If we fail to do this, few interventions will work! Access to school to job instruction must be made available to all students. Consultations for learning disabilities and school provided services should be ongoing; and these things need to be funded. So again, I say, fixing one thing causes other things to be fixed. To improve discipline, we need to reduce the factors that cause students to break the rules. In some cases, it is a lapse in judgment, a kid being a kid. But more times than not, rules are broken because the student is looking for a way out. Their misbehavior is a sign, a plead for intervention. We must meet this challenge by providing a system that intervenes quickly, equitably and consistently.

We need to hold students accountable, but punishments that remove the child completely from the educational system doesn't improve the educational experience. And I know someone will say, it will improve the situation for the other students. And I agree, I will not simply keep the student in a room to disrupt the learning environment. But there needs to be alternatives. Support staff and administration need to be visible, and actively monitoring the classrooms, not stuck in an office building waiting for a call. And I know that they are dealing with parent calls and hundreds of other issues to keep those issues from falling on the teachers. But being present, being visible, creating relationships with the students creates an environment that is less confrontational. Again, little things like dress code and tardies will still occur. But, with better monitoring, better relationships, more consistent and equitable consequences, we can improve discipline. Above all else we need to be fair to all students, the ones that follow the rules and the ones that bend/break them. The system is working right now. And it needs a newer and fresher approach, not a return to the "way we did it when I was in school".

I hope you give me the opportunity to serve on your school board. On August 23rd, you have the opportunity to make that happen. I may not have all of the solutions, but I am willing to work to find solutions that work for everyone. Know that I will put students and staff first. I will fight to make our public schools safer and more equitable.