The Challenges Facing Schools Today

Schools today are facing intense scrutiny and are under tremendous pressure for improvement compounded by major issues that place significant demands on our schools. Some of the issues are:

- ▶ Increasing diversity of student demographics
- ▶ Changing home structures
- ▶ Growing student alienation
- ▶ Increased exposure to violence
- ▶ Dropout crisis
- ▶ Students with special needs
- ▶ Stringent academic accountability

Impact of Behavior Problems on Students & Educators

Problem behavior exists in every school and though varied in frequency and intensity, it remains a concern for administrators, teachers, parents, students, and the community. The National Education Goals Report (1995) and the U. S. Departments of Justice and Education annual report (2014) indicate a lack of discipline is viewed as one of the most serious challenges facing public schools.

Lower student achievement. Teachers report that "uncivil" behavior is increasing and is a threat to learning. Up to 50% of the school day is lost due to misbehavior during transitions, discipline, and other non-instructional activities (Cotton, 1990; Sugai & Horner, 1994).

School failure and life-long difficulties. Students with discipline problems are clearly at risk for school failure and developing more severe antisocial behaviors as well as other life-long difficulties. These students tend to experience juvenile delinquency, social isolation, diminished employment rates and income, and more frequent legal and mental health issues (Gresham, 1984).

Increased use of exclusionary practices. As behavior problems have increased, so have exclusionary practices such as detentions, in-school suspension, homebound instruction, shortened school day, referral to alternative schools, administrative transfers, or ignored truancies that restrict student access to learning (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Over 90 percent of schools had implemented some form of zero tolerance policy by 2001 (Kaufman, et al, 2001; Skiba, Peterson, & Williams (1997).

Administrative job demands. As principals report that their workweek exceeds 60 hours, many feel their effectiveness as an instructional leader is being hindered by student discipline (Hedges, 1991; Trump, 1987).

Teacher effectiveness and morale hindered. Studies show up to 60% of new teachers leave the profession within the first five years, often citing student discipline as the primary reasons for leaving (Martinez, 2001). There is a growing sense of frustration, as more is demanded of educators under challenging circumstances.

School improvement initiatives impeded. Our schools have long histories of unfulfilled efforts to improve instruction, assessment and academic outcomes for students. When discipline issues impact the school climate teachers, principals, parents and students are affected (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Gordon, 2002).

Rethinking Discipline

The Traditional View of Discipline

For the most part, our approaches to school discipline are still based on the punitive and exclusionary policies developed when public education began in the early 1900s and schools were oriented toward the academically inclined and socially acceptable. Today, the child at the schoolhouse door has created a swing in the balance of power in schools and classrooms. While the teacher's authority was once taken virtually for granted, now teachers are confronted with students who challenge that authority. A resulting focus or greater emphasis on maintaining control has led to an increasingly reactive and often punitive approach.

Whether intentionally or unintentionally, schools have a long history of being exclusive. Discipline policies act as a means to weed out students less able, less motivated, or poorly behaved. When educators are asked to define discipline, the most common response is "punishment for rule-breaking behavior." Schools develop lists of prohibitive rules and a series of increasingly severe punishments for violators of these rules. Unfortunately, such a punitive view of discipline results in approaches that have questionable, if not harmful, effects (Skiba & Peterson, 2000; U.S. Department of Education 2014). Punishment focuses on what not to do, does not teach desired behaviors, can damage relationships, impedes learning, and leads to students dropping out of school. Some educators feel that these punitive and exclusionary practices have served them well to eliminate the irritating and unnecessary intrusions to their teaching agendas. Many believe that students know the right way to behave, that their behavior is a performance deficit and that they have the skills but are merely choosing defiance or insubordination. They therefore assume that punishment will bring a halt to the problem behavior and the student will behave appropriately.

In reality, punishments satisfy the punisher, but have little lasting effect on the punished (Losen, 2011). These exclusionary approaches are in direct conflict with school missions to help all students achieve their fullest potential. Our punitive policies fail the very students they target (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

Discipline is Teaching

As we seek to ensure inclusive learning environments, our attitudes regarding discipline must change. Is discipline concerned with punishing misconduct or with preventing it? According to the dictionary, it refers to prevention and remediation, "training to act in accordance with rules;" and "instruction and exercise designed to train to proper conduct or action;" "training that is expected to produce a specified character pattern of behavior;" and "controlled behavior resulting from such training."

> ## Dis•ci•pline
> n. *(fr. Latin disciplina, teaching, learning)*
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> Instruction that corrects, molds or perfects character and develops self-control.
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> Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary

Reaching today's students requires a teaching focus–teaching students how to be successful and behave responsibly in school. This is based on the belief that social behavior is learned, therefore it can be taught. Students can be taught socially acceptable ways of behaving just as one would teach any academic subject. Discipline should be based on the very same instructional concepts used to facilitate academic learning. Direct instruction in social behaviors can be provided to students, and practice, encouragement, and correction given as needed. And just as with academics, when behavior problems are complex or chronic, specialized interventions or intensive teaching arrangements may be necessary. A comparison of approaches to academic and social problems is shown in Figure 1.

The Role of Social Competence

As early as the 1970s, some educators stated that social development has more impact than cognitive development on determining success or failure in school as well as society. A lack of social skills has been linked to juvenile delinquency, grade retention, suspensions, truancy, dropping out, lower self-esteem, and delayed cognitive development (Gresham, 1984). In 1996, the Alliance for Curriculum Reform set goals for student learning in the 21st century: 1) learning how to learn and integrate knowledge, 2) communication skills, 3) thinking and reasoning, 4) interpersonal skills, and 5) personal and social responsibility. This emphasis on social competence by schools is mirrored by the world of work. As adults, social deficits have been correlated with inability to gain and maintain employment, discharge from military service, involvement with the judicial system, and mental health problems.

Since social competence plays such a significant role in life-long success, it is a legitimate school task worthy of our time and resources. In January of 2014 the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice published a joint policy report entitled Guiding Principles: A Resource Guide for Improving School Climate & Discipline. This document articulates a plan to a) create a positive climates that focus on prevention, b) Develop clear, appropriate, and consistent expectations and consequences to address disruptive student behaviors, and c) ensure fairness, equity, and continuous improvement. The report specifically mentions the implementation of Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) as a systematic process to achieve these goals (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

Academic & Social Problems: A Comparison of Approaches [1]

ERROR TYPE	APPROACHES FOR ACADEMIC PROBLEMS	INEFFECTIVE APPROACHES FOR SOCIAL PROBLEMS
Infrequent	▶ Assume student is trying to make correct response; error was accidental, a skill deficit. ▶ Provide assistance (teach, model, guide, check) ▶ Provide more practice and feedback; monitor progress. ▶ Assume student has learned skill and will perform correctly in the future.	▶ Assume student is choosing to be "bad;" error was deliberate, a performance deficit. ▶ Use consequences/punish. ▶ Practice not required. ▶ Assume student has "learned" lesson and will behave in the future.
Frequent	▶ Assume student has learned the wrong way or has inadvertently been taught wrong way. ▶ Diagnose problem; identify misrule or determine more effective way to teach. ▶ Adjust teaching arrangements to accommodate learner needs. Provide practice and feedback. ▶ Assume student has learned skill and will perform correctly in the future.	▶ Assume the student is refusing to cooperate; student knows what is right, has been told to stop, and is being insubordinate. ▶ Provide more severe consequences; remove the student from normal context (office referral, detention, suspension, etc.) ▶ Maintain student removal from the normal context. ▶ Assume student has "learned" lesson and will behave in the future.

Figure 1.1

1 Modified from Colvin & Sugai, 1988.

DISCUSSION

What did you hear that gives you pause to rethink your understanding of discipline? Share the key ideas that might change your view of discipline.