**Suspending Students is the Easy Way Out**

By Matthew Guldin

Recently, a number of conservative writers and charter school executives have attacked the idea of replacing “zero tolerance” discipline policies with alternatives such as “restorative justice,” saying such moves reflect a “soft” or lax approach to discipline that will destroy order in the classroom.

Let me tell you what’s soft – handing out suspensions. It’s the so-called tough punishment that’s taking the easy way out. When you suspend a boy or girl from school, you’re just isolating the student, not addressing the real problem. Pushing them out of school ignores all of the underlying issues. It doesn’t make for any lasting changes in either the young person’s behavior or the professional growth of adult teachers or staff.

Restorative justice practices are much harder because they take so much time and require students, teachers and administrators to do the hard work of resolving conflict and changing behavior. Given the daunting numbers, suspension can seem like the easier route.

Last year alone, New York City public schools suspended more than 53,000 students. Only 1 percent of those suspensions involved violence or other serious misconduct. The biggest single cause for suspension was “defying authority”/insubordination-for ‘offenses’ such as not putting away your phone, taking off your hat or moving quickly to your class.

In scores of schools in the city, people are moving away from zero tolerance because we’ve found it to be ineffective. When you suspend a student, it might stop the behavior in the short run but the student doesn’t learn the social skills needed to handle conflict differently. And if a similar situation happens in the future, the student will respond the same way again and they’ll be suspended again, and the cycle will repeat itself.

We also know – because the research on this is crystal clear – that multiple suspensions greatly increase a young person’s chances of dropping out, interacting with police and winding up in jail.

Let me provide just one example of how restorative justice practices work in real life. An assistant principal responds to disruption in a classroom and scolds a group of girls for being loud. One girl responds with curses. She’s removed and taken to the Dean’s office for a possible three-day suspension. But then the assistant principal and student sit down with the dean and discuss what happened, explain their feelings and why they reacted as they did and apologize. They both return to the classroom the next day to reveal the outcome and share their strategies for avoiding similar incidents in the future.

Bottom line – the student missed one day of that class instead of three. The student grew emotionally and the administrator professionally. The two built a new bond between them and the class’ consciousness grew. The restorative response directly addressed the “why” behind the defiance of authority. But it took time. It would have been far easier just to kick the girl out of school for three days.

Listening to another’s feelings, explaining your actions and sharing your feelings, coming up with ways to change behavior . . . all this is hard. For adults as well as children. But it can lead to significant behavioral changes and a more positive and safer learning environment.

Recent studies and reports from school districts across the nation show students feel safer and academic outcomes improve when suspensions drop and alternative approaches such as restorative justice are implemented.  In Oakland, California, where the school district has been supporting schools to implement restorative justice practices since 2005, graduation rates have increased by 60 percent, reading levels have increased by 128 percent, and chronic absenteeism is down by 24 percent in schools using these practices.

Restorative practices work best when they are adopted school-wide and embraced by the entire community. That comes with some expense since school personnel need to be trained and behavioral specialists should be in place. Schools can cover some of the cost by shifting resources currently spent on police and other harsh discipline practices to hiring counselors and training teachers and principals in restorative approaches. But to be truly successful, implementing restorative practices should be a funding priority for school districts, county agencies and states.

Unlike zero tolerance, none of this is easy. Ultimately, it’s a choice between paying somewhat more now or paying much more later when students drop out of school and enter the juvenile justice system after being repeatedly suspended.

*Matthew Guldin is a School Climate Coach in a number of New York City public schools.*

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