

Suspend or Innovate? Alternative Discipline That Works!

As school administrators, we have both experienced the emotions and challenges connected with students making poor decisions in schools that result in school discipline/consequences. We have also experienced the pushback from teachers, parents, and district leadership that comes with not following a black and white handbook approach to discipline. If you are truly committed to using innovative/alternative approaches to discipline, it must be: **Restorative, Reflective, and Instructional.**

This requires thinking beyond the traditional method of sending students home and hoping that either a) their parents will teach them not to do it again, or b) being home from school will teach them not to do it again. It also requires that the message to students, teachers, and parents isn't "We just don't suspend anymore." Opponents to alternatives argue the message sent to students who misbehave is that there are no consequences for their actions because they know they won't be suspended. We would argue: If that is the culture of your school, you aren't using alternatives effectively. When used correctly, the alternative will be much more impactful and meaningful than simply sending a student home for a few days. Here is a case study example of how innovative discipline works.

Case Study: During recess, two sixth grade male students began arguing over the rules during a football game. This topic has been an ongoing debate between these two boys for the past several weeks. On this particular day, the students were yelling at each other during the game, which attracted a crowd. The yard duty teacher noticed the commotion and was able to intervene. She pulled the boys aside and had them apologize to each other and made them agree not to engage in such behavior again. Both boys agreed to follow the rules, but were not over the conflict from the game. Although the yard duty teacher believed she had resolved the conflict, she did not realize that one of the students did not know how to get over what he believed to be an injustice and had his friends tell the other boy to meet him in the bathroom after school to fight. The other boy did not want to meet him, but was taunted by his peers to do so throughout the school day. After school, he reluctantly met in the bathroom and engaged in a fight to resolve the issue from the morning football game. The administrator got word of the fight and was able to intervene shortly after it started. After stopping the fight, the administrator had a choice to make about the consequence given. She knew both of these boys and had dealt with them through suspensions in the past, so she challenged herself to try something different, knowing her other methods were not effective up to this point. She wanted to make sure the consequence was one that would teach the importance of handling conflict appropriately in the future. Traditionally, she would have referenced the school discipline handbook and suspended them both for 3 days, but decided to look at this discipline differently.

Innovative/Alternative Discipline: Below is the response from the administrator that changed behavior for both students as well as how she approached discipline from this point on. The handling of this incident was also a catalyst to how students and staff at her school viewed the commitment to changing behavior. In the past, she would have used her short conflict resolution script she was trained to use for incidents similar to this one, but decided to take it many steps deeper into the conflict and resolution. Her steps were simple and to the point with the students. She brought the boys into her office and explained the phases of their consequence. After hearing them, one student actually said he would prefer to be suspended than have to complete all the alternative components of the consequence. He told the administrator he had been suspended plenty of times before and at least this way the consequence would be over when he came back to school. The administrator asked the student if being suspended helped change his behavior? The boy answered, "for a little bit,

until someone else made me mad.” So she decided at this point to use innovative/alternative discipline that was designed to help change behavior for the long term.

Phase 1 (Restorative): Together, they began by completing a restorative behavior contract with each other. Each student had to share where they felt an injustice took place, write an apology to each other, commit to a resolution, and agree to the progress monitoring terms of the agreement they created together. Both students along with the administrator signed the document.

Phase 2 (Instructional): They were assigned six sessions each of hands off academy. Hands off academy was designed to provide a behavior teaching opportunity for both students to learn other methods of resolving conflict rather than through violence. In these courses, the administrator taught coping strategies to the students when dealing with conflict and checked the application of learned skills through behavior scenarios and a culminating behavior exam.

Phase 3 (Reflective): The students had a set check in date and time with the administrator on a weekly basis where they had to progress monitor their restorative contract and learn about each other. They were asked to both derive thirty questions they wanted answered about each other, they were asked to interview each other, and prepare a presentation about the other student. This allowed them to have a safe space to learn about each other and how to accept similarities and differences.

Phase 4 (Instructional): Both boys were assigned a project aligned with sports game rules and character. They had to present the rules of the football game to the sixth grade class and also provide strategies for students to use when they become upset during a sports game. In addition, they had to become referees of the football game and focus on identifying students playing the game by the rules and showing character.

Phase 5 (Restorative): Both boys were celebrated for their hard work learning from this major behavior incident at their school. They both had to write a reflection about what they learned from this experience and create an individual contract ensuring they would not engage in this type of behavior again.

For this consequence to be effective and meaningful, it had to be **Restorative, Reflective, and Instructional**. Notice the administrator used a combination of the three (two restorative, two instructional, and one reflective); there isn't a secret formula for how many of each to use as long as you include all three. This administrator used her discretion based on the fact this wasn't a first offense for these students and understood what these students would respond to best.

Discipline must be viewed as an opportunity to teach and change behavior. Consequences must be strategically thought out and intentionally implemented based on each student by name, by need the same way a school system responds to a student who struggles to learn academically. As you can imagine, this approach is much more time consuming for an administrator, however, seeing a student's behavior change because you believed in them is equally as fulfilling as seeing a student learn because a teacher believed in and supported them.

When a school is firmly grounded in a solid Tier one school-wide system for behavior (see *The PBIS Tier One Handbook*) and utilizes effective alternatives that are restorative, reflective, and instructional, you will see a dramatic reduction in the number of incidents and a significant increase in the positive culture on your campus. In our next blog, we will provide six tips on how to assign innovative/alternative discipline that works.