



School Discipline vs. Conflict Resolution

Key to understanding why the traditional approach to student conflict is lacking is this: *Most schools simply do not employ a systematic approach to managing student conflict.* Rather, they have a disciplinary system that by default is used for conflict management. Unfortunately, the latter is not well suited for the former.

The rationale of the typical school disciplinary system can be summarized as follows:

For schools to accomplish their educational mission, students must behave in a manner that is conducive to learning. To ensure that they do so, students are subject to the strictures placed upon them by a disciplinary code. The code prohibits everything from physical violence, destroying school property, and drug use, to teasing, talking out of turn, and passing notes in class. Negative consequences are assigned to offenses in order to discourage students from engaging in them. When violations do occur, offending students are brought before a disciplinarian where they receive punishment. The entire school community is informed of this code.

How effective such disciplinary codes are at ensuring that students behave appropriately is uncertain. But they are clearly ineffective at helping student reconcile interpersonal differences. The recent increase in student conflict has made this clear. There are a number of reasons for this.

- Disciplinary systems do not distinguish between disciplinary offenses and interpersonal conflict. Most interpersonal conflicts between students are just that, between students. They do not involve the violation of a school rule. Two students in conflict over a boyfriend, for instance, might never take action that constitutes a disciplinary offense. As a result, their conflict, like the majority of student interpersonal conflicts, does not come to the attention of the system. In effect, students must wait for their conflict to escalate, leading one of them to break a school rule, before the system pays attention. The potential for students to refer themselves or their peers for conflict resolution assistance is also lost.
- Even when conflicts come to the attention of the system, the focus is primarily on the disciplinary offense and not on the interpersonal dimension of a conflict. It is quite common for two students who fight to be suspended for their behavior, but never encouraged by the school to resolve the issues that led to the behavior in the first place. Such students serve their three-day suspensions and then return to classes without discussing their conflict in any depth.
- The disciplinary system relies almost exclusively upon sanctions and negative reinforcement. The power of school discipline lies in its ability to mandate punishment for students who break the rules. Short of expulsion, suspension and detention represent the ultimate sanctions in the disciplinary arsenal. Theoretically, this "negative feedback" steers young people away from destructive behaviors and toward proper conduct. Unfortunately, however, sanctions are often ineffective and even harmful to students involved in interpersonal conflicts.



- Rather than resolve the issues in an interpersonal conflict, sanctions can escalate a conflict. Both students, angered because each was suspended on account of the other, retaliate with even greater force when they return to school.
- The degree to which sanctions deter the violation of the school rules is unclear. Many students are suspended more than once for the same offense. Suspension alone does not help young people understand, take responsibility for, or control their actions.
- Sanctions like suspension undermine the basic educational mission of the school by removing those students from school who can least afford to miss it. And by giving them the message that they do not belong in school, suspension can contribute to students' desire to drop out altogether.*
- Suspensions and other sanctions are often applied inequitably. Some research has shown that children of color receive these punishments more frequently than Caucasian children who commit the same offenses.
- The effectiveness of suspension and detention has been diminished by changes in the contemporary family. Whereas in the past, being suspended from school would be met with disapproval and even additional punishment at home, today this is less likely. Some students enjoy the time away from school, where they can watch TV and spend time with friends who have already dropped out. "In-house" suspension, in which students are suspended from classes but are required to spend the school day doing schoolwork in a supervised room, was designed in part to prevent this.

Of course, disciplinary consequences serve an essential function within schools. Some students must be suspended or even expelled because of their behavior. Punishment can frighten students into doing the right thing or not repeating antisocial behavior. And teachers and students are sometimes able to put their relationship on a more productive footing after they have had a break from one another.

But disciplinary sanctions have a limited usefulness. Schools need methods that not only deter inappropriate behavior, but that motivate students to "do the right thing." Though sanctions may enforce compliance and conformity, they do not inspire prosocial behavior.

Most relevant to our inquiry, however, applying sanctions does little to help students resolve interpersonal conflicts. In the end, school disciplinary systems are simply not designed for this purpose. Educators who seek to integrate collaborative conflict resolution into their schools must create approaches that work separately from the disciplinary system.

*For an excellent study of the effects of "student exclusion practices," see *The Way Out: Student Exclusion Practices in Boston Middle Schools* (Boston: Massachusetts Advocacy Center, November, 1986).