

Out of Control and Failing: Improving Discipline and Learning at Two High Schools

By Russ Thompson, Ed.D.

When I began my teaching career in 1979, it was a very rough start. The kids ran all over me. I almost quit after my third week because I was unable to establish control. Luckily, due to the help of teachers who took me under their wing and worked with me, my skills improved and I was able to establish discipline. My classes got better and I began to enjoy teaching. But it was a very difficult start. It was also very painful.

I went on to spend six years as a teacher and mentor teacher, four years as a dean, and six years as an assistant principal. After that I spent almost twelve years as the principal of three different high schools. I am now providing support to principals as a director of school services.

I have learned that schools can become safe and orderly if adults do the right things. First, you must acknowledge that there is a discipline problem and be determined that you will do whatever is necessary to fix it. Second, you must establish a clear set of rules with fair and consistent consequences. You must also develop a very tight system of record keeping and follow-up. Third, you must focus on building positive student attitudes. This means getting students to believe in themselves, to establish goals, and to strive for their goals every day.

I have seen a lot of good people get run out of teaching because they were not successful in establishing discipline. I have seen many students suffer because they were in classrooms that were out of control. I have also seen principals fail and lose their jobs because of discipline problems. Schools should be safe and orderly places of learning with high expectations. This is the story of two schools that were very much out of control. Improving the discipline at these schools made it possible to improve student achievement.

Out of Control and Failing

When I began as principal of my second high school, discipline was seriously out of control. Tensions among students were high, with frequent fighting, gang activity, and racial unrest. On-campus truancy was rampant. Students would bring Super Soaker water guns in their backpacks and have water fights in the halls. Student conduct in classrooms was frequently out of control. In one of the first classes I spoke to, students told me that I was at "the riot school." In many of the classrooms I observed, much of the work given to students was busywork just to keep the lid on. Teacher morale was very low. The feeling I got from many teachers was that they had given up hope, and they did not want to be there.

Through teamwork and determination we made significant improvements, and the school became extremely orderly and extremely safe. Student achievement also increased significantly. The Academic Performance Index rose 82 points over five years, from 437 to 519.

When I began as principal of my third high school, it was also out of control. On my first day there, when the tardy bell rang to begin second period, approximately five hundred students were still wandering around out of class.

There was frequent fighting and gang activity. Bathrooms were unsafe, and there were frequent strong-arm robberies. Teams of police had been called frequently to the school because of racial unrest. Academically, due to a failure to test enough students, the school had not received an Academic Performance Index score in three years. The morale of students and teachers was very low. The feeling I got from staff members was that it was a bad school, and that it could not get better.

Through teamwork and dedicated efforts, this school also improved significantly. It changed from a dangerous school to one that was safe and orderly. Student achievement also improved significantly. The Academic Performance rose 107 points over four years, from 484 to 591.

Improving Discipline

These improvements took persistent and focused efforts. Staff morale had been very low for a long time. And many people believed that the schools could not improve.

The first step at both schools was for me to talk to administrators, teachers, support staff, parents, and students to get their impressions of the problems that needed to be fixed. I met with them in small groups and asked them to identify their concerns. I then recorded their concerns in writing. This formed the foundation of the improvement plans at both schools.

The next step was to create systematic programs to improve student conduct. The focus, based upon the "broken window" strategies implemented by William Bratton when he was police commissioner in New York City, was to make sure that small violations were fully addressed as a way of preventing major violations. We also created positive programs to build self-esteem and increase motivation.

We established tardy sweeps every day, every period. Administrators, deans, and campus supervisors were stationed throughout all areas of the campus during passing periods. The duration of our bells was lengthened to twelve seconds. When the tardy bell finished ringing, every student had to be in class. Any students who were out of class were sent to a centrally located guidance classroom. Students who were sent to the guidance classroom completed essays which were mailed home to their parents. In these essays they explained why they were tardy and how they would improve. When their essays were completed they engaged in sustained silent reading. Students who accumulated three tardies during period one received Saturday school. Students who had any tardy during periods two through six were issued Saturday school. Improvements were significant. On a typical day after lunch, at my third school of 3,400 students, we would have three or four students tardy in the entire school.

We established a detention program during lunch for students who violated class rules. When teachers assigned detention, they were also required to call home. Students who could not serve detention during lunch were allowed to write detention essays at home. Students who failed to complete detention by the following day were sent to the guidance room, where they received Saturday school.

Saturday school was conducted every Saturday of the school year from 9:00 a.m. to noon in the auditorium. It was taught by a team of three teachers and

me. Our goal was to motivate students and help them develop positive attitudes about school. The students did written work about being successful in school. As they were writing, we circulated among them to speak with them individually and give encouragement. We also gave them motivational speeches about believing in themselves, setting goals, and achieving their dreams. On an average Saturday we had 75 to 100 students. I saw many students develop positive attitudes and make great improvements as a result of Saturday school. This was a huge reason for the improvements we experienced.

We established a zero-one suspension program for students who failed to report to Saturday school. A computerized record-keeping system was developed to keep track of all students issued Saturday school. Students who failed to report to Saturday school were issued zero-one suspensions. In a zero-one suspension, we cancelled the suspension if the parent came to school for a parent conference on the following day. Our goal was to keep students in school by working with them to improve their behavior.

We also provided positive recognition for students who were doing a good job. Once a month we awarded medals to students nominated by their teachers for academic achievement, improvement, and good citizenship. We would then take a group picture of them and make a large poster for our main hall. These awards had a significant impact. For many students, it was the first time they had ever received an award.

Improving Supervision

We made a very strong effort to improve supervision. Our basic goal was to ensure that students were supervised in every part of the campus throughout the entire school day. Hall passes, except for discipline referrals or passes to the health office, were prohibited during the first and last ten minutes of each class period.

We watched students very closely and we worked very hard to prevent fighting. If we saw unusual grouping during lunch or we sensed that students were having a conflict, we would make a "503" radio call. This was a signal for our supervision staff to round up the particular students and bring them into a classroom where we would identify and talk to them. We also made a strong effort to identify and keep a close watch on suspected gang members. Any students who fought were suspended for three to five days. They were also cited by the police. When they returned from suspension they participated in mediation to make sure that the fighting did not happen again.

We also extended our range of supervision after school. At my second school this involved walking with students to a shopping center and a park. At my third school we extended supervision to a McDonald's and a transit station. We coordinated these efforts with law enforcement. Our goal was to prevent all fighting, both on and off campus.

Interventions for High-Need Students

At my third school we provided intervention services for students through grants and special programs. This allowed us to provide anger management classes, family services, and parenting classes.

We also served as the site of a ten-week boot camp program conducted on

Saturdays by the police department. Parents would refer their children to boot camp if they were out of control at home or if they had been in trouble with the law. During boot camp the students would engage in marching and physical training. They would also participate in group counseling. Parents of the boot camp students would attend parenting classes. This program built self-esteem and had a very positive impact on many students.

Improving Teaching and Learning

We made a very strong effort to program all students correctly and create a very solid master schedule that would require no changes. This allowed us to get off to a very good start each semester, with students scheduled into correct classes and very few class changes.

At my third school we provided professional development time for teachers to work together in subject-specific learning teams. The teachers in these learning teams were asked to create standards-based common assessments that would be given prior to the ten, twenty, thirty, and forty-week report cards. Teachers in these learning teams would discuss the achievement of their students on the common assessments. They would also share instructional techniques.

A Better Learning Environment

When I arrived at my second and third high schools, many people had given up hope that they could ever improve. By taking simple measures to improve student conduct and foster positive attitudes, we improved the learning atmosphere and created an environment where teachers could concentrate on teaching and students could concentrate on learning. This created a foundation that made it possible to improve student achievement.

Russ Thompson is a director of school services at an urban school district in California. He is also a member of the ACSA Urban Education Committee. He may be reached at russ.thomp@verizon.net.