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Consistency, documentation key in discipline policies

When it comes to effective discipline policies, there's no silver bullet. These policies are the result of hard work, collaboration and planning and require the ongoing support and commitment of key players.

Take a school-wide approach

Research shows that the best discipline policies must be developed and implemented by a range of participants (administrators, teachers and staff) consistent throughout the school and designed to reflect and address a range of student behaviors.

Effective leadership by the principal is critical. The principal must be a visible presence in the school — management by walking around is vital. He or she must also connect with staff and students on an individual level and model desired behaviors for staff, parents and students.

Be data driven

Unless a school is capturing and analyzing critical data, it's difficult to recognize — other than anecdotally — problem areas and policy impact. Data also takes some of the emotion out of issues related to school climate.

"There's a strong link between school climate and behavior, but you must collect and analyze data to determine effectiveness," said Kimberly Charis, project director for the National Association of State Boards of Education in Arlington, Va. "Information about expulsions, suspensions, office referrals, attendance data and graduation rates helps determine the success of your disciplinary practices. Plus, it encourages a level of transparency."

Document

In addition to helping uncover patterns and addressing key issues, documentation helps ensure consistency and can be critical if your staff or school ever faces legal action. Make sure your records include the student's name, reason for referral/action, time of day, staff member's name, location and discipline steps taken.

Go beyond zero tolerance

According to the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), "zero tolerance" was originally defined as "consistently

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Risk Reporter talks with Ken Trump, president of National School Safety and Security Services® in Cleveland, Ohio



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enforced suspension and expulsion policies in response to weapons, drugs and violent acts in the school setting." Now, zero tolerance has grown to include policies that dictate mandated consequences for a variety of rule violations. According to the NASP, research shows that "as implemented, zero tolerance policies are ineffective in the long run."

"In too many cases, it's been used to punish students for nonviolent offenses — things that would be better addressed in other ways," Charis said. "This affects a disproportionate number of minorities and those who receive special education services and is a very reactive approach. There's strong consensus that unless it's a safety or security issue, we need a graduated approach."

At Jennings School in Jennings, Okla., the discipline policy calls for a warning and a call to the parent for a first-time offense. Next is a parent conference and, possibly, detention followed by an in-school placement (the student is separated from the general population but still at school). "We try not to suspend out of school unless there's a violation of state policy, but that is an option on a first offense for a serious violation, such as one related to drugs or weapons," said Derrick Meador, principal at Jennings.

Develop an appeals process

"In our district, a written appeal must be filed within five days of the offense," Meador said. "The student might be allowed to have in-school placement during this time. This appeal goes to the superintendent. If the parents aren't happy with that decision, they have the right to appeal to the local board of education."

Build relationships

"Get to the root cause of a behavior," Meador said. "If you've seen the same child five or six times, maybe there's something happening at home or there's a personality conflict. By looking more closely at the situation, you have a better chance to make a meaningful difference."

Relationships are at the heart of improved school climate. "Instead of reacting to conflict, it's important to build a climate where people feel heard and valued and to develop discipline practices around that," Charis said.

Share expectations

At Jennings School, staff spends the first two days of every school year — and part of a day following winter break — taking fifth through eighth grade students through the school handbook. "In the past, we heard a lot of, 'I didn't know that was in the handbook' when students got in trouble," Meador said. "Now, the students know exactly what our expectations are."

Jennings' teachers use poetry, essays and lively discussions to give students the chance to learn school policy on everything from bullying and inappropriate language to respect and acceptable behavior. "This has made a huge difference in our school's culture," Meador said.

Provide discipline training

"Classroom management is key to effective teacher performance, and we consistently hear from teachers that they do not feel they have sufficient preparation in this area," Charis said. "Classroom management is an emerging policy issue in teacher preparation that state boards of education and boards of higher education should work on collaboratively."

Use office referrals sparingly

"If teachers send a student to the office for every little thing, this undermines their authority," Meador said. "Kids are smart — they'll figure out the teacher can't handle them. The office should be your resource for larger issues or recurring problems."

Be consistent and fair

"When there's an incident, investigate and listen to all sides," Meador said. "Don't jump to conclusions and remember to be consistent in the consequences of a particular action."

Involve parents

"There can be challenges with getting parents from some communities involved," Charis said. "Sometimes it can help to have someone from a community service organization act as your liaison. Ideally, designate someone in the school community to act as the parent engagement director. When parents feel that they have an ally in the school community, they're more likely to get involved."

When in doubt, get legal counsel

If you're uncertain about whether an action is in line with your district's policies and procedures, contact the district's attorney for advice.

Solve problems now — or face more issues tomorrow

"We can't just push the 'bad' kids out of the schools," Charis said. "Often, they're going into environments that aren't conducive to their social and emotional development and limiting their opportunity to grow into productive people. If we don't do what's right early on, we'll all have to deal with the consequences eventually."

- **For more information** about discipline policies, visit www.churchmutual.com, click Safety Resources and then General Risks. Look under the "Discipline Policy" section.



Managing Your Risks

Prevent slips and falls at building entrances

Slip-and-fall incidents are the leading cause of injury to school staff, administrators, teachers and visitors for Church Mutual policyholders.

In the winter months, a school's building and facility employees are typically responsible for monitoring sidewalks and parking lots to make sure snow removal and icy patches outside are properly addressed. But of equal importance are slippery conditions inside your building entrances, which maintenance staff must closely monitor.

With the winter months upon us, all entrances into buildings should be reviewed for potential slip-and-fall exposures. Rain, snow and mud can easily be tracked into the building from outside and create slippery conditions at entrances or in adjacent areas. Smooth concrete surfaces are especially susceptible to slip-and-fall accidents.

A person can track in a considerable amount of snow, water and dirt with the first three to five steps he or she takes into a building. Using water-absorbing floor mats is one way you can stop all of that from getting past the entryway. The mats help prevent puddles from forming in the building entrance. Choose mats with surfaces that are designed to help scrape snow, water and dirt from footwear.

Mats should cover the area where people normally take their first three to five steps into the building. They should lay flat without bunching up in the middle and without curling edges — conditions that can contribute to trip-and-fall accidents. When a mat becomes saturated, it should be removed and replaced with a dry one.

Finally, always have a mop and bucket handy and use it to help clean up water puddles in areas of heavy foot traffic. To help warn others of slippery conditions, use "Caution: Wet Floor" signs as standard practice in your floor maintenance program.

Edward A. Steele
Risk Control Manager

Staff Lounge

Improve school safety with a proactive committee

While many people equate "safety committee" with "school security," security should be just one element of safety planning. "Security is paramount, but schools face losses in a huge range of areas," said John Geitz, safety director for three self-insured pools in New Jersey, which include 70 school districts. The following can help ensure the value of your committee:

Prioritize safety

"Staff, students and families must feel we're doing all we can to create a safe environment," said Marc Bachman, head of the district safety committee for schools in St. Peter, Minn.

Go beyond administration

The committee should include a cross-section of departments and roles. Geitz recommended administration, food service, facilities and transportation. The committee should also include representatives from nursing and the science and athletic departments, which have unique risk exposures.

Look for people who are interested in safety, willing to be on the committee, have the respect of colleagues and work well with a diverse group. "The focus needs to be on finding solutions — not complaining about problems," Bachman said.

Look for trends

"We review all reportable injuries to find underlying commonality and also pay attention to state, regional and national trends," Bachman said. "And you can't manage safety from behind a desk — get out and see what's happening."

Ask for help

States that use joint insurance funding — like New Jersey — may have dedicated risk management resources for schools to turn to. Other options can include the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, first responders and your insurance company. Church Mutual customers can access safety resources at no cost at www.churchmutual.com/schoolsafety.

Set meaningful short- and long-term goals

"Don't say you'll go from 50 injuries to no injuries in one year," Geitz said. "Set a goal of a 20 percent cut and spell out how you'll accomplish that."

Document

"Every training, every inspection, every work order and every compliance program that you've fulfilled needs to be documented," Geitz said. "These help insulate your district from a negligence claim."

Keep the committee alive

"Communicate, hold members accountable, rotate members and recognize their efforts," Geitz said.

Help students and staff de-stress

Your students face midterms, spring fever, finals, summer job searches and “real life” job searches — plus the relationship drama that no student can entirely avoid. As your campus dives into spring semester, it’s inevitable that students will be anxious and stressed, and it will be critical to find ways to help them cope.

Recognize that students tend to be unrealistic

“It’s very common for students to take on more than they can handle — and then to pay the price,” said Rosa West, PhD, an assistant clinical professor at the University of Florida’s Counseling and Wellness Center in Gainesville, Fla. “Help them analyze what’s on their plate, admit if it’s too much and find where they might be able to make changes.”

Know the signs of stress

These can include irritability, problems with concentration, memory issues and a change in work quality. “They might start to look gaunt or tired, be more emotional or seem like their thoughts are jumbled or confused,” West said. “If someone is exhibiting these signs, don’t ignore them — pull the student aside and talk.”

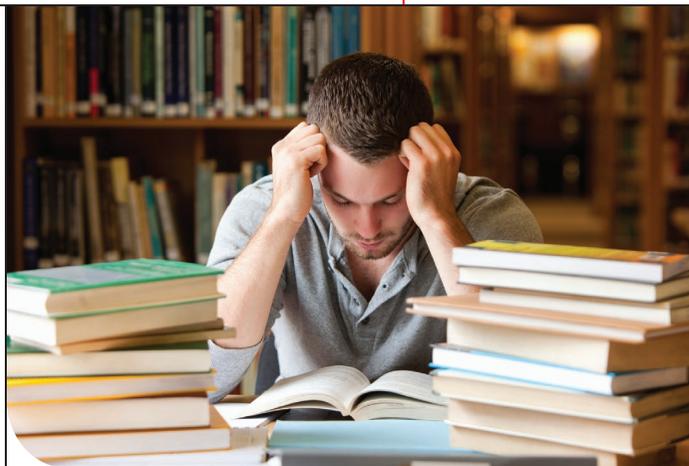
Focus on the basics

Adequate sleep, good nutrition, exercise and downtime are all critical to managing stress. Remind students to strike the right balance between these critical elements. Other fundamental things to suggest:

- Get organized — calendars and lists can help students better manage assignments and commitments.
- Cut electronic ties — recommend that students put away their cellphones (the constant ding of incoming texts is distracting and stressful) and stop checking Facebook and surfing the Web for a while.
- Learn to meditate, focus on breathing and get a massage — all of these can help to relieve and manage stress.

Encourage students to ask for classroom help

“This can be hard for many students, especially high-achieving students,” West said. “Recommend that they go to their professor, advisor or mentor and admit they need help — whether that’s guidance, extra time to complete an assignment, tutoring, etc.”



Direct them to counseling resources

Most colleges offer a wealth of services, including walk-in sessions and sometimes short- or long-term counseling — often both individual and group sessions. “Whether a student is dealing with minimal stress or anxiety or depression, the counseling center can help match them up with the proper resources,” West said.

Establish student ambassadors

“It’s critical that students don’t feel like they’re the only people dealing with these issues,” West stressed. “We do a lot of outreach and have students called AWARE Ambassadors on campus who help us get the word out about our resources.” To learn more about AWARE Ambassadors and their mission, visit <http://www.counseling.ufl.edu/cwc/aware.aspx>.

Suggest online tools

Today’s college students are extremely tech-savvy and may be more comfortable tapping into electronic tools rather than face-to-face resources — plus they’re available 24/7. “Even if a student is working one-on-one with a counselor, these might be a good supplement,” West said. “And if their counseling sessions are finished, these can help students support the gains they made.”

If your college doesn’t have its own tools, find reputable resources and suggest those. Options include:

- University of Florida self-help resources: <http://www.counseling.ufl.edu/cwc/SelfHelp-resources.aspx>
- Mayo Clinic stress management resources: <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/stress-management/MY00435>

Remember that online tools should not take the place of a professional counselor.

Realize that staff might be dealing with many of these same issues

In our busy, overbooked society, people of all ages are dealing with a near-constant feeling of overload. Make sure staff are also aware of university resources and recommended stress relief techniques.

Culture change critical when dealing with bullying

Headlines in recent years have been filled with frightening examples of students driven to despair and, in the worst cases, suicide because of bullying.

A 2011 U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention survey of high school students found that bullying is widespread — 20 percent had been bullied on school property in the previous year and 16 percent reported electronic bullying.

How can staff make a difference?

Recognize indicators of bullying

Jim Jordan, president of reportbullying.com and an expert on bullying, provides training and insights at schools across the country. Jordan explained that bullying requires:

1. An imbalance of power — the bully is bigger, stronger, smarter and more popular, or it's a group versus an individual
2. An intent to harm physically, emotionally or mentally
3. The threat of further aggression

"If something happens once, that's an act of aggression — you need to investigate, but you can't assume it's bullying because there are two sides to every story," Jordan said. "But when someone is targeted repeatedly with that imbalance of power, that's bullying."

Know male versus female tactics

"Boys tend to be physical and bully those outside their group — typically making it easier to catch them bullying," Jordan said. "Girls tend to bully inside their circle. It's much more subtle — gossip and exclusion — which makes it very difficult to see what's going on."

Change the culture: put the focus on the bystander

"Most schools focus on the wrong people — the victims and the bully, which are only about 5 percent of your student body," Jordan said. "This ignores the role of the bystander — the majority — and is a very reactive approach. We need to create a culture where bullying isn't acceptable and gets bad results from both people in authority and peers."



Teach students to speak up when bullying behavior occurs — not to gossip and not to pass along bullying on social media. Jordan likes to use a campfire analogy — a fire won't ignite without oxygen, and that's what complacency is. When bystanders speak up, the fire no longer has the oxygen it needs.

"Bullies tend to be cowards, and if someone stands up to them, they'll usually back down," Jordan said. "Research shows that with peer intervention, bullying stops within 10 seconds in 58 percent of cases."

Too often, students don't want to be viewed as a tattletale. "Teach them it's not about getting the bully in trouble, it's about keeping the victim from harm," Jordan stressed.

Respond to student complaints and keep confidences

"Staff must intervene, document what happened and follow up," Jordan said. "Demonstrate intentions and integrity, and students will be more comfortable speaking up. You must keep this confidential, or no student will want to report a problem again. Online reporting can be a good way to encourage students to take action."

Involve parents

"Bullying isn't a school problem — it's a community problem. Everybody needs to play a role," Jordan said.

Dealing with cyber bullying

"Because this happens off school property, schools can feel their hands are tied," Jordan said. "If they try to discipline a student, they're likely to get sued — and lose — because it will be seen as free speech."

There is a way to address this. "State in your school handbook that students can be disciplined for cyber bullying that happens outside school if it affects students while they're at school," Jordan suggested. "Then it becomes a contractual issue rather than a constitutional one."

Q | A

A Perspective

Every school wants to create a welcoming environment for students, staff, parents and visitors, but that welcome feeling can't come at the expense of safety. It's critical to control access to your building and limit opportunities for unwanted intruders to gain entry.



Risk Reporter recently spoke with school safety expert Ken Trump, MPA, president of National School Safety and Security Services® in Cleveland, Ohio. Trump has 30 years of experience in the field and has worked with school and safety officials from all 50 states and throughout Canada.

- **For more information** on access control at schools, visit the National School Safety and Security Services website at http://www.schoolsecurity.org/resources/school_access_control.html.

Risk Reporter: What are the most common mistakes schools make?

Ken Trump: An overreliance on technology tops the list. The first and best line of defense is a well-trained, highly alert staff and student body — the best school security is only as strong as the weakest human link. The balance between humans and hardware has been out of whack recently. There's been a rush to add equipment but not enough focus on training staff and students. The human side of school safety has largely been ignored.

Risk Reporter: Many schools now lock doors and buzz people in. Thoughts on this?

Ken Trump: Technology is only as good as the people using it. Train staff to ask people to stand where they can be seen by a camera, buzz in one person at a time and ask who a visitor is and the purpose for his or her visit. Staff must feel supported if they choose not to buzz someone in. If someone is buzzed in but doesn't report to the office, there must be a procedure, and administrators or security need to respond.

Risk Reporter: Electronic access control is getting more popular. Thoughts on this?

Ken Trump: Most schools still use keys, but electronic access control is better. Control costs by limiting which doors have a reader. Program cards for specific staff; limit their access to certain doors, times, etc.; and get a system that can create an electronic record of when and where each card is used and deprogram a card at any time.

Risk Reporter: What are your recommendations for visitor log-in?

Ken Trump: Whether you have a computerized visitor management system or you identify visitors at the office and issue them badges, a school employee must verify who the visitor is and have a written record of the visitor, time and purpose of the visit. Human engagement helps identify the purpose and mental state of the visitor.

Risk Reporter: How can schools control access for off-hours activities?

Ken Trump: This is always a challenge. Limit activities to one area of the school and restrict access to unused areas. Determine what kind of security technology (for example, surveillance cameras) you might need to provide a record of who was in the building. You need supervision plans — not just for the event area but the whole building. This is absolutely critical. Train after-hours custodial and cleaning personnel on security and emergency response protocols and communication. You can't leave your school open for off-hours use without an investment in additional supervision, training and, perhaps, security technology.

Risk Reporter: You place a large emphasis on supervision.

Ken Trump: It's critical — nothing trumps the value of a proactive adult presence. Staff should have specific supervision assignments for student arrival and dismissal, and these plans should be in writing and disseminated to all staff. Staff should be trained to the plan.