Countering the Pushout Problem
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Disengagement Problems Disguised as Discipline Problems

Amy Rodriguez

The pulse of a school is felt in its routines—the bells that mark time in predictable, 45-minute increments, the thrumming beat of students' footsteps and hum of their chatter as they transition from one class to another—the steady sounds that are as natural to those who inhabit school buildings as breathing. All too often included in the acoustics of a regular school day is the cacophony of disengagement. The disengaged raise their voices, march out of the classrooms, wander the hallways; and when they do, they are disproportionately represented by our most vulnerable students; our black and Latino girls and boys.

One of my most jarring experiences as an administrator was receiving a "persistently dangerous" designation from the state. Looking in the eyes of students as they wandered the halls or hid in the nurse's station, I knew our school didn't have a safety problem; we had an engagement problem. The data we were sending to the state—page after page of incident reports—read more like a pulp fiction novel than an objective report of incidents. My colleagues and I analyzed these reports for times, dates, and locations of incidents and found patterns of behavior. We created an Incident Reduction Plan to identify the discipline policies and classroom management practices that fueled student disengagement, and therefore "persistent danger," in our school. Three areas became focal points of our plan:

Developing de-escalation strategies to help prevent behaviors that create a risk of physical injury.

Reframing communication to give student identity and culture a voice and to prevent instigating violent responses to school policies.

Examine behavioral data and student feedback and reflect on the role school policies play in exacerbating negative trends. With student guidance, adjust policies.

With student voice as the connective tissue, this three-tiered approach has helped us adjust schoolwide policies in order to better support and engage the whole child.
Relate and De-Escalate

School discipline policies are generally punitive and do little to offer strategies to de-escalate negative interactions with and among students (Kupchik, Green, & Mowen, 2015). My school shared grounds with three other schools, and as the high school principal, my office was located near the shared safety office. From my perspective, the damaging effects of these punitive policies were painfully obvious. One afternoon, I heard a crash and screaming from the safety office. Above the chaos, I heard a familiar voice. "Is that my Fatia?" I wondered. A student of mine from middle school who had transferred to the high school, Fatia's face maintained shadows of the little girl I knew. On the floor were remnants of a broken clock recently ripped off the desk and hurled at the wall. She sat in the corner, frantically seeking something else to throw, when an safety officer whispered to me that if Fatia didn't calm down, they were going to cuff her. "Fati, can I come to you?," I asked. She nodded, and when I wrapped my arms around her to give her a hug, she collapsed into tears. She needed to cry, to release her anger and her frustration, and to know she was safe and with someone who would hear her voice.

Punitive education policies set disproportionately rigid rules for our most vulnerable students. Fatia was trying to get to the guidance counselor and found herself close to being handcuffed. In this school, our policy mandated students report to class in order to obtain a pass, but Fatia needed help now. Well-meaning staff implementing this policy inadvertently triggered Fatia's frustration. My history and relationship with Fatia allowed me to defuse a difficult situation. She knew I would listen to her, no matter what. De-escalation strategies work when they're built on relationships and trust. By prioritizing de-escalation in our incident reduction plan, our school culture shifted to supporting staff in maintaining a calm demeanor and approaching students with kindness rather than hostility. For example, during a difficult interaction with a student, staff calmly acknowledge students' feelings and give students time to process what they feel, while inviting them into a collaborative problem-solving space. An educator might tell the student, "I can see you're feeling frustrated and angry right now, and I would like to understand what's made you so upset." Then students are given space to process their feelings. This ensured our students were less likely to feel trapped during a time of crisis and significantly reduced our number of incidents.

Give Alex a Voice

As early as 6th grade, Alex was no stranger to others' assumptions about him. Each day, teachers instructed him to pull his pants up, take his hood clown, stop talking, lower his voice. If he wasn't being corrected for his clothes and speech, he would get an earful about missing homework. It is no surprise that Alex often stormed out of classrooms and walked the halls, irate at what staff felt were "the littlest things." What teachers did not know was that Alex's mother had only recently regained custody of him and that his beloved father was missing from the picture.

Alex's context required a nuanced and culturally appropriate approach to affect change (Gay, 2015). Alex and I talked about what would have to happen in order for him to stay in class and do the work. He wanted to sit alone without teachers standing over him as he worked and to be given feedback in private, not in front of peers. Alex wanted the freedom to walk out of the classroom when he felt overwhelmed or upset, and in return, he promised not to be gone for too long and to leave and return without disrupting the class.
The middle school teachers and I gave Alex his space, and slowly his need for breaks lessened. He was able to enter a classroom and work on any given assignment. The frequent class disruptions faded. Giving Alex a voice to advocate for his own needs allowed him to keep his identity and individuality intact in school, which in turn created an opening for him to be present in class and as a part of the school community.

**Examine Data and Adjust Policy**

After looking at the number and location of reports, we found that most incidents happened in the hallways, after lunch. In meetings and advisories, students were telling us that having teachers pick students up from lunch and transition them back to the classroom wasn't working. We listened to this and modified the policy to allow students to transition themselves, while teachers greeted them at the classroom doors. This change gave students a greater sense of independence and a chance to reconnect with friends and ease back into learning for the afternoon. Changes like these communicate that schools are listening to students, that what students want matters, and that staff trust students to make positive decisions for themselves.

**Student Voice as a Mechanism for Change**

In my "persistently dangerous" school, some teachers were reluctant to release authority because they felt uncertain about what to do when they encountered noncompliant behavior. Several staff attended a series of trainings about de-escalation and shared the strategies they learned; like acknowledging a student's feelings in times of crisis, expressing a desire to understand why a student feels that way, and giving a student space to process emotions. Staff role-played situations students might encounter at school and at home, as well as how to give students safe spaces to express these concerns in advisory.

Student surveys on climate and culture are another way students can safely express their experiences in school. Engaging in small routines like administrators meeting with grades and classes each week not only builds rapport, but also provides leadership a direct line to students' thinking and feelings. Providing a method for students to share their thoughts about processes and perceptions of school gives students voice and fosters a sense of students as integral part of the community. Building relationships, through homerooms, advisories, or just small conversations in the hallway or lunchroom, demonstrates an authentic, positive regard for students by school staff.

Over time, student discussions during weekly meetings with administrators shifted from discontent about teachers and school policies to ideas about what programs and curriculum students would like to see. Our community began to manifest the vision of the school—an environment that nurtures tomorrow's leaders. Moreover, we experienced a drastic reduction in behavior incidents, from 37 incidents in one school year to seven incidents in the next.

No matter who they are or where they are from, students want their voices to be heard. Listen to the behavior problems in your school, and you will hear the voices of the marginalized and disengaged. We teach about Rosa Parks and the Civil Rights movement, but we do not give children permission to sit-in for their beliefs in school. Students need positive ways to influence the rhythm of the school day, too.

**References**


Amy Rodriguez is a principal with 15 years' experience in New York City Public Schools.

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