

# SCHOOL DISCIPLINE: Positive Reinforcement and High Expectations Can Ease Problems in Middle Schools

Spit wads, note passing, talking back and school bullies-all are problems that have plagued middle schools for years.

Thirty years ago holed paddles and rulers were the answer to getting students to behave for many teachers.

But, the face of discipline in schools has changed over the years, and as punishments seem less harsh, student respect is also declining.

Middle schools are "their own planets," according to principal Mike Sirois of South Hills Middle School in Jordan School District. Discipline and misbehavior aren't huge problems in his schools, but the students definitely have a history of being creative.

"Young adolescents think in the here and now," Sirois said. "It seemed a good idea at the time" is their catch phrase. He has had students do anything from lighting fires in class to ordering 50 pizzas delivered to the school.

Educators say middle schoolers are a difficult group to teach because of all the changes they are going through, physically and emotionally. And as instructional techniques and trends for middle school shift toward the "middle school philosophy"-a more nurturing environment tailored to early adolescents for a smoother transition from elementary-discipline techniques in many schools have followed.

Sirois said a long list of rules and threats for a principal's visit aren't the answer.

"The 1,000 rules up on the wall-at this age some aren't really good at following rules. That type of discipline really doesn't work," he said.

The first line of defense is classroom intervention, which is on the shoulders of teachers. At South Hills disciplinary visits to the office are the last resort, and students see the principal only after parents have been contacted.

"The first step is to establish a working relationship with the students," Sirois said. "With that in place the all-stars can manage a classroom with just a look."

Nowadays Sirois said teachers act as police, judges and advocates in the classroom, so garnering respect is key. It's getting to know students, their personalities and needs to build a relationship and establish trust.

Leslie Trane, teacher at South Hills Middle School, said discipline, for her, is a constant work in progress and something she has learned through trial and error.

"I had one class in college dealing with management, and it didn't help at all," Trane said. "When I started my student teaching, it was like being thrown in with the wolves."

But Trane said after her first year she attended a conference about positive management and started to revamp her system to focus more on positive reinforcement rewards and incentives instead of negative discipline. Her students responded much better to those techniques.

Even so, Trane said, any smart teacher knows that the key to running a good classroom is what type of relationships you have with your students.

"I've learned that if the kids like you and know that you care for them, they'll pretty much do what you ask them to do-this includes the defiant kids, too," Trane said.

It's a question of establishing relationships and making students feel safe and comfortable in an environment, and that's hard to do when there are 1,400 students crammed into a school building, Sirois said.

It may not be as difficult for West Point Junior High teachers who teach seventh and eighth grades in smaller, more nurturing learning communities at the school. But Steve Davis, assistant principal at West Point Junior, said another key in discipline at that age is teaching the rules themselves and setting a high expectation.

Adolescents are still learning to follow rules and learning why to follow them, Davis said. But 90 percent of the students, if you teach them the correct principles and set the expectations, they are going to comply.

"I personally have a discipline philosophy where I have very high expectations but very few rules," Davis said.

"I have a high expectation of respect, and if they break that, I take that as a teaching moment to say, 'This is what you did wrong, and this is why you are in there.'"

Nonetheless, Davis said, the buck seems to stop at positive attention and structure in the classroom.

More and more students don't have a discipline structure at home, so that lack of discipline comes into the classroom. But even those students like structure-though they'll kick against it-because they like the consistency in knowing this is a safe place, Davis said.

"When it comes down to it, I think they want any kind of attention, whether it be negative or positive-they just want to be recognized," Davis said. "If they are not getting the positive, they are going to get attention one way or another."

Though moving in a more positive direction has worked for teachers like Trane, she said there is no quick fix and no one answer for middle school discipline. Each year a new group of students brings a new situation, and Trane is always tweaking her system.

"If you don't change with the kids, you're doomed," Trane said. ■

*Reprinted with permission from the author. This article originally appeared in the Deseret Morning News, Tuesday, June 22, 2004.*

*Editors' note: South Hills Middle School is a Tier II school, participating in Utah's Behavior Initiative (UBI), a project of the Utah Personnel Development Center (UPDC). For information concerning South Hills program, contact Nicole Welsh at nicholewelsh@jordan.k12.ut.us.*



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