

The HIDDEN Opportunity in Student Discipline: 5 Simple Steps to Wise and Just Discipline Decisions

ACCI Lifeskills

The impact of the School-to-Prison pipeline is well-documented and researched (Heitzeg, 2009, Wolf & Kupchick, 2017, Mowen, Brent & Boman IV, 2020).

As a result of the growing body of research, many schools and districts have responded to the call for change. They have begun to discard zero tolerance discipline practices, work to increase cultural responsiveness, and put into place Restorative Practices and other productive strategies to intervene with the at-risk students on their campuses. Restorative Practices can be loosely defined as any effort or practice on a school campus that is designed to create healthy learning communities by proactively building positive relationships to address conflict and misbehavior through skill-building, accountability, and empowerment of the involved parties.

The initial results are promising. Research shows that Restorative Practices can improve teacher-student relationships (Gregory et al, 2015), improve school climate and culture (Augustine et al, 2018), help shrink the disproportional gap in discipline (Kline, 2016) and achievement (Perry & Morris, 2014), along with many additional anecdotal benefits.

Despite these results and the valiant efforts of school leaders, the actual implementation of Restorative Practices remains lacking in many areas. One such area is how educators respond to the actual discipline incidents and the people involved. An opportunity for positive influence arises when school administrators and staff respond to discipline infractions and interface with the students and their families involved in the discipline proceedings.

This paper will explore the opportunity educators have to administer discipline in a more productive way with a more effective mindset. This new approach allows for what has traditionally been a wedge in the relationship between school and family to become a bridge to building relationships, healing wounds, and providing a way forward for all parties involved.

Unproductive Mindsets

Historically, discipline proceedings have largely been viewed by administrators and teachers as either:

1. A huge bother that drains time and energy (both of which are already in short supply)
2. A necessary evil that jeopardizes the safety of students and staff if not administered forcefully
3. A detractor from the “real work” of educating students

While meeting with multiple school administrators recently, I asked how they viewed discipline in their schools. One principal immediately replied, “It is the worst part of our job!”

Unfortunately, many administrators share this sentiment as they deal with the difficulties associated with leading schools and districts. This negative perception points to the heart of the matter and the opportunity that educators have to effectuate substantial change and bring about a more equitable disciplinary response.

One of the earliest guiding principles of Restorative Practices, put forth by Cameron & Thorsborne (1999), is that Restor-

ative Practice “views misconduct, not as school-rule-breaking, and therefore a violation of the institution, but as a violation against people and relationships.” Although this idea has been around for over 20 years, it is still missed by many educators. They continue to view misbehavior as rule-breaking and a violation of the institution. Even worse, they often view the misbehavior as a problem that needs to be fixed, minimized, or at the very least, passed on to someone else to deal with.

Many educators operate with this mindset, and it presents problems for everyone involved in the discipline process. This problem-focused mindset allows administrators to feel justified in levying the full weight of the traditional discipline paradigm. It encourages them to align the predetermined punishment to fit the infraction with little or no thought regarding context, relationships, or the impact on the family. Teachers feel vindicated in knowing that the problem has been removed from their class. Students feel disenfranchised, ostracized, and victimized. Families feel at a loss for how to respond. They have little understanding of how to move forward in a productive manner.

Difficult Dynamics

To find a productive way forward, it is necessary to contemplate the vantage points of each player in the game and the points at which they interact with one another in that process. The one constant in every discipline case is a power differential - whether perceived or actual. In each instance, there is a student at the behest of the school staff or administrator - a more powerful authority figure. Moreover, between these two is a parent/caregiver who is caught in the middle of trying to be an advocate for their student and a good citizen of the school community. This power differential, when combined with a negative mindset of the school staff or administrator and the culpability of the student, can lead to a disastrous impact on the educational viability of the student and their ability to recover academically and socially from a brush with school discipline proceedings.

It is important to note that none of these players actually think consciously about their “role” in this high-stakes game. The student may appear overtly defiant - or even apathetic - to the entire proceeding. But more often than not, they just want to avoid or minimize negative consequences. They wonder how they got caught and how their parents/caregivers are going to respond. Often, they plot how they can get off with less punishment than what they fear might happen. At the same time, the parent/caregiver is most often blindsided by the discipline proceedings. They are often upset at either the school or the student or both. And complicating matters, the over-worked educator (administrator, assistant principal, dean of students, teacher, etc) is perpetually being pulled in multiple directions. They are strapped for time and energy and often try to complete the discipline proceeding by expending as little time and effort as possible.

With all these dynamics at play, the responses from the parties involved are almost as varied as the circumstances that gave rise to the different discipline incidences. But what is important to keep in one’s awareness is the pervasive mindset that accompanies each party as they engage in these proceedings. For it is at this mindset level that the entanglements and problems begin to take shape. It is here that the wedge and difficulties between the student, family, administrator and school begin to manifest. It is here where educators can really make a profound difference, not only in the outcome of the discipline proceedings, but in the actual interactions and relationships between each party involved.

Here is the crux of the matter: What does it take for educators to become better equipped to respond to discipline proceedings and understand the impact on everyone involved in order to provide interventions that are more effective?

The New 5-Step Model for Effective Interventions

Under the traditional discipline paradigm, the educator would carry out the proceedings by gathering evidence, determining the infraction, and meting out discipline. The case would be closed and the administrator would move on to their next task with students and parents left in a weakened, disenfranchised position.

Instead of following the old model, the school personnel can decide to be intentional and constructive. They can implement a new model -- a five-step strategy to take advantage of the hidden opportunity that lies before them. To serve as a guide, the acronym - HIDDEN - will point educators to this more productive process for handling discipline incidents.

The Real Starting Point of the Discipline Process

STEP ONE: Do a Heart-Check. A Heart-Check consists of the educator taking inventory of their deep-seated attitudes and views. How do they see the key elements of the situation -- the misbehavior, the misbehavior, and the victim?

This step consists of the educator checking their own biases toward any party involved in the discipline incident. It also involves giving the initial gut reaction some time to settle and some room to breathe. Most importantly, in the words of the philosopher C. Terry Warner (2001), "There is no better means of promoting another person's change of heart than allowing our own heart to be changed."

Each educator is different with their initial response when responding to student discipline. Many factors influence how we think and feel in these emotionally-charged situations. Some important questions to consider when conducting a Heart-Check include:

- What is the nature of my relationship with these students and their families?
- Do I feel any resentment or frustration toward these students or families?
- Is there any implicit bias at play with how I regard this student or family?

Doing a Heart-Check before responding to the discipline incident is rich with opportunities. It allows the educator to engage more fully and be present with the students and staff involved. It helps them set realistic goals about a positive outcome. It allows them to get out of their own way when helping both the offenders and the victims in each scenario.

Most importantly, the Heart-Check allows the educator to focus on the most important opportunity: maintaining, and even strengthening, the relationship and connection with the parties involved. There is a multitude of evidence surrounding the importance of this initial step of the process through the conflict resolution work of Terry Warner and the Arbinger Institute (<https://arbinger.com/>).

Four Important Questions For Uncovering the Truth

STEP TWO: Focus on the Information. Trying to gather all of the information regarding a particular discipline incident can be time-consuming and challenging. However, just as it is short-sighted to make decisions about curriculum or personnel based on gut feelings and preconceived notions, it is harmful to make discipline decisions with incomplete or inaccurate information. It is worth the time and effort to ensure you gather all the accurate, relevant information needed to make wise and just decisions.

How then can we gather unbiased and useful information when investigating a discipline matter? At times like these, the "4 W's" can be extremely helpful. They are, of course -- Who, What, When, and Where. These questions allow you to focus on the facts and eyewitness accounts and avoid the pitfalls of leading questions and assumptions.

Another pitfall that manifests in the information-gathering step is how to respond to discrepancies between the reports of those involved in the incident. Administrators indicate that they must regularly deal with such discrepancies. These may take the form of contradictions in statements or perceptions regarding what actually took place. This can be a staggeringly difficult variable to handle in a restorative way and can lead to additional frustration for everyone involved. The next step in this process can help tremendously when unraveling the tangled web of conflicting information.

Reading Between, Around, and Under the Lines

STEP THREE: Draw out the context and Determine the function of the behaviors that have been exhibited. This is separate from gathering facts and information because it is often found “between the lines” and not spoken explicitly. In this step you examine both the dynamics of the situation and the relationships between the offenders, victims, and bystanders.

Unfortunately, many educators focus primarily on the superficial events of the situation, rarely excavating the details and getting to the Why and the How of the situation. For that reason it is being treated as its own element in this five step process.

The context is everything that surrounds the situation. It’s the relationship of the participants. It is everything that happened before the incident. It is different and deeper than just the “facts” of the situation. The context will almost always give clues to the function of the behavior and the story that is being told by the misbehaviors and misbehavers.

As rational animals, human beings have a function or intent behind their behaviors. Discovering this function is imperative in determining a productive intervention response and possible consequences.

Effective Interventions and Consequences

STEP FOUR: Evaluate the possible interventions and consequences and choose those that will bring about the best outcome for all parties involved. The vast majority of schools and districts in the nation have hard and fast rules that govern the consequences of every possible student infraction. At their worst, these discipline matrices handcuff administrators and teachers when responding to discipline incidents. This lack of flexibility can make it nearly impossible to implement a restorative intervention.

Many discipline policies mandate traditional consequences including after-school detention, lunch detention, in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, referral to an alternative school, and even expulsion. Often these consequences do not serve any purpose outside of the offender “doing their time” by removing them from their normal instructional setting. There is no research available that supports the use of these traditional discipline approaches as a mechanism to bring about behavioral or cognitive change.

There is another approach. Instead of this punitive, traditional, exclusionary response, educators should implement consequences that are focused on intervention for the offender and reconciliation between the offender and victim. These consequences and intervention tactics should be logical and purposeful, rooted in the paradigm of meeting the needs of the students, families, and educators involved.

There are a variety of constructive interventions and consequences that can be utilized in these situations. The use of Restorative Circles, Restorative Conferencing, and Family Group Conferencing have been well-documented and researched (Wachtel, 2016). Additionally, educational and informational resources can help increase student’s knowledge about the infraction.

Still, one of the most important types of interventions that are now available is cognitive-behavioral curriculum that allows offenders to reflect on and discover their values, attitudes, and beliefs related to the incident and the harm that was perpetrated. These thought-level interventions provide fertile soil in which the educator can harvest restorative conversations and engage in the cognitive change process in a meaningful manner.

Meeting the Needs of Students, Families, and Staff

STEP FIVE: Make sure the intervention and consequences provide for the Needs of the students and families involved. It is easy to get sucked into the trap of focusing solely on the needs of the school and institution. While these must be considered, it is critical that the needs of the students and families become paramount in the decision-making process.

At a very basic level, the needs of the students and families are two-fold: restoring relationships that have been fractured and repairing the harm that has been inflicted. The needs that manifest themselves throughout this process, however, may become even more apparent and important than the original intended purpose of the discipline meeting and intervention. Throughout the entire process, the discovery of the students' needs must be at the center of everything the educator does. These needs will only become apparent as the educators are aware, engaged, and mindful.

This 5-Step Process Saves A Young Woman

A story may help convey the power of this five-step process and the principles that support it.

There was a principal who led a small high school in rural Wisconsin. Over the summer, he attended a training that allowed him to examine his own pervasive mindsets and how he could more effectively fulfill his role as principal. Additionally, he engaged in bi-weekly coaching sessions to help put these principles into practice. He started the school year with a new and improved determination to be more restorative in his approach and more responsive to the needs of students, staff, and families. It did not take long for this resolve to get tested in a significant way.

Within the first few weeks of the school year, he received a discipline referral from a teacher. It was regarding a student that he had dealt with numerous times the previous year. The student had been approached by the teacher because of an attendance issue - but then verbally lashed out at the instructor during the interaction.

In typical fashion, the principal called the student into his office and began discussing the incident with her. However, the student would not engage in the conversation; she just stared at her shoes, despite prodding by the principal. Typically, he would have just meted out discipline, assigned her some sort of in-school suspension, and quickly delved into the 10 or 15 other items on his list for that day. Instead, he had the thought to dig a little deeper and try a little harder to really understand not just the situation, but the student - his Heart-Check came well into the discipline meeting.

He then asked a few more questions of the student, with little response. Finally, he made a plea to the student. "I really don't want this to continue to happen. And I really want to help you right now. Can you please tell me what is going on?"

To his surprise, the girl screamed, "You don't understand! None of you understand!"

Instead of responding in kind, he took a deep breath and responded with a question, "What is it that we do not understand? I really want to understand." After assuring her that he was there to help, she shared with him intimate details of her suicidal ideation, lack of will to live, and deepening depression.

In response to these details, he was able to involve her caregivers, call in a crisis team, and get her the help she really needed. None of that would have been possible if he had gone about his normal routine of handling discipline. He would have missed this all-important opportunity to care for and help this student.

Get Started Today

This five-step process outlines a new methodology, the **HIDDEN** opportunity, in handling discipline incidents.

- **Heart Check:** examine your deep-seated attitudes and views
- **Information:** gather all the relevant facts using Who, What, When and Where
- **Draw** out the context, and **Determine** the function of the behaviors
- **Evaluate** possible productive interventions and consequences
- **Needs:** provide for the needs of the students and families

This process helps educators employ a more restorative mindset while setting the tone for the continued interactions with the students and families that are impacted through the discipline processes. It not only serves as a roadmap for educators, but can also serve as a checklist to ensure that each step is being implemented in the right way at the right time. Checklists can be an effective tool to ensure that educators are not making errors of ineptitude when responding to emotionally-charged discipline incidents (Gawande, 2009).

When utilized effectively, educators will find that the tone of the discipline meeting will shift, the responses of the students and families will be more positive, and the intervention efforts of the school will be more effective. With a more effective discipline response, students are invited to change and problem behavior will decrease. Over the course of the school year, the educators will spend less time responding to discipline incidents and more time as instructional leaders on their campus, which is ideally the focus of their work to begin with. As the previously-missed opportunities are capitalized upon, educators will be successful in building bridges to healing and progress for all parties involved.

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About the Author

Richard Long has worked in leadership positions in the helping professions for the past 20 years, including wilderness therapy, community behavioral health, therapeutic boarding schools, and public high schools. Richard is passionate about helping youth and young adults succeed, overcome difficult circumstances, and become the best version of themselves. Richard specializes in providing tiered interventions, restorative frameworks, and youth and adult leadership models. Richard completed a Master of Social Work from Arizona State University in 2007 and a Master of Educational Leadership from Capella University in 2016. He loves his family (wife and 4 kids), his bikes (mountain or road), and his ropes (rock climbing and canyoneering)!