

Case Study: Shaping School Culture

Benchmark – Reflection of Professional Development Session

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Part 1: Case Analysis

1. Brief summary of the case.

You have just been named principal at a middle school where student achievement is a struggle. Many students are from lower-income and ethnically diverse households. The school has a large number of veteran teachers, but the students are still missing a good deal of instructional time because student discipline has been neglected.

2. Issues to be resolved.

There seems to be a general lack of accountability. The lack of accountability applies to both students and staff. There seems to be no expectations as far as things like teacher observations, student discipline. The absence of these measures has helped create problems in other areas, notably academic achievement which has left the school with a “D” rating.

3. Stakeholders involved in the issues.

The stakeholders are all personnel who have contact with the school at a variety of levels which includes the school district, the middle school administration (principal, vice principal, etc.), the faculty, staff and parents and finally the students and to a lesser degree the community.

4. One or two existing laws or court rulings that relate to the issues

Serrano v. Priest (CA. 1971) is one of three cases. Here the students and families in the Los Angeles County public school argued that the state of California financial system primarily benefited students in wealthier districts since is relied heavily on property taxes to

finance its schools, therefore disadvantaging students from lower-income districts. A similar claim was made in *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez* (TX. 1973). But in this case the Supreme Court found the system didn't violate the Equal Protection Clause because the district didn't "intentionally or substantially discriminate against a class of people" (Stanford, 2023).

5. District policies that relate to the issues.

There are a variety of school discipline policies that address suspension and expulsion. But recent research shows that these kinds of exclusionary policies are disproportionately applied to students based on their race, gender, or disability status (Kelly & Jamieson, 2021).

6. Possible solutions to the issues.

The school needs to rethink and reimagine its discipline plan. Suspension and expulsion plans remove students from learning, which only adds to the school's already declining achievement. We are looking to replace suspension and expulsion with programs that focus on equity and inclusion. Those could include programs involving community service, peer mediation, conflict resolution, counseling, and other more positive behavioral interventions.

7. Solutions chosen to resolve the issues.

I like the idea of instituting a peer mediation council at the school. In addition to students being responsible to teachers and parents, when their own peers hold them to account it often sends a more effective and lasting message than when adults do it.

8. Action steps (2-5) for implementing each solution, including a timeline for each step.

- a. Ask teachers in their PLCs to come up with a plan of selecting students worthy to serve on the school's new "discipline council." (2-4 weeks)
- b. Work through teacher recommendation and student leadership (student council) to appoint students who are high achievers and hold themselves to a higher standard. (2 weeks)
- c. Hold mock training courses for teachers and students so the entire campus becomes familiar with the "discipline council" process. (4 weeks)
- d. Conduct a "dry run" of the council using several real cases to see how council members handle judging the behavior and issuing consequences. (2 weeks)

9. Potential moral and legal consequences of each solution.

I believe each solution I have offered is a more culturally sensitive approach to discipline and therefore nearly eliminates the risk of legal consequences that can arise from suspensions and expulsions.

Part 2: Rationale

- **Is designed for continual and sustainable school improvement to improve student outcomes.**

A peer mediation board has several advantages over traditional discipline programs that can result in consequences like suspension or expulsion. First of all, it helps students learn peaceful and productive approaches to resolving student conflict. This training improves

students' communication, leadership, and decision-making skills which in turn promotes a healthier school climate.

- **Demonstrates cultural competence and responsiveness in decision-making, school planning, and meeting the needs of students.**

Experts have found that peer mediation can help “alleviate the sense of disenfranchisement and powerlessness that some students feel and can help turn a difficult situation into a time of mutual growth and understanding for disputants.” Of course, mediation isn't the right choice for all disputes. When we're dealing with confrontations that involve violence, weapons, drugs, physical or sexual harassment or abuse it is appropriate that these be addressed by an administrator and/or by the police. Peer mediation can oftentimes be useful in exposing the underlying issues that led up to these conflicts as well as exploring different, positive ways of relationship building.

- **Addresses difficult issues related to meeting students' needs while promoting a culture of collaboration, trust, learning, and high expectations.**

Research reveals that students who have a sense of belonging are far less likely to commit violent actions in school. Traditionally, punitive systems, suspensions, and expulsion offer schools few choices other than to push students further away from their learning communities. A school peer mediation program promotes critical thinking and builds decision-making skills, develops healthy standards of relationship within the school community and supports student self-determination--all valuable tools in an increasingly violent and disconnected world” (Block & Blazej, 2005).

- **Strives to build and sustain positive relationships between school representatives, students, families, and community partners, when their needs conflict.**

In addition to training students on appropriate ways to handle their conflicts, experts agree that “a solid peer mediation program helps schools become safe and respectful learning environments.” The mediation process has an added benefit. It helps students become actively involved in improving their school and community climate by becoming change-makers. Peer mediators learn valuable skills they can take with them throughout their lives and become a symbol of peacemakers---which transforms their homes, their schools and eventually the world into a more equitable place to live (Block & Blazej, 2005).

References

- Block, M. & Blazej, B. (2005). Resolving conflict with a peer mediation program. University of Maine & Civics Education. Retrieved on September 13, 2023 from <https://tinyurl.com/4f4kz5hf>.
- Kelley, B., Jamieson, C., Perez, Z. (2021, May 17). 50-state comparison: school discipline policies. Education Commission of the States. Retrieved on September 13, 2023 from <https://www.ecs.org/50-state-comparison-school-discipline-policies/>.
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