

# Working with "Disruptive" Youth

William Maynard

*How can "disruptive" youngsters be transformed into cooperative, contributing members of the school community? An able educator who accomplished this gives some positive suggestions.*

In a five-year period, from 1971-76, Cleveland High School in Seattle, Washington, transformed itself. At the beginning of this period it had a reputation for racial tension, riots, high dropout rates, suspension rates, and absenteeism. At the end of this period it had become a school with the city's lowest dropout and absentee rates, and virtually no violence or vandalism during the past school year.

How did an urban, multi-ethnic school change so significantly in such a short period of time? Many assume that there must have been an extensive use of security guards. This is not true. Security guards have not been a part of the Cleveland staff since 1971. Others assume that troublemakers were suspended or expelled. This is not true, either. Cleveland has maintained one of the lowest suspension rates in the city during the past four years.

How then has the staff of an inner-city school, with a minority student enrollment of over 70 percent, learned to deal with disruptive youth in a positive and productive way?

## The Climate of a School

The climate of a school often determines how we deal with disruption, and in fact, is often a contributing factor to disruptive



Photo: Charlene Rothkopf, taken at Old Mill Senior High School, Anne Arundel, Maryland

behavior. The climate of any school is determined by the people who work there. Climate is composed of the goals that the staff members have for themselves and for their students, and by the processes by which they pursue these goals.

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individuals within the school. It is determined in part by the processes that occur in the school, such as effective communication, a problem-solving approach, and involvement in decision making, as compared to an authoritative, “win-lose” structure. School programs such as active learning experiences, individualized expectations, varied learning environments, and rewards other than just grades also contribute to a positive school climate.

If, for example, black students all sit together in one area of the lunchroom and whites in another, something is wrong with the climate. If, at the same time, certain staff members occupy one area of the faculty room and another group always occupies a different area, then this too indicates a need for improvement in the climate of the school. Ironically, it is not unusual for these separate faculty cliques to discuss “Why do the black students always stay together?” How people feel about their school and about

others in the school is a reflection of the climate of that school.

As a result of studies on school climate, we have identified a number of “critical elements” that affect our ability to involve “disruptive youth” in the educational process. Two of the critical factors are:

1. Reducing the *threat* of going to school;
2. Providing a *meaningful* experience in the classroom.

What do these factors mean in the school? They mean that if we are sincere about working with disruptive students, we need to deal with the factors created by our schools that cause students to fail. School rules, grading practices, teaching strategies, schedules, and course offerings all contribute to the success or failure of students, and contribute to or detract from the school’s climate. Most disruptive students are convinced that they are failures and perceive school to be a threatening experience. Children, even before kindergarten, are forced to meet the needs of the school, rather than the school making efforts to meet the needs of the children. Unfortunately, the schools’ needs are basically built on white, middle-class standards and values. There is little in the structure of most schools that meets the needs of black, Chicano, Asian, Native American, or other ethnic and cultural groups. The pressure for conformity often causes disruption, and this pressure often stems from a lack of meaningful and/or successful classroom experiences.

### **Behavior—Good or Bad—Is Learned**

Our responsibility is to teach children how to behave and how to be responsible for their own behavior. We can do this. Surely we should

know by now that the use of force, which is the traditional strategy employed, does not work. Granted, there are some youth who do not belong in school at a given moment in time because of their disruptive behavior or lack of interest, and a time-out period may be necessary. Also, it may be necessary to use force for the purpose of reestablishing control in a school that is totally disrupted by student violence and disorder. Force is band-aid surgery and is not effective as a long-term solution. We have, however, created a structure in schools that insists upon conformity for the sake of the status quo, and usually results in the elimination of "disruptive" students. Traditionally, school rules and teachers' standards have served as the instruments for forcing conformity.

Who established the rules of your school? How many rules are there? Are they reasonable for all pupils, minority and white? Some schools have two to three pages of typewritten rules for students. Most are stated "thou shalt not." Remember when "thou shalt not" wear a skirt more than two inches above the knees? Many vice-principals carried rulers and recognized kneecaps rather than faces. How about "no hats in school," "no coats are to be worn in school," "no gum chewing," "miss ten days of class and you will be suspended"?

When new trends develop or student behavior changes, we invoke new rules. Hair grew long, and we made a new rule. If students brought radios, we outlawed them. If students were rude at an assembly, there were no more assemblies. If they left garbage on the lunch tables, we closed the snack bar. If they smoked in the lavatory, we removed the doors from the stalls. And, of course, every student needs a hall

pass to announce to the world that he or she has to go to the bathroom.

"Do it or else," we say. Kids are now saying, "Tell me more about the 'or else.'"

Rigid rules, applied with "consistency," that is, all students receive the same punishment for rule violations regardless of circumstances, eliminate the opportunity for

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teachers, counselors, and administrators to teach behavior. The decisions have already been made, and the exceptions are few, if any. The fact is that force will be met by equal resisting force, and will generally result in disruptive behavior.

This is not a suggestion that there be no rules. Rather, that they be reasonable, fair, and determined by students and staff, as well as by administrators.

As an example, at Cleveland High School the rules were reduced from 26 to 6 as a result of student and staff group work. The current rules are as follows:

1. Attend classes;
2. No drugs or alcohol;
3. No weapons;
4. No gambling;
5. Smoking is permitted outside the school building only;
6. Treat all with respect for their dignity, welfare, and material goods.

At Cleveland, the rule at one time was, "Fighting will result in an automatic three-day suspension for all parties." No decision, no judgment, no effort was needed to work with those involved. Consider, however, an example that occurred last year: A call came to the office that there was a fight in a classroom and that one of those involved had pulled a knife (fighting or weapons meant automatic suspension and/or expulsion). One of the participants weighed about 220 pounds and the other, who had the knife, weighed about 140 pounds. In the office an interesting dialogue took place:

"Bobby, did you pull a knife up there?"

"Yeah."

"How come, Bobby?"

"He was messing with me, and we got in a fight, and he was so big, he scared me. So I took out my knife."

"Bobby, you haven't been in a fight or in any trouble all year. What happened?"

"Well, last night I got in a fight with my dad, and he told me to get out. So I left, and didn't have my dinner, or money, and I walked around downtown all night. Then I went to school and got to class late, and got chewed out by the teacher in front of everybody. Then I went to another class, and he started giving me trouble and I got mad and hit him."

Obviously, Bobby had had some tough times that day. Also, Bobby grew up in the inner city of St. Louis, and told me that he had been carrying the knife since he was nine. After hearing Bobby's story, his adversary apologized. They shook hands, and began talking with each other. They learned something about relationships.

According to the rules, Bobby should have been expelled or at least suspended. "Consistency" should refer to the application of personalized discipline. The goal should be to teach students to be responsible for their own behavior. There needs to be consistency with each individual child, not consistency across all students regardless of circumstances.

### **School Structure Contributes to Disruptive Behavior**

In addition to school rules, other elements of the structure of the school may well be causes of disruptive behavior of students. We tend to fix blame quickly on students when disruptive behavior occurs, but we need to look to ourselves first.

Grades and grading practices, the issuing of credits, or the withholding of credits as a punishment for missing classes; the refusal of many teachers to incorporate into the curriculum or even to recognize the value of cultural pluralism; and the perpetuation of competitive teaching strategies that allow some students (usually white) to learn at the expense of others (often minorities), all contribute to disruptive behavior.

Many children give up at a very early age feeling that with no attempt, there can be little or no humiliation.

### **"Every Kid A Success"**

Not possible, we're told. Perhaps not, but it certainly is possible to reduce 25 percent dropout rates, 25-40 percent absentee rates, 500 million dollar vandalism, and a 75 percent increase in assaults on teachers.

Most children, even in those schools with the lowest reading

stanine scores, are reading at grade level through the second grade. From then on many of these children, especially minority children, gain only 1/2 a year in reading ability each year instead of gaining one full year. Research evidence indicates that our teaching strategies, at least in part, are at fault. By the time these students reach junior or senior high, if they have not already dropped out, they are programmed to fail. They are forced to read at grade level, and they can't. Is it any wonder that they become discontented, frustrated, and angry? Teachers' expectations of students as learners, especially minority children, often establish a pattern of failure that is never broken: the "self-fulfilling prophecy."

"Every effort is made to ensure that each entry has an equal chance at victory." Should this not be a theme for all schools? Unfortunately, this theme was not found in a school, it was discovered at a race track.

### Critical Elements for Success

Experience and research have shown that there are several critical elements over which we have some control that enhance the possibility of a student's success in school. These elements include:

- The *climate* of the school
- Student *self-esteem*
- *Expectations* of the student as a learner
- The *value* students place on learning
- Effective *teaching strategies*
- The *relationships* that students can and should learn while in school.

To define each element in detail would require more space than is available. It is sufficient to say that

the climate of the school, the level of self-esteem of the students, and the relationships that students of all ethnic groups learn to develop, can determine the success or failure of any school.

In summary, the most effective means of dealing with disruptive students is prevention. The school staff must identify and reduce, or eliminate those elements in the school that contribute to unacceptable student behavior, and must strive to create a positive climate for learning. Force may be necessary to regain control in schools that are hostile and in which violence is prevalent, but is counterproductive in most schools.

In addition to "personalizing" discipline, the following will contribute to the reduction of disruptive student behavior:

1. Building a positive school climate;
2. Implementing strategies which enable students to succeed;
3. Teaching children how to behave by modeling that behavior;
4. Involvement of staff and students in all facets of the school;
5. Developing open and honest communications;
6. Building trust;
7. Modeling and teaching interpersonal relationships.



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