

Administrators in the market for a discipline program must carefully examine more than immediate results. Here are 10 questions to ask about any discipline program before implementing it in your school:

1. What happens to students who break rules? Punishments or consequences?

2. Is it realistically possible to reinforce this program consistently?

3. What do students learn as a result of the enforcement?

4. Are the principles of behavior as visible and as important as the rules?

5. Do students have a say in what happens to them?

6. Do teachers have discretion in implementing consequences?

7. Is adequate time given for professional development of teachers and administrators? Is the training completed in only a day or two? Is there continuous follow-up and administrative support?

8. Does the plan account for the special relationship between teaching and discipline style, or does it focus

exclusively on student behavior? Does it encourage teachers to examine their potential contributions to discipline problems?

9. Is the dignity of students preserved? Are students protected from embarrassment?

10. Is the program consistent with the stated goals of your school?

From the Heart of the Teacher toward Self-Discipline

What most students learn about their behavior affects them as profoundly, if not more so, than what they learn about their subjects. When teachers devote as much energy and enthusiasm to behavior as they do to "content," and perceive misbehavior as an opportunity to affect students' lives positively, good things happen. Students recognize that teachers genuinely care, and teachers feel less like police. Cynicism is replaced by hope for teachers and students.

Effective discipline, then, does not come from the quick mastery of techniques nor the use of a packaged

method. Effective discipline comes from the heart and soul of the teacher. It comes from the belief that teaching students to take responsibility for their behavior is as much the job of the teacher as is teaching history or math. It comes from the belief that most students do the best they can in what many feel is an adverse environment. It comes from the belief that all students need hope. And it comes from the positive energy of the teacher. Only within the framework of the teacher's internal strength and the development of a caring classroom environment can a discipline plan yield responsible and self-disciplined school citizens. □

I. We wish to thank Raymond Wlodkowski of the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee for sharing this insight.

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Let the Educator Beware: A Response to Curwin and Mendler

Theories make for good reading, but Assertive Discipline is supported by research and gives teachers an effective strategy to use *now*.

I was asked to respond to Curwin and Mendler's article because I was told it criticized the Assertive Discipline approach to classroom management. In reading their article, however, I find it difficult to see exactly where they refer to Assertive Discipline and exactly what they object to. The majority of their points are vague and theoretical. Assertive Discipline, on the other hand, is based on experience and research. Therefore,

in responding to Curwin and Mendler, I will address those parts of their article to which I feel I can respond in a concrete manner. Opinions are easy to come by; facts are hard to dispute.

An Effective Classroom Management Strategy

First, I would like to address the theme of the article. Curwin and Mendler seem to be warning educators about discipline programs that are

not only ineffective but can have negative effects. If they are referring to Assertive Discipline, I suggest they consider the following facts.

In 1983, Mandelbaum and her colleague at Bowling Green University examined the results of implementing the Assertive Discipline approach in a 3rd grade classroom in a midwestern metropolitan school district. They found that teachers were able to reduce inappropriate behavior as a re-

sult of using Assertive Discipline and concluded that the program "is an effective and practical behavior management strategy" (Mandlebaum et al. 1983).

Mandlebaum's conclusions are supported by other researchers, teachers, and administrators who report substantial reductions of discipline problems and improvements in pupil behavior after Assertive Discipline was implemented (Becker 1980, Moffett et al. 1982, Ward 1983, Webb 1983). These findings are supported by school district observation reports in California, Arizona, and Minnesota (Loss 1981, Lubow 1979). Additionally, follow-up surveys indicate that observable pupil behavior continued to improve two to five years after introduction of Assertive Discipline (Crawley 1982, Bauer 1982).

Curwin and Mendler also warn against discipline programs that are "lockstep" and have a limited potential for application. I agree that finding an effective classroom management system that has broad application is a formidable task. How does Assertive Discipline measure up to that challenge? McCormack (1985) concluded in her study of 36 3rd grade classrooms that "Assertive Discipline works to reduce off-task behavior of students of varying reading levels, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, sex, and parental influence. Further, Assertive Discipline works for teachers who have varying qualifications, experience, and knowledge of the subject" (69-70).

Improved Self-Concept of Students, Teachers

Curwin and Mendler criticize discipline programs that adversely affect students' "dignity." If they are referring to Assertive Discipline, they must have overlooked the following studies.

Ersavas surveyed four elementary schools in which Assertive Discipline was not used and then introduced the program to the staffs of those schools, where the teachers subsequently implemented it. In addition to finding improved self-concept of teachers and pupils at the four schools, Ersavas (1980) validated the program's effectiveness in improving classroom behavior.

Other studies have also found improvement in teacher and pupil self-

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concept (Bauer 1982, Henderson 1982, and Parker 1985). In addition, Swanson (1984) reported positive self-concept findings in the Compton Unified School District in California (approximately 1,300 teachers) after Assertive Discipline was implemented in the entire district.

Positive Reinforcement, Proven and Powerful

Curwin and Mendler advocate a "responsibility" model for behavior management but offer no validation of its effectiveness. I believe I can help them there. Assertive Discipline is based on presenting students with choices (Canter and Canter 1976, 119), and it is through choice that students learn about responsibility (Dreikurs 1957). For students to choose to behave, they must know the rules, the positive reinforcement they will receive if they choose to follow the rules, and the negative consequences that will result if they choose not to follow the rules.

Curwin and Mendler completely overlook the importance of positive

reinforcement, a proven and powerful tool in behavior management (Weber et al. 1958). From the beginning, Assertive Discipline has been based on a balance of positive reinforcement and negative consequences (Canter and Canter 1976, 118). Negative consequences can stop unwanted behavior, but the way to encourage continued good behavior is to recognize and reward it (Madsen and Madsen 1981).

Assertive Discipline trains teachers to use positive reinforcement consistently to focus students' attention on desired behavior and to encourage them to continue that behavior because of the recognition they receive. Any classroom management program not based on positive reinforcement ignores the behavior of those students who regularly choose to behave appropriately.

A Positive Learning Experience

Curwin and Mendler also question discipline approaches that deal with 5 to 15 percent of disruptive students at the expense of the majority of the class. I agree with their premise but not with their numbers. All it requires is 1 student to take 29 other students off task. For an approach to discipline to be effective, it must stop the disruptive student(s) but improve learning and make education a more positive experience for all students.



assertive
discipline

Can Assertive Discipline improve learning? In her study, McCormack stated that classrooms using Assertive Discipline had 5 percent more on-task time than classrooms not using the program (1985, 79, 80). That's 15 minutes per day, 75 minutes per week, 5 hours per month more time teachers have to teach and *all* students have to learn.

A Systematic Approach to Discipline

Curwin and Mendler seem to prefer discipline programs that are not systematic and take a long time to develop and implement. But what is the classroom teacher to do while this development process is taking place? When Johnny decides to hit Billy because it is his only way of "coping with living in an adverse environment"? When that "5 percent" of students are disrupting because they haven't yet developed their "internal locus of control"?

A vital point Curwin and Mendler fail to address is what happens when teachers do not have a systematic way of responding to discipline problems. Too many times, teachers who are overwhelmed by constant disruptions react in ways that are emotionally or physically harmful to students. If you think we are dealing with a theoretical problem, what do you say to the 1,099,731 children who received physical punishment (padding) for misbehaving in class in 1985-86 (U.S. Department of Education 1988)?

Assertive discipline not only prevents teachers from responding emotionally, but the approach is also replacing corporal punishment in some districts; for example, Clear Creek in Texas (Snooks 1988) and Williams Valley in Pennsylvania ("Sparing the Rod," 1988). The program is working because it is fair, it is proven, and it does not hurt children.

The True Test

I could cite other studies that support the effectiveness of Assertive Discipline, but the real test of any educational approach is its use by teachers, in classrooms, with students. Assertive Discipline undergoes that testing in tens of thousands of classrooms every day.

Theories such as those of Curwin and Mendler make interesting read-

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ing, but teachers don't need more educational literature. They need answers, and they need them now. And to those who are concerned about protecting teachers from ineffective systems and approaches, I say, "Don't worry." Teachers and the process of educational natural selection are taking care of that. □

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