

Discipline

The Discipline Debate: A Road Through the Thicket

Five criteria useful in evaluating any discipline model will help educators make sense of a complex issue.

By now, if you have been following the *Educational Leadership* articles on the topic, you are probably thoroughly confused about Assertive Discipline. Let's see where we are as a result of the debate so far, and then determine what schools and teachers need to do as they attempt to make sound decisions for themselves and the students they serve. Maybe we can find a road through the thicket.

Reviewing the Debate

Richard Curwin and Allen Mendler ("Packaged Discipline Programs: Let the Buyer Beware," October 1988), without actually referring to Assertive Discipline by name, raise a number of caveats and *philosophical* objections to "packaged discipline programs." Their cautions are useful ones: simple-to-learn and easy-to-implement discipline strategies are unlikely to provide long-lasting satisfactory results. And their philosophical position merits reflection: Does Assertive Discipline, as practiced in your school, overemphasize *obedience* at the cost of student *responsibility*? Their 10 "questions to

pose before you choose" are helpful guidelines in evaluating a discipline model and will give practitioners an opportunity to measure practice against principle.

Lee Canter ("Let the Educator Beware: A Response to Curwin and Mendler," October 1988), for his part, restates his well-known position, supporting it on the *pragmatic*

grounds that Assertive Discipline "works." He points to research studies that he believes "prove" that this model reduces discipline problems while actually improving students' self-concepts. He then suggests that Assertive Discipline is, in fact, a *responsibility* model (not merely an *obedience* model) since it provides students with choices.

Note that here Canter moves away from research and pragmatics to engage Curwin and Mendler in a philosophical argument. This debate should be one every teacher joins: What is responsible student behavior, and how does my discipline program help or hinder the development of responsible decisions *by students*? Are their choices real choices or contrived ones? Am I more concerned with my power and control or with helping students toward self-discipline? Last, note that Canter appeals to our emotional side. His assertion that teachers "need answers, and they need them now" should give us pause.

Gary Render, Je Nell Padilla, and Mark Krank ("Assertive Discipline: The

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Data," p. 72) focus on the *research* aspect of how the program works, suggesting that Canter overstates the research support for such claims as an 80 percent reduction in student misbehavior. How does one "prove" effectiveness of any discipline approach? Curwin and Mendler make a valid point when they say that a lower number of office referrals does not necessarily *prove* that discipline in a classroom is better. Render, Padilla, and Krank simply point out the surprising paucity of research (only 16 studies that met their two criteria of systematic collection of data and presentation of results) on Assertive Discipline and note that *none* of the studies they located compared this approach with any other specific approach. Even though Canter says "teachers don't need more educational literature," they surely need research results.

Now, this is where Sammie McCormack ("But Practitioners Say It Works," p. 77) enters the fray. She concludes that from a "practitioner's perspective," reports from school districts and state organizations (along with teacher endorsements, visitor impressions, and administrator observations) tend to support claims made for the effectiveness of Assertive Discipline. The point here, it appears, is that research is often inconclusive and certainly is not the only basis on which an administrator should make a pragmatic or policy decision. So what if there is scant research on the actual effectiveness of Assertive Discipline? If it seems to work and experiential (as opposed to research) reports from educators and students themselves are positive, practical wisdom would say to give the program a try—especially if the research does not controvert anecdotal data.

Clarifying the Issues

The debate about Assertive Discipline illustrates the complexity, if not confusion, that characterizes most educational issues. Often the grounds of the debate shift before our eyes. At one moment the discussion hinges on definition: What is "Assertive Discipline"

anyway? And what is "responsible" behavior? "Choice" of consequences? A program that "works"? "Proof"? The next moment the discussion shifts to philosophical questions: Is keeping students in line less important than maintaining their dignity? Are constant disruptions of the group of greater concern than the needs of an individual student? And then, finally, the discussion moves outside itself to address the research question: Does research support the claims—and do we even need research? Interesting, important questions.

Assertive Discipline, at its heart, is not much more than applied behavior modification and take-charge teacher firmness with rules and consequences. There are some effective communication techniques, such as "the broken record" and "moving in." The approach is not magic; it has the virtues of simplicity and system and the shortcomings of potential abuse as a quick-fix. Assertive Discipline can be a basis on which to build a more comprehensive model of discipline; it can raise and clarify teacher expectations for behavior. If the approach is viewed as a set of principles rather than a packaged discipline program—and if it is applied professionally and humanely—Assertive Discipline can become part of the decision-making process good teachers always employ. It is not *the* answer to all discipline problems. Of course, there should be more research on all aspects of Assertive Discipline. Anecdotal reports, including my own, may be helpful and illustrative; they are not sufficient for sound policy.

Selecting a Discipline Program

Any school contemplating Assertive Discipline, or any model of discipline, ought to measure the program on the following criteria:

1. *It should be philosophically sound.* That means it has clear definitions and concepts and coherent theoretical premises. (Discernible and logical principles generate helpful practices.) Teachers and administrators, parents and communities, should

reach some measure of consensus on the goals of the program consistent with the school's educational philosophy.

2. *It should be pedagogically defensible.* Discipline is always a learned behavior; discipline techniques should be based on what we know about learning theory and instructional methods. Teachers should understand how the program relates to educational needs of students.

3. *It should be psychologically appropriate.* The theories, principles, and practices of any discipline model should lead to better self-concepts and more positive attitudes about human relationships, learning, and life.

4. *It should be pragmatically feasible.* Training time, materials, consultants, follow-up inservice, logistical arrangements—all of these should be financially affordable. But the school or district must provide sufficient resources and support, human as well as financial, to make the program possible. Consideration must be given to the politics of implementation.

5. *It should be professionally evaluated.* Sufficient research, as well as anecdotal reports, should be available to satisfy administrators, teachers, and parents who want to know if the program has been effective elsewhere (before you begin) and if it has been effective in your school (after implementation).

Evaluating the Options

There are few absolutes for dealing with the difficult problem of school discipline. There are hundreds of models, programs, principles, and techniques that in some combination can help your school and your teaching staff better address the complexities of classroom management and student behavior. The most important task at the outset is to evaluate your options against these criteria and to do that with the cooperation of all of those affected by the ultimate decision. That's the only way to find the road through the discipline thicket. □

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