

# Managing Disruptive Students

The Special Education Learning Center in Hartford, Connecticut, successfully teaches students with serious behavioral disorders.

What should a school system do with its most disruptive students? In 1978, the Hartford Public School System was faced with the problem of providing education for its students with serious behavioral disorders ("BD students"). Out-of-district tuition was increasing rapidly, P.L. 94-142 required more local programming, the number of identified BD students was rising, and schools were having to accept students expelled from out-of-district placements.

Hartford responded by creating the Special Education Learning Center (SELC), a specialized therapeutic school for students with violent behavior. Starting with five students, one teacher, a teacher's aide, and an administrator, the SELC now serves a student population of 185 (K-12) with a staff of 50. This review of SELC's first decade may help *your* school district address the problem of programming for those students who are too disruptive to remain in regular schools.

## The Behavioral Curriculum

In developing a program for BD students, it is important to remember that traditional school programs have *not* worked for them. In fact, traditional

schools often contribute to BD students' behavioral problems. Therefore, alternative programming must not be merely a smaller version of "business as usual."

Program developers must give careful attention to teaching a behavioral curriculum. While we are all aware of the need for subject-area curriculums, we often forget that a curriculum in

the *behavioral* area is equally important. What are our behavioral expectations? How do we expect students to progress in behavioral skill development? What are our reinforcers and punishments? How do we deal with advanced students and students requiring remediation? A behavioral curriculum addresses these issues.

Subject-area curriculums in the SELC parallel the curriculums in the rest of the school system. But this academic curriculum is secondary to our behavioral curriculum. Regular classroom teachers often continue their lessons despite minor behavioral infractions; SELC teachers, who are in the business of teaching behavioral basics, always stop class to deal with inappropriate behavior. Consequently, students realize that inappropriate behaviors will be dealt with quickly.

One might expect this practice to have a negative effect on academic growth. Yet we have found just the opposite to be true. When teachers stop class immediately to deal with behavioral problems, more time-on-task is ultimately devoted to academic lessons. It is not surprising, therefore, that in addition to behavioral growth, our students make important aca-

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demetic gains. For example, their year-for-year growth in math and reading is normal.

### **Expectations and Rewards**

Teachers of BD students should hold high expectations for appropriate behavior—despite students' behavioral histories. Specialized programming must also provide a structure that enables students to develop more appropriate behaviors while eliminating inappropriate ones.

Within the SELC, teachers give students brief report cards *at the end of each period*. Teachers rate each student on conduct and academic work: two points for meeting behavioral expectations, only one if a small problem developed, and none if there was a major problem requiring discipline. Academic performance is rated similarly. Once a month, students with the highest points get a special treat: a movie, lunch out, or some other recognition. This point system provides students with reinforcement and feedback.

### **Punishments**

Teachers must choose punishments carefully to ensure that students perceive them as negative. In our school, *boredom* is a major punishment. When a student has misbehaved, he or she has to stand rigid in the corner, facing the wall, for 10 minutes. For more serious behavioral problems, we use a special room for Controlled Time-Out. When the time is up, the student returns to his or her desk and continues work. No need for a teacher's lecture—the students know what they have done wrong. Further, if you

warn a child at the end of punishment about repeating an act, you are setting an expectation for such repetition.

### **Setting and Supplies**

Those developing a specialized school for the behaviorally disordered must give careful attention to its design. Physical space must be attractive, compact, and functional. Since BD students tend to wander and become "lost," the school should have as little unsupervised space as possible.

One of our buildings has a large central open space, used for breaks, program meetings, and the like, surrounded by 10 small classrooms. Classrooms and bathrooms all open onto this central space. There are no corridors, stairs, or corners where students can go for unsupervised activity. We simply don't give behavioral problems a place to begin.

Because staff in a program for BD students need to spend maximum time planning, they need a wide variety of educational materials, books, and supplies. Our teachers receive over \$1,000 in start-up costs when they join the staff and \$400-\$500 a year after that to replenish used items. (These figures do not take into account normal classroom furnishings and supplies.) With only 5-10 students in a class, this represents considerable funding per teacher. But with such a challenging student population, teachers need to spend their time developing behavioral plans and interventions rather than academic materials.

### **Collegial Support**

Given the manipulative skills of BD students, teachers need to coordinate their efforts and provide collegial support. In the SELC, we operate a four-hour school day for students and a six and one-half hour workday for staff. This gives staff a half hour before students arrive and two hours after they leave for this important team function. After a difficult day, staff members can review the day's events and learn from their experiences.

To work effectively, teams must be kept to reasonable numbers. Though there are 50 staff members at the SELC,

they are divided into 5 separate teams, with fewer than 10 members in each. While the number of students assigned to a team may vary according to their degree of violent behavior, each team consists of five teachers, several aides, and a therapist (social worker). This grouping enhances the team's ability to get to know their students.

### **Physical Intervention**

One of the most controversial elements of an effective program for BD students is physical intervention. This is *not* the use of corporal punishment. Physical intervention is the use of reasonable physical force to ensure student compliance with appropriate staff direction. If a BD student is allowed to win a confrontation because an adult cannot take appropriate physical action, the student assumes the position of control; and the program will eventually collapse.

Let me give an example. Ms. Smith asks Harry to step to the board. Harry refuses. She asks a second time. He sits defiantly in his chair. Ms. Smith approaches Harry, takes him gently by the arm, and pulls him toward the board. He gives an exasperated sigh, rises to his feet, and goes to the board. Ms. Smith used a gentle physical nudge when words were ineffective.

In another case, John jumps to his feet screaming profanities and begins swinging at Mark. Ms. Smith calls for help in physically separating John and

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Mark. The team quickly arrives. Because John is still struggling wildly, four staff members each hold a limb, Ms. Smith his head, and another teacher his torso, as John is lowered to the floor and restrained. Once they have John under physical control, the staff members begin a planned and practiced "talk-down" procedure. As John calms down, they slowly release him from restraint—limb by limb.

Of course, safeguards must be built into any system that allows physical intervention. The staff must not abuse their ability to physically control students. Proper teaming provides such safeguards, as team members observe one another's behavior and then discuss differences of opinion at team meetings.

Since one-on-one physical interventions, except in a mild case like Ms. Smith and Harry, can result in staff or student injury, we *always* use a team approach in physical restraint. In addition to preventing injury, this practice guarantees that other staff members are present during restraint in case one becomes overly emotional and loses control. On the rare occasions when this occurs, the understood code words "I'll take over now" give that staff member a nondebatable order to leave the area and regain control. When his or her control returns, so can the staff member. Teachers are human; they need to plan for the occasional instance when emotion overcomes professional skill.

### Demonstrated Success

For over 10 years, the SELC has demonstrated that it is possible to provide a program for severely BD students within the public school setting. Moreover, the SELC saves the district money, complies with P.L. 94-142, allows Hartford to set its own placement priorities for disruptive students, and provides a model for other districts. And each year, one third of our student population moves to a less restrictive environment. □

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