



# About Student Discipline

In no other area of education is the gulf between teachers and administrators wider than in the area of student discipline. When new teachers cite lack of administrative support as their reason for leaving the profession, what they usually mean is lack of administrative support in handling student misbehavior. When administrators complain to one another about teachers, they usually commiserate about those who struggle with classroom management and discipline.

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*To establish effective schoolwide discipline systems, school leaders must challenge these five common notions.*

**Laurie Boyd**

The focus of our work is teaching and learning, and we invest a lot of time and attention in improving its design and delivery. Seldom, however, do teachers and administrators spend time together addressing an equally important task—developing a buildingwide discipline system. Ignoring the need for a comprehensive, consistent approach to student behavior is like sending teachers to deliver the academic program in utter darkness, wearing muzzles.

As the leader of an urban middle

school, I've worked with my staff to design and refine our schoolwide discipline system (see "Arrowhead Middle School's Schoolwide Discipline System," p. 64). I believe that this system is essential because my highest priority is to make sure our students have an enjoyable and productive middle school career. Actually, I want our students to love their middle school experience. Because their peer group, their hormones, and their emotions can wreak havoc on sensitive adolescents' souls, the best support we can give them is a school environment that is physically and psychologically safe—where they feel loved and supported even when, and maybe especially when, they don't love themselves.

Although it may be self-evident that students can only feel safe and secure in a school where the adults guarantee order, mediation, and justice, establishing a schoolwide discipline system is often more difficult than it should be.

### Challenging the Myths

Teachers and administrators alike hold erroneous notions about discipline that do not serve us well when we seek solutions to behavior problems in schools. Unless we adequately define the problem, we won't be effective in our attempts to solve it.

Here are five false statements I continue to hear from education leaders and teachers that perpetuate problems related to student discipline.

## MYTH 1:



*If your lessons are engaging, you won't have discipline problems.*

Yes, the teacher who can deliver consistently interesting and challenging instruction may have fewer student behavior issues than one whose lesson plans are boring or meaningless. But no

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learning activity is guaranteed to engage 100 percent of students, every minute of every class period, every day of the school year. And every teacher knows what even one or two disengaged students can do to a learning environment if classroom management is inadequate.

This myth assumes that students act up only if the lesson is boring. In the real world, their behavior is influenced not only by the lesson, but also by whether they like their teacher; who else is in the classroom; the social dynamic created by that particular group of peers; whether they are hungry (thirsty, angry, depressed, sleepy, worried, afraid, and so on); and how successful they have been in this subject before.

Teachers deliver learning activities within a complex context of schooling. Corralling off-task students, endeavoring to create the perfect learning zone for all students in the classroom within the same class period, and providing a sensible routine for communicating feedback and assigning grades are just a few of the responsibilities of the classroom teacher that affect, and are affected by, student behaviors.

And let's consider, as well, that preparing students for college and careers means helping them apply themselves to tasks even when the tasks aren't all that engaging.

## MYTH 2:



*Teachers need to find their own style of discipline.*

In my decades of working with teachers on classroom management and discipline, I generally hear this claim from two kinds of teachers. One is the already-expert teacher-disciplinarian. Experienced or naturally talented teachers often do develop a singular style of classroom management founded on relationships with their students that transcend the norm. Seemingly without effort, these expert disciplinarians build true community, not just between themselves and each student but also among the students themselves. No one bullies anyone else. No one is afraid of looking dumb or failing. Everyone is motivated to succeed and believes he or she can. It's magical.

Typically, these individuals do not argue when a school decides to establish a schoolwide discipline system. They simply embed the common rules and consequences in their own effective system, or they seldom invoke the schoolwide system because they don't have occasion to do so. When disciplinarians of this caliber try to explain to me why they don't use every detail of our schoolwide system, I typically respond, "You don't need to. What you already do is effective. Let me know if you ever need help."

Often, however, a teacher's claim of having a different style of management means that the teacher is uncomfortable with confrontation and hopes to be able to get his or her adolescent charges to behave without any conflict. Such teachers may post rules and consequences and claim they will enforce them, but they have a hard time actually making themselves follow through.

Fear of conflict results in a host of ineffective disciplinary choices,

including (1) addressing the behavior of a few disruptive students through general comments to the entire class; (2) overlooking incessant side conversations or interruptions because the teacher claims to have a “higher tolerance” for noise than other teachers; (3) grinning and joking to decrease tension in the confrontation about misbehavior; and, when the teacher finally gets fed up, (4) disciplining the whole class for the misbehavior of a few.

When a teacher claims that he or she cannot implement even the skeletal framework of rules and consequences that our school requires in every classroom because it is not his or her “style,” I have to ask, “What exactly is your style, and is it the best approach for all kids?”

Sure, the students who love to roam the classroom, stop by others’ desks to socialize or bully, or blurt out off-

topic comments will appear to love a more permissive style of discipline. But the teacher is accountable for the psychological safety and comfort of every student in the classroom. And the only way to give all students the learning environment they need is for the adult to be in charge—to be the gatekeeper, even, of who talks when and what topics are allowed; to be aware of and immediately address any hurtful interactions between peers; to insist that every student puts forth effort on his or her school work; and to ensure that every student can concentrate in the classroom.

When the teacher does not take charge, it is not uncommon for an intimidating student or group of students to take over. A management “style” that results in a psychologically threatening environment is not an acceptable style.

## MYTH 3:

### *Effective teachers do not have power struggles with students.*

Fear of conflict that results in relinquishing one’s authority is, at its root, a selfish stance for a teacher. It is more important that every student gets what he or she needs, including discipline, than for the teacher to feel liked and accepted by every student. Teachers should convey the attitude that they have such relevant and meaningful truths to impart about the academic content, as well as about how to succeed in life, that they and the class have no time for foolishness.

Expert teacher-disciplinarians do not fear conflict or avoid confrontation. Such teachers are so clear about what fuels students’ misbehavior that they can respond in a way that keeps the

## Arrowhead Middle School’s Schoolwide Discipline System

Our multilevel discipline system is based on the model developed by Behavior Intervention Support Team (BIST), an outreach program that provides training and consultation to hundreds of schools throughout the Midwest. Information about the BIST model is available at [www.bist.org](http://www.bist.org).

### Level 1: Procedures and Routines

At the beginning of the year, every class learns and rehearses key classroom procedures, such as how each class will begin, how students will be dismissed, and a signal that means “come to attention.”

### Level 2: Common Rules and Step-Based Consequences

Every classroom has five basic rules: (1) Stay in your assigned seat unless you have permission to move; (2) Raise your hand and get permission before you speak (unless directed to discuss a topic as part of a structured learning activity); (3) Keep all body parts and possessions to yourself; (4) Keep your head up and your eyes open at all times; and (5) Follow all adult instructions.

All teachers use a consistent, step-based consequence system to ensure that students comply with our simple standards for classroom behavior. Consequences escalate from a

simple verbal warning or reminder; to a phone call home; to a 20-minute detention (supervised by the teacher and used as a time for building relationships and solving issues); to an office referral. This four-step system is effective with 85–90 percent of our students.

### Level 3: Behavior Interventions for Chronic Misbehavior

If a student displays chronic misbehavior, the teacher implements our Behavior Intervention Support Team (BIST) model. The student may be moved from his or her assigned classroom seat to a designated *safe seat*, to a *buddy seat* in another classroom, or, finally, to the school recovery room. With each move, the student is given the opportunity to regroup and to talk with a supportive adult about his or her struggles and goals. If the student begins to spend more time in BIST movement than in regular class, we create a more intensive intervention plan—for example, a monitor sheet that a teacher reviews regularly with the student and parent.

### Level 4: Student Behavior Plan

If the monitor sheet alone is not enough, the teacher and student complete a BIST planning sheet to explore the student’s strengths and weaknesses, to examine when and where

student from erupting or withdrawing, which means the teacher can keep the relationship intact even when confronting the student on his or her attitude or poor choice of action.

Expert disciplinarians can get a student to acknowledge, own, and want to improve his or her deficiency. These teachers do not mind if a student gets angry with them temporarily, as long as they know they are helping that student develop important lifelong skills. They are not in the teaching business to make friends with students or to have all kids love them. Ironically, these teachers are the ones whom students come to love—and usually not because of the content they taught, but because of their commitment to the development of the students' characters.

I tell teachers who fear conflict to look for opportunities to confront students about their misbehavior or bad

attitudes several times a day, like daily exercise. Enter the conflict and win. It may be messy, and they may suffer temporary student or parent backlash, but they cannot have much influence on their students' lives without developing that expert disciplinarian's mind-set and follow-through. Like overcoming a fear of public speaking, you overcome fear of conflict by facing your audience, stumbling through your delivery, reflecting on your experience, and preparing to face another incident. The discomfort decreases as you practice.

## MYTH 4:



***A school leader's attention needs to be on instruction, not discipline.***

Many more teachers need help and support with classroom management

and student discipline than do not. If a school lacks a coherent system of discipline that all adults enforce, it becomes more likely that teachers will experience problems with student behavior.

Behavior issues in schools are not just occasional; they are daily, hourly, and everywhere. Some behaviors warrant immediate office referrals or even suspension (for example, physical assault, sexual harassment or misconduct, possession of drugs or weapons, and fighting). Other behaviors—defiance, disruption, disrespect, pranking, failure to work, name calling, incessant talking, and so on—are usually left to the classroom teacher.

It is the school leader's responsibility to ensure a consistent, schoolwide system for preventing misbehavior, for responding to misbehavior in the classroom and elsewhere on school grounds, and for removing chronically

the problems occur, to identify missing skills that cause these problems, and to set goals toward acquiring those life skills. Planned interventions might include sheltered arrival and dismissal; preferred seating; an adult escort to every class; color-coded cards (for students who can't talk when they are angry or upset); and other ideas. An adult monitors the student's plan and meets with the student daily about his or her progress toward these behavior goals.

### Level 5: Team Focus

The most intensive plan facilitated by a classroom teacher is team focus. One of the teachers on the grade level team volunteers to take a chronically misbehaving student on team focus. In our school, it is not uncommon for every teacher to carry at least one student at this level. This teacher monitors an intervention plan that helps the student understand the reasons and consequences for his or her behavior and plan how to make things right. The team focus teacher provides daily support until the student can handle the majority of his or her day, even if much of it is spent with the team focus teacher and not in regular classes.

### Level 6: Second Step Program

A student who fails to cooperate with his or her team focus

teacher is assigned to a 10-day program in the recovery room, called "Second Step." Regular teachers deliver the student's assignments, and the recovery room teacher holds up to three one-on-one sessions a week with the student about specific behavior goals and struggles. To reenter the team focus level, the student must identify the behaviors that resulted in his or her being assigned to Second Step, review his or her life skills, and commit to partner with the team focus teacher successfully.

### Level 7: School Within a School

This past year, we created a School Within a School program for our most severe behavior problems—students who would otherwise have received long-term suspensions for their extreme misbehavior. A few exceptionally skilled teachers who have one 45-minute period unassigned at the beginning of the school year provide instruction in the core subjects of math, reading, science, and social studies to a total of 16 students. These students receive nearly one-on-one attention for their schoolwork, but the hidden curriculum consists of understanding the behavioral expectations of the school and developing the life skills they lack.

disruptive students from the classroom. After all, teachers cannot meet the school's academic priorities in a chaotic, dangerous, or unproductive environment.

School leaders who do not focus on behavior and discipline must take responsibility for lost instructional time, and probably for an unsafe and ineffective learning environment as well. After all, the biggest myth about school discipline may be that it just takes care of itself. Nothing could be further from the truth. Ask any teacher. Ask any student.

## MYTH 5:



*The school code of conduct is an adequate building discipline system.*

The code of conduct is not a discipline system that fully supports the work

of teachers. It supports the work of administrators, those in positions with the power to assign office-level consequences. But one assistant administrator monitoring hundreds of students' behavior will never be an effective school discipline system. Classroom teachers, as well as other adults who interact with students in the building, must be empowered to discipline students.

An effective system enables teachers to manage their classrooms, the hallways, the multipurpose room, and the school grounds—in short, wherever they are with students—so that administrators can handle the more severe student behaviors. One serious incident can occupy an administrator for half the day, particularly if a thorough investigation is needed. Teachers and staff must be able to handle the bulk of the daily discipline. To have the authority

to do this demanding task, teachers and other staff must have a system that thoroughly backs them.

### The School Leader's Responsibility

When we help our young charges develop self-discipline through a consistent, coherent discipline system, we show them that we care about their lives, not just their grades or test scores. My goal is to help all teachers provide the same support to our students that expert teacher-disciplinarians provide. As administrators, we can't manage teachers' classrooms—but we can provide a system that supports teachers in their efforts to create a safe space for learning. 

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