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Richard L. Sullivan Ph.D.
Central State Oklahoma

Lou J. Ebrite R.N., Ph.D.
Central State University

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CLASSROOM DISCIPLINE: PRACTICAL TECHNIQUES

Richard L. Sullivan¹

Lou J. Ebrite

Abstract: Classroom discipline is a major concern to teachers, administrators, and the public. This article addresses causes, prevention, and intervention techniques for discipline problems. Causes of discipline problems include a lack of interest in the program, anger, worry, fear, shame, embarrassment, or frustration relating to a physical impairment or learning disability. Effective planning for classroom instruction can help decrease discipline problems. When problems do occur, the teacher should act quickly, be fair and consistent, provide the student with a written plan, and expect a change in behavior.

Jerry has his head on the desk again. "Jerry, why must you sleep in **class!**" Jerry looks up, hesitates, then responds with "I'm tired of this class. It's **boring!**" What would you do?

¹Richard L. Sullivan, Ph.D., is Associate Professor, Vocational Education, Central State Oklahoma; Lou J. Ebrite, R.N., Ph.D., is Assistant Professor and Coordinator, Health Occupations Education and Chairperson of the Department of Adult, Vocational, Administration, and Higher Education, College of Education, Central State University.

Maintaining discipline is a major concern of teachers, especially new teachers. School administrators often spend a significant amount of their time dealing with discipline problems. Kindsvatter, Wilen, and Ishler (1988) define discipline as "a dynamic set of conditions that exists within students, individually and collectively, the effect of which is revealed in the classroom in terms of order and decorum" (p. 277). A recent Gallup poll showed that discipline in schools was second only to the use of drugs as the biggest problem with which the public schools must deal (Gallup and Elam, 1987).

Cruickshank (1980) examined the effects of maintaining discipline on teachers "Teachers who spend a great deal of time and energy dealing with misbehav or will have little time, energy, or patience left for teaching" (p. 114) Considering the importance of maintaining classroom discipline, it is cr tical that vocational teachers understand why problems occur, how discipline problems are prevented, and what to do when a problem does occur. After reviewing a number of studies on discipline, Kindsvatter et al. (1988) concluded that "classrooms characterized by a positive climate and academically motivated students are those in which misbehavior occurs infrequently" (p. 276). There appears to be many benefits of effective classroom discipline. The most obvious is that students are free to work in a positive environment which encourages learning and prepares students for expectations of future employers. The teacher not only gains the admiration and respect of students, but avoids becoming burned out from continually dealing with control problems. The school benefits through positive public relations from offering quality vocational programs.

Causes of Discipline Problems

There may be any number of causes for a given discipline problem. To complicate matters, Brophy and Rohrkemper (1981) report that teachers often blame sources outside their control as causes of discipline problems. Regardless of the source, one of the most common causes of discipline problems that is within the teacher's control is a lack of student interest in the vocational program. When interest drops, students may look for other diversions often resulting in discipline problems. The most common implication for vocational teachers is to plan every minute of every day with relevant, productive, and challenging activities to keep students on task.

Discipline problems may be due to emotional stress resulting from anger, worry, fear, shame, or embarrassment. These emotions could result from student frustration with non-completion of program activities, failing a test, disagreement with another student, worry over paying a laboratory fee, or anxiety resulting from family problems. Students reprimanded in front of others for any reason may feel embarrassed as an emotional reaction. This embarrassment may precipitate a confrontation with the teacher and create a discipline problem. The teacher should avoid placing students in situations that might trigger one of these emotions. Finally, discipline problems may result from physical impairments such as poor hearing or vision. Student frustration may once again trigger an emotion which causes a discipline problem. This also applies to students with undetected learning disabilities. When a teacher believes one of these may be causing discipline problems, it may be necessary to work with counselors and parents to identify corrective strategies.

Preventing Discipline Problems

Most discipline problems can be prevented. The vocational teacher, through proper planning, can ensure the majority of potential discipline problems never occur. Some techniques for preventive discipline include the following:

1. Begin on the first day of school to establish expectations early as programmatic and institutional policies are presented. Teachers often provide each student with a copy of these policies and ask that they return them with student and parent signatures. Adult students are asked to sign for themselves.

2. Plan effective classroom presentations and laboratory activities for every day. Start each class session on time, plan for the entire period, and keep students on task. Begin teaching on the first day of school .

3. Maintain a well-organized and clean classroom and laboratory.

4. Promote a positive learning climate by providing a comfortable environment using a number of program related posters and signs, maintaining current and interesting bulletin boards, arranging the classroom setting in a horseshoe shape to encourage interaction, using student names as often as possible, and ensuring that the classroom and laboratory are bright, cheerful places to work.

5. Maintain well-organized storage rooms and supply areas. All equipment must be in proper and safe working condition.

6. Arrive in the classroom prior to students and greet them as they arrive.

7. Involve each **student** in every presentation and provide positive reinforcement as often as possible. This reinforcement can be verbal, such

as great answer Michelle, or nonverbal a smile or pat on the back) and given in front of others or in private. It is difficult for a student to be disruptive when that student feels good about a positive relationship with the teacher.

8. Model desirable behavior in terms of attitude, dress, safety apparel, support of the school, enthusiasm, and humor. Students have a tendency to model their **teacher's** behavior.

9. Build variety into instruction by using a number of instructional methods, activities, and evaluation techniques. Take the students on a study trip, invite a guest speaker, use small group and individualized instruction when appropriate, and avoid the same old schedule syndrome that leads to boredom and often to discipline problems.

10. Relate all instruction to the world of work. Show students that the skills and knowledge they are acquiring will help them be successful in their chosen career.

11. Encourage students to assume some responsibility for their learning by allowing them to provide input into the selection of learning activities, vocational student organization events, and break schedules to name a few possibilities. When students begin to develop a sense of program ownership and pride, there will be a decrease in the number of discipline problems.

12. **Exhibit** a positive attitude by maintaining high expectations and being sincere and honest in terms of how students are progressing in their vocational program.

13. Involve parents and guardians in the secondary program. Avoid waiting until there is a problem before contacting parents. Win them over by sending happy gram notes and letters, making home visits, phoning parents to visit about their son or daughter, and inviting them to visit the

program. Then, when parents must be contacted regarding a discipline problem, they are less likely to be defensive and are more likely to work with the teacher to correct the situation.

14. Maintain a positive learning atmosphere for adults. Inform them of their progress frequently and help them to view problems as skills to be developed and not as personal threats.

15. Establish as few rules as possible and develop a program policy or rule only if there is a need. Rules typically focus on dress, entering and leaving the classroom, safety apparel, horseplay, attendance, staying on task, arriving prepared for class, language, submitting assignments, and following directions. State rules from a positive perspective and be very clear about the consequences of inappropriate behavior.

When Problems Occur

Even with proper planning, discipline problems may occur. When they do, the teacher should attempt to handle the situation correctly and recognize there is no standard action to follow when a problem occurs. Following are some suggestions of what may be done when a discipline problem does occur. Many of these suggestions are based on information from the National Center for Research in Vocational Education (1980):

1. Avoid sarcasm and ridicule. These **will** only alienate students and create additional discipline problems.
2. Remember that secondary students are in the process of growing up and will make mistakes. Avoid overreacting to a minor incident.
3. Avoid punishing a student in the heat of anger.
4. Collect all information regarding an incident before making a decision.

5. Act at the first sign of a problem. Many teachers wait too long before taking action.
6. Reprimand the student in private.
7. Avoid the use of peer pressure by using group punishment. A more effective use of peer pressure is to reward students for appropriate behavior in front of other students.
8. Be consistent and fair with discipline.
- 9." Attempt to handle most discipline problems, keep the school administration informed, and involve the administration in serious cases.
10. Avoid threatening, arguing, and attempting to bluff students because they may lose respect for the teacher. Also, avoid assigning classwork as punishment. This sends the wrong message regarding the importance of class activities.

The Process for Disciplinary Action

The process for disciplinary action should be handled very carefully. The teacher should talk to the student at the first sign of a problem. It is important for the student to understand the teacher is serious regarding the consequences of inappropriate behavior. When an incident occurs, the teacher should follow through by informing the student of the inappropriate behavior and then applying appropriate punishment. This punishment must be consistent, fair, and comply with both program and school policies. To test for this, teachers should ask themselves "what punishment would I use if this were my best student; my worst student?" These questions and the subsequent answers will keep the teacher from being too strict or too lenient.

School administrators often require each teacher to complete a disciplinary action report when an incident occurs. The teacher should

describe the situation in writing and list the specific rules being broken or the objectives not being met. Identify a period of time the student **will** have to improve, the specific way in which the student should improve, and the consequences if improvement is not made. Parents should be informed of the situation and apprised of the disciplinary action being taken.

The teacher should select consequences which are appropriate **for** the incident. Options for vocational teachers include the following:

1. Student conference with the teacher.
2. Parent-teacher conference.
3. Lowering of daily grades based on attitude and time on task.
4. In-school detention.
5. After school detention.
6. Meeting with the **administrator**.
7. Corporal punishment administered following institution policies.
8. Removal of a program privilege (break, hall pass, etc.).
9. Suspension.
10. Expulsion.

Due Process

Due process must be followed when a decision has been made that a student is to be dismissed from a program. When the dismissal letter is received, the student may wish to contest the expulsion. The teacher should be aware of the administration's due process policies and follow them explicitly. Students should be aware of due process and be apprised of their rights within the process. **Due process may involve** the following policies:

1. The student is provided a copy of the appeal procedure.

2. If an appeal hearing is to be held, the student is given timely notice so as to have sufficient time to prepare. For English as a second language students, the notice also should be in their native language.

3. An impartial hearing is conducted. A panel comprised of school representatives, program faculty, and other individuals may be appropriate to review the case.

4. The student and school may be represented by counsel. The student also may have legal counsel, parents, and other students speak on one's behalf.

5. During a cross examination period the student must be allowed to ask questions.

6. The student must be allowed to maintain status quo pending **appeal**. The student remains in the vocational program during the appeal process so that if the decision of the teacher is overturned, the student will not have deficiencies to make up. However, if the teacher feels the student may not function safely if allowed in a laboratory or clinical area, the student can spend time in a study area.

7. **The student**, legal counsel, and parents must be allowed to see and review any records or grades pertaining to the student.

Within the school system, the appeal process ends with the school board. However, a student may elect to involve the courts outside the school system.

Summary

Cruickshank (1980) presents five principles that can make control less of a problem. These include (a) pursue goals that are appropriate and important, (b) analyze factors that affect problem situations, (c) use

positive techniques for managing behavior, (d) use punishment appropriately and sparingly, and (e) teach students to manage their own behavior.

Health occupations teachers should maintain a positive learning environment by respecting students and using a variety of learning activities to keep them involved. Discipline problems should not be taken personally. It is the student's behavior that is the problem, not the student as a person. When discipline problems occur, act quickly, be fair and consistent, provide the student with a written plan for improvement, and expect a change in behavior. High expectations, planning, and effective discipline will help to ensure the success of both the teacher and student.

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