

School Suspensions Don't Work. It's Time for Something Better.

There are far more effective ways of dealing with student misbehavior than traditional suspensions and expulsions.

By David Bulley

Cindy sits across from me in what is now called The Justice Center at Turners Falls High School in Montague, about 20 miles north of Amherst. The room is brightly decorated with student art, there is a coffee machine and some candy on a table, and behind me on the wall is a quote from the mystic Rumi: "Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I'll meet you there."

Cindy (a pseudonym) smiles, though she is painfully embarrassed. Last year she was suspended for fighting. Now she sits across from me after having thrown a cafeteria tray and several other things at two boys. She is upset — still in fight or flight mode. We just chat for a while, about the weather and her weekend, her friends. Eventually I know she is ready, and I ask a question to begin the real work of our meeting. "Cindy, what happened?"

When it comes to student misbehavior, most schools have long practiced a basic system of crime and punishment, isolating the perceived "offender" through detention or suspension. Until this school year, that's what we did at Turners Falls. But during the summer I was trained in a system called restorative justice, an approach that focuses on nonjudgmental discussion, developing empathy, and repairing the damage done. We've put it into effect for all our nearly 300 students.

Even last year we might have suspended Cindy first and done the restorative work second. Before that we would have simply suspended her without ever asking what happened. After all, it's caught on camera: her throwing the tray. That's all the evidence we need to make a problem disappear for at least a couple days.

Today Cindy answers my question. She tells me that the boys had been joking with her and another girl, not inappropriately, exactly, but in a way that made her feel self-conscious. When the other girl left the table, the boys began whispering and laughing. When the one word she heard loud and clear was "Africa" — Cindy is black, the two boys are white — Cindy erupted.

I called the boys to my room to join us. Cindy and I learned, through nonjudgmental questioning, that she did hear the word, but it was uttered in an entirely different context. The rude whispering had nothing to do with her at all. Yes, the joke was dumb, but the anger from Cindy was based on a self-conscious and fear-based misunderstanding.

Now, I don't want to give the impression that restorative justice is some touchy-feely New Age kumbaya. We were not done!

Although the students reconciled immediately, forgave one another, and parted friends, Cindy was still responsible for her actions (no matter how understandable). She apologized profusely to the boys.

After that, we walked down to the cafeteria, where she had tough conversations with the lunch workers and cleaned up the mess she had made. We talked with the teachers who were on lunch duty, so Cindy could understand how difficult and scary it is to intervene in a physical confrontation between high school students. She apologized to them, to school administrators, and to me. Cindy spent the rest of the day in my room producing a report on how the violence of others can affect classmates and the overall school climate. Her last task was to make a plan about what to do the next time she felt angry enough to erupt.

Under the traditional system, Cindy would have been suspended immediately, even though we know that suspensions significantly contribute to the likelihood that a student will eventually drop out. She would have made an enemy of the boys and their friends for the remainder of the school year — and that antagonism would be essentially promoted and encouraged by the administration's stay-away orders and safety plans. The boys would never have known the harm they caused and how to avoid it in the future. Cindy would never have known that the boys didn't actually intend anything racist. Rather than solving a problem, everything about the traditional way of handling situations like this one only contributes to the likelihood that it will happen again.

All across the country, schools that institute restorative justice — including the Boston Public Schools — are seeing massive reductions in suspension and dropout rates; in some cases, they're even seeing improved test scores. Although our school has faced obstacles aplenty — including from some teachers and parents who firmly believe traditional punishment works best — the numbers are compelling. We had more than 50 suspension days in the first two months of the 2013-14 school year. So far this year we've had only two.

For most new practitioners, it seems astonishing what you learn when you stop punishing and start listening. When a school can help solve a student's problem, the student stops becoming the school's problem.

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