



A Union of Professionals

Tips for Student Discipline

School violence and discipline problems have reached epidemic proportions in many school districts. In far too many schools, a lack of respect for the authority of teachers and other school employees, as well as for the rights of other students, is undermining the ability of schools to provide students with quality education.

Even in the best of schools, employees too often experience frustration and abandonment in their efforts to maintain a safe and orderly learning environment. Most teachers, school bus drivers, paraprofessionals, custodians and food service workers can relate personal stories of administrators undermining attempts to maintain order by letting student offenders get away with disruptive behavior.

Solving school violence and discipline problems isn't easy, but it can be done. Ultimately, it requires a districtwide commitment to safe, orderly schools --and school buses--including a real effort by district officials to stand behind school employees with the support they need. It also requires a commitment by administrators to forge a cooperative effort with school employees aimed at educating students, parents and members of the community about the need for tough but fair discipline policies.

But even if your school's administration doesn't make student behavior the priority it should be, there are steps you can take right now in your school or on your school bus that can help you establish, maintain or restore order.

Here are some specific tips for the classroom, many of which can be used on the school bus, the playground or any other place where school employees supervise students.

BE SURE TO: Greet students as they enter your classroom.

BECAUSE: This not only models the kind of courteous behavior you want to instill in your students, but it also gives you an opportunity for "early targeting" of potential troublemakers. You may pick up early warning signs of potential trouble, e.g., anger, illness, arguments, fights, trouble on the way to school, inappropriate attire or paraphernalia, homework not done, etc. Without early targeting or intervention, small problems can escalate to major disruption or violence.

BE SURE TO: Make "Before-Class-Starts" activities available in the classroom to engage students in positive and productive interactions. Such activities could include board games, a five-minute "free conversation" period or simple calisthenics.

BECAUSE: The "dead time" before the bell can be "deadly" if students don't have a way to channel their energies.

BE SURE TO: Have a designated place within your view for students to turn in homework assignments as they enter.

BECAUSE: The failure of students to turn in homework on time can be a major disruption to the class. When asked why they have not completed their assignments, students will often engage in denials and excuses, resulting in a waste of learning time. With a homework box, or other designated place for students to turn in work, the teacher or paraprofessional can watch the students as they enter to see who has completed their assignments and who has not.

BE SURE TO: Have a few (three to five) basic overarching rules in place to help govern student behavior in the classroom or on the school bus.

BECAUSE: Overarching rules provide parameters within which each student can function in the group and identify his or her own appropriate and inappropriate behaviors. This promotes individual ownership of the rules and encourages responsibility. (Examples of four good overarching rules--be prompt, be polite, be prepared, be productive. Examples of bad rules--do not chew gum, do not talk). Recite the rules often at the beginning of the school year and make sure to explain why these rules are necessary.

BE SURE THAT: Your students know and understand the rules. Teach and reinforce the rules as if they were curriculum, repeating them often as needed.

BECAUSE: Many school employees believe that a read-through and quick review of classroom or school bus rules are enough to ensure student understanding and buy-in. This is a dangerous misconception. Researchers have discovered that many young students really don't understand the meaning of words in the rules, such as "courteous." Also, don't assume that students have been taught proper behavior at home. Learning how to respect one's self and others is something that must be taught and reinforced.

BE SURE TO: Develop expectations for behavior that are backed up by a set of fair, workable, enforceable and hierarchical consequences. **Do not promise a consequence you cannot deliver.**

BECAUSE: Consequences are an important link to the effectiveness of your discipline code. If the consequences fall apart, or are not there to begin with, the whole thing collapses. If they are not enforced, the teacher's credibility is damaged. Negative consequences should increase in severity (hierarchical). Rule breaking and the punishment should be documented so that you can prove that those students whom you disciplined exhibited unacceptable behavior. This is very important when dealing with parents. Proper documentation can also help to ensure that administrators give you the support you need to enforce your discipline plan.

BE SURE TO: When possible, involve your students in developing the rules.

BECAUSE: By involving students in the drafting of the rules you help create an environment in which the students have a role in enforcing the rules. Peer pressure can be very effective in helping to keep an orderly class.

BE SURE THAT: Parents know and understand your rules, including the consequences. Make several different attempts to contact them. Phone calls and mailing letters to the home are the most effective means of contacting parents. Do not depend on students' hand-delivering the rules to parents.

BECAUSE: Parents who are not aware of or are not well-versed in discipline policies are prone to side with their children and might feel that the school employee's actions (especially suspension or expulsion) are arbitrary or biased.

BE SURE TO: Move a child who acts up on a school bus to the front of the bus -- perhaps at the next regular stop. If the action is severe enough to cause possible injury, bus drivers suggest pulling over immediately to a safe location off the road.

BECAUSE: You should avoid, if possible, disciplining a child in front of his/her peers because this can result in a child feeling that he/she needs to show off by becoming more aggressive. Move the student away from other students and friends to a place where you can observe his/her behavior. It is usually best to wait until you arrive at the school site to continue following the standard disciplinary procedures.

BE SURE THAT: School administrators are aware of your rules and consequences and the roles that they, as school leaders, may have to play in supporting your efforts.

BECAUSE: While you cannot always count on getting the support you need from the school administration, you still should try to elicit their help. The worst thing that can happen to dismantle a classroom discipline plan is to have "no supportive action" or "counter-enforcement action" from building administrators. This sends a message to students that nothing is going to happen no matter what the infraction. By the same token, don't set rules you know won't be supported by administrators.

BE SURE TO: Plan out the arrangement of furniture, desks and supplies in your classroom for ease of traffic flow, access and visibility. Design seating charts that keep all students within eye contact. Do not put all troublemakers together and do not place them in the back of the room! Avoid, to the best of your ability, congested aisles and stumbling blocks to easy access of supplies. (Appoint class monitors.)

BECAUSE: Classrooms are places where there is constant traffic. The ease of flow can prevent "traffic jams." Often, when students are placed in close and uncomfortable contact, flare-ups become common. Moreover, teachers should be able to see each student, and each student should be able to see the teacher. This provides opportunities for what is called "early desists" of potentially disruptive behaviors.

BE SURE TO: Learn all students' names as soon as possible--within the first three days of school.

BECAUSE: Knowing students' names helps to develop a personal relationship between you and your students. It also helps with **early targeting** and **early intervention** by accurately identifying troublemakers. When you don't know names and try other forms of identification (boy-in-blue-shirt), students can play games of avoidance, denial and trickery.

BE SURE TO: Figure out ways of scheduling routine classroom procedures smoothly and with the least possible disruption (e.g., taking attendance, tardiness, leaving the room, bulletin boards, grades, make-up work). Teach your classroom procedures as if they were curriculum.

BECAUSE: Student disruption and dissatisfaction can result from student anxiety and uncertainty about how to do things in the classroom. Procedures change from class to class, based on teacher style. Students should know how to function in each class.

BE SURE TO: Look for and try to understand differences between ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) behaviors and general misbehavior. Your school should already be supplying training and policy information about this, especially in view of current increases in mainstreaming and inclusion. If not, contact your local union representatives and ask them to work with the administration to make this kind of training available.

BECAUSE: It is difficult to identify those students who are affected by ADD and those who are not. Issues of fairness or legal problems can arise with the teacher caught in the middle.

BE SURE TO: Educate yourself on the rules and policies concerning disruptive and violent behavior by special education students.

BECAUSE: Rules governing what you can or cannot do to discipline special education students who have committed the same infractions as regular education students can be different. This can cause havoc in the classroom or on the school bus. If you are unsure of your authority or the rights of your students, ask your school's administration for clarification.

More Tips

- Prominently display copies of the discipline codes and let students and parents know where it is kept.
- Maintain dated personal documentation of individual cases and what actions you took.
- Avoid public verbal confrontations with students. When a discussion is headed in that direction, cut it off immediately. Arrange a private talk.
- Avoid physical confrontations with students. Have a contingency plan in place to get help if a fight erupts.
- Be creative. If you are teaching young students who seem unable to sit still, try taking breaks from time to time and have them do exercises at their desks.

How Your Union Can Help

A series of recent polls and national studies shows that when it comes to public schools, the public wants what school employees want--safe and orderly schools where students can learn.

To help achieve this goal, the AFT has launched a nationwide campaign aimed at getting lawmakers and school officials to provide school employees with the support they need to solve the discipline problem and to raise their school's academic standards. The AFT is advocating that every school district in the country:

- Establish a student discipline code--developed with broad input from school employees and their local AFT union--that is regarded as fair by the community. The code should have a continuum of punishment that allows schools to respond quickly and appropriately to the whole range of student misbehavior.
- Consistently enforce the discipline code so that no group thinks its members--and no parents think their children--are being unfairly singled out for punishment.
- Develop a range of alternative educational placements for chronically disruptive students. These students don't belong in regular classrooms, but they don't belong on the streets either. Schools need to develop settings that are more effective in meeting the needs and behaviors of these students.
- Establish rigorous academic standards and assessments that measure whether the standards are being met. All schools should become places where high grades stand for high achievement and where promotion truly is earned.