

The Need for Multilevel Programs and Approaches for Ensuring School Safety and Developing Successful Citizens

Ensuring student and staff safety should be a paramount goal for all schools. A synthesis of the literature reveals four frameworks (and subsequent approach outgrowths) for how schools and society tend to view behavior.

1. Cognitive (learned behavior, mimicking – root: psychologist – programs: character ed., peer mediation, student handbook, suspensions)
2. Ecological (structural, environment, socialization – root: sociologists – programs: Big Brother/Sisters, mentoring, parenting programs, small classes, suspensions)
3. Biological (genetic, innate – root: health profession – programs: Psych. Eval, diversion, and suspensions)
4. Rational Choice (weigh benefits vs. consequences – root: criminology – programs: peer mediation, student handbook, and suspensions).

Behavior can be a result of more than one theory. An example of behavior as a result of more than one theory is “the bullied becomes the bully.” This phenomenon may develop out of the ecological frame as well as a combination of ecological and cognitive.

Beyond the classification of the theories regarding behavior, the usefulness of identifying the theories is understanding that schools should deal with behavior by means of more than one approach. For example, school programs (restorative justice, peer mediation, character education etc.) with responses based on more than one theory and clear consequence guidelines (e.g. our four step process) may yield the “safest” schools. Research supports the belief that it is common practice to use a combination of programs and policy to ensure a safe and caring school environment. For example, according to Varnham (2005), schools tend to deal with student discipline using some combination of either a “punitive” approach in which the focus is on ‘getting rid of troublemakers’ or a form of “support”, which aims to help students work through their inability to behave appropriately. Suspension and expulsion is a needed option for schools. Our four-step process is well articulated and consistently implemented. However, advancement with consistency and clarity of programs and policy regarding our “support” programs is needed. The Ambassador program has great promise. In addition, our Values program provides varied opportunity for guest speakers and community service learning trips. Likewise, our Conference Period and Protégé tu Corazón programs present positive avenues. However, our Peer Mediation program is not active, our Student Council does not have a strong voice in relation to school climate and student behavior, and our ongoing counseling activities should be established (mother daughter night, classroom lessons, movie talks etc.).

In conclusion, we make efforts to be proactive and we have established clear guidelines for how misbehavior will be dealt with if it happens. However, we are at a place to more fully identify and communicate our programs on the “proactive” front.

References

Varnham, S. (2005). Seeing things differently: Restorative justice and school discipline. *Education and the Law*, 17(3), 87-104.