

The following strategies can help you prevent and control discipline problems:

- Do not threaten all students for the transgressions of a few.
- Individual behavior problems that do not affect other students are best handled privately.
- Avoid threats or physical force.

When a discipline problem is serious:

- Do not try to handle it yourself. Refer it to the school principal and your supervisor.
- Speak to the offender(s) in a courteous but “I mean business” tone.
- Keep the student where you can see him or her.

Avoid ‘Never Land’

There are some things you never want to do:

- Never lose your temper.
- Never use physical force.
- Never use profanity.

I do feel like we are the first line of defense--but that's a good thing because we all work together as a team in my school. There are always students in our office, and sometimes all they need is someone to listen to them and find out what's going on.

Kim Harris,
Chadsey High School,
Detroit, Michigan

The Union’s Role in Supporting School Office Personnel

Your local union leaders can be a great support and resource for you on student discipline problems.

They will advise you to:

- Keep details about the instances when you have been asked to supervise a student sent to the office for disruptive behavior.
- Maintain notes on problems you have had with any students and/or their parents or guardians.
- Keep track of your ability to complete your regular assignments when distracted by disruptive students left in your care. The union can then ensure that you face no repercussions or disciplinary action in that regard.

The union will also:

- Advocate for a voice for office personnel in the development of district- and school-level discipline policies, codes of conduct and emergency plans.
- Work with the district to establish policies that clearly outline the chain of responsibility for students sent to the office for behavior problems.
- Work with the district to provide training for all office personnel on managing student behavior.
- Protect employees from any repercussions that result from your responsibility looking after disruptive students, including your ability to complete your regular work.

Resources

AFT’s Educational Research & Dissemination Program on Managing Antisocial Behavior.

Many of the ideas and tips in this brochure come from this highly acclaimed, research-based program. We encourage school office personnel to be involved in their union and advocate for increased professional development for all school support staff.



Dealing with Student Behavior Problems

A GUIDE FOR SCHOOL-BASED SECRETARIES



If you have questions about district discipline policies, or want to gain support from the school administration for your concerns, contact your local union for assistance.



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School secretaries have to deal with two very different kinds of issues with student behavior:

those typical, active, inquisitive (and perhaps unruly) students who move through the office in the regular course of the day; and those students who have been sent to the office for follow-up with the principal due to overly disruptive behavior.



No matter which group they fall into, all students should be expected to follow the same set of rules, but the way you as a school staff member deal with them may be different. Ideally, every room in the school, including the main office, needs to be treated as if it is a classroom. In every room or area of the school, there is someone in charge. Appropriate student behavior should be required and expected.

As a school secretary, you need to be prepared to enforce regular school rules for student behavior. You also must be prepared to handle seriously disruptive students. The end of this brochure will address ways the union can lessen this burden for you but, in the end, these students will be in your workspace and you'll have to be prepared to handle them.

Managing Behavior

Acceptable and unacceptable behavior must be clearly spelled out, including consequences for unacceptable behavior. Your school should have a discipline policy and standards set for behavior. Make sure those rules of behavior are posted in the office as well as other locations in the school building.

We can influence a student's behavior by how we respond to it. Three strategies to accomplish this are positive reinforcement, extinction and punishment.

Positive reinforcement is one of the most powerful ways of influencing behavior. Positive reinforcement is doing something immediately after a behavior that will increase the likelihood of that behavior being repeated. Praise students who are behaving well or helping. Saying to John, "I like the way you waited until I was finished with my phone call to ask your question," increases the odds that he will repeat this behavior.

Extinction is ignoring behavior that is annoying or attention-getting but *not* dangerous. The rationale behind extinction is that by consistently ignoring the behavior, it will cease. ***Dangerous or seriously disruptive behavior should never be ignored.*** It may not seem like there could be dangerous behavior in the office, but think about those restless students who rock back and forth in their chairs until they fall over, pulling down the coat rack with them and unplugging the phone system. Clearly both dangerous *and* disruptive.

Punishment is a penalty imposed for wrongdoing, which usually causes a behavior to lessen or cease. If a student is in the main office for behavior problems, that means he or she is already well down the punishment path. What you need to be aware of is that using punishment can cause some students to retaliate. Since they are now in your office, you are the one they will retaliate against, possibly continuing their misbehavior. Punishment can only work when it is part of a behavior management plan that spells out the consequences for inappropriate behavior or for behavior infractions including consequences for continuing the bad behavior. In the main office, there should also be repercussions for continued misbehavior, and those repercussions should be part of school rules.



Why Do You Need Rules?

For students, ending up in the office is usually the end result of breaking the rules, but that doesn't mean that students shouldn't still be expected to follow the rules.

- Rules establish expectations for acceptable behavior and safety.
- Rules should be reviewed with students on the first day of school and routinely throughout the year. This includes rules for behavior in all areas of the school and individual classroom rules.
- Rules should be simple, realistic and enforceable, and should be posted where everyone can see them.
- Rules should be short and stated positively to promote good behavior.
- Enforce the rules consistently and equitably. Be sure your students know and understand each rule.
- Students should take a copy of the rules home to be reviewed with parents, signed and returned.

Expect safe behavior and accept nothing less.

Communication Is Key

When you are speaking to students, there are two forms of communication you can use. They are alpha and beta commands.

Alpha commands are clear, concrete and specific, and allow a reasonable time for behavior to occur: "John, sit in your seat on the count of three!"

Beta commands are vague and wordy, containing too many directives and not enough time for compliance: "John, sit down right now! Why don't you behave like everyone else? Don't say anything and look straight ahead! You just won't be obedient."

We understand that teachers have 30 kids in their classroom and one disruptive student really causes problems, but sending that student into our work space is also a problem. We get great support from the teachers and administration, though, and students know that the same rules apply in the office for acceptable and unacceptable behavior.

Wendy Young,
Roberto Clemente Learning Academy,
Detroit, Michigan

Come up here and sit near me!" Beta commands are typically used when people feel frustrated and angry. Beta commands should especially be avoided when communicating with students who have problems complying with directions.

Setting the Tone:

Prevention Strategies

You set the tone for your office much the same way that teachers set the tone for their classrooms.

Students are people, too, and they carry a lot of "baggage" with them when they walk through the school door. The tone of the school and the respect we give to students set an example of what we expect back from them.

Here are some strategies:

- Greet every student who enters the office.
- Get to know students' names as soon as possible.
- Set an example of courtesy and friendliness.

Taking Control:

Discipline Strategies

Handling discipline problems in the office is a real challenge for office personnel. You are "responsible" for the conduct of your students in the office but you quite often don't have the authority you need. Students must know you have the support of the school principal to effectively manage behavior.