

Where Discipline and Racial Equity Intersect



Professional educators—in the classroom, library, counseling center, or anywhere in between—share one overarching goal: ensuring all students receive the rich, well-rounded education they need to be productive, engaged citizens. In this regular feature, we explore the work of professional educators—their accomplishments and their challenges—so that the lessons they have learned can benefit students across the country. After all, listening to the professionals who do this work every day is a blueprint for success.

BY KIMBERLY COLBERT

It was the second hour of the school day. Students filled with early morning energy darted through the halls in the mass rush to class. Dylan stood in front of me, eyes cast down, with Mr. D., an administrative intern in a training program to be a principal, at his side. “Dylan wanted to come and apologize for his behavior,” Mr. D. explained.

After a prior confrontation, I had enlisted Mr. D.’s help in finding Dylan. Though I was not one of his classroom teachers, I knew he was a ninth-grader with a reputation. They approached me in the hall as I made my way to a meeting with colleagues.

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“I’m sorry for the other day,” Dylan said, extending his hand. As I studied his face, he appeared to be a different child than he was during our recent encounter.

It is said that the opposite of love is not hate but indifference. Hate requires you to see another, whereas indifference renders the other nonexistent. I believe Dylan’s attitude changed when he realized that he was not invisible. I had identified him, and I had asked Mr. D. to help Dylan process his conflict with me. This desire to be seen, to exist, is at the heart of restorative practices. We begin to act and live restoratively when we prove to our students that they are worth the effort to make negative situations right.

Five days earlier, Dylan had been one of several students congregating in the hall near the stairwell. The bell had rung, and I was making my way to my classroom. The teenage energy was palpable, as it always is between classes. There were clusters of animated conversations and varying levels of swagger and silliness on display. I said to no one in particular, “The bell has rung.

Please go to class.” Most of the students moved along without incident, including Chris and John, two amiable hall “regulars” at whom I shot a playful “you heard me” look.

I then turned to Dylan, who seemed glued to the wall. “Somebody better get this [expletive] teacher out of my face,” he said, surveying the corridor and purposely not making eye contact. His words hit me hard. I looked directly at him and said calmly, “I said please.” As he turned and moved down the hallway as slowly as humanly possible, he repeated what he had just said.

I don’t consider myself unusual when it comes to behavioral expectations. At 55 years of age, I can tell you that teachers, whether longtime veterans like me or novices of any age, take great offense when students swear at them. I was raised in a bicultural family—my mother is Japanese American, my late father was African American—and my parents communicated clear, consistent, and strict standards about how one interacts with adults. Their different cultural contexts had taught them the same two things: First, that elders and authority figures are to be respected. Second, that racism forces us, as people of color, to prove our equal worth to white society through our “good” behavior—what author Michelle Alexander, in her book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, calls the “politics of respectability.”

In that moment, Dylan’s behavior had contradicted my learned set of values. His response pushed my buttons, and I was angry.

Where We Get Stuck

The 2014–2015 school year felt like the toughest, in terms of student discipline, my school, Central High School, had ever experienced. In the Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS) district in Minnesota, as in many districts across the nation, discipline issues are synonymous with equity issues. We have the same racially predictable outcomes as other districts, with African American students (particularly African American males like Dylan) experiencing the highest rate of disciplinary actions. At Central, as in many SPPS schools, we continually grapple with what causes the discrepancy.

SPPS has sought to improve its approach to school discipline in a couple specific ways. About four years ago, the district hired Glenn Singleton’s Pacific Educational Group to provide “Courageous Conversations” workshops to teachers charged with training colleagues in how to talk about racism with students and with each other and how to do something about it. Such professional development around equity issues often includes personal reflection and discussion with colleagues about the role of institutional racism in public education, in the hopes of changing the system.

In 2013, to bolster this work, the Saint Paul school board approved a racial equity policy, available at www.bit.ly/1VJON6a, which “acknowledges that complex societal and historical factors contribute to the inequity within our school district.” It further states that “rather than perpetuating the resulting disparities, SPPS must address and overcome this inequity and institutional racism, providing all students with the support and opportunity to succeed.”

At school board meetings, in the mainstream media, and on social media, this policy has become the topic of contentious discussion among educators, parents, and community members. Most agree that racial equity is imperative to have successful, vibrant public schools that effectively serve students. But a divide

exists between those who view the policy and subsequent racial equity training as ineffective in resolving school discipline issues and those who believe that discipline disparities can be resolved only by acknowledging the intersectionality of racial equity and school discipline.

As an Afro-Asian teacher with 23 years of experience in education, I applaud the racial equity policy and support the training. I do not disagree, however, that over the last few years, our district has had some very serious challenges with successfully communicating and instituting a clear, consistent, and culturally relevant discipline policy. Thus, the intersection between student discipline and achieving racial equity is where we in SPPS—and, I would wager, in many other school districts as well—seem to get stuck.

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Difficult Transitions

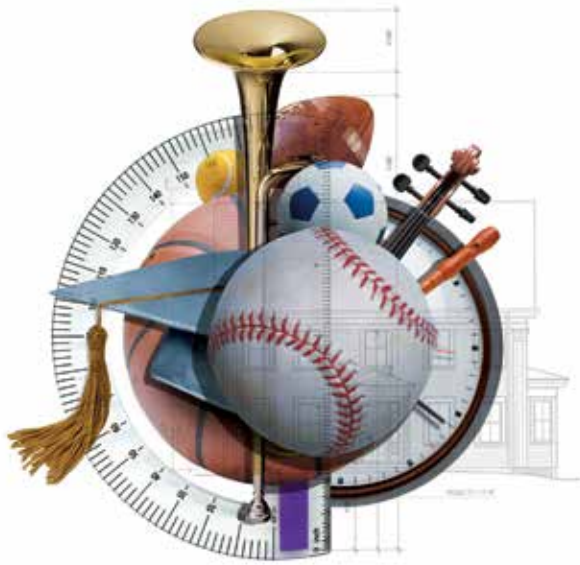
Teaching academic content while simultaneously ensuring that students possess the social and emotional skills needed to focus on learning and to engage with teachers and peers involves deeply personal interactions between educators and students. At Central, even with a supportive administration, the time and support that we and our students require to create these kinds of relationships are not there.

Many of our incoming ninth-graders hail from a middle school that was notorious for its discipline issues, chaotic environment, and history of challenged leadership. Parents, who had expressed repeated concerns about the behavior in that particular middle school, turned to my union, the Saint Paul Federation of Teachers (SPFT), after school district officials did not act. With the union’s help, parents successfully advocated for more staff members skilled at engaging students and helping manage behavior.

Like many districts, ours has tended to underestimate the value of paraprofessionals, as evidenced by annual job cuts. These educators often develop meaningful relationships with students—relationships that large class sizes and heavy workloads sometimes prevent teachers from forming.

Unfortunately, Dylan and his classmates had already graduated from this middle school and did not benefit from the increase of adults in the building who would help build relationships. And so they experienced a difficult transition into high school.

Meanwhile, Central faced its own set of challenges. We had moved from a six- to seven-period day, which left us grossly understaffed. The result was much shorter class periods and more



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unstructured time. Also, the district's iPad initiative, which provided students iPads to use in class, put in play a whole new set of classroom management challenges. (Understandably, students became easily distracted by the technology.) To top it all off, the software used for our grading system experienced a major upgrade midyear, and it was the initial year of a new teacher evaluation system.

All these new efforts required separate trainings and were overwhelming. As a school with many programs, including AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination), French immersion, Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate Middle Years and Diploma programs, time seemed to move at warp speed. I was overwhelmed, and many of my colleagues (and even an administrator) shared that they felt the same way. It all made me feel ineffective and like I was not the teacher I wanted to be or that my students needed. I became so frustrated that at one point I told district administrators I was almost ready to leave the profession.

The climate continued to be challenging until the very end of the school year. Teachers in my English department collaborated on a plan to head off disruptive behavior by ensuring that the hallways remained clear after students changed classes. The plan would be positive: make Central the best it could be. Our encounters with students would be intentional and relational. My colleagues presented the plan at a staff meeting. Other departments agreed to participate.

Toward the last few weeks of school, other teachers engaged upperclassmen in discussions about school culture and what they

wanted to see improve the following year. Our union was also involved in larger discussions around this issue. Contract language that SPFT had negotiated two years earlier resulted in training for School Climate Improvement Teams at each school. The teams consist of teachers and administrators and allow for parents and community members to join. Currently, my team is on the list to be trained.

In addition, to further disrupt racially predictable discipline trends, SPFT released a position paper this fall, available at www.spft.org/restorative-practices, which outlines the history of SPPS discipline practices and lists changes that need to happen to establish a restorative culture throughout the district. The local has also proposed some new contract language around instituting restorative practices districtwide, in advance of its upcoming contract negotiations.

On a personal level, I believe the challenge to treat all students equitably, particularly when it comes to discipline for nonviolent issues, is to refrain from making these behaviors about me. It is not easy, especially in the high-energy, high-stress environment of a school. I have often failed. And when I do, I have to remind myself that as the adult, I have the emotional and intellectual maturity to steer a nonviolent situation in a direction that is restorative rather than punitive. Students can't always make that happen. But to do this, I need support; educators need support. Unfortunately, we must often seek it out on our own. Becoming active in one's local union, taking a leadership role, and encouraging local leaders to organize around the issue of school discipline are all good places to start.

I would also recommend reading Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*, which I mentioned earlier. It is factual and thoroughly unpacks the history of institutional racism. *Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates, is also worth reading. This eloquently written narrative can help educators understand that institutional racism is real and can inform their efforts to disrupt it.

When I reflect on the day of Dylan's confrontation with me, I especially remember his face: his expression was hard, his eyes angry. On the day he apologized to me, however, I noticed that his jaw was relaxed, his eyes soft. He was having a good day, said Mr. D.

"Sometimes I get mad. And when I do, I get mad at everybody," Dylan explained.

In addition to teaching subject matter, educators must navigate the complexities of human relationships. My encounter with Dylan exemplified such complexity. His explanation took me straight to the place where discipline and racial equity intersect. And so I took a deep breath.

"It's all right to be angry," I said to Dylan. "We all get angry. The problem happens when we take our anger out on others." I asked Dylan how he thought one should react to people on difficult days, and I suggested that when he was feeling particularly frustrated, he could seek out the help and counsel of adults in the building, even me. To my delight, he told me he understood the importance of having someone to talk to on bad days and would try to do so. In the end, we shook hands. As we parted, I made a commitment to myself that I would show him that he's not invisible. From that day on, whenever I saw him, I would greet him by name and ask how he was doing. □