

Creating safer schools

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By Kelly Davenport

Disciplinary procedures made a great leap forward last month when the Philadelphia School District directed school police officers to cease responding to “level-one” student conduct offenses.

Before the directive, police were on call to handle classroom issues as minor as dress-code violations or arguments between students. This policy change moves our schools closer to a culture of mutual respect, in which students are treated like adults, which will help them learn to act like adults.

But the change also raises the question: Why have we become so reliant on a police presence to maintain school safety?

Asking law-enforcement officials to handle nonviolent, noncriminal incidents sets a low standard for student behavior. On the opposite end of the spectrum, the recent events at Bartram High School are demonstrative of violent incidents, well above a level-one offense, that necessitate a police response. But Bartram also serves as a reminder that police alone are not effective at addressing the underlying cause of violent behavior.

Can you imagine a police officer disciplining you for the clothes you wore to your job or because you had a disagreement with a coworker?

When all disciplinary incidents are treated as criminal, regardless of context or magnitude, there is no incentive for students to change their behavior. In fact, as Deputy Chief Inspector Carl W. Holmes has noted, police involvement in school discipline can have the effect of escalating minor and nonviolent infractions to incidents of assault.

How, then, can schools maintain a safe and respectful learning environment for all students and staff? If Philadelphia schools are to maintain discipline without relying on police for enforcement, we must focus on empowering students to make choices that will help them succeed.

Over my more than 20 years in education, I’ve learned that successful school discipline requires students to have both the incentive and the means to control their own behavior. We must teach our students real world conflict-resolution skills, like how to engage responsibly in a dialogue with peers and how to settle arguments in a constructive manner. Then we must provide the incentive for students to make use of these skills by extending to them the same basic respect we would extend to any of our fellow adults. It is this culture of mutual respect that frees students to learn and grow, both academically and as individuals.

There are several programs already in operation in Philadelphia that demonstrate the enormous potential of this kind of respect.

The School District offers behavior-management and behavioral-health training programs to all staff, and Temple University’s College of Education has recently developed a conflict-resolution program for educators as well. No math teacher would expect a ninth grader to pass an algebra test

without ever having practiced solving an equation. Similarly, we owe our students the same opportunity to learn and practice the social and behavioral skills they need to succeed in adult life.

At Freire Charter School, our faculty and staff program for kids, but we treat our students like adults. We know they are still growing, emotionally and mentally, and are still learning to implement the social and academic knowledge they gain in school.

Our students learn to engage constructively in conflict, extending empathy and respect to their peers and learning to take the unique circumstances of every individual and situation into account. They practice these skills through our student-run peer mediation program, where students turn to each other for help resolving disputes without violence.

We respect our students by holding them to high behavioral and academic standards — and by showing them how to achieve those standards. We strive to maintain an environment where students understand what is expected of them, and where they can learn and practice the skills they need to meet those expectations.

Students — young adults — need to learn how to treat their peers and teachers with respect, just as they learn to solve equations and analyze texts. We can facilitate this learning by modeling for our students the same respect we ask them to show to others.

Preventing police officers from intervening in level-one offenses in schools is a step in the right direction, but it does not address the root of the problem. If we want Philadelphia schools to be safe, every student and educator must be equipped with the skills — and the incentive — to manage disputes effectively and without violence.

Otherwise, there can be no real change in the culture of Philadelphia's schools. Students will remain just as frustrated as the teachers and staff around them.

Kelly Davenport is head of school of Freire Charter School in Philadelphia. kdaven1048@gmail.com