

Time's Up for Time Outs: A Critical Examination of the “Temporary Removal of Students from Class” Consequence of the Student Discipline Policy and How It Could Affect Students’ Mental Health

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Author Note

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Throughout DC Public Schools, the Student Discipline Policy is commonly referred to as “Chapter 25,” which refers to Chapter 25, Title 5 of the D.C. Municipal Regulations (DCMR). In 2009, Chapter 25 was repealed and replaced by Chapter B25, which claims that “it is the policy of D.C. Public Schools (DCPS) that a safe environment conducive to learning shall be maintained” (*District of Columbia Register*, p. 1). It goes on to say that “[t]o build and maintain this environment, DCPS shall provide students, families, and staff with clear expectations and rules for appropriate school behavior” (*District of Columbia Register*, p. 1). Stakeholders across the District will agree that students need to be in a good headspace to be the most successful they can be and that they learn best in a safe learning environment. However, while Chapter 25 provides general guidance, schools in DC maintain their own individual student discipline policies, several of which involve temporarily removing a student from class, a disciplinary response that is outlined in Chapter 25.

This response is defined as a “removal from the student’s classroom for less than half a school day, not to extend beyond the time of dismissal on the day of the disciplinary action. (*District of Columbia Register*, p. 37). It is also listed as a response for Tier I, Tier II, and Tier III behaviors, which begs the question of why all other options (e.g., behavior contracts, parental contact, stakeholder conferencing, etc.) are not exhausted before considering removing a student temporarily from class. If removing a student from class was a disciplinary response for Tiers II and III only, it could allow for more time and space to be dedicated to social-emotional learning (SEL) and relationship-building. Students’ mental health and well-being are just as important as academics, and one should consider a child’s thought process and emotional response to being removed from class. Of course, safety is always a priority, and an educator must strive to keep everyone in their classroom as safe as possible, just as they must strive to build strong, trusting relationships with their students. Once those relationships are established, students will feel valued and welcome within the classroom, and educators will have a deeper understanding of their students and be able to respond more accurately and empathetically to their individual needs.

Literature Review

Student well-being is at the forefront of many school district’s mission statements, as well as the minds of their educators and families. According to Luisell et al. (2005), “[e]stablishing effective discipline practices is critical to ensure academic success and to provide a safe learning environment.” To actualize these mission statements, schools have developed protocols such as positive behavior intervention strategies (PBIS) to maintain these safe and successful learning environments (Green, 2009, p. 457). Protocols such as PBIS are met with varying levels of success, with factors such as consistency, regular data collection, and analysis contributing to that success (Putnam et al., 2003). At any grade level, as shown by the research of Greenlee and Olgetree (1993), the success or failure of a behavior management system depends heavily on its thoughtful development and consistent utilization. Their research also mentions that teachers set the “climate” of their classrooms and suggests that teachers who experience large amounts of stress will likely resort to more “punitive” measures of discipline (Greenlee & Ogletree, 1993). Research by Anderson et al. (2019) suggests that “exclusionary discipline harms students academically,” another factor to consider when deciding on a disciplinary response (p. 259). Their study also found the following:

[T]he first disciplinary consequence in a given year is associated with larger academic declines. This implies that policies should target preventative approaches, rather than waiting until students get into

major trouble before getting involved. Supporting this idea, many scholars have argued for more proactive discipline focusing on preventing misbehavior by setting clear expectations and teaching students prosocial behaviors. (p. 260).

It is clear from the literature that preventative approaches to discipline such as building relationships and setting expectations seem to be the most effective methods of responding to student behavior.

Methodology and Data Analysis

Research began with the literature review and then progressed into data collection. 15 educators both in and out of Washington, DC completed a brief survey to share their insights into temporarily removing students from class. The survey began with collecting demographic information such as where the educator taught (e.g. which ward in DC or another town/state/country) and for how long they have taught. It then progressed to topic-specific questions such as, “Does your school have a specific protocol when it comes to removing students from class?” and “If a student is sent out of your class, what are the reasons?” Participants were also asked to describe the protocol, if any, for welcoming students back into the classroom.

Of the educators surveyed, 57 percent did not have a specific protocol for what to do when removing students from class. The educators who did have a specific protocol outlined a “behavior ladder” that included strategies to try before removing a student from class. 100 percent of survey participants indicated “Disruptive and/or unsafe behavior” as the reason for removal, with 35 percent also indicating disrespectful language as the reason. Furthermore, 64 percent of participants did not have a protocol for welcoming students back into the classroom, and those who did referenced Restorative Practices and shared that their protocol included a private check-in conversation with the student. These protocols were also personal ones as opposed to ones used consistently throughout the school.

Recommendations

Regardless of the reason for removing a student from class, their physical and emotional well-being should be top priority, as should be the physical and emotional well-being of their teachers. This brief survey showed inconsistent behavior protocols as well as strong need for recommendations. Professional development regarding boundary setting and prioritizing tasks could help teachers establish and maintain a healthy work-life balance. In addition, the most successful classrooms are ones in which time is invested to build loving, trusting relationships between teachers and students, between peers, and between teachers and families. Classrooms also thrive when there are consistent, practical, and reasonable behavior protocols in place, both at the classroom level and the school level. Students typically respond very well to structure and predictable routines, so if they are able to anticipate rewards and/or consequences, they may engage more consistently in self-reflection about their behaviors and may be able to problem-solve on their own.

Hosting regular check-ins for students may also reduce the need to remove students from class and allow for proactive problem-solving within the classroom. Educators should prioritize students with behaviors and check-in with them more regularly, but every student in the class should have one-on-one time with their teacher. To prepare for these check-ins, all school-based staff should be trained in Restorative Practices and Responsive Classroom pedagogy, particularly in areas of relationship-building and non-violent communication. Universal language would be established throughout the school as a result of these trainings, which would allow for more adults to positively interact with any student at any grade level. Staff members would also be able to communicate more effectively with each other, which would foster a more positive and cohesive school culture and would ultimately result in the safe, loving learning environment that DCPS strives to maintain in all of its schools.

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