

School Practitioner Community of Practice
(A network for sharing & exchange)
June 12, 2019

Topics for discussion

“Disruptive Person Letters” – *Isn’t there a better way to work with parents when frustrations and tensions are high?*

Links to a few other relevant resources & other topics of concern

Note: Go to <http://smhp.psych.ucla> for links to other Center resources including

- >Upcoming initiatives, conferences & workshops
- >Calls for grant proposals, presentations, and papers
- >Training and job opportunities
- >Upcoming webcasts & other professional development opportunities

This resource is from the
Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports, UCLA

Given shrinking education budgets, we have been asked to increase our outreach to make our free resources more available (e.g., for planning, professional development, etc.).

So please feel free to share with anyone you think might benefit (e.g., forward our resources to individuals and share on listservs and websites).

For those who have been forwarded this and want to receive resources directly, send an email to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

For previous postings of community of practice discussions, see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/practitioner.htm>

Topic for Discussion –

>“Disruptive Person Letters” – *Isn’t there a better way to work with parents when frustrations and tensions are high?*

A recent news article reported that more and more parents are receiving “disruptive person letters.” This suggests the need to discuss alternatives.

Here is some background and recommendations from a report by the *Parent Organization Network*:

https://websites.godaddy.com/blob/5fe5f323-ec0a-4292-a0e1-de93fe965611/downloads/1bi26ivmp_896741.pdf?390d3e65?ver=1555092957243

A “disruptive person letter” is a document received by a parent, guardian, other adult, or even a minor, from a school principal, for behavior which has been deemed “disruptive” This document restricts access to the school campus for an unspecified time period, and requires that in order to enter the premises at any time for any reason, the recipient must first obtain permission from the principal or the principal’s “designee.”

RECOMMENDATIONS (partial list, see report for full text)

To recalibrate the system so that it is centered on protecting children and staff and strengthening relationships with parents to better identify and address students' needs, here are the following recommendations:

A. District Level Policy & Procedure Modifications:

1. Clarifying the Process of DPL Issuance

- i. Provide instruction to differentiate responses to parent behavior;...**
 - ii. Talk calmly to parents who enter the office and appear distressed or angered....**
 - iii. When a parent does not calm down, issue an emergency DPL to restrict access for an specific period of time, 48 to 72 hours, to allow parents and staff to calm down before attempting to resolve the issue in a meeting ...**
 - iv. Clarify that actions which are not willful or not intentionally disruptive, such as verbal behaviors and minor policy violations, do not qualify as grounds for restricting parents' access to school for an extended period of time. ...**
 - v. When parents come onto campus to intentionally disrupt instruction in classrooms or school events, if they display weapons, or engage in physical violence with others, then call the police and issue a DPL**
- 2. Update the letter template used by principals ...**
 - 3. Offer assistance in mediating conflict between staff and parents....**
 - 4. Review the district policy and procedure to investigate and resolve bullying cases ...**

B. Training for School Staff:

- 1. Provide training to any staff member that interacts with parents...**
- 2. Prioritize training for principals who have issued five or more DPLs and their main office staff....**
- 3. Evaluate principals and staff on how they work with parents in the school and in the community as well, on whether they increased parent participation. ...**

C. Training for Parents at School Sites:

- 1. Providing parents with a booklet of rights to review on their own is not enough. Principals need to review the rules most frequently violated with parents at "Back to School Night" events ...**
- 2. Offer formal orientations to new parents...**
- 3. Before a parent is granted permission to volunteer or observe a classroom, schools need to provide training on what to do and what not to do. ...**

D. Strengthen Relations with Parents

- 1. Establish an Office of the Parent Advocate by creating a specific unit to help resolve conflict between administrators and parents....**
- 2. Engage Parents in Identifying the Problems and Finding Solutions**
 - i. Review Current Procedures and Update School Safety Plans at the School Site: ...**
 - ii. Assess School Climate....**

As an overarching philosophy, "Listen to parents; don't restrict their access to campus when they are informed and empowered, because they are your most crucial partners in educating children."

From Colleagues in the Field: We asked colleagues what else they would recommend to prevent, de-escalate, and repair difficult interactions between school staff and parents/families. Here is a sample of responses:

- (1) **From a parent advocate:** “I am not surprised by this information. Another tactic we have seen schools use, especially for low income, African-American, immigrant, LEP, etc. families is calling the child welfare system on the family complaining about either child abuse or, more commonly, neglect. This is usually occurring when a family, or a group of families, that has more traditionally not attended school meetings, not had high expectations for their children, not spoken up, has participated in leadership development training, support groups, etc. where they learned about their rights and the importance of speaking up. We were working with one immigrant group in NE NJ a few years ago where more than 50% of the 200+ families participating in the support group had a school professional call the child welfare system on them - with 0 findings of actual child abuse or neglect. We actually brought this issue to the attention of our child welfare system who did some analytics and found data supporting our allegations. They then identified specific schools in the area that had high numbers of unverified complaints and went out and did "staff training" to those staff to "help them understand" what was truly child abuse and neglect and what was not. We also worked with them to get a question added to the intake questions asking if it was an education disagreement. Our experience was similar to the finding in the report you shared:

Thus, local districts with higher DPL issuance had more schools or principals that issued 5 or more DPLs. This suggests that their higher DPL rate is coming from a small number of schools, with principals who have made DPL issuance a regular practice. In other words, there were a relatively small number of schools that had school staff calling child welfare much more frequently, as a regular practice. It's often really about POWER - school staff who have had it (power) for a long time, and who feel threatened when the invisible or the silent parents start showing up and speaking up. We have also had parents who have had these types of letters issued to them, and/or even having the police called, but not as often as schools calling the child welfare system. So it may be a different approach, aimed at having the same effect.

We will now add information about the potential for these tactics to be used in our parent leadership trainings. We also tell parents to immediately let the schools know that they are working with the SPAN Parent Advocacy Network, and to immediately inform us, so that we can reach out and reach up to support them as they try to resolve the issue. One of the most effective proactive things we have done is do Creating Agreement workshops for families, educators, and/or family/educator groups.

<http://www.ideapartnership.org/using-tools/learning-together/collections/411-collection-tools/1579-1579-creating-agreement-collection-tools.html>

We often suggest that a parent bring along a friend, another parent leader, their religious leader, etc. whenever they are planning to visit the school to talk about a concern or respond to a concern that has been raised about their child. This person can help them stay focused, remind them if they are becoming overly emotional, and also serve as a witness and even someone who might make the school think twice about behaving poorly toward a parent.”

- (2) **From a school psychologist:** “Difficult parents come into school offices and confront the staff or directly into classrooms confronting teachers. There has always been a difficult person or two to deal with but around the region more and more events are being reported. The schools are charged with providing a safe environment. ALL visitors must register in the office and be given a name badge. Parents who want to participate on site must have a district approved identification. There are differing levels of 'Volunteer status' designated by the color of laminated badge containing the person's picture and worn on a lanyard while on school grounds.

School shootings are on the rise and while these are typically NOT parents, should a parent be overly confrontational or unreasonable, they might be asked to inform the administrator when they are on site. I think this is a safety issue and even parents who are misunderstood should find comfort in this process. If the parent is wrongfully treated then speaking with the district office administration may be helpful in working out the situation. Parents might request from the superintendent's office, in writing, a conference with the principal and other district staff, to resolve the issue.

I am able to state from personal experience that more and more parents are using aggressive behavior to assert their wishes. I think social media plays a part. Parents riling up parents about situations that may or may not be relevant to the home school or to their own children. My personal opinion (and likely over-generalization) based on years of service is that unmet needs as children contribute to poor decision making in adults....The schools are a microcosm of our greater society. PTSD, poor mental health and frustrations in meeting our basic needs of shelter and safety are affecting the reason of many. I think that parents expect immediate solutions to issues that may take time to turn around. They are being sent into the schools by community agencies looking for immediate services that do not meet the criteria and/or are not provided. They are looking for solutions to neighborhood issues. They are annoyed by what seems to be unnecessary requirements borne by the schools due to events beyond control. If an administrator is being unreasonable a parent does have recourse and does everyone a service by pursuing an appropriate solution.”

- (3) **From a Principal:** “As mental health becomes more of an epidemic it seems parents are not immune. Some parents do suffer from chronic mental health issues and adding to the fuel of some perceived injustice to their child, it can get confrontational. In some cases the parent has the right to be highly upset and confrontational. Albeit, they may not have the skills to address the concern in a civil matter and may go straight to an aggressive default.

Depending on the situation, actions of teachers, staff, or administrators can dredge up past historical memories and emotions for parents as well. "This happened to me when I was in school or this happened to my brother (etc.) and I will make sure it does not happen to my child!". That can be a difficult emotion to navigate through in a heated moment.

Teachers, staff, and administrators are many times not innocent and can be unethical in their actions. Unfortunately, that seems to be more rampant as less than qualified individuals enter the profession due to teacher shortages. As teachers and administrators become less prepared to de-escalate, less qualified to build positive relations, and frustrated with the amount of work and discipline in general we see where adults can make unethical or immoral decisions.

Other times it is about communication as the student will tell the parent/guardian pieces of the story in their favor and the parent believes the child and comes up highly frustrated with misinformation regarding the situation. If a school has a structured well framed parent communication system that may cut down on some of the concerns as parents can receive the correct information prior to the student's story.

It is difficult to mend relations as it is a trust issue with their children. When trust is broken or perceived to be broken it can be a heavily weighted emotion to mend. Parent advocates can assist but when both parties need to swallow their pride and mend it can become one sided more than the other. Building positive relations with families/parents/guardians is a primary key. With positive relations are in place they are less likely to confront.

Unfortunately, as principals we must draw the line with parents/guardians as confrontation and parents becoming irate can become a perceived safety issue and/or something you would not want other students to witness (hallway argument).”

- (4) **From a state department of ed school counseling consultant:** "...I have to wonder if the use of DPLs has to do with the size of the schools and lack of relationships among parents, staff and administrators. I also have to assume that at least some parents become disruptive because they don't think they have or know about other options to resolve their issues. Similarly, I have to wonder whether the 11% of principals issuing the majority of these letters also feel this is a good option when they don't feel supported to do anything differently.

Many of the strategies listed in the Parent Organization Network document are reasonable and could help to prevent such escalation practices. First of all, clarifying the purpose and process of issuing DPLs could educate administrators on how to use the tool effectively when it is warranted. Second, training for both staff and parents (not just issuing a policy handbook) could help to get everyone on the same page. And, working to improve relationships between staff and parents could go a long way to reduce the numbers of these letters. While I understand the need to show ID to pick up a child, I think it's sad that schools have gotten so large that most parents are not recognized by office staff when they come to the school.

As for intervention strategies, I've always been an advocate for conflict resolution practices. In fact, Iowa has a network of trained conflict resolution specialists throughout the state who work with parent and school staff over disputes related to students with special needs <https://educateiowa.gov/pk-12/special-education/dispute-resolution>

If other districts have a similar network of trained staff, it would make sense to use them to facilitate parent/staff problems for the general population. I also recommend that issues are handled at the lowest possible level. In other words, if there is a problem between a parent and the teacher, the conflict should be facilitated at that level first and only move up to administrative and district levels at the recommendation of the trained facilitator. De-escalation is key. Starting at the top to get results can only stunt the process.

I see this increase of DPLs as a symptom of poor communication, lack of relationships and (perhaps) busy people who want to avoid conflict. I'm not sure another layer of "advocacy" is needed, but do see a need for alternatives. Perhaps a local building committee of parents and staff could be created to define practices together and then use the data being collected to revisit the effectiveness of their practices. I never believe that "one size fits all." While district policies apply to all, I think there is a need for local control of how they are implemented and what they should look like for each building. This is especially true for elementary buildings.

I really liked their overarching philosophy, "Listen to parents; don't restrict their access to campus when they are informed and empowered, because they are your most crucial partners in educating children." This is so true. It's equally important for parents to be visible and get to know their child's teachers. Schools should be "family-based" places where attention is given to student well-being and learning (in that order)."

- (5) **From a School Psychologist:** "...Working hard on prevention is usually more effective and less expensive than cleaning up a mess after the big blow-up. I think that involves looking at school from the perspective of the "customer," the parent and the child. There are a lot of traditional methods in public schools that have worked fairly well... Different cultures and neighborhoods will have varying standards for how serious discussions should proceed. If the school serves people from a wide variety of backgrounds, it might be necessary to develop cultural humility. Contact community leaders for hints and tips for ways to avoid offending, show proper respect, and engage others in problem-solving....

I visited an elementary school this week that deals with 26 different languages. The school has declared itself to be a place that promotes social justice. Each class takes on a

long-term project to improve a condition that concerns the students. One class studied bullying in the hallways, produced a skit that demonstrates why bullying is not a good idea in a crowded school and how all students can stand up for the victims. I suspect when lessons like these come from student-initiated projects implemented by the students themselves that the students feel more like joining in....A fifth grade class in that school thought it would be difficult for students without houses to do well in school because they had no place to bathe, wash clothes, and deal with personal hygiene. They negotiated with the district and obtained a room that would be set aside for self care. They then used GoFundMe to raise money for food, clothing, school supplies, a shower, and a washer/dryer. It is available to anybody who needs it....”

For More Resources Related to this Discussion:

See the Center’s online clearinghouse Quick Find on

> *Parent/Home Involvement and Engagement in Schools*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/homework.htm>

Please share whatever you can about what your local schools do to work on these concerns? Let us know what you recommend.

And share with us your questions and comments about other relevant matters!!

Send your responses to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

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Links to a few other relevant resources & other topics of concern

7 Tips for Teachers on Dealing with Difficult Parents

<https://www.wgu.edu/heyteach/article/7-tips-teachers-dealing-difficult-parents1804.html>

How to Deal With Difficult Parents

<https://www.educationdegree.com/articles/how-to-deal-with-difficult-parents/>

Poverty and early childhood outcomes

<https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2019/05/17/peds.2018-3426>

The promise of adolescence: realizing opportunity for all youth <http://nationalacademies.org/>

Measuring School Contributions to Growth in Social-Emotional Learning

https://www.edpolicyinca.org/sites/default/files/PB_Fricke_May19.pdf

One Step at a Time: A Traditional School’s Journey Into Personalized Learning

<https://www.edsurge.com/news/2019-06-05-one-step-at-a-time-a-traditional-school-s-journey-into-personalized-learning>

A student's disability status depends on where they go to school.

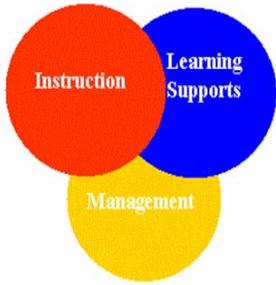
www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2019/05/190529084830.htm

Transition Time <https://www.educationworld.com/teachers/transition-time-any-move-new-grade-challenge>

Success with Multicultural Newcomers and English Learners (webinar June 27) – Register at

<https://event.on24.com/eventRegistration/EventLobbyServlet?target=reg20.jsp&partnerref=ASCDsmartbrief&eventid=2008878&sessionId=1&key=C364F79A77D8D0F423B27F480412A661®Tag=&sourcepage=register>

For other relevant webinars, see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/webcast.htm>



For information about the

National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports
go to <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html>

*Equity of opportunity is fundamental to enabling civil rights;
transforming student and learning supports is fundamental to
enabling equity of opportunity, promoting whole child development,
and enhancing school climate.*

***THE MORE FOLKS SHARE, THE MORE USEFUL AND
INTERESTING THIS RESOURCE BECOMES!***

For new sign-ups – email Ltaylor@ucla.edu

Also send resources ideas, requests, comments, and experiences for sharing.

We post a broad range of issues and responses to the Net Exchange

on our website at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newnetexchange.htm>

and on Facebook (access from the Center's home page <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>)