

Anne Stuhldreher: Start in early grades with strategies to avoid suspending students

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The girl in the back row finished her assignment early. She started to fidget with the materials under her desk (not allowed) and talk to her neighbor (also not allowed). Cecilia Gonzalez, the teacher, considered what to do. Gonzales has 32 students in her third-grade class at Kammann Elementary in Salinas. She's taught for 12 years and knows it's all about control. "If I can control the class behavior-wise, more learning can occur," she said.

Last year, Gonzalez knew exactly how she would have handled it. "Give her warnings and if she didn't listen, consequences, probably take away her recess," she said.

The problem, Gonzalez said, is that punishment like this rarely works in the long run. "You do it again and again and the students eventually give up," she said.

Gonzalez isn't the only one rethinking how to discipline students and manage her classroom. Many California educators, including ones at Kammann Elementary and the leadership of the Salinas City Elementary School District, are trying to find more effective approaches to school discipline -- ones that get at the root cause of misbehavior, help students learn from their mistakes and keep them in the classroom and thriving.

The stakes are high given California's soaring rates of suspensions and expulsions. A recent landmark study by The Council on State Governments found these rates have doubled nationally over the past 20 years. The authors found that California has a 13 percent suspension and expulsion rate, the highest of the states they examined and twice that of Texas.

There is no evidence, according to a report coauthored by the UCLA Civil Rights Project, that frequent reliance on suspensions improves school safety or student behavior. Studies do show, however, that suspensions hurt academic performance, worsen kids' attitudes toward school, and increase the odds that they'll enter the juvenile justice system.

To turn this tide, the key may be to start working with students when they're young, as Leticia Garcia, program manager at Kammann Elementary, has started doing.

Garcia sent seven of Kammann's teachers, including Gonzales, for training in mediation and conflict resolution this summer.

Gonzalez returned and spent the first three days of class working with her students to develop a "Respect Agreement" -- a contract for how they'd all respect each other. They all signed it and Gonzalez reviews it with them every week.

Instead of punishing that fidgety girl, Gonzales convened a mediation session. She explained that the girl's continued disruptions hampered her ability to teach. The girl said it's hard for her to see from the back row. Gonzalez agreed to move her to the front. They agreed Gonzalez would give her a signal to remind her to stop playing with her materials. If she finished her assignment early, Gonzalez asked if she would be her helper and assist with classroom tasks. So far, Gonzalez is pleased with the results.

Garcia thinks she's seeing fewer students sent to her office. Last year was the first time they carefully tracked the number of students sent to her office -- 474. She wants to see that number go down along with suspensions.

Salinas Superintendent Donna Vaughan says the reforms being implemented district wide don't cost much. But any expense is difficult right now.

Garcia says Californians have a choice. They can search for solutions, like Kammann Elementary, and pay a little up front to address students' issues while they're young. Or they can wait and face a much bigger price tag later, when many students eventually drop out or end up in jail.

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