



Program offers positive approach in addressing student discipline issues

Since 2011-12, schools have been trying to find different ways to handle disciplining students. The old way of doing things was detention, suspension and expulsion. The new way is through approaches like Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports. These can include methods such as in-school suspension, counseling, restitution, etc.

Paul Meyers, superintendent of Standard SD, said his district uses PBIS, a Circle of Friends program, adding more school psychologists and other efforts in this regard. They have also implemented Alternative to Suspension at the middle school level.

“ATS helps students identify and own their behavior, understand the harm that was caused by their actions, and teach them how to repair the harm and restore relationships,” Meyers said.

The ATS program is not an on-campus suspension program in that ATS is an intervention and support for students rather than a punishment or consequence, as in the on-campus suspension model. The ATS Model is part of a district or school’s multi-tiered system of support, and is grounded within Tier 1 and 2 interventions.

The difference between ATS and on-campus suspension programs is that it focuses on “what to do instead” by identifying the cause of the action. This is brought out with the ATS curriculum which uses a Restorative Approach, and assists students in owning and recognizing behavior, making amends with those harmed, creating replacement strategies and successfully reintegrating students back into classrooms and schools.

As Barbara Perez, director of student services in Oceanside USD and Barry Tyler, consultant with Blue Water Educational Consulting note, ATS provides a necessary separation for a teacher and student which is needed when harm has been caused by a student’s disrespectful, inappropriate, or sometimes just disengaged action in the educational setting. Perez and Tyler have established Blue Water Educational Consulting to help colleagues throughout the state implement an administrative practice they developed called Restorative Discipline; strategies and techniques that allow adults to make decisions with students, not for students.

Perez and Tyler said an important component of ATS is providing students with the needed support or intervention while working on appropriate replacement or coping strategies so that the student has something else to do instead, and doesn’t repeat the same action.

“The ATS Model is significantly different than most training programs in that the work we do with districts begins with more formal professional development for the entire staff and is followed up with monthly, full-day, on-site coaching visits in the ATS classroom,” Perez said.

“We also work in the administrative offices to assist in implementing restorative discipline processes and facilitate staff development to implement classroom circles for academic and social/emotional purposes,” Tyler said. “These ongoing, on-site follow-ups allow sites to fully implement the ATS Model in order to truly move the cultural shift toward facilitating and maintaining a Restorative Culture.”

Tyler and Perez both note that the professional development is a key component to implementing the ATS Model. It is important to communicate to staff that non-threatening actions should not always result in a suspension. These should, in many cases, be an opportunity for reflection and separation between staff member and student. While separated, students work on owning and recognizing behavior, making amends with a heartfelt four-part apology, creating and implementing replacement strategies, and then successfully reintegrating into the class and/or school environment. They find that teachers truly appreciate the gesture of a thought-out, genuine apology from a student.

And the ATS approach has paid off. Student suspensions have decreased throughout the district and school connectedness has improved, Meyers said.

“We are seeing an improved school climate with better behaved students making better choices and using newly learned skills to solve problems. Related to improved school climate is renewed school spirit and improved attendance,” he said.

Over at Taft Union HSD, Chelle Koerner, director of Alternative and Special Education, said they have seen similar positive results. She said they have seen a dramatic drop in suspensions in the district.

Alternative to Suspension may show positive results, but it is a big paradigm shift for those who are used to the old school way of school discipline. In that traditional approach to discipline, if a student yelled at a teacher in class or engaged in other unacceptable behavior, they might simply

get suspended under the catch-all “willful defiance.”

The biggest problem with this is that any student not in school is not learning, and therefore is falling behind. But in 2013, AB 1729 restricted the use of suspensions and directed administrators to find other interventions.

Using an approach like ATS keeps the student in school. Students take part in restorative practice exercises away from the classroom in a non-charged atmosphere – both with peers and adults – making it easier for them to admit ownership of their actions and decide how they want to make amends for their misbehavior. Meanwhile, they keep up with their schoolwork so as not to fall behind.

However, as one might imagine, this kind of approach takes buy-in from teachers and families. Sustainable transition takes time; schools might need to allow months or years for the process to become widely accepted and implemented. And it helps to bring in some expert assistance to guide the implementation process.

“When we introduced the new ATS program, we did have some push back from the parents and from the staff who still believe that the punishment model worked and that suspending kids taught them a lesson,” Meyers said. “But it doesn’t work and if it did, we would not have been suspending the same kids over and over again. Our ATS program, using the principles of restorative or years for the process to become widely accepted and implemented. And it helps to bring in some expert assistance to guide the implementation process.”

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Koerner said initially teachers in her district were also parents and students have been open to ATS.

“The parents and students are typically grateful for another way to teach lessons that can bring positive changes for their children,” she said.

“The students who have been assigned ATS really appreciate the opportunity to maintain a clean record, keep up on their studies, and resolve their respective issues,” ATS Teacher Michael Valdivia said. “Avoiding suspension is only achieved if students successfully complete the ATS program (about 90 percent do).”

Shane Hilde, dean of students at Banning High School, agreed that ATS is showing positive results with students.

“The proof in the pudding are the students. Their experience in ATS is affecting their home life and the parents are noticing,” Hilde said. “There is definitely a process of educating the parents and community, but so far we’re seeing a positive response from parents whose kids have participated in the program.”

Perez and Tyler say ATS allows the site and district to maintain strong attendance, and academic support from certificated employees to help the student maintain their studies even during their time out of class. This is a paradigm shift from a home suspension, where students are not reflective, and often do not work on assigned classwork. Additionally, while on campus, students have access to districtwide academic and intervention programs such as ST Math or Read 180.

ATS is an intervention and support which directly addresses behavior and keeps the relationship between student and teacher moving forward, while also designating time to work on regularly assigned classwork. Time on campus also gives staff an appropriate, real-time opportunity to address student-to-student conflict. Inherent in the ATS process is reflective time for students to understand the harm they’ve caused to peers and also to ascertain how they can ‘make things right’ with their classmates when appropriate. This is often accomplished through structured mediation between peers, as well as specific coaching to help students mitigate the ‘friend-factor’ when they return to campus.

“What I love about the ATS program is that students finally get a chance to express what is at the root of a problem or concern within themselves or with someone else,” Matt Valdivia, principal of Banning High, said. “They truly open up. I could have never imagined that this was possible. Students learn to coexist with their own lives and with each other. ATS is literally a ‘game-changer’ for Banning High School and the Banning Unified School District.”