



## Washington State Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

“The Practitioner’s Best Friend”  
[www.wsascd.org](http://www.wsascd.org)

### ‘Critical Questions’ Series September 2015

#### What is the True Meaning of Discipline?

A teacher in a middle school classroom hands out an assignment. As she walks around she notices a student is not doing the work. She gives the student a friendly reminder but three minutes later notices that he is still not doing anything. When she approaches the student again, he replies that he “can’t do it,” dropping an expletive in the process. What does the teacher do?

Many people would say this child needs discipline, and I would agree. However, my interpretation of discipline may be different from others. Discipline is about supporting and teaching the child. During our work at Jemtegaard, we have developed a culture of discipline which aims to teach students to self-regulate and learn from the situation. The three critical questions we use are:

- 1) What is the behavior?
- 2) Is the behavior a symptom of something else?
- 3) How do we support the child to learn from this situation?

Effective school discipline begins with understanding the reasons behind the behavior. Much of our work at Jemtegaard has been informed by Ross Greene’s book, *The Explosive Child* (2010). Approaching student behavior with the idea that “kids do well if they can” (Greene 2010) allows us to start the process of truly helping students to regulate their behavior. No student comes to school wanting to be unsuccessful. They want to do well, but they often have lagging skills that are getting in the way. Greene identifies some of these lagging skills as flexibility, frustration tolerance, and problem solving. The student in the above scenario most likely does not know how to start the assignment and doesn’t have the problem solving skills to ask for help. As the situation escalates the response of the teacher is critical. Is she looking at the child or looking at the behavior? Focusing on the child allows us to teach and support our students.

Last year at Jemtegaard Middle School, as a part of our focus on the whole child, we decided to transform our discipline processes at both the classroom and school levels. We started with redesigning our library into what we call the “Learning Center.” Students can ask for a Yellow Card, which allows them to go to the Learning Center to refocus and return to class. Teachers can also give a student a Yellow Card for behavior. The goal is to provide a place that serves as an intervention to behavior before it escalates to an office referral. The Yellow Card acknowledges that students struggle and may need early intervention. Students can also go to the Learning Center if they need one-on-one academic support or a quiet place to make up an assignment. What makes this different from more traditional discipline is that a Yellow Card is not punitive. Instead they are given an opportunity to refocus and return to class without being “in trouble” for what may have been a minor event. This has been especially helpful for our students

who deal with anxiety, PTSD, and other mental health issues, as we often have our school social worker or counselor available to meet with students. Every student who comes into the Learning Center is logged into a data collection tool that is monitored to identify students who needed an increased level of intervention or are trying to avoid a certain class or teacher. This removes the concern that the Yellow Cards are letting kids “get away” with poor behavior or using a Yellow Card to avoid work in class.

Our Learning Center model also allows us to change the way we use in-school suspension for more serious offenses. Previously we had our ISS students in a small room in the office that was monitored by a staff member. The Learning Center allows us to have our ISS students monitored by two or more staff members in an environment that is supportive and focuses on academics. Students in ISS are given academic support and are also available for debriefing, restorative conferences, and counseling that is unavailable if they are sent home.

Students have responded well to our discipline culture. We have seen a dramatic decrease of 77% in level two offenses (classroom disruption, defiance, disrespect, etc.) from the previous year. We have also reduced out-of-school suspension by sixty-six days. In-school suspensions were 13% of our total suspension days in 2013-2014; we increased this number to 38% in 2014-2015.

The systemic change our Learning Center provides is key in our focus on the whole child. Being creative with existing resources and finding strategies to support students have made these changes possible. We now have a student discipline culture that allows continued access to the curriculum, while ensuring that students are supported in learning from their mistakes.

Brian Amundson  
Dean of Students  
Jemtgaard Middle School  
Washougal School District  
[brian.amundson@washougalisd.org](mailto:brian.amundson@washougalisd.org)

[www.wsascd.org](http://www.wsascd.org)