How to Make Troubled Schools Better and Keep Successful Schools On Top

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When a school gets out of control or its academic results are considered to be insufficient, I'm often the one who is asked to come and help the school turn around. Stealing an image from the Horse Whisperer movie, I think of myself as a school whisperer. I'm good at figuring out what is wrong and how to make it better. Let me share some of that insight with you now. These steps can help make troubled schools better and keep successful schools on top.

There are several patterns I see in troubled schools. If you're in a well-functioning school, you can watch for these concerns to develop and work to head them off. If you're on the faculty of a school that is already struggling, I will also note the best next steps for you.

1. Staff Overwhelm and Helplessness

You'd be very surprised at the number of desperate calls we get from teachers and counselors asking what can be done at their site to stop the out-of-control student behavior. By out-of-control behavior, I mean students swearing at teachers, repeatedly and blatantly defying rules and directions, and causing damage to people and property. These behaviors are usually not being consequenced or managed sufficiently to decrease the severity or frequency.

By far, having out-of-control students, hallways and classrooms is the top characteristic I've noticed at the schools that are struggling. In these schools, staff almost always feel
helpless, discouraged, overwhelmed and unable to get the administrators above them to take effective steps to reverse the growing tide.

To improve the situation, the first step is to get back in charge of students, which is usually a very difficult goal to accomplish. It is always easier to start off strong and ease up if necessary, and far harder to start off weak and then try to tighten up down the road. That's a key tip that both healthy and troubled schools should consider.

2. Not a United Team

Often the breakdown of the school is accompanied by severe interpersonal problems among the staff. The most common version of this breakdown is that teachers feel that the principal is not backing them up enough, isn't adequately stopping out-of-control student behavior, and doesn’t understand the severity of the safety issues.

Think of the divisions among the staff as cracks that acting-out students can mine and exploit. Divisions that may not be very apparent to adults are like neon signs to some misbehaved students— and all those signs say “misbehave here.”

Getting help to become a united team will be of paramount importance so that students can no longer readily spot weak links in the chain and exploit those weaknesses.

3. Insufficient Communication

The problems with team communication can take many forms but the most common is that staff feel that their candid input about the most serious problems is either unwelcome or prohibited. Without open communication, teams will have the odds stacked against them for improving the situation.

Typically, staff turnover becomes a big issue, with often some of the most talented and concerned teachers being the ones to leave. The turnover problem gets stacked on top of the existing problems, and well, you get the picture, don’t you? The only solution is to air out all the concerns and create a climate where any staff input is actively encouraged, welcomed and addressed by administrators.

4. Lack of Effective Behavior and Classroom Management Training and Methods

Schools that are struggling often continue to use yesterday’s behavior management methods with today’s students. Unlike schools with fewer challenges, schools that are struggling can’t afford to use anything but the best, most powerful behavior management interventions if they hope to reduce their outsize conduct problems to a minimum. Using outdated and ineffective behavior management tools at a distressed school is like shoveling snow with a teaspoon. You’re not going to make much progress and it will be a long, cold, frustrating process.
Most U.S. K-12 school faculties are composed of staff whose training did not include learning an arsenal of techniques for modern student behavior management. For staff who work at in-control sites, this oversight may be tolerable, but for staff who work at out-of-control sites, this oversight leaves them vulnerable to safety concerns. Sadly, out-of-control schools often have increasing safety incidents unless steps are taken to reverse the direction the school is headed.

It is way past time for all K-12 educators to learn the basics of managing out-of-control children and teens. Counselors, family therapists, youth workers, juvenile court staff, mental health clinicians, psychologists and psychiatrists have long been extensively trained in this area, and so much data exists to show what approaches work best, and how to use them. It remains a mystery to me why generation after generation of K-12 teachers are not provided this decades-old information that could put the adults back in charge of the most unmanageable students. That modernized training would go a long way to help distressed schools, and can really amp up schools that are already thriving.

Let me show you more of the effective methods that exist to manage extreme student behavior, build motivation and teach what I call School Skills. My 5 Minute Classroom Management Podcasts are brief audio podcasts that you can listen to in just five minutes-- but those five minutes will significantly expand on the information provided here. You’ll get a longer look at the latest ideas on how to actually teach kids to become motivated, prepared students, plus get a greater understanding of the effective mental health behavior management techniques that can help put you back in charge of unmanageable students. Whether you work in a distressed or more healthy school setting, these are the new tools that can make teaching difficult students less difficult.

To listen to my 5 Minute Classroom Management Podcasts, head to Youth Change Workshops’ website: https://www.youthchg.com/teacher-professional-development-resources/.

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