

EXIT



# So What's a Principal to Do?

When I was a conference superintendent of education, one of my main responsibilities was visiting schools and evaluating the classroom performance of teachers. One dreary November morning, I entered the front doors of XYZ Junior Academy and walked to the secretary's office, which had a door leading into the principal's suite. Looking around, I noticed two students from Ms. Susan's<sup>1</sup> grade 4-6 classroom sitting on the bench, waiting to see the principal. The secretary casually mentioned that another student from the same class was inside talking to the principal.

Continuing down the hall, I spotted a student sitting on the floor just outside Ms. Susan's classroom door. Not an encouraging sign! Upon entering the back of the classroom, I could tell that things were not going well for this experienced teacher. Students clustered in small groups throughout the class-

## Thoughts on How to Help Teachers With Classroom Management and Discipline Problems

room, shouting at one another and at students in other groups. The teacher was trying unsuccessfully to get everyone's attention, but the class seemed determined to ignore her.

As I contemplated this scene, it was all I could do to keep from stepping in to restore some semblance of order. But I resisted the administrative temptation to "take over" and solve this teacher's immediate problems. Instead, I took a deep breath and asked myself three questions: (1) What had gone wrong in this classroom? (2) How could the principal help Susan? and (3) Could some type of school-wide discipline plan have prevented the chaos in Ms. Susan's classroom? These three questions are the central focus of this article. But let's first clarify some impor-

tant issues involved in classroom discipline and management in a Christian school.

### Discipline, a Major Concern for Teachers

1. School and classroom discipline are major concerns for teachers, parents, and communities. For the past 40 years, the Gallup Poll<sup>2</sup> organization has asked Americans, in an open-ended question, to describe the biggest problems facing public schools in their communities. Consistently, lack of discipline and control of students have ranked number one or number two. While no such data exists for Adventist schools, I would surmise, from observation and direct involvement, that parents, teachers, and churches also consider discipline a significant concern.

2. Although the terms "classroom management" and "discipline" are often used interchangeably, they are not synonymous. According to Marshall,<sup>3</sup> discipline "deals with how people

BY JAMES R. JEFFERY with DONNA JEFFERY

behave,” while classroom management has to do with “procedures, routines and structure.” Wong and Wong agree with this distinction but go even farther, asserting that the vast majority of classroom behavior problems are “caused by the failure of students to follow procedures and routines, which in turn are caused by teachers who do not have procedures and routines.”<sup>4</sup> These researchers believe that effective teachers manage their classrooms primarily through the use of procedures and routines that organize the school day and teach students a sense of responsibility. Thus, because their students consistently stay on task, these teachers rarely have to resort to traditional forms of discipline, such as threats and/or punishment to maintain order.

Wong and Wong also believe that ineffective teachers, lacking a classroom-management plan to keep students busy and on task, must focus on disciplinary solutions to the behavior problems caused by their disorganization and lack of planning. Rather than issuing threats and punishment for student misbehavior, they might better have prevented the problems from occurring in the first place.

However, even in the best-managed classrooms, students do misbehave; therefore, schools need to plan ahead and have rules and procedures in place to prevent and deal redemptively with behavior that is detrimental to the learning process, immoral, illegal, and/or dangerous. School policies need to include specifics about what behaviors constitute grounds for suspension or expulsion.

### The Holy Purpose of Discipline

3. Teachers and educational administrators must understand that classroom management/discipline in an Adventist classroom is more than “controlling the barbarians”—it has a high and holy purpose. Hebrews 12 provides insight into how we should view the training of students. I particularly like *The Message* paraphrase of Hebrews 12:6-11:<sup>5</sup>

**“God is educating you; that’s why you must never drop out. He’s treating you as dear children. This trouble you’re in isn’t punishment; it’s training, the normal experience of children. Only irresponsible parents leave children to fend for themselves. Would you prefer an irresponsible God? We respect our own parents for training and not spoiling us, so why not embrace God’s training so we can truly live? While we were children, our parents did what seemed best to them. But God is doing what is best for us, training us to live God’s holy best. At the time, discipline isn’t much fun. It always feels like it’s going against the grain. Later, of course, it pays off handsomely, for it’s the well-trained who find themselves mature in their relationship with God.”**

In 1903, Ellen White observed that “The object of discipline is the training of the child for self-government.”<sup>6</sup> And yes, while discipline “isn’t much fun” at times, it helps us grow and ultimately makes us more Christlike.

4. Every school should have in place a brief, workable set of rules, based on biblical principles and community standards, which have been created by the board and administrators, with input from teachers, students, counselors, and constituents. Ellen White described this process succinctly: The “rules should be few and well considered, and once made they should be enforced. Every principle involved in them should be so placed before the student that he will be convinced of its justice.”<sup>7</sup> Once the rules have been chosen, they should be published in the student handbook and applied consistently.

5. Another consideration is that in all actions taken relating to discipline, parents and teachers *must* be in constant communication. When the school disciplines a student, the actions taken must be documented and followed up with timely communication with par-

ents about the details of the incident.

6. Finally, the single biggest in-school influence on academic and personal growth is the quality of the teacher. When Americans were asked in the latest Gallop poll<sup>8</sup> what words best described teachers who had made a positive difference in their lives, these words rose to the top: *caring, encouraging, interesting, personable, and of high quality*. With these important considerations in mind, we now return to Ms. Susan’s classroom.

### The Blame Game

The chaos in Ms. Susan’s class continued on for what seemed an eternity. But finally, the recess bell rang, and I had a chance to visit with her. She complained, “I don’t get any support from the office. I have kids here who are trying to get away with everything they can. When I send them down to the office, they’re back in 15 minutes. They swagger back in with the same arrogant attitude they had when they left. It’s all become a big joke for these kids. However, the principal tells me that I should be handling my own discipline problems.”

A short time later, when I walked down the hall to the principal’s office, his first words were: “I’m at the end of my rope with Susan.” Having just accepted the job of principal of the school after 10 years as a successful classroom teacher, Tom had the misconception that it was his job to solve Susan’s classroom-management problems. He could hardly do anything else since Susan sent students to his office for a wide variety of offenses—ranging from flippant remarks and class tardiness to insubordination and violent behavior.

I told Tom that he could not keep doing this and retain his sanity. The “revolving door” from her classroom to his office, and then back to her classroom, was not resolving her “classroom management” and “discipline” problems.

As Tom and I discussed what he as a principal could, and should, do for

Susan, we reflected that many educators now see their noble work as having deteriorated into a daily power struggle with disruptive students, compounded by unsupportive parents. Schools daily confront major school discipline problems: profanity toward teachers, bomb threats, drug-related infractions, arson, fighting, intimidation, harassment, theft, and bullying. The impact of the media, significantly less adult supervision, poverty, and dramatic changes in family structures, all contribute to children coming to school less prepared to engage in the schooling process.<sup>9</sup>

### What Should a Principal Do?

The blame game being played in XYZ Junior Academy won't solve any of Susan's or Tom's immediate problems. So, what is the best way for the principal to help Susan? Administrators run the gamut as to how much disciplinary assistance they give to teachers. Some principals allow teachers to send students to the principal's office or to detention only when they have become so disruptive that they should no longer be in class. These principals insist that teachers deal with lesser infractions, sending students to the office only for the "big" problems—such as vandalism, violence, and bullying. In some public school systems, teachers have lost their jobs because of "excessive" student discipline referrals.

Pytel<sup>10</sup> describes a public high school where the principal refused to see students who were sent to his office for dress code infractions, not following instructions, not putting away cell phones, using profanity to other students, horsing around, plagiarizing, forging parents' signatures, and gambling. The principal did allow referrals for profanity toward a teacher, bomb threats, pulling fire alarms, drug-related infractions, arson, assaulting a teacher, fighting with other students, intimidation, harassment, and theft.

Even Christian schools are not immune to some of these problems. But as they establish rules for behavior, they will set higher standards than merely prohibiting illegal and dangerous behavior. Their goal is to help stu-

dents become Christlike adults and to prepare them for everlasting life.

Creating rules that strike the right balance between justice and mercy will require much thought and periodic review. An integral element of any discipline policy is referrals for student misbehavior. What kinds of behavior are serious enough that the student should be sent to the principal's office, appear before a discipline committee, or be referred to the local school board? I believe that this must be decided by the teachers and principal in each school, with input from the school board (par-

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ticularly in cases where suspensions and expulsions are involved), and then communicated clearly to students and parents.

### The Revolving Door to the Principal's Office

Teachers with classroom management challenges are a problem every principal has faced or will face in one form or another. Discipline problems aren't limited to rookie teachers. Because Susan has had three years' teaching experience, one would expect her to be able to maintain classroom control. However, she needs substantial help. First, she must understand that

sending students to the office for discipline will not solve her classroom-management problems. Jones<sup>11</sup> observes that although it has been repeatedly proven that sending students to the office does not prevent/cure misbehavior, everyone seems convinced that it *should* work.

So why do teachers continue using this tactic? Because sending a disrespectful, obnoxious child to the office provides an instant solution to an immediate problem. If principals were to close the office door and refuse to deal with disruptive students, that would quickly produce allegations that they are unsupportive of their teachers. So, rather than alienate the troops, the principal will see the worst cases, give a short monologue on citizenship and responsibility, and then send them back to class. Because other students are waiting to be seen, and a hundred other administrative items need his or her attention, the principal can give the matter only perfunctory attention, which does little to address the underlying issues.

A 10-minute conference will not bring repentance or a significant change in the student's attitude. He or she returns to the classroom bragging that nothing happened, emboldened in his or her rebellion. Even if something did happen, the perpetrator would not admit it, and so the cycle of referrals continues.

Thus, the discipline referral and the trip to the office have become a matter of survival for both the teacher and the principal, while the core problems remain largely unsolved. Is that the inevitable outcome? Can a principal do better?

### Course Correction Needed

The facts are clear. Susan needs to adopt new classroom-management techniques so she can successfully provide the instruction that her students deserve. She needs to establish daily routines, procedures, and class structure. However, she also needs help to understand what is causing the current problems in her classroom. Without a thorough assessment of what is working and what is not, she will be unable

to determine how to proceed.

Furthermore, Susan needs to know that she can use research-based techniques and strategies to solve her discipline problems. Since Tom has had a decade of successful classroom teaching experience, he needs to observe Susan's classroom and then ask her to reflect on how things are going in the classroom. This can start with the simple question, "What is working, and what is not?"

Frankly, if a teacher won't recognize his or her management deficiencies and blames the students, their parents, and/or lack of administrative support (the most common complaint), then there is a serious problem. It might be better for such an individual to begin looking for another calling.

Following the recognition phase, a plan and a specific timeline for improvement must be developed. Susan is still in her three-year probationary period, so her eligibility for long-term denominational certification can be made contingent on certain requirements, such as her successfully completing an online or university course in classroom management, working with an assigned mentor, and submitting weekly reports to the principal.

For experienced, credentialed teachers, the principal should consult with the superintendent of education for advice. Here, too, a specific plan and timeline are necessary. The plan can be created by the teacher, or by the teacher and principal working together. Whatever course is followed and however it is developed, there are several fundamental steps: recognition of what needs to be fixed; acknowledgment that significant attention must be given to developing and implementing a workable plan, and recognition that all change begins with small bits and not large bites. The plan must draw upon two or three basic classroom-management practices (see the list in the next paragraphs).

During this process, Tom should encourage Susan to take the 12-question classroom-management profile produced by *Teacher Talk*.<sup>12</sup> He should also

arrange for her to obtain the following books on classroom-management practices: Harry and Rosemary Wong's *The First Days of School: How to Be an Effective Teacher*<sup>13</sup>; Fred Jones' *Tools for Teaching: Discipline-Instruction-Motivation*<sup>14</sup>; and Marzano et al.'s *Classroom Management That Works: Research-Based Strategies for Every Teacher*.<sup>15</sup>

Tom should also encourage Susan to look carefully through two excellent Websites that are dedicated to discipline and classroom management: *The Really Big List of Classroom Management Resources*<sup>16</sup> and *Behavior Advisor*:

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**Aiding even one teacher with classroom-management challenges can be a time-consuming task for the principal. But what should the principal do if a number of teachers in his or her school are experiencing similar struggles?**

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*Dr. Mac's Behavior Management Site*.<sup>17</sup>

In the area of classroom organization, Susan needs to learn how to arrange the desks, tables, and computers in a way is conducive to easy classroom management. Classrooms should make students feel welcome, encourage involvement, and allow for learning experiences in a multitude of arrangements. Seating charts are thus an important part of classroom organization.

Many teachers would argue that lesson preparation is the key to classroom success. Susan must reflect on whether she is devoting enough time to lesson preparation. Are students getting the individualized help that they need? What about those who finish all the

lessons quickly? Do they "goof off" because they are bored? What activities can she plan that will prepare students to move seamlessly from one topic to the next?

And finally, what about classroom routines? Has she posted clear behavioral expectations where they are visible for all students? Has she regularly reviewed and emphasized the important points with the class?

These are some basic issues that a principal can emphasize in aiding a teacher who is experiencing difficulties.

Throughout the process, Tom should play a significant role. Each week, either he, or a designated mentor, must observe Susan's classroom to check for success and to provide specific feedback. The mentor or principal thereby helps Susan gain insight into how she is doing in three key areas: classroom organization, lesson preparation, and classroom routines. Susan should also be required to engage in ongoing written and oral reflection on her progress. As time goes on, the principal's/mentor's role should decrease. If, however, significant improvement is not evident by early spring, Susan should not be offered a contract for the upcoming year.

Aiding even one teacher with classroom-management challenges can be a time-consuming task for the principal. But what should the principal do if a number of teachers in his or her school are experiencing similar struggles?

### **The Case for a School-Wide System**

XYZ Junior Academy has five teachers, three of them new to their roles—plus a new principal! Like Susan, the novice Grades K-1 and 7-8 teachers are experiencing some challenges with classroom management. Would all of them benefit from the implementation of a school-wide system discipline system?

Summarizing recent research, Protheroe writes that, "A schoolwide approach to discipline that is focused, proactive and consistent is more likely to be effective than the classroom to

classroom approach used by many schools.<sup>18</sup> A number of variations of school-wide approaches to discipline exist, all of which emphasize consistent behavioral expectations throughout the building and in every classroom. The entire school's staff, including janitors, secretaries, and bus drivers, adopt and uniformly implement these agreed-upon strategies.

According to Horner, Sugai, and Horner,<sup>19</sup> schools need to define, teach, and support expected student behaviors. Rather than using punitive methods of discipline *after* students misbehave, they admonish administrators to be proactive and forward thinking in providing a solid base of support for school discipline.

Research has found that institutions with school-wide behavior plans usually employ seven common elements:

1. They focus on a team-based approach comprised of teachers, support staff (secretaries, bus drivers, janitors), and administrators, each of whom shares similar expectations for student behavior.

2. Behavior expectations are few in number (usually three to five) and positively stated. Examples might include statements such as: "Be responsible," "Be respectful," "Be kind," "Be honest," and "Be courteous."

3. School and classroom behavioral expectations are reviewed regularly with all students.

4. The plans include a proactive system for encouraging and rewarding positive behavior such as tokens or coupons. The key is openly rewarding students for meeting behavioral expectations.

5. Teachers and administrators agree on which behaviors will be dealt with in the classroom and which will be handled by the principal.

6. The plans outline specific steps or consequences that will result from rule infractions, ensuring that consistent and predictable procedures are in place when a rule is broken.

7. Finally, each plan includes a support team that conducts regular assessment, using carefully defined procedures. Data from office referrals and staff surveys is collected, organized,

and reviewed to provide informed decision-making about areas where the support team should concentrate its efforts.<sup>20</sup>

The research on school-wide behavioral management systems is quite encouraging. However, this approach does consume a considerable amount of staff time and energy. To gain consensus and to build and maintain a common set of positive expectations requires a long-term commitment. Furthermore, success will be achieved only through cooperation between teachers and parents. For lasting im-

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## Principals must collaborate with their teachers to implement programs that teach students how to deal constructively with conflicts.

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provement in student behavior patterns at school, parents must be trained to use similar behavior expectations at home. A positive home and school partnership will require ongoing communication and collaboration.<sup>21</sup>

### Conclusion

Disruptive classroom- and school-wide behaviors are inevitable. They may occur in the classroom of the first-year teacher or the 20-year veteran who faces a "rogue" class. Principals must collaborate with their teachers to implement programs that teach students how to deal constructively with conflicts.

How much assistance should be given to the individual teacher? The myth that sending students to the office will produce a radical transformation in their behavior is just that—a

myth. In general, routine classroom-management issues should be handled by the classroom teacher.

An increasingly popular approach is a school-wide system or plan that is fully endorsed and supported by teachers, support staff, and parents. Clarity in setting behavioral expectations must be combined with consistent reinforcement. Success requires clear administrative leadership and constant support by the school-wide team, as well as parental support. When all adults with a stake in the students' success collaborate to implement a consistent and redemptive approach to discipline, this will effectively prevent disruptive behavior and prepare students for self-management and a productive life here on earth and in the heavenly kingdom. ✍



*Jim Jeffery has been the Dean of the School of Education at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, for the past eight years. He*

*previously served as the Dean of Education at Canadian University College in Lacombe, Alberta, and as a conference superintendent of education, boarding academy principal, and high school and elementary principal and teacher. Dr. Jeffery holds a Ph.D. in educational administration and an M.A. in counseling.*



*Donna Jeffery, Ed.S., a school psychologist, works for a city-wide public school system in South Bend, Indiana. For five of the past 10 years, she*

*has worked in Title 1 schools. Previously, she taught in Adventist elementary and secondary schools for 25 years.*

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