



As disciplinary incidents rise, teachers lose time teaching and the kids lose time learning

By Charis Anderson

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Think back to middle school: Remember when someone in your class did something particularly bad and got sent to the principal's office?

Now, think about that incident in terms of the time it took: the minutes the class was disrupted while the teacher dealt with the offending student, the amount of time that student spent out of class, the time spent by the principal in determining how to handle the offense.

Multiple that by a couple thousand, and you'll start to get a picture of the disciplinary environment at New Bedford's three middle schools.

In the 2010-2011 school year, the number of disciplinary incidents documented by conduct cards, or office referrals — forms completed by teachers when a student misbehaves — ranged from 1,712 at Normandin Middle School to 3,136 at Keith Middle School, according to data released by the city's school department. At Roosevelt, 1,960 conduct cards were written.

Through the first few days of May in the 2011-2012 school year, Roosevelt and Keith were on track to post lower numbers for this year, although both schools were approaching or in the thousands, with 946 and 1,786 conduct cards respectively.

At Normandin, 2,264 conduct cards had been recorded through May 3, an increase of more than 500 with about seven weeks still to go in the school year, according to the data.

Across the two years, the schools doled out about 6,640 detentions and 1,371 suspensions as well as numerous other punishments, according to the data.

Any data set is open to interpretation, and this discipline data is no different: perhaps the students are particularly unruly at one school, perhaps another school has a set of teachers with particularly short fuses, or perhaps the disciplinary philosophy differs based on principal.

No matter which way the data is cut, however, every office referral written represents some amount of time taken away from teaching and learning.

"I think parents have a right to expect that their children will learn in an orderly and nurturing setting free of disruptive students," said Mayor Jon Mitchell, who serves as chairman ex officio of the city's School Committee. "Real learning can't take place if teachers are occupied by a handful of unruly students."

He continued later: "To me, we've got a long way to go to ensure that our classrooms have the kind of learning environments that parents expect. There remain too many disruptive students."

HOW THE SYSTEM WORKS

Conduct cards or office referrals — the term is essentially interchangeable — can be written for a broad range of offenses, many of which are highly subjective: the question of whether the student who was talking loudly in the back of a classroom deserved a conduct card or just a reminder about proper classroom etiquette, is left largely up to teachers.

If an event is deemed significant enough to warrant a conduct card, the teacher starts by writing a narrative of exactly what happened. The form then goes to a building administrator, typically an assistant principal, who decides how to handle the offense and what punishment should be given, as well as how the incident should be coded in the computer system.

The too-talkative student might end up as "d5: disruptive behavior - disruption of class" while a student who refuses to do what her teacher asks might be entered as a "d4: disruptive behavior - defiance."

Based on data provided by the school system, the available codes run the gamut from attendance problems, like being tardy to school, to a range of insubordination infractions — inappropriate gesture, use of audible obscene language — to serious offenses, such as physical assault or bringing a weapon to school.

Across all three schools, the most common offenses, including disruption of class and defiance, are grouped under the "disruptive behavior" umbrella. While each school did document more serious offenses during the two-year period examined by The Standard-Times, those types of incidents represented a small fraction of the conduct cards written, according to the data set.

According to Dr. Terrance M. Scott, a professor at the University of Louisville and chair of its Department of Special Education, the number of office referral forms being written in New Bedford middle schools isn't uncommon: "You've just described exactly what we would expect to see," he said in a response to a run-down of New Bedford's statistics.

But, he said: "It's not a good situation."

School Committee member Larry Finnerty said conduct cards numbering in the thousands raised questions for him about whether there were clear expectations on what kinds of behavioral issues would be handled in the classroom and what kind of incidents needed to be elevated.

"If you think your job is just to be a traffic cop to the office, you're not managing the classroom learning environment at all," he said.

(It's not clear whether students are always sent out of class when they receive a conduct card. Jeanne Bonneau, principal at Normandin, said teachers sometimes write conduct cards for documentation purposes but do not actually have the student removed from the class.)

Finnerty continued later: "Without a doubt, the teacher's reaction, whether appropriate or not, to any upset to the learning environment is time off instruction, and on the other end of that, that's time off learning."

TIME ON DISCIPLINE

Regardless of the seriousness of the offense, discipline does take time: time from the student being disciplined, from the teacher doing the disciplining, from the administrator who receives the office referral form — and from the rest of the students in the class.

Exactly how much time likely depends in large part on the individual teacher and the school's approach to discipline.

Nicole Britton, who teaches eighth-grade history at Roosevelt, said it takes her about four or five minutes to write up a conduct card — but she's only written three or four so far this year.

"They're only written up for any major incidents," said Britton, one of four teachers who agreed to an interview request e-mailed to about 110 middle school teachers in the city. "A fight has already taken place, so the class has already been disrupted."

Josh Almeida, also an eighth grade teacher at Roosevelt, said at the beginning of the year, he will spend between five and 10 minutes on discipline across his four hours of teaching, or about one to two minutes per class per day.

Toward the end of the year, he spends even less time, he said.

"The students get used to routines and expectations," said Almeida, who said over his four years at Roosevelt, he's only submitted about four conduct cards.

At Normandin, however, a teacher, who asked to remain anonymous out of fear retribution, said that discipline, or the lack of it, was the number one concern for teachers at the school: teachers write conduct cards "all the time," this teacher said, but often don't receive feedback from the administrator on how — or if — the incident was handled.

(Under the administrative handbook, teachers are supposed to receive conduct cards back within 24 hours with an indication of what action was taken, but that time line is often not met, according to this teacher.)

"Teachers ... feel an increasing frustration that they are not allowed to teach because so much of their time is being spent dealing with misbehavior," the teacher said.

The teacher added later: "If you were able to talk to enough Normandin teachers, I'm sure you would hear from a lot of them that this year in particular is so much worse, that the amount of teaching and therefore the amount of learning has decreased so profoundly."

Scott, the University of Louisville professor, said he has found that office referrals take the student being disciplined out of the classroom for about 20 minutes and also take about 20 minutes of adult time.

Pamela Fenning, an associate professor at Loyola University Chicago's School of Education, put those numbers at 45 minutes.

"The minute you start writing referrals, you're talking the class being disrupted, the teacher's time in writing that referral, the kid being sent out of the classroom," she said.

Fenning continued later: "Teachers who have to deal with referral upon referral, they are also, I think, having challenges because they can't teach because they're writing referrals. ... If they're always putting out fires, everybody's stressed: teachers are stressed, kids aren't happy."

Even the numbers at the most conservative end of the spectrum — take Britton's estimate of about five minutes — can add up to a lot of time over a thousand or more incidents: five minutes for each one of Normandin's 2,264 conduct cards this year adds up to about 11,320 minutes — or 28.3 school days, enough time to extend the school year to the end of July.

(At 20 minutes a piece, the tally goes up to 113.2 days, and at 45 minutes, it's a whopping 254.7 days.)

LESS DISCIPLINE, MORE TIME

When Darcy Fernandes became the principal at Roosevelt several years ago, she heard from various groups, including teachers and members of the community, that discipline at the school was a concern.

The plan the school put in place to try to address its discipline problems was based on a Response to Intervention, or RtI, model, in which children at different tiers receive different levels of services, said Fernandes. When diagrammed, the model looks like a pyramid, with the smallest group of children at the top receiving the most intensive services.

Roosevelt has formed partnerships with a number of outside organizations, such as the Women's Center and PAACA, who can provide its students with different counseling that its own guidance counselors might not have experience with, said Fernandes.

Fernandes has also brought in a school adjustment counselor trained in social-emotional support who works just with the "top tier" students, those who are having the most issues; this counselor never has a case load of more than 30 students, said Fernandes.

"The kids needed that type of support," said Fernandes.

She continued later: "Children don't just wake up in the morning and decide to be disruptive. ... There's something going on."

Finally, the school is also trying to figure out how it can motivate all students to maintain good behavior, whether it's awards or participation in events like the Gentlemen's Roundtable or the Girls Tea, both events in which members of the community come meet with students at the school.

One thing Fernandes credits with helping to curb disciplinary issues at the school is its system of having teachers escort students to their unified arts classes or to lunch.

This practice was put in a place a few years ago in response to a number of incidents that were occurring in the hallways during passing periods, said Fernandes.

According to Fernandes, the number of disciplinary incidents has declined over the past four years, and indeed, the number of conduct cards written through the end of April was down about 42 percent from the same time last school year.

Britton, the history teacher, has been at Roosevelt for seven years and said she has seen positive changes in student behavior in that time.

According to Britton, teachers at Roosevelt do a good job of setting clear and consistent expectations for their students, who know there are consequences to face if they fail to meet those standards.

"We kind of go by the golden rule: treat others the way you would want to be treated," she said. "It seems a little bit broad (but) it helps us to promote those positive behaviors by everyone."

Britton said she largely handles behavioral issues within her own classroom, starting by asking a student to stay after school for a few minutes, then following that with a detention or a call home to the parents if the behavior continues.

Only if those steps fail to work will she write a conduct card, said Britton.

Thomas Drake Jr., who teaches seventh and eighth grade at Roosevelt, said he thinks the school has done a good job dealing with any immediate behavior issues while also putting a more long-term plan, such as providing more support services to students, in place to address some of the root causes of those behaviors.

Drake credits the decrease in the number of conduct cards written at the school to that long-term approach: "I think it's everything coming into fruition. ... It's a long, long process of a lot of hard work, day after day," he said.

The reduction in disciplinary issues has not just improved the school climate, it's also freed up time to do things other than deal with discipline, said Fernandes.

"The number of times we can get in the classroom is so much more because we're not responding to behavior," she said.

According to Fernandes, she and the assistant principals were able to do about 150 classroom visits over the course of the year.

"That's in part because there's more time now to do that because we're not constantly being called on the radio to get to a classroom," she said.

Keith Middle School also had a significant decrease in conduct cards this year from the prior school year. Principal Richard Desrosiers did not return multiple calls and e-mails for comment.

MORE DISCIPLINE, LESS TIME

While Roosevelt has seen a significant drop in conduct cards this year, the opposite is true across town at Normandin: through May 3, the number of office referrals written had already increased 32 percent over the prior school year with almost seven weeks remaining in the school year.

Bonneau, the principal, said she did think the number was high, but attributed the increase in part to the influx of students the school experienced this year.

According to Bonneau, both Carlos Pacheco and Hayden-McFadden elementary schools were added to the middle school's feeder pattern this year, which increased the number of students coming in to the school.

Additionally, some neighborhoods that had previously been zoned to Keith were redirected to Normandin, said Bonneau.

"There's ... more kids so more opportunity to have referrals," she said.

(The enrollment at Normandin in 2010-2011 was about 982 students; in 2011-2012, it was about 1,021 students, according to enrollment data on the state education department's website. If one looks at the number of referrals per 100 students, which controls for changes in enrollment, the frequency has still risen this year: last year, there were 174.3 referrals per 100 students; through early May of this year, there were 221.7 referrals per 100 students.)

Bonneau also pointed to problems with the school's lunch schedule — they kicked off the year with overlapping lunch shifts, which did not work and led to some conflicts between children, according to Bonneau, who said the schedule has since been changed — and the addition this year of a behavioral program at the school as other factors that could be behind the high number of office referrals.

"We do our best," said Bonneau. "The staff does its best, and the administrative team does its best. I'd like to say that every student ends up self-managing all of the time. We have it as one of our requirements for promotion."

But, she continued later, "There are some very troubled kids. There isn't a night I don't leave wondering what else we can do with those youngsters that are really struggling."

The Normandin teacher who wished to remain anonymous, and who has been at the school for a number of years, said the discipline situation at the school is getting worse, and while some of it can be pinned to the students who have transferred into the school from Keith, not all of it can.

"The hallways are chaotic and in some cases dangerous," said the teacher. "I think the kids just basically feel that they can get away with anything ... and that has consequences for those kids as well as for everybody else."

The issues are not ones of adolescent goofiness, or kids being kids: the staff understands that these students are still children in many ways, said the teacher.

"We're talking about kids who throw things across the room, kids who curse teachers and are in school the next day, kids who walk out of class," said the teacher. "These are not minor infractions or problems. These are things that really dramatically impact the way teaching and learning take place at the school."

Most of the school's discipline issues are caused by a small group of students, said this teacher, but those students have a disproportionate amount of power, both in the amount of teachers' time they take and in their ability to attract otherwise good students into doing things they know they shouldn't.

Additionally, teachers feel a lack of support from the building's administrators, this teacher said: the office referrals that are written are not always followed up on, and even when a punishment, like a detention, is handed out, there's no good way for a teacher to know if the student has actually served that detention, according to the teacher.

There's also a sense in the building that Bonneau frowns on a teacher calling an administrator for help in dealing with a misbehaving student, which leads to some teachers being reluctant to call for assistance, said the teacher.

A student has to be escorted to the office by an adult, so if a teacher doesn't feel able to call an assistant principal to pick up the child, that disruptive student just remains in the class, said the teacher.

"When you look into the eyes of the kids who want an education and who kind of silently tell you that they're not getting it because of that kid or that kid, you heart breaks," said the teacher. "Then you get mad, because it's resolvable, it's manageable ... but the administration has decided not to handle it."

Mayor Mitchell said he found the discipline numbers at Normandin alarming.

"They mirror the anecdotes that I've heard from parents and teachers alike about the state of affairs at the school," he said. "Superintendent (Michael) Shea sees the problem too, and he has set about to determine the roots of the problem and whatever the causes, we will take direct steps to address them."

CHANGE OF APPROACH

Based on data released by the school system, all three middle schools rely heavily on detentions and suspensions when it comes to punishing misbehavior.

While these consequences may work as a deterrent for some students, maybe even the majority of students, they will do little to change the behavior of the small subset of students who are the most frequent offenders, according to George Sugai, co-director of the Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, a national center funded by the U.S. Department of Education.

Sugai is also a professor at the University of Connecticut's Neag School of Education and the director of the Center for Behavioral Education and Research there.

"The failure is that (for) kids who are frequently violating rules, we give them more of the discipline handbook ... assuming that more of the same will have an effect," said Sugai. "In fact, they've already demonstrated they're unresponsive to that, and they need something different."

In other words, said Sugai: Don't give a kid a 15th office referral when the first 14 didn't work.

According to Sugai, a system of positive behavioral interventions and supports, or PBIS, is a way of balancing the consequences for rule violations with more proactive strategies aimed at teaching students good social skills and encouraging positive behaviors.

In a school with a PBIS system, for example, there would be a small number of clear behavioral expectations phrased in a way to emphasize what students should be doing as opposed what they shouldn't: "Be respectful," instead of "Don't talk out of turn," according to the Center on PBIS website.

Students at the school would be taught what those expectations look like in different settings around the school — the classroom, the cafeteria, the hallway — and then be praised for exhibiting those positive behaviors, according to the center's website.

Another central element of a PBIS system is a tiered model of support, similar to the RtI-like model Roosevelt is using, where students who are consistently displaying problem behaviors receive additional supports and interventions.

"The social-behavior supports we give kids need to be formalized in the same way we formalized academic instruction," said Sugai. "We need to give them the social skills to be successful in navigating the school and the classroom environment. ... The assumption is that kids know how to move through those environments when the truth is they have to be taught how to go from an elementary school when you have one teacher to a middle school when you have six."

WHAT LOCALS SAY

Shea, who started in May as the district's acting superintendent, said he was still coming up to speed on discipline and couldn't say yet why the middle school's office referrals number were where they are.

However, discipline is one of the areas the district's leadership team will be examining over the summer, he said.

"It is on my radar," he said.

Mayor Mitchell said one of the things he would like the district to consider is a possible increase in the number of available spots at alternative schools within the district.

According to Mitchell, the city's school system has fewer slots in alternative settings than the nearby cities of Fall River and Brockton, both of which are comparably sized to New Bedford.

"I think we need to at least explore the possibility of placing some students, more students, in alternative settings for their own good and for the good of other students whose learning they may be disrupting," he said.

School Committee member Marlene Pollock said she would also like to see the district moving away from a reliance on out-of-school suspensions to a more consistent use of in-school suspensions.

"I think it's very important to keep the kids in school unless they have very egregious charges against them," she said.