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School, student mediation creates path to success

THE RICHMOND EXPERIENCE

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The head of security at [Richmond High School](#) is [Darryl Robinson](#). But everyone there knows him as "Coach D." When he started 15 years ago, fights broke out nonstop. Students roamed the halls. And things didn't improve much over the years.

Robinson remembers standing in front of a classroom and asking how many students had ever seen someone get killed.

"Every hand in the room shot up," he said.

Robinson and the school took a no-nonsense approach to restoring order. If students fought, they were suspended for five days. If they were five minutes late, they got detention. If they didn't show, they were sent to Saturday school. No-shows to Saturday school were suspended.

In the first half of the 2010-2011 school year, with an enrollment of approximately 1,600 students, the school issued nearly 500 suspensions.

But the discipline didn't make things better, Robinson admits: "The kids come back, and I guarantee whatever they did will happen again."

[Millie Burns](#), deputy chief of programs at [Catholic Charities](#) of the East Bay, wasn't surprised: "Suspensions tell a person: I don't want you here."

Still, new federal data show that California schools are suspending students at alarming rates. For the 2009-10 school year, suspension and expulsion rates reached double digits in many districts, sometimes exceeding 25 percent, a spate of punishment that hits minorities hardest.

Black students are about six times more likely to be kicked out than whites in San Francisco and Los Angeles.

But there's scant evidence the punishment works. Studies show that frequent suspensions don't increase safety or improve achievement. To the contrary, suspended students are more likely to enter the juvenile justice system.

The problem has caught the attention of state legislators, who are now considering eight bills to address the overuse of harsh discipline and propose strategies to help keep kids in school instead of suspending them.

Fortunately, a growing number of schools are pioneering programs that hold kids accountable while keeping them on track. At first, Robinson was skeptical when he first heard of "restorative justice," an approach to discipline requiring students and teachers to talk through their conflicts and jointly decide how to remedy them.

But he played along. When two students got into a fight, he took them to a mediator instead of sending them home.

"They went in that room two raging bulls," said Robinson. "Thirty minutes later, they came out all smiling and laughing. I thought, what the heck is going on?"

Instead of just receiving punishment, the students described how they felt, how they had contributed to the harm and how the harm could be repaired. The gist, Robinson said, was "doing with" students rather than "doing to" them.

Even three guys who jumped a kid in the lunchroom weren't automatically suspended. Teachers took them to a mediator and called their parents in. As everyone talked, they realized it had been a misunderstanding over a girl. The boys left shaking hands.

The school also takes a different approach now when students are tardy or cutting class. First, Robinson lets kids know he cares about them. Then he offers them a choice. "I'll ask them, 'Is this where you want to be?' " he said. "I don't want to see you walking the streets in a few years." Or sometimes Robinson says: "I want to see you get your diploma; what do you want to do?" The students almost always move along to class, he said.

Teachers were trained, too. If kids show up a few minutes late to class, now teachers say, "Come on in, we'll deal with it later," instead of processing them for detention, Robinson said.

"The goal is to send a school-wide message to the kids that we want you here," said Burns, one of the approach's chief advocates.

For the first semester of this year, suspensions at Richmond High were down 63 percent, according to Catholic Charities. The feel of the school has transformed, Robinson said.

"This used to be a grim, chaotic place," he said. "Now we've got happy kids and fewer fights."

Burns says district officials want to expand the program. She's excited but cautious. "It takes a long time and a lot of patience to change the culture of a big school," she said.

The approach has achieved promising results in Oakland and Salinas schools, too. Hopefully, other California schools will consider them.

Robinson says he can convince other schools to follow suit, he just has to show them how much calmer his school is now.

"Now I know my real job," he said. "To help these kids grow up."

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