

BACKGROUND

TIME TO ADDRESS SCHOOL CULTURE AND CHRONIC BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS

School culture can have a variety of descriptors, that are not universally identified. In many ways it is similar to the characterization of pornography by Supreme Court justice Potter Stewart: "I know it when I see it" (Jacobellis v. Ohio, 1964).

School culture is the set of core values that shape patterns of behavior, attitudes and expectations in a school. For educators it can be associated with morale, job satisfaction, and effectiveness, as well as to student learning, achievement, and school safety. The culture in a school can support or limit student learning. It also impacts every action and decision in a school, from management by school administration, how curriculum and classroom materials are selected, all the way down to the interaction of students.

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Educators seek to promote safe, supportive learning environments that cultivate academic growth for all students. If we want to develop all children into healthy and productive citizens, we must also develop their essential social, emotional, and intellectual skills. This means we need to address some of the more critical issues many educators in our public schools' face: chronic discipline issues with students with behavior issues that cannot be easily addressed in a classroom setting, with an unsupportive school climate. Engaged students rarely cause discipline problems.

Chronic Behavior Problems

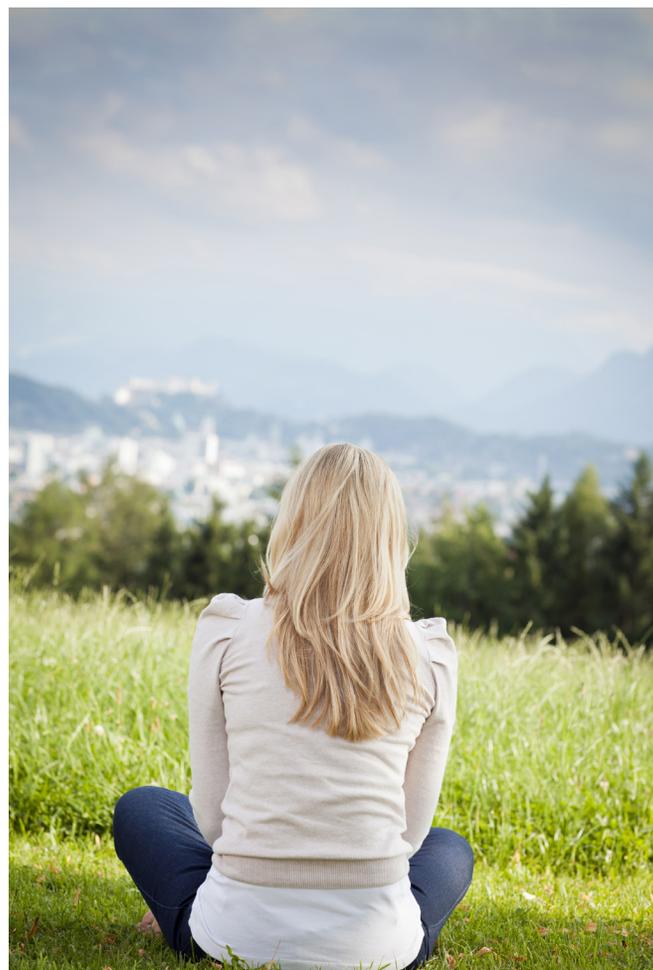
The United States Department of Education has pushed back against the zero tolerance policies put in place in many states in recent years. In some cases, this was certainly justified. The most passionate proponents of zero tolerance have expanded the scope of student discipline to include the juvenile justice system. In this situation, an offending student is arrested and charged with a crime in addition to receiving a suspension or expulsion.

Our state and local policies, must consider a very tiered approach to student discipline. Good policies should be grounded on a plan developed by educators in the district, on a school by school basis, if needed. A one size fits all approach is unlikely to work. Texas Appleseed, an organization that seeks to derail the "school to prison pipeline," offers these recommendations to schools and districts:

- Develop, implement, and regularly evaluate a schoolwide disciplinary plan that employs research-based strategies that have been shown to reduce the number of disciplinary referrals.
- Ensure that expectations for behavior and consequences for misbehavior are well defined,

easily understood, and well publicized to faculty, staff, students, and parents.

- Regularly recognize and positively reward genuine good behavior.
- Provide ongoing teacher and staff training in positive behavior management, as well as training to enhance cultural competency and the ability to form a positive relationship with parents and students.
- Adopt formalized, campus-based programs to monitor at-risk students to prevent escalating disciplinary action and support their success in school.
- Strengthen transition planning, monitoring, and support of students upon their return to school from a disciplinary suspension or alternative school placement.
- Engage parents/guardians as partners in reinforcing positive behaviors at school.



It is true that suspensions, alternative school placements, and expulsions, should not be a first step on student discipline. However, it must be included as an option and deterrent to chronic behavior issues.

There are also some behaviors that may warrant more severe punishment. The underlying principle: all students and educators should feel safe in their classrooms.

Statewide Initiative

Clarksville-Montgomery County School System (CMCSS) has implemented an innovative and more comprehensive effort to address some of these issues, which could be a model for other districts in the state. CMCSS is working to enhance emotional health and substance abuse and suicide prevention efforts on campus in order to ensure that schools have the strongest possible mental health safety nets in place. This benefits all stakeholders. It is also one of their strategic goals. This "Mental Health Initiative" is designed to assist students as they transition into thriving adults.

The underlying principle: all students and educators should feel safe in their classrooms.

All districts should look to enhance their behavioral programs, including mental health, bullying and suicide prevention programming and systems. They must develop expert resources and create partnerships so that students have the support they need, when and how they need it. We must educate and assist the professionals in our classrooms and schools to learn to leverage this assistance when and how they need it, as well.

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The Clarksville-Montgomery County Strategic Plan (*right*) is innovative. It outlines how Clarksville-Montgomery County approached their strategic work of providing resources and supports to meet students' needs social and emotional needs. This has been a long-term initiative of Professional Educators of Tennessee to address the growing behavior problems in all of our schools, assist social workers, and identify support for parents.

In 2019, we must consider a statewide school initiative for our next governor and state policymakers to champion. When the homelife is stable, test scores and learning will improve. The learning environment increases school productivity. More importantly, we don't lose our best and most highly qualified educators due to the stress of the environment with increased behavioral problems and disciplinary action. We must be proactive.



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The Clarksville-Montgomery County Strategic Plan

This could be a model for other LEAs across the state, and something the state could model nationally. It will require coordination and better collaboration.

- Principal Action Plans that focus on helping students: understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for other, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.
- General purpose budget Mental Health proposal. Contracted service with Mental Health Co-op to provide immediate mental health support to the neediest students. Provides immediate psychological and psychiatric support regardless of a student being in general ed or special ed and/or families insurance situation.
- General Purpose budget added 12.5 Guidance Counselors to schools to help support the new TN Guidance Counselor Model that states that Guidance Counselors must spend 80% of their time directly working with students in the classroom, small groups, and/or individual counseling.
- Joint Safety Grant with CMCSS, County Sheriff Department, and City Police Department added an Elementary Lead Counselor to work with Elementary Counselors and Social Workers on best practice and resource support of Social Emotional Learning in their elementary schools. They already had a Lead Counselor for Middle and High School.
- Redistributed some existing Title I grant funding to provide an age appropriate alternative school experience for elementary students that have chronic behavior needs and/or have behaved in a way that jeopardizes that safety of the school, themselves, or others. This is a temporary placement that works on regulating the student's behavior and provides a transition plan for when they transition back to their school of origin.
- Used Title IV funding to add a Social Worker to the elementary alternative school placement.

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