

# The Art of School Transformation

## *Discipline Problems Vanish When Students Start Learning*

by Sandra S. Murray

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During the 1990/91 school year, we had over 1300 discipline referrals with a population of 684 students. When referrals were reviewed, it was evident that a problem existed in that there were inconsistent expectations for either staff or students. Teachers still believed that students could be controlled by punitive measures and raising of voices. The number of disciplinary referrals proved that this was not true.

The next year we tried a school-wide discipline plan. The first two weeks of the school year were concentrated on teaching the students what we expected of them. We taught the students what we wanted using the same techniques as when we teach content areas: teach, practise, test, reteach until achieving mastery. Teachers taught the students how they wanted them to do everything. They practised how to walk in line, how to get in ready position, how to line up, etc. Each teacher strove to make every student successful. The disciplinary referrals that year dropped.

We also instituted our Disruption Alternative Education class that year. This class housed the students who exhibited chronically disruptive behaviour. The teacher concentrated on basic education and coping skills. When an outburst occurred, the teacher used that as a teaching moment. Students spent a percentage of every day learning new techniques for coping with life.

Though the students made progress, there was something missing. After analyzing the referrals, we found that

the majority of the referrals were made by less than 12% of the students. The missing ingredient was how to deal with chronically-disruptive students. When we analyzed student referrals midway through that year, we found that most of the chronically-disruptive students were also unsuccessful in academics. To address this concern, we searched for methods that would assist the students in achieving academic success. We started using SRA's *Direct Classes*. The results were amazing. Though our student population had increased to 800, our referrals dropped to 831. We found that 57% of the referrals were made by 6% of the students.

During the 1993/94 school year, we revamped the curriculum delivery to better address student needs. We still utilized team teaching at each grade level, but also each grade level was asked to have one teacher volunteer to use SRA's *Direct Instruction Reading Curriculum*, supplemented by Scott Foresman. The students were given individual reading inventories to determine reading level. Each grade utilized Scott Foresman basal reading, *Focus Reading*, and *Direct Instruction*. The number of groups each teacher delivered reading services to was reduced, and the students received more reading instruction.

Our referrals were affected also. Our population rose to 860 students, our referrals were 863. Of these 863 referrals, 47 students were responsible for 494 referrals, 5% of the students responsible for 57% of the referrals.

This year, the entire staff has been trained to deliver the *Direct Instruction Reading Program* and in disciplinary techniques. Teachers and paraprofessionals are working as teams to

teach students. Each grade group has an uninterrupted 90 minutes each day to teach reading. The art teacher, music teacher, physical education teacher, enrichment teacher, media specialist, and guidance counselor all teach reading for 30 minutes per day. We have incorporated changes in the spelling, language and math curricula to address unique student needs.

Our referrals for the first quarter dropped from 166 last year to 89 this year — a reduction of 54%. We seldom have any referrals between the hours of 8:30 a.m. and 11:00 a.m., protected reading time. Students are on task and busy all day. There is little down time. The students and the staff are exhausted and exhilarated at the end of the day. We are all excited about the progress we see. As I visit classrooms, students ask me to listen to them read. A fifth grade class begged their teacher to reteach a lesson so they could show me how well they read.

It is hard to believe how much has changed with the new curriculum and discipline techniques. We have gone from 1300 referrals (approximately 325 per quarter) for the 1990/91 school year to 89 referrals for the first quarter of the 1994/95 school year. We still need to find a better solution for the chronically-disruptive student, but curriculum change seems to be addressing part of that need. We shall continue to take risks and explore other methods of instruction and restructuring to improve the education for the students.

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