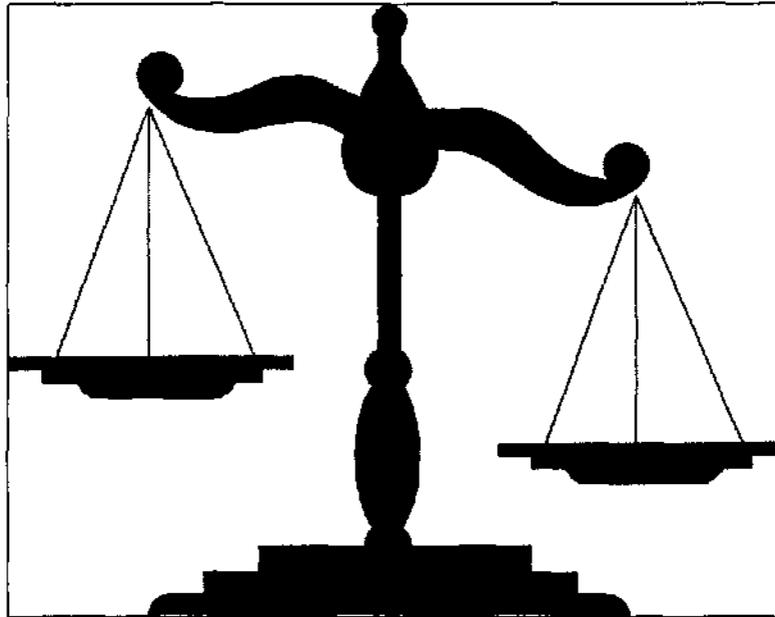


JOLIET POLICE DEPARTMENT

Schools Are For Education Project



Project: CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN
FARRAGUT SCHOOL

Ofc. David SOVA

Partnership is the Basis for Problem-Solving

CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN FARRAGUT SCHOOL
OFC. DAVID SOVA
JOLIET, ILLINOIS POLICE DEPARTMENT

Project: Short-term Conflict Reduction and Long-term Building of Conflict Resolution Skills among Third Graders at Farragut Elementary School

Officer: Ofc. David Sova; others as needed
Joliet, IL Police Department - S.A.F.E. (Schools Are For Education) Project

Scanning: Student disruptions and confrontations inside the classroom, on school grounds, and walking to and from school

Analysis: Perceived discipline problems at school; parents believe discipline is school's problem; teachers believe parents lax, and school administration inconsistent, in enforcing discipline; principal enforces little, if any, discipline; parents not contacted by school regarding discipline problems; students perceive school discipline as weak and sometimes unfair; no rewards or reinforcement for good behavior; students perceive school as uncaring and respond, instead, to peer pressure to "do things their own way"

Response: Plan formulated focussing on student sense of abandonment by school and the problem of peer pressure; experimental group of students identified; plan explained to students, teachers, school staff, parents; trust established between S.A.F.E. Officer and students; students encouraged to become actively involved in thinking about appropriate/inappropriate behavior and resolving conflict; approaching conflict resolution as a team introduced to students; incentives for good behavior and consequences for inappropriate behavior established and enforced; teachers and parents monitor and reinforce plan guidelines; conflict discussion groups with S.A.F.E. Officer continue on regular basis

Evaluation: Short-term: student conflicts requiring staff intervention reduced from 65 per week to two per week; neighbors, teachers, and parents note observable improvement in behavior of students
Long-term: students develop team spirit (Fight Busters) and volunteer to assist expansion of program into other grades and further development in their own class; other teachers request expansion of program into their grades

Background

Farragut School is an elementary school in the City of Joliet. It is located on the near west side of the City in a neighborhood known for its pride in the historic preservation of its homes. Farragut is a very diverse school in many ways. First, it is comprised of two separate buildings and three self-contained Behavior Disorder classrooms. Farragut is also a "magnet" school which means that students from outside the school's enrollment boundaries are bussed to the school. These students come primarily from federally subsidized housing projects located on the far east side of Joliet. Farragut*s population consists of approximately 500 students whose racial makeup is very equally divided between Black, White and Hispanic children; there are also a number of children of Asian background. The social and economic backgrounds of the students range from some affluent households to a majority who come from single parent households that receive public aid. There also exists within the student population a variety of ethnic, social, and moral backgrounds, all of which play an important role in how the student learns and interacts with others.

Thirty teachers, five staff workers, and one principal are assigned to teach the students and maintain order. The school district sets rules of conduct and procedures for teaching, as well

as establishing the discipline code which is to be uniformly applied in all schools. The student handbook details the expectations placed upon the students, and lists consequences for violations of school policy.

The P.T.A. at Farragut School is a very active group of parents that assists in many of the day-to-day functions of the school. These functions can include everything from passing out hot lunches in the school gym to being monitors out on the playground. They organize school parties, and honor students and teachers of the week with posters, praise or small gifts.

In August of 1995, Joliet Police officers were placed in ten elementary and junior high schools within the Joliet Grade School District as part of the new S.A.F.E. Program. S.A.F.E., which stands for Schools Are For Education, is a COPS-funded program which places one police officer in each school and allows him to interact with the students in any positive way. Officer David Sova was selected to work at Farragut School.

Scanning

Farragut School had long had a reputation as a school out of control. Parents would speak about how their child was physically and mentally harassed while at school. Citizens in the neighborhood complained of students destroying property, trespassing, stealing, fighting, and using foul language as they walked through the neighborhood to and from school. The overall impression was of a school located in a nice neighborhood but filled with unruly students that negatively impacted the area. During a drive past the school during recess you would witness children fighting, parents' cars blocking the street, children running in and out of traffic, and an overall lack of respect for the area in which the school was located. A walk inside the school would reveal much of the same disorder. Inside the school, student behavior would often lead to fights in the hallway, cursing, and disruptions in the classroom. The school rules were in place but, for some reason, student behavior was such that it created an environment which was not conducive to learning. Modifying students' behavior seemed to be the key to changing the environment in the school from anarchy back to education.

Analysis

Prior to developing a plan to modify student behavior, a comprehensive look at all the contributing factors and underlying conditions was made. On the surface, the problem behavior of the students seemed simple; an easy-to-solve problem. Closer examination revealed that these behaviors were a result of many factors.

The first source of information was the teachers working at the school. Most felt that the bad behavior of the students began at home. The teachers make numerous contacts with parents of problem students throughout the year. It is easy for them to determine if a parent is concerned about behavior or just feels that it is the schools* responsibility. It seemed that many of the parents were not adequately equipped to teach their children good behavior or had already given up on them because of a long history of problems with their child. Many other parents felt that once they dropped off their child at school, their parental responsibility ended. Personal conversations with the parents confirmed this belief. One of the more surprising factors revealed by the teachers was that they felt there was a severe discipline problem at the school. As a consequence, most teachers handled discipline in their classroom rather than following school procedure. Detailed teachers' records showed inconsistency in the

discipline handed down by the principal. Different students received different discipline for the exact same school offenses. Some students actually received no discipline for school violations that mandate some type of disciplinary action. This inconsistency seemed to confuse students. Not knowing if they would be punished or not tended to allow the students to violate rules because there was a good chance of receiving very minor punishment or none at all.

Observation was the next source of information. Being assigned to the school as a Police Officer, and being brought into disciplinary situations, it was easy to monitor the School's way of dealing with these problems. It didn't take long to determine that the teachers' concerns regarding discipline were not unfounded. Students who violated school policy were rarely if ever given any severe punishment and the discipline that was administered was dismal at best. The Principal felt that students should be counseled, not disciplined. The atmosphere of the Principal's Office was that of a refuge for students who violated school rules. Students sent to the office would be talked to, then allowed to read, color books, or even sleep if they did not wish to return to class. This lack of disciplinary response by the Principal not only encouraged students to misbehave, but created dissension between teachers and the Principal. This dissension did not create an atmosphere in which the teachers and Principal could work together to deal with the task of modifying student behavior.

Observation revealed another important factor. Not only was the discipline, or, rather, the lack of it, a problem, but there was no positive reinforcement or reward for good behavior. Good students received no extra consideration for their behavior; basically because the staff felt that good behavior was expected. Through the eyes of the students, a good student would be treated the same as a bad student. Good students received no special privileges, rewards, or incentives to be good students. Being bad, doing things your own way, was easier than being good and following the rules. Without a clear-cut reason to follow the rules, students soon discovered that they could have things "their way."

The last, and probably the most revealing, source of information was the students themselves. Personal conversations with the students uncovered many things. First, students themselves felt that discipline at the school was weak. They stated that at no time did any disciplinary action bother them or do anything to modify their behavior. Students also stated that it was very rare for the Principal to contact their parents. They could get in a lot of trouble but, for some reason, Mom and Dad would not be told. The influence of peer pressure was a major factor in student behavior with many students saying they acted a certain way or did a certain thing because their classmates were watching. They also saw their peers violating school rules and receiving little or no punishment. The most shocking factor, however, was that the students really felt a sense of abandonment.

Students stated that they felt that the Principal and many teachers didn't really care about them or the way they behaved. When a student misbehaved, the feeling was "so what, no one really cares." To the students, it didn't seem to matter to anyone how they behaved. Surprisingly, most of the students felt that if there were more severe consequences at the school, behavior would improve. It was as though they associated the lack of discipline with a lack of caring.

Response

A great deal of information about the problem of student behavior was gathered. Prior to developing a response **plan, all** contributing factors associated with the behavior problem needed to be assessed to determine which course of action to follow. The problem of student behavior could be stated as: students acted inappropriately inside and outside the school, for several reasons. One reason was that there was no clearly established discipline policy at the school, and the one currently used was inconsistent, unfair, and encouraged students to misbehave. No program of incentives or rewards was established for good behavior. Students felt a sense of abandonment because it appeared to them that if no one punished them and no one taught them the way to behave, then no one cared. Finally, peer pressure was the major factor in influencing the way students behaved.

In order to be successful, a response plan that would take into account all these factors was needed. The school and school district establishes rules and policies for discipline. In those schools where discipline is not a problem, procedures for administering the discipline are followed word-for-word. At Farragut, on the other hand, the vague language of the policies allows discipline to be administered at the Principal's discretion. Because school policy is also district-wide policy, nothing could

be done to change the language of the policy to take away the Principal's discretion. The School Board felt that a policy which works in all the other schools should not be changed because of one problem school. The Principal would not consider changing anything in her approach to discipline, and, in fact, did not see discipline as a problem in the School. Changing the Principal's disciplinary style would, therefore, be the only factor not encompassed in the response plan.

The response plan that was developed focussed on the two most influential factors, peer pressure and eliminating students* sense of abandonment. Due to the large population of the school, only one grade level of students was chosen for participation. The Third Grade was chosen because they, as a group, exhibited the highest number of incidents involving inappropriate behavior, and also because the Principal and staff had identified the Third Grade students as "the worst group in years." The Third Grade level consisted of three separate classes. Two of the classes were included in the response plan, the other was used as a control group to monitor the effectiveness of the plan. The two classes selected had teachers that believed that a program could be developed to modify student behavior and were willing to actively participate in that program. This, then, is how the response plan was formulated.

First, regular classroom visits, that the students would be aware of and prepared for, were established by their S.A.F.E. Officer. The students were told right from the start that the classroom visits were made to help them modify their behavior. The students already acknowledged that there was conflict between them and that they knew that not all of these conflicts were handled appropriately. Students also stated that their behavior was a problem, so they were receptive to the idea of an adult helping them with their problems.

A sense of trust was next developed by telling the student personal information and even allowing them to develop a detailed list of questions that the Officer would answer on the first few class visits. This gave the students the opportunity to realize that a Police Officer is also a person that may have things in common with them. Opening up on a personal level persuaded the students to open up and not be afraid to discuss their personal problems. This also showed the students that there was nothing to hide; that the concern for them was real, thus working to eliminate the sense of abandonment. Impromptu meetings and the ability of students to talk with the Police Officer at any time further emphasized the sense of caring and concern.

Once the trust was established, a list of problems that students encounter was formulated. During each visit, several situational problems were discussed that dealt with conflict and

response behaviors. Alternatives were discussed as well as what inappropriate responses might occur. In a very short time it was easy to see that, while the students knew the right way to act or respond to conflicts, they were not able to do so in real-life situations. The students began to realize this also, which prompted them to understand that they must change the way they handle conflict.

Once the students realized that their conflict-handling behavior was the problem, the final element of peer pressure was brought into play. Both classes were brought together for the classroom visits. All the students were told that their behavior would be monitored not only by the S.A.F.E. Officer and the teachers, but also by the students themselves. They were told that they were now a team and that everyone had to help out everyone else on the team. Our goal was to end inappropriate behavior in and around the school, and to resolve conflicts in a non-violent way. Students were instructed to keep their eyes open for any conflict situation and, as a group, remove their friends from conflict before it became physical.

At each visit, those students that actively participated in resolving conflict or behaved appropriately to a situation were recognized, similarly, those students who misbehaved or failed to appropriately resolve their conflict had to discuss what had occurred and why they had acted as they did. The pressure by their

peers to act appropriately, along with the embarrassment associated with having to discuss what they did wrong in front of the class, had an immediate impact on student behavior. Students began to see the relation between punishment and praise and their behavior. Good students were rewarded for good behavior and good choices. These rewards included reduced homework, coupons to purchase items at the school bookstore, extra gym time, extended lunch periods, field trips, and free candy. The rewards did not have to be large to provide the incentive necessary for the students to see that there is positive reinforcement for behaving appropriately. Rewards were given very openly so that all the students could see who was benefiting. Peer pressure for not receiving rewards further enticed students to actively participate in proper behavior and assist others in properly resolving conflict.

The teachers assisted by reinforcing the response plan throughout the day and by keeping the S.A.F.E. Officer informed about student behavior incidents. All behavior incidents were addressed by the teachers, S.A.F.E. Officer, and the students so that each incident could be used to teach students how to handle conflict. The students knew that every inappropriate behavior or conflict that was not handled appropriately would be brought to the team's attention. It would then be addressed and alternatives discussed. Parents would be contacted by teachers and the S.A.F.E. Officer whenever students acted inappropriately. Parental involvement further diminished the abandonment issue, and

reinforced the response plan outside the school. A simple outline of the plan would be:

- 1) Establish regularly scheduled classroom visits by the S.A.F.E. Officer
- 2) Explain the problem and the goals to be achieved
- 3) Open up personally to establish trust and a sense of caring
- 4) Discuss student problems to encourage everyone to think about conflict and behavior issues, and stimulate active participation in the response plan
- 5) Bring classes together to formulate team concept
- 6) Establish incentives and rewards for good behavior
- 7) Establish clear-cut rules and consequences for inappropriate behavior
- 8) Get parents and teachers actively involved in the response plan to facilitate its reinforcement beyond school hours
- 9) Continually discuss conflict-handling and use every opportunity to teach proper behavior techniques

Evaluation

The main goal of the response plan was two-fold, with a short-term as well as a long-term objective. In the short term, **the** response plan was designed to drastically reduce the number of physical confrontations and acts of inappropriate behavior in and around the school. The long-term objective was to actually educate the students to effectively handle conflict without violence and treat others with respect. The students were to realize that they, and they alone, were responsible for their actions. If these goals could be achieved, then the plan would be a success.

Progress toward the short-term objective was easily measured. Teachers kept daily tabulations of inappropriate behavior, as well as of physical and non-physical conflicts. Lunchroom personnel, staff, and the S.A.F.E. Officer would also monitor the students' actions throughout the school year. And the students would keep tabs on themselves and their fellow team members. This not only helped to test the accuracy of the results but, as mentioned earlier, reduced conflict because the students knew that no incident would go unnoticed.

Prior to implementing the response plan, the Third Grade class averaged approximately 65 incidents per week involving conflict requiring the intervention of a teacher or staff member to handle

the situation. The majority of these incidents resulted in physical violence between two or more students. By the end of the school year, this average had dropped to two incidents per week; and there were no incidents of conflict at all during the last two weeks of school.

Neighbors who lived around the School stated that student behavior, as they walked to and from School, had improved. Although a majority of Third Graders did walk to school, we noted that the neighbors could not determine to which grade level the observed students belonged. However, non-Third Grade teachers were spoken to and observed that the Third Grade behavior had greatly improved, and expressed an interest in getting their grade levels involved in a similar plan.

The most significant indicator of success came from interviews and observations with the Third Grade students themselves. They realized the importance of good behavior and expressed this, not only in words, but in actions. They viewed themselves as a team, working together to change things. The students even began to call themselves the Fight Busters, and plans are in the works to design t-shirts and patches to signify the importance and respect associated with this "club". The real turning point in the success of the plan came when over half of the Third Grade students asked the S.A.F.E. Officer if they could help teach and work with the next year's Third Grade class. This would appear to signal the

first step in achieving the long-term goal of the response plan. The response plan is now, therefore, being re-formulated so that some of the original Third Grade students can help to institute the plan with next year's Third Grade class, as well as continuing to develop the plan while in the Fourth Grade.

Philosophy and Organization

The key to the success of the response plan was the involvement of the parents and teachers of the Third Grade students. Teachers were required to spend class time emphasizing the expectations of the plan. At home, parents followed-up on the work being done in the classroom. The S.A.F.E. Officer functioned not only as a teacher, but as a role model and, most importantly, as a concerned friend. Businesses in the area became involved in the plan by donating such items as candy, food, and coupons for positive rewards and incentives. Other Police Officers were brought into the school to meet with the students so that they could see that many people were concerned about their lives.

Finally, being consistent in the treatment and education of the students was essential. No deviation from the plan's established sanctions or rewards was made. This way students could see and understand that there was a clear relationship between act and consequence, and that their actions alone determined what consequences – both good and bad – they experienced.