



Teacher's fret: UConn prof's book helps educators cope with disruptions in classroom

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STAMFORD - Anne Farrell has seen all kinds of bad behavior among elementary school students, including passing notes, talking in class, screaming, hitting, throwing things and storming out of the room.

Farrell, an educational consultant, has worked with teachers who didn't always know how to deal with the bad behavior. The disruptions cost the class valuable learning time and are a big reason why many teachers leave the profession, said Farrell, also an assistant professor at the University of Connecticut's Stamford campus.

"We see this as a major challenge in the field of education," she said.

She and some colleagues have written a guide for dealing with and preventing such behavior. The book, "Positive Strategies for Students with Behavior Problems," has instructions for finding out the causes of bad behavior and addressing it before it leads to an outburst.

For instance, some students may act up because they need periodic breaks from classwork. But schools may balk at giving breaks for select students, Farrell said, so one strategy is working small breaks into class time. That may mean allowing a student to sharpen a pencil, walk around the room a few times, or do jumping jacks in the hallway.

Some bad behavior may occur because a student is having trouble with lessons. The book cites a study in which educators found that one student's outbursts often began when the teacher assigned the class difficult word problems. The student was taken out of class when the word problems were assigned and given adapted versions of the problems. He got extra support in math and reading, and was taught strategies for dealing with frustration.

In another case, educators figured out that a physically aggressive student who injured a staff member calmed down when she worked with students who were more assertive,

and when she got more attention from a support team, which included the teacher, classroom aides, a speech therapist and a school psychologist. The student had moderate mental retardation.

Farrell said the traditional punishments - suspension or sending the student to the principal's office - may reinforce bad behavior.

"If it doesn't diminish the problem, then it hasn't really worked," she said.

The student and the rest of the class may be relieved when a problem student is sent to the office, she said.

Farrell said it takes a lot of patience and understanding to analyze a student's behavior and follow a plan for neutralizing it. But the behavior is taxing teachers and can eat up a good deal of classroom time, she said.

"There's a lot of frustration associated with problem behavior," she said.

Teachers collaborate with parents and school officials in coming up with a plan for a problem student.

This approach is "starting to become more visible in the Connecticut schools," said George Sugai, a University of Connecticut education professor who co-directs the National Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, based at UConn and the University of Oregon.

The center is working with 6,000 schools in 40 states to implement positive strategies, he said. The Neag School of Education at UConn is working with 40 schools in the state, and Sugai estimated that the state Department of Education is working with another 40.

Stamford schools have long been using positive behavior supports for special education students and are looking at how to apply them to other students, said Joe O'Callaghan, the district's executive director for youth development.

The techniques are part of a larger approach to school discipline, in which rules are framed as things to do, rather than things to avoid. For instance, instead of being told not to interrupt, students may be told to be respectful and wait their turn in conversation, Farrell said.

The behavioral supports come into play when those strategies don't work for children who continue to be disruptive.

Sugai said anticipating bad behavior rather than reacting to it is a challenge for schools - educators must be patient and attentive, not seek a quick fix.

"I think it's difficult for people to change what they've traditionally been doing," he said.

The book is applicable to students with or without special needs, Farrell said. She wrote it with Daniel Crimmins, Philip Smith and Alison Bailey, who work at the Westchester Institute for Human Development at New York Medical College in Valhalla, N.Y., where Farrell once worked as a consultant.

She's a clinical and school psychologist at UConn's Department of Human Development and Family Studies. She lives in Ridgefield, and her primary appointment is at the Stamford campus.

The book, and others like it, reflect growing attention to the atmosphere in schools and how that fuels bad behavior. The topic has become more urgent after the school violence incidents at Columbine High School and elsewhere, Farrell said.

"Those episodes really riveted national attention," she said. "It really pushed the issue of school climate to the forefront."

The book has a foreword by former Sen. James Jeffords, an independent from Vermont, saying he and other federal lawmakers promoted the use of positive supports in the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, a federal law reauthorized in 2004.

Theresa Magistro, head of the Stamford Education Association, the teachers union, said positive support techniques are valuable and teachers have long been using them. But the district needs more counselors, social workers and other specialists to attend to children who are angry and hurting emotionally, Magistro said.

"Certainly positive strategies are needed, because we have young people that are terribly isolated, and they need to connect with an adult in a trusting relationship," but many don't get that, she said.

Some bad behavior is too ingrained to be addressed through positive behavior supports, Farrell said.