MANAGING STUDENT BEHAVIOUR

AN INITIATIVE OF THE DIRECTOR GENERAL’S CLASSROOM FIRST STRATEGY
A positive school ethos

We aim to ensure that every public school has a safe and orderly learning environment. This is best achieved by creating an atmosphere in the school where students are actively engaged in the curriculum and are provided with interesting ways to learn; where they feel cared for by school staff and develop a sense of belonging to the school; and where teachers know them well, build on their strengths and encourage them to persist with tasks until they succeed. In short, students are more likely to behave well if they are in an environment where they feel respected and capable.

We know that if school staff are able to create such an ethos then many potential behaviour problems will be prevented. The crux of successful behaviour management is acting to meet students’ needs rather than simply reacting when they misbehave.

The teachers who are most effective approach student behaviour in a particular way. Firstly, they understand that behaviour is learned, and so with those students who regularly misbehave they see their job as helping those students learn more productive and responsible behaviour. Secondly, they understand that behaviour is influenced by the situation in which it occurs, and so they act to change the student’s behaviour by altering some aspects of the classroom situation. Thirdly, they know that misbehaviour serves a purpose for each student, and so they take action to enable students to find ways of belonging in more socially acceptable ways.

In other words, we want our staff in schools to view student behaviour in educational terms, and have educational strategies to manage it, rather than trying to understand it as a mental health professional might. We have control over many variables within the classroom and school that influence how students behave – and our efforts are best directed at changing these factors to produce better student behaviour.
Getting the best support

We want our classroom teachers to have access to the support they need. This support can come from within the school or from outside it. We believe there is enormous expertise within schools and there needs to be opportunities for our struggling teachers to learn from our best teachers. That is why we will give schools more flexibility in how they use the support time allocated to them so they can use it to free up expertise from within their school, buy in expertise from other schools or access support from district offices or elsewhere.

We will provide professional learning programs to help our teachers manage the behaviour of students in the classroom in a way that maximises the time they spend teaching. Teachers need to know how to set limits and apply consequences, to model and teach good behaviour, and to handle classroom conflicts in a non-provocative but authoritative way. We want our teachers to be firm but fair; they are the teachers that students respect most.

Whole school approaches

We will provide specially trained school psychologists to assist our school leaders to institute school-wide approaches to managing bullying and other behaviours that make schools unsafe or disrupt the learning of other students. All schools need to have systems of discipline where high standards of behaviour are expected, where there is consistency across the staff in the approach taken, where there is a clear code of conduct, where staff work together to support each other, where parents are involved early to support the school’s efforts to manage their children’s behaviour, and where the staff use evidence to pinpoint problems and plan action.

Managing extreme behaviour

We believe that, even with those students who have been suspended and become alienated from school by their extreme behaviour, there is still scope to re-engage these students. By facing up to what effect their behaviour has had and by making an effort to put things right, students can restore damaged relationships and be re-connected with the school.

Those students whose circumstances make it difficult for them to succeed at school often exhibit unproductive behaviours. Reacting to these unwanted behaviours in a punitive or narrow behavioural control sense is not the way to go. These students first need an appropriate curriculum and understanding teachers who develop strategies to engage them in learning. They also need, like all other students, clear limits and consistent consequences so they can learn behaviours that are acceptable at school. In other words, while their behaviour certainly needs to be managed, it is best to take a broad view of the management strategies and use successful engagement in learning as the desired outcome rather than simply trying to eliminate the misbehaviour.

For those students who persistently engage in extremely disruptive behaviour, our school psychologists will help school staff to enable them to put in place individual programs to manage the behaviour and learning of these students. For those who simply cannot be managed in a normal classroom we will provide alternative placements that will give them the intensive help they need with the aim of reintegrating them back into mainstream classes wherever possible.

We will not allow persistent disruptive, aggressive behaviour to continue to interfere with the school’s work. We accept that some students can only progress in a different environment to the normal mainstream classroom and as a system we are committed to providing such alternatives for the small percentage of students who need them.

Early intervention

Some students exhibit behaviour that interferes with their learning when they first start school; they lack the socialisation to cope with the demands of classroom learning. These students are distractible, impulsive and often aggressive in social situations. We know the prospects of changing their behaviour are better the earlier we intervene. Therefore we will support proven programs that build the social and personal skills of students in their first years at school so they develop the behaviours that are prerequisites for successful learning.
Matching support to need

We accept that some schools have more difficult student behaviour to deal with than others. Community and family circumstances can significantly affect a student’s ability to meet the school’s behavioural expectations. It is only fair that we provide those schools with a higher level of support than schools where the great majority of students come to school ready to learn. In the future we will ensure these schools receive a greater share of the time of support services such as school psychologists.

We would also want to assert that our teachers deserve to be respected – and to be able to teach and be safe from threats, insults and harassment. On occasions the behaviour of students is beyond what any employee behaving as a responsible professional should be subject to. The Department will take strong action to ensure our staff have a safe workplace.

Enlisting outside support

The school system cannot manage the most difficult and complex cases alone. The behaviour of these students is a symptom of problems well beyond the school. Our teachers should be held accountable for using the most effective educational strategies to help students progress, but these strategies will only be effective if they are part of a broader intervention that is beyond the brief of education. We will therefore take the initiative to build productive, cooperative approaches by all agencies that exist to support these students and their families.

Finally, we will take every opportunity to publicly promote the position that student behaviour is a shared responsibility between school and home. It is unrealistic for society to expect schools to shoulder the total burden of irresponsible student behaviour. While schools can and should act to prevent misbehaviour in school and to manage it well when it does occur, parents also have a significant influence on their children’s behaviour. We are likely to have much greater success if all parties play their part.