Tardiness: A Systems Approach to Problems, Transformation, and Solutions

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**Tardiness: A Systemic Problem**

There are various factors that influence student tardiness. Because of the social aspect of school, students find themselves caught up in a chat with friends before, during, or after school in hallways. Students also receive supervision from adults on a limited basis; they are aware there may not be someone watching them to catch them doing something wrong. Hallway congestion can also obstruct hallway traffic flow making other students late to class. Students see that the first five minutes of class time are often not very constructive, so they stroll into class late. Unfortunately, there are no immediate consequences for being tardy; staff members may not report the incident at all (Sprick & Daniels, 2007). Unsupervised students in the hallways and restrooms after the tardy bell rings provide students with various opportunities for fighting, bullying, and other misconduct. This misbehavior can carry over into the classroom, thus wasting even more instructional time (Sprick & Daniels, 2007).

Muir (2005) reports that “In one study from the 1990’s, 8-12% of students were absent each day, and more than 40% of teachers found tardiness to be a significant problem” (p. 1).  Many teachers noted that the first four to eight minutes of class time is wasted by tardiness. To compensate for these disruptions, teachers often either ignore the infraction or send students to the office. This practice is disruptive and sends students the wrong message that arriving to school on time is not important (Sprick & Daniels, 2007).

Student surveys indicated students were tardy because of the following reasons: transportation problems, family-related excuses, overcrowded conditions, lack of a culturally sensitive curriculum, dirty and limited access to bathrooms, health-related causes and sleeping habits. Students had also shared that they did not feel a sense of belonging to their school and thought there was a double standard with school rules for staff and students. Students also felt that their voices were not heard on campus (Muir, 2005, p. 1).  Lindsey (2009) found some parents shouldered the responsibility themselves for their student’s tardiness. While the picture painted may look bleak, administrators are still finding success through a variety of strategies.

**Tardiness: Transforming the System**

School administrators are decreasing the number of student tardiness by blending behavior modification, positive behavior support, and needs based approaches (Muir, 2005).

**Behavior Modifications**

Behavior modification approaches include the following: being locked out of class, detentions, parent conferences, additional assignments, reductions in grades, work details during lunch, after school, or free periods, Saturday classes, token systems for being on time; time cards; time management workshops; contingency contracts; and tardy rooms. While some of these modifications improved tardiness, detentions, reduced grades, tardy rooms, and additional assignments proved ineffective at changing behavior (Muir, 2005).

**Positive Behavior Support**

One method used to impact student tardiness at the high school level was to utilize a school wide approach Positive Behavior Support (PBS), originally intended to reduce disciplinary problems (Johnson et al., 2008). PBS serves to provide interventions to students who may be at risk of performing well academically or socially. Active staff supervision indicated an overall decrease in the frequency of students’ low intensity behavior such as tardiness during transitional periods when active supervision was implemented  (Johnson et al., 2008).

**Needs-based Approach**

Successful needs-based strategies included the following: identifying chronic offenders, assessing them individually, referring students to appropriate services, support groups, working with parents to find solutions, instituting free breakfast programs, working with teachers to improve the quality of the instructional program, switching to block scheduling, interdisciplinary & integrated curriculum and providing opportunities for students to express their opinions and contribute to the operation of the school. Needs-based approaches had the added benefit of not only improving punctuality, but also academic achievement and attitude toward school, as well (Muir, 2005, 1-2).

**Tardiness: A Systems Solution**

A blended, systems approach with aspects of behavior modification, positive behavior support, and needs-based approaches is recommended for administrators and school sites.  This approach would incorporate aspects of the processes suggested by Chance (2009): “System processes also include the internal organizational structure, technology, people, and

communication patterns, which collectively make up the internal social infrastructure” (p. 41).

In one study of student tardiness, teachers and support staff found that the tardy sweep, when students are swept up and taken to the multipurpose room until the first period was over, increased the number of tardies. The initial tardy sweep did very little to include teachers and was implemented mostly on the administrative side of the system.  As a solution, this school site implemented a new tardy policy that assumed students would be on time, teachers would communicate with families when students were tardy, and families would support the new policy. Students also had opportunities to participate in the discipline policy when they were tardy (Lindsey, 2009).

Sprick & Daniels description of the positive sweep differs only slightly from the regular tardy sweep; the primary difference is the positive attitude in which it is done.  While students receive the consequences immediately [behavior modification] and have positive experiences with staff [positive behavior support] it does not address the full system.  In order to do so, it would have to incorporate a needs-based approach as well to address the other systemic causes of tardiness.  A systems sweep is one that incorporates all three aspects into its approach (2007). The systems sweep builds on the positive sweep by including families and other stakeholders as well as delving into the deeper issues that surround a needs-based approach; thus, it impacts a greater portion of the system that contributes to school tardiness.

When many students are chronically late to class, the need for systems-level intervention is indicated because it suggests that expectations related to punctuality are unclear and consequences for tardiness are not implemented or are not effective (Tyre, Feurerborn & Pierce, 2011). Traditional tardy sweeps have proved ineffective and positive sweeps are promising (Lindsay, 2009; Sprick & Daniels, 2007). A system sweep by itself will not be adequate though; positive school climate and professional development play key roles in contributing to successful intervention.

The needs-based approach requires an open, positive school climate and deals with deeper changes to the school system than other approaches. Chance emphasized the importance of an open school climate when instituting changes in attendance policy (2009). Therefore, administrators should work on improving school climate before trying to incorporate the deeper changes a full system sweep requires.  When adapting school tardiness policy administrators must be aware of the culture, values and social factors (Muir, 2005). Once the issue of school climate has been addressed, then the work of professional development can begin.

Many school site administrators have focused on creating a school climate where teaching and learning are at the core of professional development. Incorporating needs-based approaches through professional development can lead to additional benefits besides the gain of instructional time. Reducing the tardiness also has had the indirect benefit of increasing staff morale (Sprick & Daniels, 2007). In addition to the improvement in school attitude and academic achievement that the needs-based portion of the systems sweep brings, it also carries all the benefits of the positive sweep as identified by Sprick & Daniels (2007).

In summary, our recommendation is for tardy policies to follow a systemic approach. It is important to include needs-based approaches if schools want to increase academic achievement and improve school climate.  These would include involving students in the process of creating the tardy policy, providing breakfast, block scheduling, and shifting to a more student-centered curriculum.  Other recommendations would be to include only those behavior modification approaches, including positive behavior support, that have proven to be effective such as: parent conferences, positive reinforcement, and workshops on time management, as well as other behavior modifications related to students losing some of their free time.  Positive tardy sweeps and family involvement are other important parts of the program.  Together all of these approaches define the systems sweep.  Administrators should stay away from ineffective measures like tardy rooms, detentions, extra assignments and grade related interventions.  Focusing on school climate and professional development is crucial in developing a systems wide approach to tardy policy.

References

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