Alternatives to Collective Punishment

Working in schools can be stressful!

These articles are intended to help the great people who work in schools.

Collective punishment is the punishment of a group as a result of the behaviour of one

Quietly approach the group and explain that you don't feel respected and seek commitment it will not reoccur

Nine times out of ten this is enough

If further incidents occur then use group dynamics to have members of the group reflect on the impact their behaviour is having on others

I can't change the direction of the wind but I can adjust my sails to always reach my destination.

Jimmy Dean

I suspect many teachers have had an experience like this: A paper airplane, ball of paper, or pencil flies through the air, or somebody makes an obnoxious noise. The object is probably aimed at another student, and it may or may not hit the intended target. The noise is just meant to be funny.

You can tell the general area it came from, but you don't really know who the culprit is. It's frustrating because that kind of behaviour does not contribute to a learning community.

What do you do?

It's not uncommon for teachers to first yell something like, "Who threw it?" No one admits to it, and then the teacher will punish the entire group.

Here's a definition of collective punishment:

Collective punishment is the punishment of a group of people as a result of the behaviour of one or more other individuals or groups. The punished group may often have no direct association with the other individuals or groups, or direct control over their actions.

I'm not convinced that this behaviour is one we want to model for our students. If collective punishment is out, then what are the alternatives?

This kind of misbehaviour does not happen that often in my classes, thankfully, but it certainly does occur. What I usually do is go over to the area where I suspect the noise or projectile originated and quietly explain that I don't feel respected when this kind of thing happens. And, since I feel like I show that I respect students at all times, I would hope they would want me to feel respected. I then explain that I don't know who actually did it, but that I would like each of them to commit that they will not throw something (or make a noise, etc.), and we shake on it. I tell them that I'm sure they are people of their word, and the matter is closed.

Nine times out of ten, that is the end of things, and there is no repetition.

However, if it does happen again, I go to the next step. For example, somebody in my class was occasionally making an obnoxious noise. I knew it was one of two students. I did the first step with them, and that went fine. Then, two days later, one of them made the noise again.

I asked them both to come outside with me, and I explained that I was disappointed that one of them was not keeping their word. I knew that one was trustworthy, but I didn't know which one. So I said that I couldn't trust the word of either of them and didn't like feeling that way. I suggested that the person who was making the noise might want to think about how his or her actions were now affecting the other student. Then, I gave them a few minutes to talk about it privately (I left the door open and asked them to stay in front of it so I could observe their actions, but not overhear what they said).

We didn't hear that obnoxious noise again.

So in other words, the second step, when necessary, is to ask students to consider the impact their actions have on others, and ask them to try to work out problems among themselves. In my teaching career, this has almost always resulted in stopping the inappropriate behaviour and, I hope, students gaining some added maturity.

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