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“Parents like to know that we enjoy talking with them. And we need to know their story to better help them connect to the school community.”

— Ted Huff, principal,
Francis Howell Middle
School

A hand is pointing at a map with several colorful pushpins (red, blue, green, white) pinned to it. The background is a blurred map. The text is overlaid on the top half of the image.

TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCES:
**A ROAD MAP
TO SUCCESS**



Accountability and responsibility are important lessons for students

BY KAREN D. SMITH

Not long ago, I was pulled over by a police officer while driving to work. I was traveling 15 miles per hour over the stated speed limit in a school zone on a school day. It scared me to realize I would not have been able to stop if a child had darted into the street. In that sobering moment, I actually thanked the officer for the ticket he handed me. When compared to potentially hurting a child, the ticket was surely the lesser consequence.

What if I had been allowed to slide, or had only been given a warning? Would that have made me more mindful and vigilant in the future? A few warnings might have caught my attention, but it was the serious consequence of the ticket that led me to change my behavior.

As I reflect upon this experience, I am reminded of numerous scenarios in my life where consequences have actually been gifts. Although I didn't always like them in the moment, they taught me valuable lessons and allowed me to correct my course.

I've found that consequences are as meaningful for students as they are for adults. They are reminders and opportunities to learn lessons and make better choices. Consequences

WAYS PRINCIPALS AND EDUCATORS CAN IMPLEMENT A “CONSEQUENCES” PLAN AT THEIR SCHOOLS:

- 1. Classrooms and common spaces must have a discipline hierarchy** that includes a plan for how you will calmly and quickly provide consequences for student behavior. This must be a clear and specific policy for what consequences scholars will choose to receive. A discipline hierarchy lists the consequences in the order in which they will be given during a day or class period.
- 2. Consequences should help students learn from their mistakes.** Don't forget to explicitly teach students how they should respond when they receive a consequence. You're not only teaching them an appropriate behavioral response, but you're also teaching them to think about consequences as a growth opportunity.

- 3. Make debriefing and restorative conversations a part of daily classroom practice when needed.**

Teachers or staff should confer with students briefly after a consequence is given, or for several minutes after a student leaves the classroom for a more substantial consequence. The purpose is to remind students that they are capable of meeting the expectations of the classroom, and to identify how to help them be successful. This is also a chance to rebuild the relationship between the student and teacher.

can help children and young adults understand they are responsible, capable individuals who are accountable for their actions and decisions. This often teaches them to consider fairness and understand societal rules and norms as they mature. This skill can increase the likelihood of making wise, ethical choices today and as they transition into adulthood.

Remember, when young adults do not receive consequences, they do receive something else—messages. Depending on the statement or action, students can think:

- What I've said or done is acceptable.
- What I've done is unacceptable, but I got away with it.
- The expectation I have violated isn't important.
- The responsible adult involved doesn't care enough to address or challenge me.

Receiving such messages and allowing them to take root during formative years increases the likelihood that troubling behaviors and beliefs will continue.

School can present the perfect setting for students to learn how to accept and process consequences. It is often a safe, caring microcosm of society where youths are the most receptive to learning. It's a place where they engage with their peers, experience norms that may differ from those in their homes, and accomplish individual and collective goals. While school is a great

place to teach the value of consequences, teachers are not historically trained in how to do this successfully. It is part of the role of principals to help provide the proper training to faculty on this extremely important issue.

Lacking Disciplinary Structures

Frequently when I begin my engagement with teachers, I find they lack disciplinary structures or simply figure things out as they go along. If teachers don't have a clear idea of consequences, how can their students? I work with educators to establish a hierarchy of consequences that is fair, consistent, and safe. When this is achieved, students better understand the choices they are making and what consequences will follow from any rules they break. That's the core of the “No-Nonsense Nurturer” program.

In enforcing those consequences, teachers struggle because tough conversations can be intimidating. But when a teacher has a strong relationship with a student, a tough conversation handled in the right way can make that connection stronger. The key is changing the mindset.



Remember, when young adults do not receive consequences, they do receive something else—messages.

Restorative Conversations

I often find that when teachers have a codified plan and a consequence hierarchy, the rules are much easier for them to enforce. Still, there are times, in the classroom and in life, when students may repeatedly fall short of meeting expectations and eventually “bottom out,” facing the most serious consequence with no apparent change in their behavior. At this point, teachers who have learned to rely on their valuable consequences structure may struggle when it’s time to go “off-road” with a crucial conversation. These conversations that may seem confrontational at first can be intimidating and stressful to anticipate. The key is changing the mindset, first by changing the language. We call these opportunities “restorative conversations.”

A restorative conversation is an opportunity for both the teacher and the student to express their feelings about what’s going on in the classroom, and to explore the motivation for the student’s frustration despite clear consequences and communication from the teacher. These conversations should strike a balance between empathy and accountability, with the purpose of communicating high expectations. By sending a strong message to the student that you care enough to help them course-correct, teachers humanize themselves. Students begin to see beyond the teacher standing in front of them.

After the student has had the chance to voice his or her concern and motivations (or lack thereof), the teacher and student can create a plan together that sets both up for success. At this juncture, teachers skilled at restorative conversations reiterate their high expectations and belief that the student can meet them.

Providing consequences and holding students to high expectations are acts of love above all; both are expressions of belief in our youth. As secondary school principals and educators, we are saying that there is a standard that we know students can meet. We are there to support and encourage them. By being emotionally constant and consistent with consequences, we also show

students that it’s not about punishment; it’s about helping them be their best.

Many of the teachers I coach and the coaches I train have witnessed the benefit of providing this road map to success. They have seen the impact it makes and the improvement it inspires in students academically and behaviorally. Empowering students with full knowledge of the consequences of their actions will prepare them to not only choose the paths they desire in life, but to make wise and productive decisions along the way.

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TO LEARN MORE

Use these practical resources to help with consequences and restorative conversations:

The Power of Restorative Conversations. Vynesha Johnson. Distributed by CT3. Mar. 24, 2016. <http://tinyurl.com/ct3restorative>

Creating and Implementing Effective Rules and Consequences. Distributed by Teaching as Leadership, a resource of Teach For America. 2011. <http://tinyurl.com/t4arules>

Natural and Logical Consequences. Distributed by University of Kansas. August 2000. <http://tinyurl.com/specialconsequences>