



Taming the Tardies

Every Minute Counts

By Randy Sprick and K Daniels

One of the most frustrating problems in today's classrooms is tardiness. Some teachers report that the first four to eight minutes of class is almost a waste of time as students straggle in, disrupting instruction.

Tardiness has other negative repercussions in addition to robbing teachers and students of precious instructional time and momentum. When students are unsupervised in hallways and restrooms after the tardy bell rings—whether at the beginning of school or during passing periods—there is ample opportunity for fighting, bullying, and other misconduct. This misbehavior can carry over into the classroom, thus wasting even more instructional time.

Teachers' individual responses to tardy students range from ignoring them to sending them to the office. This inconsistency can confuse students about the importance of being on time to class. Put simply, as Peter Davis, principal of Hill Classical Middle School in Long Beach, California, says, "tardiness suggests school is not important."

Turning Tardiness Around

Israel Cordero, an assistant principal in Dallas, Texas, says, "Inevitably, there will always be students late to school or class regardless of the

plan, but it is a realistic expectation to create a school climate where teaching and learning are at the core of that campus's focus."

At Casey County Middle School in rural Liberty, Kentucky, Principal Terry Price says, "We had as many as 40 tardies per class period in the morning. The number of students in the hall after the bell rang increased as the day went on—often up into the 70s. From September through November 2004, we averaged 240 tardies per day." After implementing a positive tardy program, however, Casey County reduced the average number of daily tardies to 2.

Not so far away, in rural Monticello, Kentucky, educators have enjoyed similar successes. Monticello Middle School Principal Johnny Chaplin reports, "In the fall semester of the 2004–2005 school year, we had more than 2,000 tardies. In the spring semester we had reduced the tardies to around 500. Many days we had as few as one tardy for the whole day. The results were unbelievable!"

At H. Grady Spruce High School, with a student population of more than 1,500, Israel Cordero reports that "...tardies and referrals decreased by 50% or more and staff morale has increased."

And, in urban Long Beach, California, where a districtwide program

has been in effect since 2003, Peter Davis at Hill Classical Middle School reports, “We average 20–25 tardies a week.”

Introducing the Positive Sweep

What enabled these educators to achieve such dramatic results? It took a concerted, collaborative, choreographed effort by both administrators and teachers to implement processes that improve teachers’ ability to teach by reclaiming time and momentum lost to tardiness.

After the tardy bell rings, administrators and security personnel typically “sweep” the hallways, sending wayward students to the office, where they record tardies, write passes, and send students to their classes.

On the surface, this procedure seems effective. “Sweeping” tardy students into a separate location for processing eliminates the need for individual teachers to use up class time. Hallways are supervised and consequences for tardiness are consistent.

While this procedure can be effective, it may compound the problem. Instead of missing 5 minutes of class, students can miss as much as 30 minutes due to the lengthy time it takes to process a large number of tardy students.

However, rather than dismissing the sweep as ineffective, we can transform this strategy from “the sweep” to what I call “the positive sweep.”

Teachers who have a class after the passing period stand at the doorway of their classrooms, welcoming students entering their rooms and, at the same time, supervising students in the hallway. If they see any misbehavior, they detain the student until a member of the positive sweep team approaches, at which time, they can pass the student to that team. When the final bell rings, these teachers close their doors and begin instruction immediately.

Meanwhile, members of the positive sweep team, comprised of teachers who have prep time after the passing period, circulate through their designated zones in hallways, restrooms, and other common areas, greeting students and providing positive supervision. Their task is to round up misbehaving students and students who have not made it to class on time. They escort these students to a “sweep” room where the students receive immediate consequences. Positive sweep team members then escort tardy students to their classrooms, ensuring that the students do not disrupt instruction when they enter.

During the passing period, at least one member of the administrative team, comprised of administrators, counselors, and security officers, circulates throughout the school, escorting seriously disruptive students to the office where they can follow up on any required referral forms or other paperwork.

What’s the Difference?

A positive sweep requires adults to change the way they behave before they can change the way their students behave—and that requires professional development.

To conduct an effective positive sweep, staff members must learn to



Reasons for Student Tardiness

Students are social animals. If they are late to class, they can have an extra 5–15 minutes to chat with friends.

There are no positive incentives to be on time. In some classes, no constructive activity happens for the first five minutes, giving students the impression that they won’t be missing anything if they are late.

There are no immediate consequences for being tardy. In many schools, staff members report tardies intermittently and nothing may happen until the tenth incident.

There is a lack of supervision in hallways. If only a few staff members are systematically supervising the halls, restrooms, and stairwells, students may realize they aren’t likely to be caught when they are tardy.

Obstructed hallway flow can cause students to be late for classes. Students may congregate in ways that block traffic for others, particularly for the younger or smaller students.

- Work together in a coordinated, highly choreographed team effort as they design and conduct a positive sweep. If everyone does a little, then no one must do a lot.
- Determine and communicate consequences and apply them consistently.
- Provide positive supervision in halls, restrooms, and other common areas by treating students respectfully.
- View misbehavior as an instructional opportunity. With a friendly demeanor, talk with the student about why it is important to be on time and encourage the student to try harder in the future. For example, share that “it’s important to be on time because you don’t want to miss what the teacher is saying,” rather than, “you don’t want to be late.”
- Develop and present lessons to students that explicitly teach them how to behave in the hallways, restrooms, and throughout the common areas in the school.

By implementing a positive sweep in your school, you can virtually eliminate tardies in a surprisingly short amount of time. Schools have reduced tardies by more than 90% in only five weeks, thereby increasing instructional time and momentum—in some cases, gaining the equivalent of three extra days a year per student.

The positive sweep is a strategy that works. But, like any strategy, it is not infallible. To give it an optimum chance for success, schools should consider the following guidelines:

1. All staff members should clearly understand the positive sweep process and how it will be implemented.
2. Administrative commitment is essential to unify staff, model positive hallway supervision, and coordinate with and support all staff.
3. Success is more likely if a representative task force, comprised of an administrator, teachers, para-educators, and possibly parents and students, takes a strong leadership role in planning and implementing tardy procedures.
4. Since good decisions are data-driven, the leadership team should collect meaningful data about the magnitude of the problem. This data can be used to foster staff commitment and then to measure progress after implementation.
5. If the decision to initiate the program rests with staff, it may be necessary for the leadership team to design a plan to obtain staff commitment. Staff commitment and cooperation are essential to success.
6. In the planning stages, it is important to organize for success. Look at your physical environment and your current system for dealing with tardies. Can any organizational or structural variable be improved?
7. Educators often assume that students know how to behave. They don't. Thus, the team should identify precise, detailed behavioral expectations for students during passing periods and then design lessons that will teach these expectations.
8. Once they've designed lessons for students, the leadership team should prepare lessons for teachers and administrators that will teach them exactly what their responsibilities are in implementing the positive sweep and in teaching students about it.

9. Prepare for implementation. Make sure that all staff members know when and how they are responsible for supervising halls, that students have been explicitly taught the expectations required of them, and that record-keeping procedures have been planned and implemented.
10. Finally, monitor progress and revise procedures based on the data collected before and during implementation.

Creating a Positive Climate

A positive sweep can contribute to an overall improvement in the school climate and culture. It can

- Reduce office referrals, in-school and out-of-school suspensions, and expulsions
- Reduce absenteeism
- Curtail misbehavior in common areas (fighting, bullying, illegal behavior)
- Improve faculty and staff morale
- Unify the staff with a common purpose
- Enhance safety on campus
- Contribute to an overall improvement of school climate and culture.

Last but certainly not least, curbing tardiness with a solid plan can significantly improve student skills by teaching responsibility, respect, and civility—skills that will serve our students well for their entire lives. **MG**

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