From Bedlam to Decorum: Improving Lunchtime Behaviour

The lunchtime bell brings a rush of energy to a middle school's hallways. The sounds of rattling lockers, running children, and shouting friends fill the air. Many of the students sprint to the cafeteria to assure themselves a spot at their favorite table. Some unknowingly spill their lunches along the way. In the cafeteria, students use their elbows to jockey for position in line around the food counter. Sandwich wrappers, empty juice boxes, and orange peels find their way onto the floor rather than into the garbage cans. Some students play keep-away with other people's lunches. The bedlam often leads to yelling, pushing, and shoving by frustrated children. As they finish their lunches, students stream back into the halls. Here, wrestling and roughhousing are commonplace. In rare instances, such jostling leads to a fistfight. The noise, litter, and unruly behaviour seem to get worse as lunchtime goes along. The bell signaling the end of lunch is a welcome relief for supervisors. Their effort to control student lunchtime behaviour has been met with ignorance, rudeness, and defiance by some students. Now, the supervisors take on the task of herding the dozens of tardy students into their afternoon classes. Soon, there will be time to survey the damage.

The aftermath of this lunchtime is typical. Crushed apples, squashed yogurt tubes, and smeared sandwiches litter the floor. Pudding lids are stuck to lockers and doors. The office is full of student discipline referrals from adult supervisors. Some of these students plead innocence. Some claim that they were forced into the crime by someone else. Regardless, they likely will miss their afternoon classes as the administration tries to sort out their lunchtime behaviour. Back in the classrooms, teachers spend several minutes of instructional time trying to settle down the students from their noon high jinx. Improving reading, writing, and math skills will have to wait until the teacher has restored decorum. By the time the custodian makes his lonely walk down the garbage-laden hallways with his broom, student behaviour finally has returned to normal.

Going Pro-Active

A teacher's job is to respond to her students' skills deficiencies with instruction. Consider a Grade 8 math teacher who has just completed a unit on fractions. After reviewing the students' scores on the unit exam, the teacher determines that her students still do not know how to divide fractions. For them to be successful in subsequent units, the teacher must take the time to review the division of fractions; otherwise, she will be setting her students up for failure. A review of poorly-learned material is a proactive way of avoiding future problems. Outside the classroom, however, many middle schools set their kids up for failure on a daily basis. During lunchtime, schools give students a large chunk of unstructured time without teaching them how to use it appropriately. Then, they punish misbehaving students because the offenders do not have the specific social skills to be successful in an unstructured situation.

In many middle schools, poor student lunchtime behaviour is an ongoing problem. Such behaviour can have a detrimental effect on a school's climate and culture, which can in turn degrade the quality of learning that occurs in the classroom. As a result, improving students' lunchtime behaviour should be a priority for staff. One solution is to make social skills instruction part of a school-wide discipline program. In many schools, administrators, teachers, support workers, and parents seek to create such programs through Effective Behaviour Support (EBS).[1] EBS is a positive and proactive approach to discipline problems in schools. The concept seeks to apply positive behavioural interventions and systems to bring about socially important change. For instance, EBS schools might seek to improve student behaviour through environmental redesign, curriculum redesign, or the removal of rewards that inadvertently maintain problem behaviour. The most successful interventions reinforce the values of students, parents, and educators.

Establishing a positive and proactive approach to student lunchtime behaviour is a tricky proposition. As educators, our response to student behaviour is more often reactive. Teachers tell students to stop certain behaviours. When a student curses, we say, "Stop swearing." When a student sprints down the corridors, we say, "Stop running in the halls." The sight of two boys wrestling during recess elicits the old adage, "Keep your hands to yourself." Time-outs, detentions, and suspensions are all examples of ways that teachers react to problem behaviour. Two years ago, my school was so desperate to reduce student lunchtime discipline problems that we reduced the break from 44 to 34 minutes. Rather than coming up with a solution, the staff reacted by giving students less time in which to misbehave.

A proactive approach to problem behaviour, on the other hand, sets students up for success by focusing on desired behaviours rather than on mis-behaviours. At my middle school, we recognized that such an approach would more closely align our discipline practices with the school's values of Respect, Excellence, Accountability, Cooperation, and Honesty (REACH).

The first step is to clearly identify the students' problem behaviours. Examining office discipline referral records, using behaviour checklists, and surveying staff and students can help to pinpoint problem areas and times. Then school staff must determine how they can use that information to encourage positive student behaviour. Rather than stopping students from running down the hallways, how do we encourage them to walk? Rather than stopping students from swearing, how do we encourage them to use appropriate words? Rather than stopping students from rough-housing, how do we encourage them to channel that energy appropriately? And then, once the students demonstrate those appropriate behaviours, how do we reward them for doing the right thing?

By asking these questions, and then implementing several proactive measures, my middle school was able to facilitate a significant change in student lunchtime behaviour. After employing some proactive measures, the school was able to reduce office discipline referrals by 56 percent. Also, the number of problem behaviours observed by adults decreased by 61 percent. Adult supervisors reported fewer instances of running in the halls, tardiness,

loitering, swearing, rough housing, littering, and uncooperative behaviour. These improvements were the result of some common-sense structural changes that were complemented by a school-wide social skills instruction program.

Implementing Change

After analyzing student behaviour data, our school staff was able to identify three structural changes that might lead to improved student behaviour during lunchtime. First, they noted that the existing cafeteria was not large enough to seat the entire student body. The staff concluded that the littering, rough housing, and general unruliness that began in the cafeteria and spilled out into the hallways was the result of students not having a place to sit comfortably and enjoy their lunch. So the first structural change was to convert the foyer at the entrance to the school into a second eating area. Second, before the foyer began being utilized as an eating area, lunchtime supervisors were spread throughout the school as students ate their lunches in the hallways and classrooms. Now, with most of the students concentrated in the cafeteria and the foyer, the adult supervisors were able to concentrate themselves in a smaller

area, allowing the students to be more efficiently supervised. Finally, some of the staff chose to expand the school's lunchtime intramural sports program. This program gave many of the students a positive way to burn off their pent-up energy.

A larger eating area, an improved supervision model, and an expanded intramural program were important structural changes designed to improve student lunchtime behaviour. However, we also wanted to teach our students the social skills necessary for them to be successful in these situations.

In order to deliver a school-wide social skills instruction program, the staff needed to collaborate on the conditions for instruction. Scheduling was a primary consideration. We decided that the first twelve weeks of the school year would be the most effective time to introduce the social skills instruction program, and that the curriculum should be delivered during Career and Personal Planning (CAPP). CAPP is delivered to all students during the last period of every day, so every staff member and every student at the school is involved in the teaching and learning of CAPP at the same time. We determined that such simultaneous instruction would be very powerful since much of the instruction occurred in actual lunchtime settings such as the cafeteria or hallways. We hoped that the students would see that the curriculum was important since everyone – staff and students alike – was learning and practicing the same set of social skills with a common set of resources.

One of our greatest challenges was to identify appropriate classroom resources to support the social skills instruction program. We concluded that many of the inappropriate lunchtime behaviours being demonstrated were a result of conditions that were specific to the school. For instance, students were having difficulty lining up appropriately in the cafeteria as they waited for their food and they were putting garbage on the floor or in water fountains instead of in designated receptacles. As a result, we realized that we would have to develop a unique set of classroom resources to address these specific problems and that the entire staff would need to learn how to deliver them.

As with any good instructional unit, our social skills instruction program combined a variety of instructional strategies. First, the teachers used direct instruction to convey the school's expectations of student behaviour during lunchtime. This activity included reading and reviewing the section

in the school's student handbook on student behaviour. The school developed worksheets to complement the handbook, so that the students could more easily learn the behaviour that was expected of them. Second, the teachers modeled appropriate lunchtime behaviours to their students in typical lunchtime settings. Then, the students practiced the behaviours in those settings. For example, the students practiced lining up at the cafeteria's food counter, sitting in the eating areas, and identifying the locations of the garbage cans and recycling receptacles. The students practiced interacting with supervisors and cheering appropriately in the gymnasium for intramural events. Back in the classroom, they completed a behaviour matrix that demonstrated to the teachers that they had learned the appropriate behaviours. Third, supervisors and student leaders observed the student body during lunchtime in an effort to "catch" individuals who were behaving appropriately. As positive reinforcement, these students were given food and prize coupons in an attempt to sustain the desired behaviours. In combination with the school's structural changes, this instructional program improved the students' lunchtime behaviour significantly.

EN BREF Les reliefs habituels du midi dans une école intermédiaire comprennent souvent des pommes écrasées, des tubes de yogourt éclatés, des sandwiches aplatis sur les planchers et un bureau de direction rempli d'élèves pris en flagrant délit. Le mauvais comportement des élèves durant l'heure du midi est un vieux problème qui a une influence néfaste sur l'ambiance et la culture scolaire, et qui peut éventuellement produire une détérioration de la qualité de l'apprentissage en classe. Pour combattre le problème, une école intermédiaire de la Colombie-Britannique a décidé d'adopter une démarche proactive et d'offrir un cours sur les aptitudes sociales (Effective Behaviour Support) dans le cadre d'un programme de renforcement de la discipline. Elle a aussi adopté une série de changements structuraux, dont l'ajout d'une nouvelle salle à manger et l'élargissement du programme d'activités intramurales.

Social skills instruction as a part of a school-wide discipline program is a positive and proactive way of improving student behaviour among middle school students during lunchtime. The EBS approach, in particular, is an effective tool for dealing with a wide variety of behavioural problems. Such instruction could be adapted for other out-of-classroom settings. Schools experiencing student behavioural problems in assemblies, on school busses, or on the playground might consider implementing a customized social skills program for those situations. By doing so, schools are able to build a positive school culture that sets their students up for success both inside and outside the classroom. ▍

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Note

1 George Sugai and Robert. H. Horner, "The Evolution of Discipline Practices: School-wide Positive Behaviour Supports," *Behaviour Psychology in Schools 24*, nos. 1-2 (2002): 23-50.