

# Guest opinion: Strides at BVSD

By Louise Benson

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The Boulder Valley School District has come under a lot of criticism in the past several years, much of it deserved. But there is something that the district is doing right, other than improving school food. It is the new direction of discipline philosophy in BVSD, away from Zero Tolerance and toward Restorative Discipline.

Like most Colorado school districts after the Columbine High School tragedy 10 years ago, which capped a decade of violence in our public schools, BVSD adopted Zero Tolerance discipline. This strategy was modeled after the Broken Windows theory of city policing, which said that by punishing small crimes consistently, and sending a “no-tolerance” message, that more serious crimes and the overall crime rate would decline. There was controversy over whether Broken Windows or other factors were responsible for apparent success.

The use of Zero Tolerance in schools began to be questioned when students nationwide were punished harshly for minor infractions or mistakes. Meanwhile, researchers such as Del Elliott at the University of Colorado Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, Russell J. Skiba of the Indiana Educational Policy Institute, and similar groups in other states, have developed strategies that are beginning to show success in reducing school violence.

We don’t need to sigh and let the 10-year anniversary pass quietly, because we are beginning to know what helps. In a nutshell: Size matters. Smaller schools where students know each other, have a chance at roles in sports and the arts, and need all their students to participate are less likely to have violent incidents. This includes reasonable size classes where teachers can know and care about their students. Students who are involved in school and cared about are less likely to become angry and alienated, and more likely to get help for mental health issues.

Leadership and culture. Successful schools have a strong identification with their culture, a sense of “how we do things here,” each individual is really valued, expectations are high, and problems are dealt with fairly and quickly. Fair Discipline. This includes modern, more effective anti-bullying strategies and new philosophies such as Restorative Discipline. This strategy looks at how the offender can repair harm to the school community and students, not at who should be punished. It seeks to keep the offender involved in school, rather than discard students with extended suspensions or expulsions, and avoids law enforcement referral. Juvenile detention is harmful, and should be reserved for students committing serious offenses, not petty theft, youthful mistakes and misbehavior.

Control school environs, and investigate possible threats immediately. This may cause inconvenience and annoyance, but is necessary. Just don’t overreact to student mischief and misbehavior. Peer “telling” is critical, and overreaction can put a damper on peer willingness to report possible threats.

So how is BVSD doing? On size, not so good. Several steps backward have been taken, in closing neighborhood schools, and building bigger schools. On leadership and culture, and discipline, getting there. Deputy Superintendent Dr. Ellen Miller-Brown has taken the lead on implementing Restorative Discipline throughout the district. Some principals still need nudging, but outcomes have been more fair lately with input from Dr. Miller’s team.

BVSD is to be congratulated on its reduction in expulsions over the past several years, and it is light-years ahead of other larger districts in this regard. Work still needs to be done in reducing out of school suspensions (which for many students is a reward for misbehavior), and increasing in-school consequences. On school environs and threat assessment, reasonably well, if news reports are any guide.

What can parents and the community do? Stay involved, as many of you are. We may be a big pain in the neck to BVSD, but they need us to push them to always do better. Other districts should be so lucky.

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