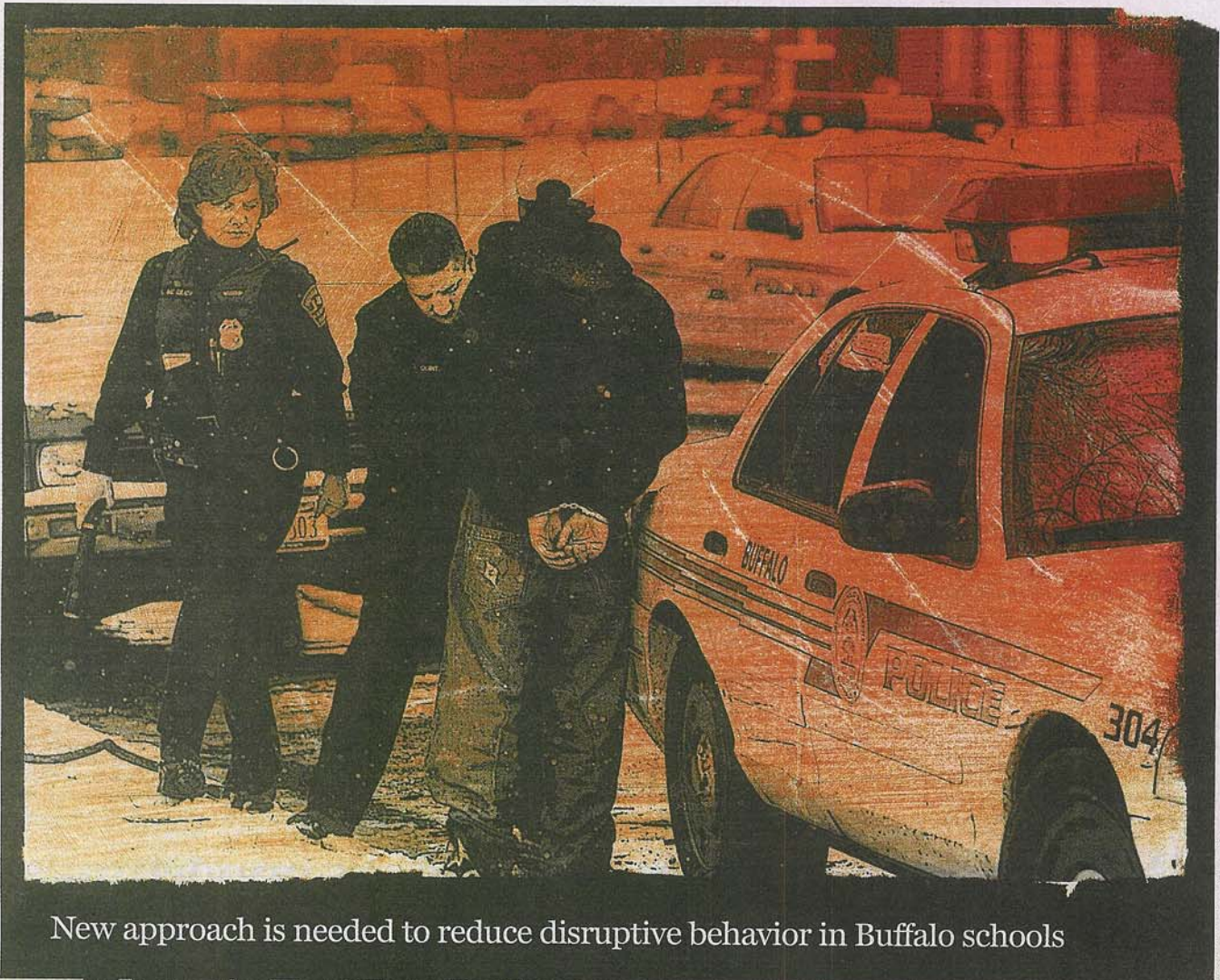


VIEWPOINTS

Mike Vogel, Editorial Page Editor
849-4411 • mvogel@buffnews.com

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New approach is needed to reduce disruptive behavior in Buffalo schools

HELP FOR TROUBLED STUDENTS

BY LOU SANDLER / SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

How many students do you think get suspended for fighting or assault each month in the Buffalo Public Schools? A couple? A dozen?

Try 210. That's the average, if you do the math on a recent Buffalo News article that noted that more than 1,000 Buffalo students were suspended between September and January for fighting and assault. That's approximately seven suspensions per day, and those suspensions only drive more young people onto the streets and outside of any coordinated professional supervision or support.

While removal of students who can be dangerous from regular classrooms is not always unreasonable, suspension is not an educational strategy and is clearly not working either – in Buffalo or in other school districts around the country. And these suspension numbers also don't represent the even larger numbers of students who engage in disruptive behaviors that interfere with learning on a day-to-day basis.

Research literature indicates that a principle reason behind teacher burnout, stress and demands for additional support and resources is the

persistence of disruptive, aggressive and otherwise at-risk student behavior in schools. Teachers then are held accountable for disorderly behavior, often unfairly, by way of testing outcomes. But if teachers can't teach, students will not benefit and schools are more likely to fail.

Conflicts then become more likely between school administrators, teachers and teacher unions as each tries to establish blame and sell its own perceived quick fix. But a quick fix is typically only as good as the day it is discussed. Instead, attention must be paid to school culture, professional systems, the academic needs of students and the rapport between staff and students.

One response offered by many professionals is the use of character education programs. While some of

Lou Sandler, Ph.D., is director of the graduate program in special education at Medaille College. He has worked in disability services for more than 35 years, specializing in multiple and severe emotional behavioral disabilities.

See **Help** on Page 1-2

Schools should strive to be proactive, not reactive

Help • from II

these programs have productive components, they more often reflect ambiguous outcomes representative of a middle class, majority perception of behavior and show little respect for individual differences, unique learning styles and different lifestyles. Rather than recognizing and building upon the unique culture of the school, character education more often tries to impose the culture of one on another.

"Alternative" in-district schools are another option and can have a place in responding to the needs of specific students. But alternative schools tend to be reactive and punitive. They concentrate some of the highest-need and most challenging students in one place — in direct opposition to what we know works — and can take only a limited number of referrals. This means that students are referred only after a sustained pattern of problematic and counterproductive behavior has been established and documented.

Alternative schools also can lead some schools to actually make less of an effort to self-evaluate and change their own instructional practices, based on their perceived ability to send "problem" students to the alternative setting.

The best time to respond to behavior that interferes with the success of the school and its students is before that behavior occurs. Far too many of these quick fixes wait until problems are well established and schools and students are failing.

Buffalo School Superintendent James A. Williams definitely has a point in observing that "people think you can end a 30-year problem in one year, but you can't." An even more important observation by Williams was his reference to the high number of students with significant academic problems.

After all, punishment does not teach, and we absolutely know that students who are struggling academically tend to act out their frustration in an attempt to reduce those perceived stressors. This is especially so when individual academic support is not available in the main school setting. For many of these students, suspension actually can be a relief, because it takes them away from this daily and often intensive frustration.

Despite all of these seemingly insurmountable odds, there are clear answers and we do know

how to teach and respond to even some of the most challenging student and academic scenarios.

Researchers at the University of Kansas, for instance, learned that urban schools can have more than 30 percent of their students at high risk for serious or extreme behavior problems. By applying a positive, schoolwide support system pioneered at the University of Oregon, the Kansas team was able to significantly reduce office referrals, suspensions and daily disruptions at a number of urban schools with issues very similar to what is happening in Buffalo.

Unlike traditional character education, the positive, schoolwide model works to create a unified and collaborative school faculty while focusing on rapport building and the development of an overall and more positive school culture tailored to the specific school. There is little logic in expecting students to demonstrate respect while in school when discipline too often includes being loudly reprimanded and embarrassed, both individually and in front of their peers, even while their academic deficits continue unattended. The schoolwide model also looks to clearly define, teach, encourage and reward those learning behaviors that lead to success in different areas of the school, while steering staff away from the frequent adult-student power struggles.

For instance, while character education may talk about "responsibility," a positive, schoolwide model will specifically define and actively teach what constitutes responsibility for individuals in specific circumstances within a given school. Rather than assuming a common or generic set of expectations that may be based in a set of cultural expectations largely irrelevant to the targeted school, a schoolwide approach demonstrates respect for and an awareness of individual student realities and the community in which the school is located. In part, this is based on the fact that school priorities and guidelines are created within the school — each school — by teams of faculty, staff, parents and resource specialists whose first priority is that school.

The Kansas team identified and focused on the existing strengths of each school, provided instructional support to students with recognized academic needs without waiting for them to move into special education classrooms and offered professional training to teachers in the use of proactive and remedial instructional strate-



Derek Gee/Buffalo News

Buffalo School Superintendent James A. Williams said the problem of fighting and assaults can't be ended in a year.

gies. And, at all times, attention to the real-time cultural priorities of students and families was stressed. This schoolwide model also emphasizes collaborative partnerships with the immediate communities and Departments of Education in local colleges and universities.

These partnerships played at least two primary and interrelated roles. The first was the ability of the schools to enhance professional training and resources. The second was the ability of these partnering agencies and programs to directly assist with and provide specialized instruction and supports to high-need and at-risk students.

While these are extremely important component pieces, the last one plays a truly unique and primary role. There is extensive evidence that indicates substantial behavioral problems in schools can be related to two distinct issues. The first is the presence of uncorrected academic problems and the need to provide additional at-

tention to these areas of need. The second has to do with instructional strategies that simply are inconsistent with, or do not match, the learning styles of the students.

It is quite unreasonable to think that a narrow instructional model can consistently support educational needs as diverse as is commonly seen in urban public school systems. The positive, schoolwide model also includes the capacity to provide individualized assessment and explicit instructional intervention for those students who may continue to challenge, even as the larger school community is changing toward the positive.

A final and specific recommendation is to pay additional attention to the principles of universal design in learning and differentiated instruction. This emphasizes teacher ability to write lesson plans that more effectively and simultaneously respond to the diversity of need in the typical classroom while creating conditions that greatly increase the likelihood of student success and engagement across the curriculum. Success, after all, is probably one of the most effective and productive educational strategies we have available to us.

It is worth noting that many of these recommendations can be facilitated within existing structures and with current personnel. It is, almost, reflective of a zero net resource-based approach with the exception, perhaps, of some initial training and organizational expenses. And effective partnerships between the school, community and higher academia can help to reduce sharply even some of these preliminary training and organizational expenses.

Results can include not only a stronger and more supportive school environment with fewer office referrals, suspensions and teacher burnout, but higher and more stable outcomes on standardized testing. The schoolwide support model consistently has demonstrated statistically significant increases in standardized testing over time as students become more engaged, teachers have more time to teach and schools become a much less stressful place to be.

We absolutely know how to teach many of even the most challenging learners. But it takes the will and consistent cooperation of administrators, teachers, students and the community, with an emphasis on best practices and what we know works. And we do know what works!