

Introduction

IF NOT NOW, WHEN?

Ask any educator worth their salt and they will say that classroom management is a vital skill for teachers to have if they want to run a successful classroom. They will say that it doesn't matter how well a teacher understands the content or pedagogy if they cannot create a culture of joyful order. Yet teacher training programs tend to spend most of their focus on instruction and content with very little attention given to classroom management. When it is discussed, lesson engagement and relationship building are said to be the key to preventing virtually all behavior problems. The underlying message new teachers receive is students will not misbehave if you prepare highly engaging lessons and deliver quality instruction. While there is no denying the impact of engaging instruction on the creation of a productive learning environment, even the most skilled teachers are likely to encounter student behaviors that are disruptive, disengaged, or unproductive. Students will continue to bring the challenges of life to the classroom. Their lives have trauma, emotional challenges, and even mental health issues. The overreliance on the engaging lessons narrative to prevent disruptive behavior leaves many teachers discouraged when classroom management issues inevitably arise. Teachers begin to question if they are good enough for this job. The last few years have seen the fallout of this message (along with many other issues) contributing to high levels of principal and teacher burnout.

The Responsibility-Centered Discipline (RCD) framework was born out of the necessity to respond to the pressing challenges that schools are facing daily in classrooms, hallways, cafeterias, playgrounds, time-out rooms, and more. For well over ten years and across dozens of schools and districts, this framework has transformed students' behavior in schools. While it helps all students grow their confidence, RCD really kicks into gear when the first level of preventative strategies does not work for a student. At its heart, RCD is all about building a student's agency and giving them the tools to better understand who they are, and which tools are best for them.

Does society need to make changes overall for school systems? Without a doubt. The question is, how do schools support students in need right now? Learning how to productively solve problems, even if the problem is not a person's fault, will always be an important life skill. When schools adopt this mentality, it is not long before students internalize a sustained growth mindset for improved behavior. The following story is told by Kevin. Kevin is currently a school leader. His first year of high school coincided with my first year as a principal at this building.



MEET KEVIN

I grew up in a small rural farming community in Kansas where my family makeup and structure were atypical. My mom was White, and my dad was African American. At the time my father moved to the community, he was one of only four African Americans. My parents divorced when I was five, yet another contributing factor that made me feel different from my classmates.

My older brother, whom I idolized, was four years older than me and finishing up his senior year. Throughout high school, my brother didn't always make the best choices. He had run-ins with law enforcement, and his fair share of detentions and suspensions. I don't think my brother's teachers meant any harm, but the strategies they used to get him to meet their expectations usually generated more anger. The harder they tightened the screws, the harder he fought back. This damaged many relationships with his teachers. He hated school, and he didn't have any motivation to achieve at a high level academically.

As I was finishing eighth grade, and preparing for high school, I assumed my experience would be like my brother's. In fact, I was excited to make the teachers' lives difficult. My goal was to wreak as much havoc and chaos as possible. In my mind, I felt that none of the teachers at the high school cared about me, my brother, or my family. So soon after starting high school, I wanted to send a clear message to the staff with some friends. The plan was to ask to leave the classroom during first period and zip tie all the freshman lockers shut. After completing the mission, I went back to my classroom. After the bell rang, I rushed to the lockers and was ecstatic to see absolute chaos unfolding as students struggled to figure out how to get the things they needed out of their lockers. Feeling like a criminal mastermind, I made my way to my next class.

It wasn't more than five minutes into class when the phone rang. The teacher shook his head and told me I needed to go to the office. I was

excited because this was going to be my first opportunity to send a message to the principal that what they had done with my brother was not going to work on me either. Unbeknownst to me, the leadership at the high school had changed. Larry Thompson had become our new principal. He had begun laying the groundwork for a new way to work through classroom discipline challenges. He was in the early stages of implementing Responsibility-Centered Discipline (RCD) at our high school.

As I sat down, Larry listened to me. He worked with me in a way that held me accountable, yet he was still caring and supportive. This conversation came across as authentic and genuine. He guided the conversation in a way that led me to realize my poor choices and helped me figure out how I could begin to solve the problem I had created. I didn't know I needed a mentor in life until after that conversation. I had constructed such high and thick walls around myself based on my perceptions of the adults in my high school. Mr. Thompson was able to break those walls down and it was the start of what would become one of the most supportive relationships in my life. For the first time in my life, it felt like an adult outside of my house cared for me.

As educators, you never know how much impact you have in a student's story. Larry (I no longer call him Mr. Thompson) had a tremendous impact on my journey. The culture and community that he established through the implementation of RCD transformed the building in so many ways. I witnessed, as a student, how our teachers began to work with us when we made mistakes. Because it was so different from what we were accustomed to, many of us referred to this as "the quiet talk." In years before, we were used to being called out publicly. Now our teachers would speak to us privately. Even though we joked about getting the "quiet talk," we preferred it to the former methods. The teachers in our school began to build deeper relationships with us as students and made us feel valued and supported.

After this experience, I too wanted to be somebody who played that type of positive role in students' lives. I knew I wanted to be an educator. I later became a high school teacher, and early on discovered I, too, had a knack for working with challenging students. I went on to become a school administrator, and I now use the RCD program that worked so well for me.

Responsibility-Centered Discipline not only builds consistency in expectations for students, but it also builds consistency in teachers' ability to address students when the expectations are not met. Because RCD is a systemic change, the behaviors are consistently coached at all behavior intensity levels, from a

side chat in the class to a student whose behavior warrants removal from the room. The RCD framework helps educators increase their confidence when a student shows resistance so fewer students are placed out of class. The result is more students enjoying a space where respectfulness is a guiding principle that is expected and required by everyone in their school. Many students and staff in RCD schools communicate that after RCD is implemented, the entire building feels calmer. More people seem happy and relationships with students seem stronger.

HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

Chock full of practical steps and illustrations, this book takes school leaders through a step-by-step process to understand and begin implementing Responsibility-Centered Discipline (RCD) in their school. It is important to note that RCD pairs well with the average school day and most behavioral programs or systems. There is no question that this process requires a mind shift, but once the shift is made it is adaptable to a school's current practices.

Chapters 1 and 2 give an overview of the RCD process and define key terms. They delve into what psychology has long known about how well-regulated brains are supported and how this knowledge can be leveraged for students.

Chapters 3 to 7 outline the four main components of RCD: the foundations, the six exits students use to avoid responsibility, a structured conversation to return students to a path of responsibility, and the creation of a solutions space. The fourth step of the process is broken into two chapters (Chapters 6 and 7) to adequately describe its implementation.

Chapter 8 concludes with a high-level view for how school leaders can prepare to lead this change in their building.