

The Secret Time and Energy Drain in our Schools



Students' inability to regulate their own behavior is sapping our schools of valuable time and resources. By focusing on self-control, and tracking it by the time students are in high school, we could alleviate a significant administrative burden in our schools.

I will share a few vignettes related to my claim:

My mother-in-law works at Target. She reports that young employees have a range of problems related to an inability to regulate their own behavior. They hide drinks at their cashier stations even though it is against policy. They don't meet dress code; they can't seem to stay off their phones. They go to the bathroom often and stay gone for too long.

Fast forward to a few days ago; I'm in the main office during first period. One of our front office administrative assistants is frustrated. It's her job to enter the names and information of all the students who are late each period so they can be assigned a 20-minute lunch detention. Every day, she reports, she has a stack of about thirty to enter, for first period alone.

Segue to my classroom. Despite having assigned a student multiple detentions (and in the process contacting his parents and documenting the incident) he cannot compel himself to put away his phone, and I am not allowed to take possession of it. When I see it, I sigh, and tell him I will be doing another detention assignment and referral. It will take twenty minutes to do all the necessary paperwork and emails. An exchange like this happens multiple times a day and the administrative burden adds up quickly.

Last week, I discovered that two students plagiarized an essay. They were assigned two days of in school suspension, and both were provided an opportunity to resubmit the essay so their grades would not be significantly impacted. The email exchanges with both sets of parents, documentation for administration, and writing of individualized lesson plans for in school suspension took at least two hours of my time.

What do these vignettes have in common? They are all a sign that our young people are lacking a key attribute that will affect their future success and the health of our nation. That attribute? Self-regulation. Self-regulation is also known as self-control, and includes the ability to act in your long-term best interest. Increasingly, it seems that our students are relying on external controls to manage their behavior.

These external controls involve an increasing share of the time and energies of our school personnel, and they sap our morale. In fact, many teachers have been so overwhelmed by the

increasing amount of time and energy it takes to regulate student behavior that they have decided it is just easier to look the other way.

I participated in just such a “selective attention moment” just the other day, and a parent who witnessed it was indignant. At lunch duty, I stopped a group of students from going off campus. I followed them at a distance to make sure they went in the front of the school instead of bolting to the parking lot. As I firmly reminded them to turn right, a student in the group yelled over her shoulder, “Kiss my a**, b**tch!” In the midst of dealing with the fallout from the cheating incident I mentioned before, I did a mental calculation. It went like this, “Huh. It is the end of my lunch duty and I have 45 minutes before 4th period. I need to eat lunch, respond to those parent emails, and work on the behavior referrals I already have for today. I do not know those girls and I don’t know which one yelled that. I could follow them, try and stop them, figure out who said what (maybe) and then complete a referral and do detective work to figure out how to contact her parents - and miss lunch and have more to do tonight- or I can just shrug and keep walking.” I chose the latter, and a parent who saw the exchange approached me in disbelief. I fully understood her point of view. She is a wonderful advocate for teachers and she was mad that the girl was going to get away with talking to me like that. But, we are bumping up against the limitations of relying on external controls to manage student behavior. We need students to manage their own behavior.

There was a time when students were able to self-regulate. It is evident in class pictures from the 1930s and 40s. I stare at them in disbelief when I realize there were 40 or more kids in each class. Today, our academic classes in high school strain under the weight of 24 students. How can we re-create the conditions of the past that equipped students with such significant powers of self-control?

First, we must inform parents about how it is fostered in young children. It is cultivated through free play; it is not developed by exposing kids to stimulating technology. Parents should be restricting screen time, limiting how many hours of the day their children are in adult-led, structured activities, and ensuring their children get adequate sleep.

Self-regulation can and should be explicitly taught in preschool and kindergarten. One program, called [Tools of the Mind](#), has developed a range of activities that encourage students to regulate their own behavior. They plan their play, can sustain their play for much longer periods of time, and research is showing significant improvements in students’ self control and behavior.

Throughout elementary school, teachers can build on those early foundations and explicitly teach skills and dispositions that extend students’ self regulation abilities.

In high school, we should elevate self-regulation to the same plane as academic performance. Self-control might actually be more important to students’ long-term success and health. Students and parents are focused like a laser on GPAs and SATs. What if we created a similar score, called a self-regulation score (SRS) that would be reported on a student’s transcript? Each

time a student comes to school late, uses profanity, skips class, inappropriately accesses a digital device, speeds in the parking lot . . . their self regulation score would reflect the incident. I imagine the number of such incidents would drop, and teachers and administrators could spend significantly more time being proactive in their jobs (creating new lessons, closing the achievement gap) and not documenting, and reacting to, misbehavior.

An SRS score could be extremely useful to colleges and employers seeking to admit and hire the best candidates. How would you consider a candidate with a 4.0 GPA and a 2.3 SRS, as compared with a 2.3 GPA and a 4.0 SRS? Interesting to imagine.

Once colleges and employers begin placing an emphasis on the SRS score, it won't be long before parents and students will make self-control more of a priority. And maybe our schools can focus more on teaching and learning, and less on trying to manage unruly behavior.

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