

Disney gives problem kids a separate class, extra support

By Maureen Kelleher

Principal Kathleen Hagstrom attributes discipline problems at Disney Magnet in large part to the Uptown school's open classroom structure.

The school, built in the 1970s, is divided into pods, in which three classes share a large space with no walls or dividers to block sound. The setup exacerbates problems for children who have difficulty paying attention in class, Hagstrom explains.

And with nearly 70 percent of students bused in from other communities, before- or after-school detentions are impractical.

Last year, though, the school took a new look at its discipline problems. Staff tracked incidents involving 6th- through 8th-graders and identified students with repeated problems. They also worked with teachers to identify underachievers and talked with families about whether their children were having difficulty paying attention in the open classrooms.

This year, 23 students whose grades or behavior were problematic are being taught in a mixed-grade class in a traditional room. Hagstrom chose a strong teacher to work with the students and gave the class a full-time aide, unusual in the upper grades.

So far, upper-grade floor director Nancy Ryan says she is spending significantly less time on discipline and credits the new class structure.

Though plenty of schools try to isolate students who misbehave, Disney's approach adds resources to help young people grow and mature. Children with behavior problems often have leadership ability, Hagstrom says, which can emerge if schools constructively "divert students' energy." She thinks other schools could benefit from a similar investment in challenging students.

Catalyst spoke with some of the students in the experimental class about their experiences.



JASON REBLANDO

Technology teacher Luis Garcia-Juarez coaches 8th-grader Joelh Calixto while he fixes a computer problem. Through special jobs like this, Joelh and his classmates in Disney's new "leadership learning lab" build skills and practice positive behavior.

ARE SUSPENSIONS A GOOD FORM OF DISCIPLINE?

Nakesha: It's just a free day off.

Alexander: I went to my uncle's house and played Play Station with him all day.

Marquise: You're out of school and not getting your education.

Khaji: You get in trouble with your parents.

Joelh: It could be a punishment or not, because some parents don't care. Some won't do anything, and some will take away your TV for a week.

Eunice: Once you're suspended you miss out on some of the work or on the tests.

Sherman: It's bad. Kids don't want to come back to school.

Reshad: It just gives the kid another chance to go home and relax if their parents don't discipline them.

WHY DO STUDENTS GET SUSPENDED?

Darius: Stupid stuff—fighting, stealing, cursing.

Alexander: Arguing.

Lisa: Disrespecting teachers.

Nakesha: Talking back.

Reshad: Some teachers, if you just take responsibility for what you did, they'll be easier on you than if you argue with them.

WHAT COULD SCHOOLS DO INSTEAD OF SUSPENDING STUDENTS?

Darius: Detention.

Nakesha: Lunch detention.

Reshad: Have them help the younger kids,

because they could tell them "take responsibility for your own actions."

Sherman: In-school suspension. Have teachers give them their homework.

Joelh: When we have in-school suspension, they put us in a planning area and ask if we have work to do. They should give us the day's work and make us do it.

Reshad: [Students] will try to behave if you make them eat lunch by themselves.

Nakesha: In-school is better because they don't call your parents.

WHAT CAN STUDENTS DO TO PREVENT FIGHTS FROM STARTING?

Khaji: Walk away.

Reshad: Tell your teacher, your parent. They [kids] don't believe in doing it though, if no one does nothing.

Nakesha: Peer mediation. We had that in 4th-grade. Sometimes it did stop fights from starting.

Sherman: If you had a true friend, they would help you walk away.

Reshad: Take it to a sport, and if you beat them, then you showed you're tough.

WHAT HELPS STUDENTS BEHAVE BETTER?

Marquise: Spaces like this [classroom] instead of a regular [open-layout] pod. You get distracted with all the noise.

Nakesha: Incentive programs, giving rewards.

Reshad: You should do that yourself. You were born to behave. ■