



## **How to Get the Warriors to Stop Fighting**

Continuous improvement of school discipline, climate at Metropolis Elementary School

*By Will Black and Laura Walker*

When we first came to Metropolis Elementary School as administrators, we rarely had the opportunity to eat lunch. Our school office was routinely packed with a line of students waiting for their discipline cases to be heard. For a school whose mascot is the Warrior, we were truly living up to the image. Conflicts among students were commonplace, and they often escalated from misunderstandings into physical fights. Classroom disruptions were too frequent, and many staff members had simply accepted them as a reality they couldn't control.

Our time as administrators was more often spent managing discipline crises rather than helping facilitate instruction. The school's climate and academic achievements were clearly suffering as a result. Through a partnership with Boeing, Massac Unit #1 School District—in which Metropolis Elementary is located—began a continuous improvement program. Gradually, we realized we had the power to change our reality.

Metropolis Elementary is located in Metropolis, IL. The school has 520 students and a 30% mobility rate. About 60-70% students receive a free or reduced lunch, and 80% of students are Caucasian. Pat Windhorst, the school's second principal, focused our improvement efforts on the assumption that "the purpose of school discipline is to create a positive, lasting change of student behavior." This served as a disciplinary mission statement that prioritized a data-based approach, student and staff relationships and proactive efforts to support students.

The next step in continuous improvement was to face the brutal facts: from 2004-2005, our school had 45 recorded fights and 154 out-of-school suspensions. We set two main goals in the fall of 2005:

1. Have zero student fights in a school year.
2. Reduce the total number of out-of-school suspensions.

Using a basic form of the plan-do-study-act (PDSA) process, we conducted an item analysis of the locations of each student fight. We quickly realized that most fights occurred on the playground as well as in other common areas such as bathrooms and hallways. Our first theory of improvement was that we could reduce the total number of fights by playing a zone defense with common-area supervision. Playground supervisors were placed in designated areas on the playground, focusing heavily on the area around the basketball court where most conflicts seemed to begin.

As we focused on common-area fights, we discovered an important root cause of many of these fights was ineffective student communication. Using strategies outlined by Margaret Dolan of the University of Missouri, we created a conflict-mediation process that helped students resolve their conflicts peacefully.<sup>1</sup> When faced with a conflict they could not resolve, students filled out a "write not fight form" explaining the nature of their conflict and the steps they



had taken to solve the problem themselves. Within 24 hours, a staff member met with the students to help them solve the problem. As long as no physical aggression had occurred, students usually were not disciplined—we simply talked out the problem until the students felt the problem was solved. Fights dropped by about 50% during the 2005-2006 school year, to a total of 21 (see Figure 1). Out-of-school suspensions dropped about 60% to 63.

In the following school year, we added a goal to reduce incidents of physical aggression, which included one-sided hitting, kicking and pushing that did not result in a fight. We began the school year by teaching students schoolwide rules and procedures. The administrators personally taught each grade level how to walk in the hallways, how to play on the playground equipment, how to play basketball under the school's house rules and how to walk through the lunch line.

We began to track our school fights publicly with a run chart. Again, based on Dolan's work, we purchased a Warrior pride banner that—ironically, given our mascot—hung in the school entryway to mark peaceful days. If the previous day saw no physical aggression, the banner was hung in the entryway the entire next day. If physical aggression did occur, the banner was taken down the next day. We made the banner a rallying point for students by doing a cheer in the all-school morning meeting each day the banner was up.

As our district became more committed to continuous improvement, we received training in quality tools from Ann Haggerty-Raines, an ASQ education trainer, as well as educational consultant Lee Jenkins.<sup>2,3</sup> We began involving students in improvement planning as we conducted a PDSA process with them during computer classes. Students completed an affinity diagram on what they felt were the major causes of fighting in the school. Using a cause and effect diagram and nominal group technique, students recommended possible next steps for the school.

As a result of student input, we began a student ambassador program that allowed sixth graders to help mentor and support younger students during lunch recess. Their role was simply to help students and playground supervisors; they never disciplined other students. By the end of the 2006-2007 school year, we had reduced our yearly fight record to an all-time low of 13. The number of out-of-school suspensions had fallen to 36.

### **Rewarded for good behavior**

In the next two years, we created schoolwide rewards including a monthly red carpet ceremony for students who go above and beyond to support our school climate. We implemented a response-to-intervention model for effectively addressing both common and unique discipline problems. Using a Pareto diagram, we recognized that the two most common infractions that prompted discipline referrals were disrupting instruction and being disrespectful to others (see Figure 2). Teachers began examining the root causes of these referrals, tracking classroom behavior and using data folders to help students track and improve their personal



discipline records. Finally, we began improving student survey data on safety and school climate. By the end of last school year, we had reduced our yearly fight record to six (see Figure 3). Out-of-school suspensions for the year fell to 16 (see Figure 4 below).

One of the most important things we have done this school year is to increase student involvement in the improvement process. We have recently implemented a student council that is working through the PDSA cycle, using affinity and relations diagrams to help us reach school goals. This group of students will also complete plus-deltas on school climate issues, such as writing on the bathroom walls, students who are repeat offenders and improving the red carpet ceremony. Through the PDSA process, these students are taking ownership in their school. As they tackle these challenges, the excitement on their faces is indescribable. Through February of the 2009-2010 school year, we have had only two fights. Out-of-school suspensions currently stand at eight and office referrals are on track to reach an all-time low.

## References

1. Margaret R. Dolan, *Fight-Free Schools: Creating a School Culture That Promotes Achievement*, Rising Sun, 2007.
2. Lee Jenkins, *Improving Student Learning: Applying Deming's Principles in the Classroom*, second edition, ASQ Quality Press, 2003.
3. Lee Jenkins, *Permission to Forget and Nine Other Root Causes of America's Frustration*, ASQ Quality Press, 2004.

Will Black and Laura Walker are both principals in the Massac Unit #1 School District in Metropolis, IL. Black is an alumnus of Teach for America and has a master's degree from Southern Illinois University. Walker received her master's degree from Southern Illinois University and serves as the district trainer for data folders and quality tools. Together, they have twice presented at ASQ's National Quality Education Conference. For more information about Metropolis Elementary School, visit <http://mes.massac.org>.



Figure 1

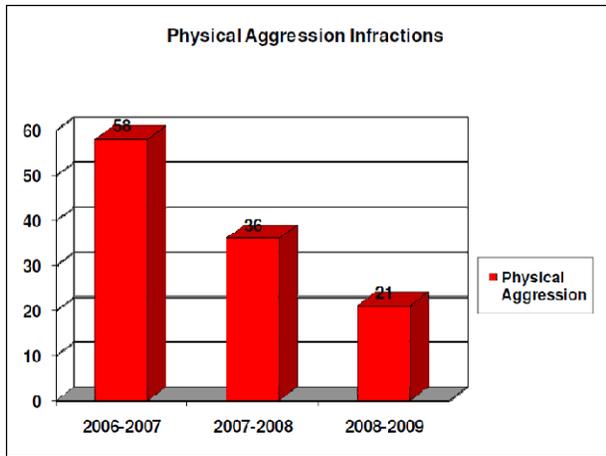


Figure 2

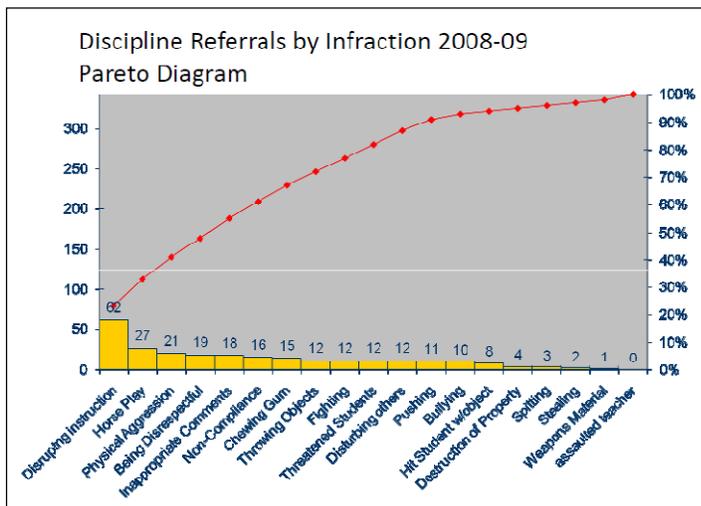




Figure 3

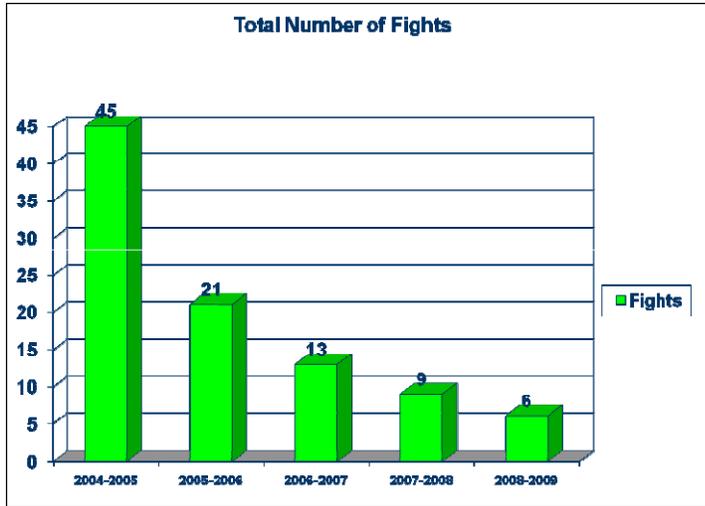


Figure 4

