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SIX TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING CHANGES TO CODES OF CONDUCT

Communication is key for superintendents improving school discipline policies and practices through reducing the use of suspension and expulsion. One of the challenges leaders face is helping stakeholders understand that reducing the use of out-of-school suspension does not weaken the discipline code. To reform the climate and culture of school discipline in the district, communicate a positive discipline philosophy and values early and often. The following recommendations offer guidelines to improve communication strategies about school discipline policies and practices:

1. **BE INFORMED** - The first step in a good communication plan is to be inclusive, informed, and collaborative in the revision process itself. Before altering the code of conduct, gauge “what’s working” and “what’s not” by investigating perceptions and opinions of staff, students, and parents about the district’s code. This early communication will ensure that changes to the code of conduct have been vetted appropriately while offering stakeholders input to the processes that affect their day-to-day experience.
2. **BE PROACTIVE** – Once code of conduct changes have been approved, be proactive. Engage parents, students and school staff in discussions about an effective rollout strategy and then initiate the planned rollout. Share the district’s vision and process with all relevant stakeholders with short, easy-to-understand materials for teachers, principals, students, and parents. District leaders should be vocal and available to answer any concerns or challenges that may arise.
3. **BE SOCIAL** – Employ a multi-media approach to sharing important information with the school community. A handout in the back-to-school folder is necessary, but not sufficient. Utilize all available district communication resources to share a clear and consistent message – the website, social media, email, printed materials, and speaking opportunities. When it comes to reaching students, families, and staff, one-size definitely does not fit all.
4. **REASSURE** – Take time to remind stakeholders that within the new code is a strong set of values, expectations, and serious consequences. Reducing the overreliance on exclusionary discipline does not mean the district takes offenses lightly. There are a variety of interventions and consequences short of out-of-school suspension that will be employed, when necessary, to teach and improve behavior. Reassure stakeholders that the district remains steadfastly determined to foster a safe, healthy, and respectful school environment for all students and staff.
5. **REINFORCE** – One of the biggest challenges in communicating changes in the code of conduct occurs early in the enactment period. Closely monitor discipline practices to reinforce the ‘new normal’ and to assist school building staff that are struggling with implementation of new discipline policies. Attention, support and assistance from central office to school building leadership is required for changes in policy to appropriately impact practice.
6. **REITERATE** – All good communication plans reiterate their values early and often: repeat, repeat, repeat. Use multiple media outlets to share success stories and demonstrate how these policies positively impact the lives of students and teachers. Especially if these changes are a significant shift from past practice, employ the tips above multiple times throughout the code revision process and the first year of enactment. Be sure to keep the new district discipline strategies front and center throughout the year.