



Progressive Discipline: Totally Rethinking Safe Schools

By **Eric M. Roher**

Partner and National Leader of the Education Law Group
Borden Ladner Gervais LLP

Bob Dylan wrote, “You don’t need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows.” With the introduction of Bill 212, the new safe schools legislation, there is clear evidence of change in the educational environment. You do not need a weatherman to recognize that the gale force of Bill 212 has introduced a new approach to safe schools. Among other things, under Bill 212, school boards are required to develop and implement policies on progressive discipline. The new Ontario legislation came into force on February 1, 2008.

Policy/Program memorandum 145 entitled *Progressive Discipline and Promoting Positive Student Behaviour*, which was released on October 4, 2007, provides an overview of the progressive discipline approach to be used when addressing issues of student conduct.

The Ministry of Education has defined progressive discipline as:
a whole-school approach that utilizes a continuum of interventions, supports and consequences to address inappropriate student behaviour and to build upon strategies that promote positive behaviours.

When inappropriate behaviour occurs, disciplinary measures should be applied within a framework that shifts the focus from one that is solely punitive to one that is both corrective and supportive. Schools will utilize a range of interventions, supports and consequences that include learning opportunities for reinforcing positive behaviour.

A critical aspect of progressive discipline is to examine both early and ongoing intervention strategies. These strategies will help prevent unsafe or inappropriate behaviours in a school. Intervention strategies should provide students with appropriate supports that address inappropriate behaviour and that would result in an improved school climate. Early interventions include:

- contact with parents;
- detentions;
- verbal reminders;
- review of expectations; or
- a written work assignment with a learning component.

Ongoing interventions are intended to address underlying causes of inappropriate behaviour. Ongoing interventions include:

- meetings with parents;
- voluntary service to the school community;
- conflict mediation;
- peer mentoring; or
- a referral to counselling.

The Ministry has recognized that in some circumstances, a short-term suspension may be a useful tool. In the case of a serious incident, long-term suspension or expulsion, which is further along the continuum of progressive discipline, may be the response that is required. For students with special education needs, interventions,

supports and consequences must be consistent with the student's strengths, needs, goals and expectations contained in his or her Individual Education Plan (IEP).

The Ministry encourages schools to actively engage parents in the progressive discipline approach. In developing a progressive discipline continuum, schools are encouraged to develop strategies for addressing inappropriate behaviour. In this regard, when inappropriate behaviour occurs, schools should utilize a range of interventions, supports and consequences that are developmentally appropriate, and should include opportunities for students to focus on improving behaviour. Consequences for inappropriate behaviour include:

- meeting with the parent(s), student and principal;
- referral to a community agency for anger management or substance abuse;
- detentions; or
- loss of privileges.

In considering the most appropriate response to address inappropriate behaviour, school administrators are encouraged to consider the following factors:

- the particular student and circumstances (i.e., mitigating or other factors);
- the nature and severity of the behaviour; and
- the impact on the school climate (i.e., the relationship within the school community).

The goal of the school board's policy on progressive discipline is to support a safe learning and teaching environment in which every student can reach his or her potential. Programs and activities that focus on the building of healthy relationships, character development and peer relations provide the foundation for an effective continuum of strategies within a school and school-related activities. These strategies and empowerment programs are the basis for creating a positive school climate.

Generally, prevention measures and initiatives include the whole school and all aspects of school life. Schools that have prevention and intervention strategies foster a positive school climate that supports academic achievement for all students. Schools are encouraged to focus on preventions and early intervention as the key to maintaining a positive school environment in which students can learn.

The Ministry asserts that a positive school climate is a crucial component of prevention; it may be defined as the sum total of all of the personal relationships within a school. When these relationships are founded in mutual acceptance and inclusion, and modelled by all, a culture of respect becomes the norm. A positive school climate exists when all members of the school community feel safe, comfortable and accepted.

Principals play a critical role in the implementation of progressive discipline and the use of early and ongoing intervention strategies in the context of their individual schools. School administrators are being encouraged to totally rethink the implementation and execution of their safe schools policies and procedures.

In each individual set of circumstances, principals are encouraged to make use of a continuum of interventions, supports and consequences that are clear and developmentally appropriate. These interventions should also include learning opportunities for students in order to reinforce positive behaviours.

In this new educational climate, principals are encouraged to develop and implement a school-wide progressive discipline policy that is consistent with the board's policy. As part of this progressive discipline policy, principals should:

- use the most appropriate response as outlined in the school's progressive discipline policy, to respond to a student's behaviour. For students with special educational needs, interventions, consequences and supports must be consistent with the expectations in the student's IEP;
- develop a process for building on existing partnerships and for developing new partnerships with community agencies, including local police services, to support students and their families;
- provide for ongoing dialogue with parents on student achievement and behaviour;
- provide opportunities for students to improve the school climate through leadership roles (i.e., peer mediation, mentorship); and
- review the school's code of conduct to ensure that it is aligned with a progressive discipline approach.

Principals provide leadership in the daily operation of their school by demonstrating care for the school community and by holding everyone under their authority accountable for his or her behaviour. In addition, school administrators play an important role in empowering students to be positive leaders in their school and the community.

Community agencies are resources that schools can use to deliver prevention or intervention programs. The Ministry suggests that linkages and co-ordination among schools and community agencies should be established. Such partnerships include the provision of services and support for students, their parents and families.

Utilizing a progressive discipline approach represents an opportunity to tailor-make solutions based on an individual student's needs, his or her circumstances and the nature and severity of the behaviour. The remedy or response in each case should fit the student's behaviour. Although a progressive discipline continuum may require additional time and resources for administrators to implement, it is clearly designed to assist students in making good choices.

The challenge for school administrators is to recognize the winds of change arising from the introduction of Bill 212 and to seize the opportunity to support the progressive discipline approach by building positive relationships that engage the whole school community and implement policies that promote positive student behaviour.

Contact Eric M. Roher at 416-367-6004
or e-mail: eroher@blgcanada.com.