Consistency, Fairness, and Understanding: Finding the Balance

By Shanna Northway, Grant Union Principal

One of the things we strongly believe in at Grant School District #3 is the importance of having clear expectations, consistent rules, and high standards for all students. At the same time, we also believe that every student deserves to be known, understood, and supported as an individual. Our goal is that every student who walks through our doors feels seen for who they are, understands what is expected of them, and knows that the adults in our schools care about their success. Finding the balance between consistency, fairness, understanding, and equity is not always easy. In fact, it is one of the more challenging parts of working with young people.

You often hear the phrase, "Fair doesn't always mean equal," and we think that is especially true when it comes to student discipline. We believe in having established rules and expectations that apply to everyone, but we also recognize that students come to us with different experiences, needs, challenges, and levels of support. What works for one student may not work for another. Our job is to understand those differences while continuing to hold all students accountable for their choices.

That doesn't mean students get a free pass or that expectations change depending on who they are. It means we take the time to understand the situation, consider the behavior, and determine an appropriate response. We want consequences to fit the behavior, but we also want them to be meaningful. Sometimes that means a traditional consequence, such as detention or loss of a privilege. Other times, it may involve a restorative conversation, repairing a relationship, making things right with someone who was impacted, or putting additional support in place to prevent the behavior from happening again.

Our goal is not simply to punish students for making mistakes. Our goal is to help them learn from those mistakes, take responsibility for their actions, and make better choices moving forward. We recognize that from the outside looking in, this approach can sometimes appear inconsistent or even unfair. Parents and students may see two situations that look similar and wonder why the consequences were different. What is important to understand is that there are often factors behind those decisions that are not visible to others. We have a responsibility to consider the circumstances of each situation while also protecting student privacy.

Another challenge is that consequences are rarely public. When something happens at school, other students or parents may know about the behavior but never see the follow-up. That can create the perception that nothing was done or that a student was allowed to get away with something. In reality, those situations are often being addressed through conversations, consequences, parent meetings, and ongoing support. Those details are generally shared only with the student, their family, and the school staff who need to be involved. Just because a consequence isn't visible doesn't mean the behavior went unaddressed.

This is where we believe communication becomes incredibly important. As a district, we have a responsibility to communicate with parents when their student has received a consequence, explain why the consequence was assigned, and work together to support better choices moving forward. Parents should understand what happened at school or why a decision was made. These conversations help build trust, strengthen the partnership between home and school, and reinforce expectations for students.

We are working incredibly hard to improve how we communicate our rules, policies, and expectations to both students and families. Students should know what is expected of them before a problem occurs, and parents should have a clear understanding of our expectations and the potential consequences when those expectations are not met. The more clearly we communicate on the front end, the fewer misunderstandings we have on the back end.

We want to be clear that understanding a student's individual needs does not mean lowering our expectations. We can have compassion for a student and still hold them accountable. We can recognize that a student is struggling and still expect them to treat others respectfully. We can provide additional support while also expecting students to take responsibility for their behavior. Those things are not mutually exclusive.

At Grant School District #3, we want our students to know that mistakes do not define them, but how they respond to those mistakes matters. We want to build a district-wide culture where students are held to high expectations, relationships are valued, accountability is meaningful, and every student has the opportunity to learn and grow.

We won't get every decision perfect, and there will certainly be times when parents have questions or see things differently than we do. We welcome those conversations. What we hope our families understand is that the decisions we make are rooted in a genuine desire to do what is best for students while maintaining a safe, respectful, and productive learning environment for everyone.

Consistency means holding firm to our expectations. Fairness means responding appropriately to the situation. Equity means recognizing that students may need different support to be successful. And understanding means taking the time to know the student behind the behavior. Finding that balance is something we work toward every single day, and it is a responsibility we take seriously.