

Preventing Graffiti and Vandalism: Enlisting the Power of Classrooms

Introduction

Graffiti and vandalism can cost a school a great deal of money in repairs. They also may contribute to a perception that the school is not well-cared for and is an unsafe environment for students and staff. Because the writing of graffiti and acts of vandalism are usually carried out in secret, schools may discover that these types of misbehavior are difficult to curb. One intervention idea to reduce misbehavior directed against school property is to have classrooms of students adopt various school locations and to reward them for each day that these locations are kept in good repair (Watson, 1996). When student bystanders are given a personal stake in the maintenance of school property, they can quickly send a message to potential vandals that defacing or destroying property is not cool!



Materials

- Copies of *Adopt-A-School-Location* poster

Intervention Steps

Step 1: *Select Locations Vulnerable to Vandalism or Misuse.* Schools first should select those areas of the school that tend to be singled out for vandalism or other types of misuse. Student bathrooms, for instance, are often targets for property destruction and graffiti. Custodial staff are an excellent source for identifying vulnerable school locations. Schools might also survey staff and students, asking them which locations they would most like to see be 'cleaned up'.

Step 2: *Collect Baseline Information About the Extent of the Vandalism Problem and Set Goals for Improvement.* For a week or two, visit the selected clean-up locations around the school each day. For each location, determine what kinds of problems are occurring (e.g., graffiti, trash strewn on the floor, property damage), how frequently they happen, and how severe they are. Keep daily notes on each location. For example, a custodian may visit a student bathroom at the end of a school day and record: "*Graffiti written in ink on four spots on walls. Drawing scratched into metal bathroom stall. Numerous paper towels thrown on floor around trash receptacle.*"



Step 3: *Determine Minimum Quality Standards for Adopted Locations.* Once school staff have collected baseline information about the degree of vandalism, graffiti, and neglect that occurs in locations selected for this intervention, they must agree on minimum daily quality standards expected for each location. (These standards will serve as the criteria that the classrooms that have adopted various locations must meet in order to be awarded daily prize points.) For example, a school may set the daily quality standards for a student bathroom as follows: "*No more than two pieces of trash are found outside of the trash receptacles, no fresh graffiti has been written, and no destruction of property has occurred.*"

Step 4: *Assign Classrooms to 'Adopt' School Locations.* Classrooms are next assigned school locations to adopt. Here are teacher guidelines for presenting the 'adopt-a-location' program to students:

- The teacher opens the classroom discussion by asking students how they can tell—using only the cues in their physical environment—that they are in a place where people are respected (e.g., “Floors are kept clean”, “Walls are freshly painted”, “Blown light bulbs are replaced”). The teacher writes student contributions on the board.
- The teacher next names a specific site in the school (e.g., the school cafeteria). (At this point, only the teacher knows that this location was picked because it is so often targeted for vandalism or graffiti.) Students are instructed to review the posted list of indicators of a quality environment that they have just generated. They are asked: *Does this particular location's daily appearance suggest to visitors that people are respected there? If not, why not?*
- The teacher announces that the classroom will be adopting the school location discussed by the group. The instructor informs students that the class will earn a certain number of points (e.g., 5) for each day that their adopted school location is kept free of litter and graffiti and in good repair. Students also learn that when their class has accumulated a certain number of points (e.g., 120) they will earn a group prize (e.g., video and popcorn party, field trip, etc.).



Step 5: *Begin the Intervention: Adoption Posters are Displayed in Each Selected Location and Updated Daily.* As the intervention is put into effect, a poster is placed in each adoption location. (See the sample *Adopt-a-School-Location* poster below.) The poster should:

- identify the classroom adopting it
- indicate the number of prize points the classroom will receive for each day that the location is kept clean and in good repair
- remind visitors to treat the setting with respect
- show the number of uninterrupted days that the location has met minimum quality criteria. (NOTE: Because the 'uninterrupted days' figure is changed daily, teachers may want to laminate the poster and use a dry-erase marker to update this information more easily.)

During the intervention, each adopted location should be examined at about the same time each day. If the location meets its own minimum quality criteria (Step 3), the classroom teacher assigns the agreed-upon number of prize points to the classroom total. When the classroom has collected sufficient points to redeem for the agreed-upon group reward, the teacher makes sure that the reward is delivered within a reasonable amount of time. Then the points accumulate again toward another possible group prize.

Tips

Build Student Excitement With an Assembly. If multiple classrooms will be participating in the *Adopt-a-School-Location* program, schools can introduce the program in an assembly to generate greater visibility and enthusiasm for the initiative.

Encourage Classrooms to Help to Implement the Program. Teachers can tap student creativity and strengthen their classroom's commitment to the location-adoption project by having students assist in carrying out the program. Students, for example, might design their own 'site-adoption' posters or visit their adopted location on a daily basis to evaluate its appearance (using a 'quality' checklist of their own creation). Students might also be enlisted in a service-learning project to make repairs or improvements to a school setting. A classroom responsible for a wall on the exterior of the school that is a popular target for graffiti, for example, might solicit a small grant from a local foundation, use the money to purchase paint from a neighborhood hardware store, and work together under the art teacher's supervision to cover the wall with an inspirational mural.

Use Public Announcements and Newsletters to Build Interest. A school can deepen student investment in the adopt-a-location program in inventive ways. A building may make daily announcements over the public address system, for example, of classrooms who earned prize points because of the good condition of their adopted locations or deliver weekly reports of those five classrooms with the longest string of uninterrupted days of having prize points awarded. The same information can be written up for school newsletters.

Trouble-Shooting

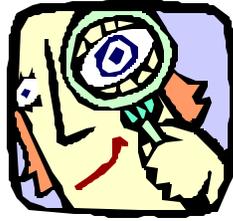
- *Students do not seem enthusiastic about the program.* If the adopt-a-school-location program seems to kindle little enthusiasm with students, the explanation may be that these students first need to be convinced that their school surroundings are attractive enough that they would want to make an effort to keep them that way. A school can model the importance of treating the building with respect by doing their best to wash off or repaint graffiti as soon as it appears, quickly repair vandalized facilities, and keep the entire school as clean as possible.

Farsighted schools can build even greater momentum for the 'site-adoption' program by coordinating it with their own renovation and maintenance plans. If a school expects, for example, to paint and repair the building extensively during summer vacation, it might be wise to wait until the following fall to have classrooms adopt locations. After all, when students start off in a well-maintained building with scrubbed walls, polished floors, and a fresh coat of paint, they are more likely to take pride in their school's appearance and "go the extra mile" to keep it looking attractive throughout the year.

References

Watson, T.S. (1996). A prompt plus delayed contingency procedure for reducing bathroom graffiti. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 29, 121-124.

Adopt-A-School-Location



Welcome to _____.

_____ 's classroom has adopted this area and is committed to keeping it clean and in good repair.

For each day that this location is well-taken care of, the sponsoring classroom will earn points toward a class prize.

People using this area should:

- throw away all trash
- keep walls & surfaces clean
- respect the property

As of today, this site has been maintained appropriately for

straight days!

Remember, when we respect our school environment, we respect ourselves. Thank you for doing your part to make this school a presentable and positive place to be!