Discipline not a given for today's students

Erath administrator finds unique ways to achieve results

By Bernard Chailot
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ERATH — The first thing unruly students notice on Maeteal Jordan's desk is a large paddle covered with the initials of those who have felt its sting.

But it's the last thing the children can expect for misbehaving, the Erath Middle School assistant principal said.

"That's the last resort when all else fails," Jordan said. "I'm a firm believer in maintaining good discipline in schools — it's crucial for a good learning environment but there are many ways to help students see the error of their ways and motivate them to do better, not just to please their teachers and parents, but for themselves as individuals."

Building self-esteem is central to Jordan's philosophy, she said. "When a student feels good about himself, he feels he's won half the battle," she said. "Every child has something special and worthwhile about them. You start by emphasizing that."

Jordan, 52, of Abbeville, taught, coached and worked as an administrator at Abbeville High for 24 years before accepting her current position five years ago.

She is Erath Middle School's primary disciplinarian, freeing Principal Ector Reaux to concentrate on instructional duties, he said.

"She handles children beautifully by being compassionate and fair, yet firm and consistent at the same time," Reaux said. "The children respect that. Mrs. Jordan believes in separating the behavior from the child. The behavior is bad, not the child. She relates to children well and is a great communicator. I don't know what I'd do without her."

Jordan said growing up as the eighth of 13 children of Leroy and Lena Lard in the rural Bienville Parish community of Shady Grove, near Saline, helped give her the insight needed to deal with a wide variety of people, situations and viewpoints.

"We were always encouraged to do our best in all of our endeavors and to get along with others," she said. "Discipline was a given. In those days, when your parents spoke, you listened. There was no two ways about it, and it worked fine.

Teachers and administrators now often have their hands tied by laws and guidelines when it comes to disciplining children, and not only when corporal punishment is involved, Jordan said.

The result is an increase in discipline problems and more suspensions and expulsions, because those are sometimes the only tools left to schools, she said.

"I believe in due process and letting the punishment fit the crime, but when a child believes there is not going to be a serious consequence for misbehaving, it makes our job a lot harder," Jordan said. "That's why it's so important to have the support of parents.

"Schools can't do it all, particularly when discipline is not practiced at home. It has to start there," she said. "A lot of problems can be headed off if parents work together with school officials. If they don't, the child knows it, and it's tough.

Jordan said she uses "behavior contracts" so children will know what is expected of them and probation cards that allow students to monitor their own behavior before the school officials, she said. If they don't, the child knows it, and it's tough.

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Maeteal Jordan, 52, of Abbeville, taught, coached and worked as an administrator at Abbeville High for 24 years before accepting her current position at Erath Middle School five years ago. She is the school's primary disciplinarian and has gained the respect of students by initiating a "due process" policy whereby the punishment fits the crime. Jordan (above) talks with students during their lunch hour Wednesday.