

Finding 1: An Old Problem with Real Costs

For teachers and parents, student discipline and behavior is a major concern, one that affects both teacher morale and student learning.

Probably few people will be surprised that this study shows student discipline and behavior to be an important concern for teachers and parents. Past surveys, including some conducted by Public Agenda, have shown this to be a persistent issue. But it is eye-opening to consider the very real costs the problem exacts of education in terms of teacher morale, teacher attrition and student learning.

In *Teaching Interrupted*, we tally the damaging impact student misbehavior is having on today's schools. But before reporting the details, it may be useful to add a word about what teachers and parents mean when they talk about discipline in schools. For well over a decade, Public Agenda has addressed this topic in surveys and focus groups with parents, teachers and others. Although there is overwhelming consensus for more disciplined schools, few want them to become intimidating places where children tremble before teachers and silence is the rule. Educators and parents alike readily accept that kids will be kids, and that energy, spontaneity and a little impishness here and there are natural parts of childhood. Yet both parents and teachers seem to yearn for schools that offer a more civil and respectful atmosphere, where teachers can teach and students can learn, and where the adults, not the kids, set the rules.

Start with the Teachers

Early in the research it became clear that teachers—who spend countless hours in school buildings and bear witness to the behavior of hundreds of students—were in a far

better position to judge and report the specific discipline issues facing their own school. Parents often are not as knowledgeable about the behavior of students overall and are quite naturally focused mainly on their own child's experiences. As a result, while we consistently report the views of both teachers and parents throughout *Teaching Interrupted*, it is the views of teachers that drive the analysis. Moreover, although discipline problems affect the wide spectrum of schools across the country, many of the problems appear to be especially severe in urban schools and schools with a high concentration of students from low-income families.

An Extremely Important Area

Teachers and parents agree in overwhelming numbers that good student behavior is a must-have for schools and kids to thrive—an essential condition before teaching and learning can take place. Virtually all teachers (97%) and an overwhelming majority of parents (78%) say good discipline and behavior is a prerequisite for a successful school*. Vast majorities go further, saying the job of the public schools is not simply to ensure that kids achieve academically but also to “teach kids to follow the rules so they are ready to join society” (93% of teachers and 88% of parents).

According to these data, however, there is much room for improvement in terms of student discipline and behavior. Speaking of their own school, pluralities of teachers (49%) and parents (45%) say student discipline ranks “somewhere in the middle” in the range of problems. And some teachers (30%) and parents (15%) say it is one of the top problems.

* Full question wording and responses are available in the Complete Survey Results beginning on page 43.

Cops with Guns

Perhaps the harshest testimonial to the seriousness of the problem is this simple data point: 52% of America's teachers report their school has an armed police officer stationed on school grounds—and more than 4 in 10 parents (43%) know this as well. The number is higher among high school teachers (60%), but a substantial 45% of middle school teachers also report having an armed officer on the premises. Teachers working in urban (62%) and suburban (60%) schools, in the South (70%) or in schools where all or most of the students are African American or Hispanic (67%) are more likely to report that their school has an armed police officer on-site.

Instruction Is the Minimal Piece

In the context of the national push to raise standards and academic expectations, the discipline problem gains even greater relevance. In one of the most profound findings in this study, most teachers—and many parents—say discipline is such a distraction that student learning is suffering. More than 3 in 4 teachers (77%) acknowledge that “if it weren't for discipline problems, I could be teaching a lot more effectively,” with 40% saying that they *strongly* agree. More than 4 in 10 parents (43%) believe their child “could be learning a lot more if the teachers weren't so busy trying to control the classroom”—although 52% disagree.

In the words of a New Jersey teacher: “Instruction becomes—I don't want to say the minimal piece, but often it does become that. Often the first month or two you're just getting through all their emotional and thinking management.... They're not focused on getting an education.”

“I’m Not Doing It Anymore”

Lack of discipline in the schools engenders other serious costs as well. The findings in *Teaching Interrupted* reveal that problems with student discipline and behavior are driving substantial numbers of teachers out of the profession. More than 1 in 3 teachers (34%) have seriously considered quitting because of student discipline and behavior. “I haven’t [quit] yet. I have wanted to many times. I have cried and been very upset. I have actually had students lie to the point where I could have been written up,” said a Florida middle school teacher.

And it appears that teachers are actually leaving their jobs—not just thinking about it. More than 1 in 3 teachers (34%) responding to this survey say colleagues in their school have quit or were asked to leave because student discipline and behavior were too challenging (another 29% are not sure). As another Florida teacher told us: “We actually had a teacher in our department that quit. She ended up going home one day and saying, ‘That is it. I’m not doing it anymore.’ She was gone.”

Teachers are not the only ones who leave: 1 in 5 parents (20%) have considered moving their child to another school or have already done so because discipline and behavior were such problems.

Even More Troubles for the Urban and the Poor

Although schools across the spectrum have problems with student behavior, the issue appears to be more acute in urban schools and in schools with high poverty. Student discipline is cited as a top problem by 42% of teachers in urban schools—in contrast with only 1 in 4 of their rural (25%) and suburban (26%) counterparts. A 51% majority of

urban teachers *strongly* agree that “if it weren’t for discipline problems,” they “could be teaching a lot more effectively.” The numbers are lower among rural (35%) and suburban (38%) teachers. Urban teachers (43%) are more likely to report teacher attrition caused by student discipline problems than are rural teachers (27%).

Problems with student discipline are also more acute in schools with the highest concentration of economically disadvantaged kids (those where 75% or more of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch). The pattern of detrimental effects repeats: teachers in the most impoverished schools are more likely to say discipline is a top problem (45% compared with 15% of teachers in schools where less than 25% of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch); twice as likely to report teachers have left in recent years because student discipline was such a problem (49% to 24%) and more likely to *strongly* agree that “if it weren’t for discipline problems,” they “could be teaching a lot more effectively” (54% to 31%).

Sink or Swim

Teachers in the focus groups said that newer teachers are particularly vulnerable to the negative consequences of discipline problems. They pointed out that newcomers typically lack the experience or training to deal with behavior issues, that students are more likely to test them and that they are often assigned the harder-to-manage classes.

The survey indicates this is more than anecdotal. For example, 85% of teachers who took part in *Teaching Interrupted* believe that “new teachers are particularly unprepared for dealing with behavior problems in their classroom,” a sentiment Public Agenda has uncovered in previous surveys.^{i,ii} One second-year teacher was feeling the

pressure: “It has been tough...it is kind of a sink-or-swim program right now. You are just thrown in there [to] see if you can handle it.”

Is Anybody Listening?

The education field bemoans the rate at which teachers drop out of their profession, yet few focus on student discipline as a serious cause of the problem. These findings provide fresh evidence that the losses and costs in terms of attrition of personnel are very real and deserve attention. Who knows just how much motivated talent the public schools lose every year when teachers are overwhelmed by problems with discipline? And these findings suggest an even more important rationale for taking a serious look at the urgency of the problem: the large number of teachers reporting significant consequences for the academic achievement of students—especially when they are in the nation’s cities and highest poverty schools. Even as the pressure to raise standards and improve student performance mounts, it is apparent that much time and opportunity to learn is being lost. Finally, the fact that so many of the nation’s middle and high schools feel they need an armed police officer on their grounds is a sobering reality whose cost may be more than can be measured in dollars.