

PUBLIC AGENDA



Contact:

Claudia Feurey or
Michael Remaley
Public Agenda
(212) 686-6610

Not for Release Until 12 Noon, Tuesday, May 11, 2004

Discipline Problems, Unruly Behavior Seriously Threatening Student Achievement

A growing “culture of challenge and second guessing,” including the fear of lawsuits, is undermining classroom order, hindering learning and driving teachers out of the classroom.

New York City - Discipline and behavior problems in America’s public schools are serious, pervasive and are compromising student learning. They are also driving a substantial number of teachers out of the profession. These are some key findings from a new national study of teachers and parents which found that while only a handful of trouble makers cause most disciplinary problems, “the tyranny of the few” leads to a distracting and disrespectful atmosphere. Teachers in particular complain about the growing willingness of some students and parents to challenge teacher judgment and threaten legal action.

According to a new report by the nonpartisan, nonprofit opinion research organization **Public Agenda**, teachers too often must operate “in a culture of challenge and second guessing” that is affecting their ability to teach and maintain order.

- Nearly 8 in 10 teachers (78%) said students are quick to remind them that they have rights or that their parents can sue.
- Nearly half of teachers surveyed (49%) reported they have been accused of unfairly disciplining a student.
- More than half of teachers (55%) said that districts backing down from assertive parents causes discipline problems in the nation’s schools.

The study, *Teaching Interrupted: Do Discipline Policies in Today’s Public Schools Foster the Common Good?*, was prepared for **Common Good**, a bipartisan legal reform coalition dedicated to restoring common sense to American law.

Proposed solutions selected by teachers and parents include stricter enforcement of existing rules of conduct, alternative schools to help chronically disruptive students and limiting parents’ ability to sue schools over disciplinary decisions.

“Rowdiness, disrespect, bullying, talking out, lateness and loutishness - these misbehaviors are poisoning the learning atmosphere of our public schools,” said Public Agenda President **Ruth A. Wooden**. At a time when the achievement stakes for students have never been higher, the fact is that in school after school, a minority of students who routinely challenge legitimate school rules and authority are preventing the majority of students from learning and teachers from teaching.”

“The present legal environment undermines order in schools by enabling students and parents to threaten a lawsuit over virtually anything,” said **Philip K. Howard**, Chair of Common Good. “The legal system must strike a better balance between the claimed rights of individuals and the legitimate interests of society as a whole.”

Teachers Think of Leaving

Virtually all teachers (97%) said good discipline and behavior are prerequisite for a successful school. And virtually all (93%) said it is the public schools’ job to teach kids to follow the rules so they are ready to join society. Yet nearly 8 in 10 teachers said their school has students who should be removed and sent to alternative schools. In what the report terms a “perhaps the harshest testimonial” to the problem, 52% of the teachers surveyed reported their school has an armed police officer on school grounds.

More than 1 in 3 teachers said colleagues in their school had left because student discipline was such a challenge, and the same number personally considered leaving. Many complained about being more in the “crowd control” business than in teaching. “The gum chewing... the yawning aloud or putting their feet up on the desk...like they didn’t know that was inappropriate,” said one New Jersey teacher.

More than half of teachers said that behavior problems often stem from teachers who are soft on discipline because they can’t count on parents or their schools to support them. And 85% believe new teachers are particularly unprepared to deal with behavior problems.

Taking Parents to Task

Parents, too, agreed (78%) that schools need good discipline and behavior. But 82% of teachers and 74% of parents surveyed felt that parents’ failure to teach their children discipline ranked as one of the biggest causes of school behavior problems.

But parents are worried too, with 20% of parents reporting that they have considered moving their child to another school or have done so already because discipline and behavior was such a problem.

Restoring Order – From Alternative Schools to Limits on Litigation

- More than 6 in 10 teachers (61%) and parents (63%) strongly believe that strictly enforcing the little rules sets a tone so that bigger problems can be avoided. Another 30% of teachers and 25% of parents support this idea somewhat. (Total support: 91% teachers; 88% parents)
- More than half of teachers (57%) and 43% of parents also especially liked proposals for establishing alternative schools for chronic offenders, with another 30% of teachers and 32% of parents liking this idea somewhat. (Total support: 87% teachers; 74% parents)
- 70% of teachers and 68% of parents strongly supported the establishment of “zero-tolerance” policies so students know they will be kicked out of school for serious violations, with another 23% of teachers and 20% of parents indicating they supported this idea somewhat. (Total support: 93% teachers; 89% parents)
- 69% of teachers said finding ways to hold parents more accountable for kids’ behavior would be a very effective solution to the schools’ discipline problems, with another 25% saying they think it would be somewhat effective. (Total support: 94% teachers)
- 42% of teachers and 46% of parents strongly supported limiting lawsuits to serious situations like expulsion, with another 40% of teachers and 32% of parents liking this idea somewhat. (Total support: 82% teachers; 78% parents)
- 50% of teachers and 43% of parents also strongly approved of removing the possibility of monetary awards for parents who sue over discipline issues, with another 32% of teachers and 27% of parents approving somewhat. (Total support: 82% teachers; 69% parents)

Discipline in Special Education

The vast majority of teachers (94%) believe that treating special education students just like other students, unless their misbehavior is related to their disability, would be an effective solution: 65% of teachers say this would be a very effective solution, while another 29% consider it somewhat effective. But teachers said this is not happening now: 76% of teachers agree that special education students who misbehave are often treated too lightly, even when their misbehavior has nothing to do with their disability.

Don't Forget Common Sense

While acknowledging the need to deal with persistent trouble makers, based on this survey, teachers were very concerned that “these children be retrieved, not forgotten.” Nor, the report said, did teachers want gum chewing to be treated as the equivalent of a capital offense. Both teachers and parents acknowledged that schools are doing a good job on the most serious offenses, such as those involving guns or drugs.

Still, according to *Teaching Interrupted*, “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.”

According to Public Agenda President Ruth A. Wooden, “Time and again, Public Agenda research has shown that a safe, orderly school environment is a fundamental concern of parents and teachers. Yet this issue has been given short shrift by policy makers and by the very schools of education that send new teachers out unprepared for the realities of today’s classrooms. It’s way past time to focus on solutions to this impediment to educating all our children.”

The findings in *Teaching Interrupted* are based on two national random surveys; a mail survey of 725 public middle and high school teachers and a telephone survey with 600 parents of public school students in grades 5 through 12. The surveys were preceded by six focus groups. The margin of error for both surveys is plus or minus 4 percentage points.

Public Agenda is a nonprofit organization dedicated to nonpartisan public policy research. Founded in 1975 by former U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and Daniel Yankelovich, the social scientist and author, Public Agenda is well respected for its influential public opinion polls and balanced citizen education materials. Its mission is to inform leaders about the public’s views and to educate citizens about government policy.

Common Good – www.cgood.org – is a bi-partisan legal reform coalition dedicated to restoring common sense to American law. Its board is composed of leaders in a wide range of fields: former government officials, including Griffin Bell, Newt Gingrich, Eric Holder, George McGovern, Diane Ravitch, Alan Simpson, and Richard Thornburgh; current and former university presidents, including Tom Kean, George Rupp, and John Silber, and numerous other leaders in education, healthcare, law, business and public policy. The Chair of Common Good is Philip K. Howard, a lawyer and author of *The Death of Common Sense* and *The Collapse of the Common Good*.

Visit Public Agenda Online - www.publicagenda.org Public Agenda Online has been named one of *Library Journal*’s Best Reference Sources and is a *USAToday*, MSNBC and About.com recommended site. Public Agenda Online is the go-to source for unbiased facts, figures and analysis on issues ranging from education to terrorism to abortion to illegal drugs.

Public Agenda
6 East 39th Street, New York, NY 10016
(212) 686-6610 (tel.) (212) 889-3461 (fax)
www.publicagenda.org