

## **Finding 2: The Tyranny of the Few**

**Teachers and parents are convinced that the school experience of most students suffers because of the unruly, disruptive behavior of just a handful of students.**

America's public schools were founded on the belief that all members of society benefit from an educated citizenry, that a basic education for all citizens is essential for a democracy. But today, teachers and parents believe that the good of the many is in jeopardy because of the misbehavior of the few. Most teachers surveyed for *Teaching Interrupted* said outright that there are some students in their school who are so badly behaved they should have already been removed from the building, and overwhelming numbers admit most students suffer because of a few persistent troublemakers. Although the schools seem to have made headway when it comes to handling the most serious discipline problems, they appear to routinely fall short when dealing with less serious violations.

### **The Same Names Over and Over Again**

Both teachers and parents clearly believe that most discipline problems in schools are caused by just a few kids but that all students end up paying the price. Large majorities of teachers (78%) and parents (74%) say it's just a handful of students who cause most of the problems in their school; only 21% and 15%, respectively, say it's more widespread. One teacher conducts her own reconnaissance at the start of each semester: "There is a handful. You can check the in-school suspension and out-of-school suspension list. You recognize the names over and over again. If you see them on your list, you know what to expect."

The source of the problem may be limited, but the consequences and costs are widely felt. An overwhelming 85% of teachers agree that “in the end, most students suffer because of a few persistent troublemakers” (43% *strongly* agree). Most parents (73%) are of the same mind on this point. “It’s a low number [of students], but the effect is disproportionate. You can have one kid blow up a whole class,” said a Florida teacher. “There are kids that are trying to learn. They definitely feel like they are losing out,” added a colleague.

### **Just Terrorizing Other Students**

Nor do teachers claim their own school has found the Rosetta stone for handling chronic discipline problems. In conversations with teachers, it was startling to realize how rare it was for the schools to take effective action until a student truly crossed the line—by doing something violent or outrageous. “We have students that just terrorize other students, and yet we can’t get rid of them, and they know this,” a New Jersey teacher said. Nearly 8 in 10 teachers (78%) admit their building has persistent troublemakers who should already have been removed and sent to alternative schools. A much smaller proportion of parents agree (37%), with almost 1 in 4 saying they don’t know.

The frustration with problem students being constantly recycled through the system often coexists with genuine concern that the system has failed to come up with an effective alternative for the toughest cases, those children who seem to refuse to learn. In the focus groups, it was clear that teachers and parents were looking for a way to retrieve, not abandon, these students. “A lot of these kids who are troublemakers,” a Florida

teacher told us, “are dying to have some consistency because they don’t have it in their life anyway.”

The contrast between how public schools and private schools handle student discipline was instructive to many in the focus groups. In the survey, by a 41% to 25% margin, teachers believe the private schools in their community outdo the public when it comes to dealing with student discipline (34% are not sure). Those who give the nod to private schools believe the reason they do a better job is mainly because private schools “have stricter rules and kick out troublemakers” (69%), not because students there come from more affluent families (4%) or because they have stronger parental involvement (27%). The views of parents virtually mirror those of teachers: by a 39% to 29% margin, parents say their local private schools do a better job on student discipline (32% are not sure), and, among those who feel this way, 55% say it is mostly because private schools “have stricter rules and kick out troublemakers.”

### **Treading Lightly on Special Education**

Public schools also appear to be failing when it comes to disciplining special needs students. Focus group participants didn’t say that special needs kids were especially prone to misbehave. But there was a definite sense—especially among teachers—that the authority of the public schools to effectively discipline special needs students who do break the rules is constrained both by the law and by anticipatory fears of parental challenge. More than 3 in 4 (76%) teachers believe that “students with

I.E.P.'s\* who misbehave are often treated too lightly, even when their misbehavior has nothing to do with their disability.” Most parents (75%), for their part, are unaware that this is even an issue, although parents of special needs students are much more likely to be familiar with it than other parents (41% vs. 16%).

### **Better on the Most Serious Offenses**

Disturbingly high numbers of the teachers and parents surveyed in *Teaching Interrupted* report serious problems in their school with issues like illegal drugs (41% and 46%) and physical fighting (36% and 30%). But it is at least somewhat reassuring that most teachers and parents believe their school responds swiftly and forcefully to these serious offenses. Overwhelming majorities (83% and 88%) say their school has a quick, no-nonsense response to weapons or drugs, with 63% of teachers and 76% of parents saying they *strongly* agree. In New Jersey, a teacher said, “There are some no-brainers, like no guns, no weapons, no drugs, none of that kind of stuff going on. There are certain things that are certainly zero tolerance.”

As to how assertive their colleagues are when fighting breaks out among students, teachers are divided. Although just over half (51%) predict that most teachers in their school would physically intervene and pull kids apart, almost half (45%) think their colleagues would be either “very reluctant” or would “never” do so—either because they are afraid of getting hurt themselves (49%) or because they are worried about getting mixed up in legal trouble (45%). Interestingly, only 17% of teachers say their school has an official policy that discourages them from physically intervening when students fight.

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\* I.E.P.: Individualized Education Plan

### **Yawning Aloud, Putting Their Feet up on the Desk**

If the schools respond quickly to transgressions that compromise the safety of their students and teachers, they appear to be far less effective in dealing with the low-intensity violations of school order. Nearly 6 in 10 teachers (and 43% of parents) believe that their school should be doing a lot better in dealing with routine misbehavior.

When asked about nine specific student misbehaviors, majorities of teachers say their school has serious problems with six of them. [See Table 2.] Topping the list is students who disrupt class by talking out of turn and horsing around (69%). Almost 6 in 10 teachers also point to cheating, lateness, disrespect and bullying as serious problems; more than half say rowdiness is a serious concern. A New Jersey teacher commented, “What I find amazing, and I teach middle school, seventh and eighth graders, is this lack of morals. There’s just a disrespect for classroom materials; they’ll write all over things, desks, rulers...I don’t even think they think [it’s] wrong, and it just amazes me. The gum chewing...the yawning aloud or putting their feet up on the desk...like they didn’t know that was inappropriate.”

### **Kids Will Be Kids?**

Taken individually, these more typical problems might draw a “what else is new, kids will be kids” response. But teachers having to deal with a series of such low-level interruptions, day in and day out, complain that they are in the business of crowd control, not education—and many in our focus groups talked about exactly that. What’s more, when it comes to student learning and teacher morale, the cumulative impact of such

disruptions may be as costly as the most dramatic incidents—although they garner less press coverage and op-ed outrage.

### **Fighting in the City, Cheating in Suburbia**

Not surprisingly, perhaps, urban school teachers are substantially more likely than their rural and suburban counterparts to report problems in their school when it comes to student rowdiness, class disruptions, lateness, truancy, physical fighting and lack of respect toward teachers. [See Table 3.] There are two notable exceptions: First, the data show virtually no differences across the groups when illegal drugs are at issue. Second, suburban teachers are more likely than the others to report cheating as a serious problem.

Teachers in schools with a high concentration of students eligible for free or reduced-cost lunch are also substantially more likely to report specific discipline problems such as class disruptions, disrespect toward teachers and rowdiness, among others.

### **The Swing Vote**

A teacher interviewed in the Florida focus group offered her own demographic analysis of the students in the typical classroom. According to her, there are three types: those who show up eager and loving to learn; those who are always ready to make trouble or act the class clown; and the larger “swing vote,” those students who follow the prevailing atmosphere in the class and school. In essence, when a teacher or a school enforces the rules, deals effectively with the tougher cases and insists on accountability, students quickly learn what is and what is not permissible and behave accordingly. As we

will see in Finding 5, teachers and parents are especially disposed to a solution to student misbehavior that directly addresses the “swing” students: strictly enforcing the little rules so that the right tone is created and bigger problems are avoided.