

Finding 3: Getting the Support They Need

Most teachers say their principals support them on discipline, but many say formal documentation requirements sometimes go beyond common sense.

Teachers overwhelmingly accept responsibility for handling behavior problems in their own classroom. To them, it's part of the job. At the same time, they believe the principal sets the tone for the building—and in one of the good news stories to come out of this study, a large number say they can count on their own principal for help when it comes to backing them on discipline decisions.

Teachers are less sanguine about school policy and procedures for documenting incidents of misbehavior. While few teachers say their school's requirements are over-extensive or cumbersome, many feel they sometimes go beyond common sense.

It's Part of the Job

Teachers still see managing student discipline and behavior as primarily a teacher's job and are hardly anxious to hand off responsibility for classroom discipline to administrators. In the focus groups, teachers sometimes criticized colleagues who they thought were shirking their responsibility by being too quick to send students to the principal's office. Almost 9 in 10 (89%) believe that an integral part of being a teacher is knowing how to handle the inevitable misconduct that will crop up in the classroom. Just 9% of teachers believe instead that “the profession would be better off if discipline were the responsibility of the supervisors in the building.”

Lean on Me

Nevertheless, teachers believe that the overall atmosphere of a school and enforcement of policies concerning student behavior are determined by a school's leadership. Almost 9 in 10 (89%) agree it's the principal who sets the tone when it comes to discipline and order, with more than half (53%) saying they *strongly* agree. What's more, experience tells teachers that sooner or later someone will challenge their decisions on discipline, and that's when they need their principal's support. In fact, nearly 1 in 2 teachers (49%) say they have been accused of unfairly disciplining or reprimanding a child. When it happened, 2 out of 3 say an administrator had to get involved to resolve the dispute.

Interestingly, when identifying the broad underlying causes of behavior problems in the nation's public schools, 44% of teachers point to lack of support by administrators. But their own personal experience tells them something different: more than 7 in 10 teachers (72%) say they can virtually always or mostly rely on their own principal to support them on matters of student discipline and behavior. "My administration's very supportive. If I say it happened, it was that way," said one teacher from New Jersey.

Previous research conducted by Public Agenda confirms just how crucial administration support is in the minds of teachers. In our survey of new public school teachers, 82% said they would prefer to work in a school with supportive administrators than one that offered a significantly higher salary.ⁱⁱⁱ

Documentation: Too Much of a Good Thing

The teachers we spoke with were matter-of-fact about the need to document incidents of student misbehavior. They knew that having a written record would protect them if they were ever questioned. They also knew that if they needed their principal's support, they would be asked if they had followed proper procedures. More than 7 in 10 teachers (73%) say the official documentation required for incidents of student misbehavior in their school is about right; only 14% say it's over-extensive and cumbersome; 11% say it's not extensive enough.

In focus groups, teachers also readily acknowledged the fallibility of their colleagues—misunderstandings can occur, errors in judgment can be made, oversights are always possible. A focus group participant from Missouri said, “I think students deserve due process. As a parent and a teacher, if my child, or a child in my classroom, had done something wrong, I think they have a right to discuss it, to talk about it. I don't think there should ever be, ‘You did this, see you, good-bye.’” A sizable 33% of teachers say documentation requirements “are on target—students need these protections because administrators and teachers make mistakes.” Still, the opposite viewpoint—shared by 44% of teachers—is that the schools have resorted to these procedures mostly to protect them from parental or legal challenges (with another 23% unsure). As one Missouri teacher put it: “...now we document all this stuff. The irony here is as we're documenting it more, we have less control.”

Similarly, teachers are also split over whether the process for expelling students who really shouldn't be there is “too elaborate and requires too much documentation”

(38%) or “strikes the right balance in protecting accused students and the school” (40%).
(Another 23% are unsure.)

Too Many Rights?

There are more telling indications that many teachers feel the schools have gone too far in expanding the power of students and parents to challenge educators over discipline decisions. For one thing, teachers feel their authority is undermined when students are overly empowered. Nearly 8 in 10 teachers (78%) agree that “today’s students are all too quick to remind you that they have rights or that their parents can sue.”

Although teachers accept the need for due process, they do want some limits and boundaries: the overwhelming majority (79%) would reserve formal procedures—such as a hearing with witnesses and lawyers—for the most egregious cases; about 1 in 10 teachers (12%) say that hearings and the like should be available “any time a parent feels the school has disciplined their child unfairly.”