

Finding 4: Who's to Blame?

Topping the list of causes of behavior problems in the schools is parents' failure to teach children discipline, followed by a general disrespect in society and a growing willingness on the part of parents and students to challenge schools' authority.

The conviction that parents play the central role in the way children learn and behave in school is one of the most unambiguous and recurring trends in Public Agenda's extensive body of opinion data on the public schools.^{iv,v,vi} A recent Public Agenda survey showed the degree to which parents themselves accept responsibility for their own shortcomings on this front: almost 6 in 10 agreed that when a child doesn't know how to behave, it usually means parents are not doing their job.^{vii} As one parent from a northern Virginia suburb explained, "Sometimes parents aren't disciplining their children at home. Maybe it's because a lot of parents both are working so there's not a lot of time to be a bad guy.... You don't want [to] come home and tell your child no...[but] somebody has to tell them no, and they have to know that there are boundaries."

"I'm Lucky if I Get a Response"

Parents' failure to teach their children discipline tops the list of the underlying causes of behavior problems in today's public schools. [See Table 4.] On a scale of 1 to 5, 82% of teachers and 74% of parents rate this as either a "4" or a "5." Moreover, more than half of teachers (52%) believe that the schools' problems with student behavior result from teachers being soft on discipline "because they can't count on parents or schools to support them." Other Public Agenda research shows that only 34% of parents say they have succeeded in teaching their child to have self-control and discipline and

only half say they have succeeded in teaching their child to do their best in school.^{viii}

“The thing I see missing when we’re looking at accountability and dealing with discipline is the parent,” a Missouri teacher said. “Somehow we’ve got to get the parents.... They will not come to school.” Another said, “The student will mouth off or not do homework, and I’ll contact the parent in writing or on the phone, and I’m lucky if I get a response.”

“The More Money They Make...”

Not surprisingly, the discussion quickly turns to parents when teachers talk about student discipline and behavior problems. Their concerns often seem to be about parents who are not paying enough attention to their kids and failing to teach self-control or appropriate behavior. But teachers also talk about another kind of parent, those who are unreasonable, who instinctively refuse to consider that their child may be at fault.

According to a New Jersey teacher, “The more educated the parent is and the more money that they make...their respect for the teacher is not the same. They feel they are on a higher level, they question, they’re so defensive of their children and it’s a big problem.... They will try to intimidate you.”

The majority of teachers (69%) say, at most, there’s just a handful of parents like this, who challenge or threaten to sue the school when their child is disciplined, and only 18% say it’s more widespread. (As for parents, only 7% think it is widespread.) For their part, parents seem to trust teachers when it comes to discipline. Seventy-five percent believe that virtually all or most of their child’s teachers are fair and appropriate when they discipline or reprimand students. A relatively small 30% have ever felt that a teacher has acted unfairly toward their child.

A Lot of Times We Are Afraid of Parents

Unfortunately, the few parents who are always primed to challenge educators appear to have an inordinately negative effect. Nearly 6 in 10 teachers, and 42% of parents, cite parents who are “too quick to challenge and appeal school decisions on discipline” as a main source of discipline problems in the nation’s schools. About half of both groups—55% of teachers and 48% of parents—point the finger at school districts “backing down” when they are challenged by parents, because they “are scared of lawsuits.” “I am finding a lot of times that we are afraid of parents,” said a Florida teacher. “...A lot of times parents will say that they are going to sue. Therefore, [administration] bend[s] down for them quite a bit.”

The findings show signs that this growing willingness to question teacher authority has seeped into students’ mind-set as well, with an overwhelming number (78%) of teachers believing that “today’s students are all too quick to remind you that they have rights or that their parents can sue.”

When teachers were asked to choose among three basic factors that may undermine student discipline in the nation’s public schools, 40% of teachers point to parents who are far less likely to trust educators, 26% say too many lawsuits and student rights tie the hands of administrators and 24% point to schools’ failure to enforce discipline policies already on the books.

Disrespect Everywhere You Turn

Still, teachers and parents recognize that parents are functioning in a society replete with social trends that undermine their efforts to raise well-behaved, respectful

children. About 7 in 10 of both groups say that among the biggest causes of discipline and behavior problems in the schools is the “disrespect everywhere in our culture—students absorb it and bring it to school.” A Missouri teacher had a list: “The lack of respect the kids show. The loss of innocence, really. The kind of stuff that I think the kids see, the exposure [from] watching too much TV. Maybe the fact that they’re probably not monitored enough. That they read stuff on the Internet.”

Another theme that emerged in the focus groups with parents was their belief that society’s views about appropriate ways to discipline children have hindered parents’ capacity to handle their own kids’ behavior as they see fit. The survey results confirm this feeling, with well over half of parents (56%) saying one of the biggest causes of the schools’ discipline problems is that “society has put too many limits on parents’ right to discipline their own children.”

Teachers Get a Pass?

Although conventional wisdom puts much of the onus on teachers, most teachers and parents surveyed for *Teaching Interrupted* reject the notion that teachers are a main cause of student discipline problems. Only about 1 in 4 teachers (26%) and 1 in 3 parents (32%) agree with the statement, “When students misbehave, it usually means the teacher has failed to make lessons engaging,” with barely handfuls saying they *strongly* agree (2% and 12%). Similarly small proportions say that the discipline problem resides mainly in teachers who “try to be friends to students rather than authority figures” (34% and 19%). And despite concerns reported earlier about inadequate classroom management

skills among new teachers, the charge that too many don't know how to run a classroom is toward the bottom of the list of possible causes (30% and 25%).

Power to the Teachers

A close look at the data also shows that many teachers and parents are in fact confident in the power of teachers to positively influence student behavior, even in those children who come to school lacking family support or basic values. Majorities of teachers (58%) and parents (60%) believe most students, regardless of the neighborhood, will behave properly as long as expectations are clear and rules are enforced. In contrast, smaller numbers say discipline problems are inevitable in the toughest schools (35% and 33%).

This hopeful sentiment was corroborated in a recent Public Agenda survey of K–12 public school teachers, where approximately 2 out of 3 said they had faith that truly good teachers can overcome societal barriers such as poverty or uninvolved parents and still get their students to learn what they are supposed to.^{ix}

The Politics of Race

The focus groups indicated that the politics of race can intrude in discipline decisions. One teacher—an African American—explained, “Here in St. Louis [they] pull the race card very, very fast, instead of looking at the issue. [They are] quick to grab a hold to, ‘What’s going to help me out of this hole?’ If it’s a non-African American [who] disciplined me, that’s the first thing I’m going to say.” But in the survey, a slim majority of teachers believed evenhanded accountability can transcend race-based suspicion. The

survey asked teachers to imagine a white principal taking charge of a school with serious discipline problems and a predominantly African American student body. While 40% of teachers said that “it would probably be tougher” for this principal to enforce discipline for fear of accusations of prejudice, 52% said that “if the principal is effective and fair, it probably wouldn’t be a problem.” Parents were more closely divided, with 45% saying that “it would probably be tougher” and 48% that it wouldn’t be a problem.

Perennial Problem: Overcrowding

These findings suggest that broad social issues are at the heart of most discipline problems, but practical considerations may also be at play. Overcrowded schools and classrooms are among the top causes of student behavior problems as well, according to majorities of both teachers (62%) and parents (54%). One Florida parent expressed, “Honestly, I think...[teachers] are overwhelmed with classroom size. Because in every situation, especially [when it comes to] listening, having the smaller classroom size, they’re allowed to focus more on the needs of the children. Whereas when you’re dealing with 250 children a day, I don’t care who you are, you can be Mighty Max or Superwoman or whatever, you’re going to be overwhelmed.”