

Finding 5: Solving the Problem

Teachers and parents gravitate toward solutions that address the problem of persistent troublemakers, that hold parents more accountable and limit their capacity for legal challenges, and that contribute to an orderly school environment.

Seasoned observers of public opinion know there are countless social policy issues where Americans overwhelmingly agree there's a problem but where there is no consensus about action. But on the issue of discipline in the schools, there are high levels of agreement on both the sources of the problem and solutions. The most popular approaches for solving the discipline problem fall into the following general categories: The first looks at diminishing the impact of those “few persistent troublemakers.” The second focuses on ways to hold parents more responsible for their own child's behavior. Another aims to limit parents' capacity for frivolous challenges or lawsuits. The last category revolves around ideas for creating an orderly school environment.* [See Table 5.]

Perhaps because respondents are so hopeful about the public schools' capacity to solve discipline and behavior problems, each proposed solution garnered an overwhelming degree of support. To get a sense of priority, our analysis focuses on those who feel strongly about the proposed solution—that is, teachers who say it would be a “*very* effective solution” and parents who say it would be a “*very* good idea.” Once again, teachers' experiences with discipline issues proved to be much more detailed and vivid than those of parents, which is why it is teachers who mainly drive the analysis.

* While the concepts we wanted to cover were the same for both teachers and parents, some tweaking was necessary to ensure that survey questions were phrased appropriately—that is, that they were not too complicated for parents, not too simple for teachers. Thus, in the solutions battery, answer categories intentionally vary. Teachers were asked how effective they thought each solution would be; parents were asked if they thought each solution was a good or bad idea.

Strong Medicine, A Dose of Common Sense

Given that so many teachers and parents trace most discipline problems to a few chronic offenders—many of whom should already have been removed from the building, according to most teachers—it is not surprising that solutions addressing this issue resonate strongly.

Approximately 7 in 10 teachers (70%) and parents (68%) strongly support establishing and enforcing “zero-tolerance” policies so students know they will be kicked out of school for serious violations. But focus group participants were quick to caution that they did not want to see a blind application of the rules. Instead, they expected the strong medicine to include a dose of common sense. A New Jersey teacher said, “The point is zero tolerance, it’s good. It kind of scared some of the kids, but it’s with common sense. Every case is different.” The appeal of zero-tolerance proposals no doubt stems from people’s desire to recapture the sense of accountability they feel has been lost.

Fifty-seven percent of teachers and 43% of parents strongly approve of a proposal to “create more schools that specialize in dealing with students who are chronic discipline problems.” Nearly half of teachers (46%) and 33% of parents strongly support giving principals “a lot more authority to handle discipline issues and reduce interference from parents or central administration.”

Moving the Onus from the Schools to the Parents

As we saw in Finding 4, large majorities of teachers and parents believe that inadequate parenting is a primary cause of student behavior problems. Thus, it makes sense that so many also point to solutions that deal directly with parents’ behavior. Both

groups seem to rally around approaches that have the potential to either pull in parents who've checked out in terms of taking responsibility for their kids' behavior or rein in those who are relentless about defending their children, right or wrong.

Almost 7 in 10 teachers (69%), for instance, feel strongly about a solution that would “find ways to hold parents more accountable for their kids when they misbehave in school.” “We have to find some way of engaging the parents,” a Missouri teacher said. “We’re putting the onus on the schools. We’re nagging at the child. That’s a *child*. Something has to happen with these parents that are neglecting their children.”

Repercussions of Lawsuits

More specifically, teachers and parents respond favorably to proposals that place some limits on parents' ability to legally challenge schools on disciplinary disputes. In the focus groups, both groups acknowledged that schools sometimes make mistakes and that there should be a venue for parents to appeal discipline decisions. But they also talked about the effects of the squeaky wheels—the parents, though small in number, who go to extremes and cause the schools to wrongly back off for fear of litigation.

These sentiments are reflected in the survey findings. More than 4 in 10 teachers (42%) and parents (46%) strongly support a proposal that would limit lawsuits over discipline to only the most serious of situations, like expulsion. Half of teachers (50%) and 43% of parents also strongly support a measure that would eliminate the option of monetary awards when parents sue over discipline issues. One St. Louis parent speculated: “The schools are reluctant because they’re facing repercussions of lawsuits

from the parents for kicking their kids out...they may not punish the serious offenders enough because of the fear.”

Fixing Broken Windows

Most teachers and parents react positively to solutions that cultivate an orderly school environment and provide a “nip it in the bud” approach to student misconduct. More than 6 in 10 teachers (61%) and parents (63%) strongly back a proposal “to strictly enforce the little rules on behavior so that the right tone is created at school and bigger problems are avoided.”

For parents, establishing a dress code is one concrete manifestation of setting the right tone—about 6 in 10 (59%) think it would be a very good idea. A much smaller number of teachers feel strongly about this (39%). One explanation could be that having a dress code makes the “what to wear” decision much easier for parents—but for teachers it is just one more rule to enforce, one more incident to document. A Missouri parent told us, “That’s why I like the Catholic school system, because they had the dress code. They all wore the same [uniform], so there was no big difference in what the family had or where you came from. Everybody was the same. No competition.” A teacher from New Jersey who liked the idea of a dress code said, “It sets a definite tone that when you walk in this door you are going to check some of your ‘I’m going to do what I want to do and screw everybody else’ [attitude]. You are part of a community, you are part of a school.”

Most teachers (54%), in their own version of nipping a problem in the bud, think it would be very effective to “put a lot more emphasis on effective classroom management in teacher education programs.” And almost 2 in 3 teachers (65%) think that

“treat[ing] special education students who misbehave just like other students—unless the misbehavior is related to their disability” would be very effective.

Openness to a Wide Variety of Other Solutions

Again, overwhelming numbers of teachers and parents were receptive to virtually all the solutions they were asked about. There are clearly some, however, that enjoy less intense support than others. Only 3 in 10 teachers think assigning armed police officers to patrol the most troubled schools would be very effective—although 51% of parents see it as a very good idea. Process-oriented methods of dealing with discipline problems garnered the least support among teachers, with just 28% pointing to reducing the paperwork for documenting incidents of misbehavior as a very effective solution (31% of parents), and only 21% to creating a school-based committee to deal with discipline appeals (45% of parents).

Easy Does It

It is crucial to remember that the seemingly straightforward support for so many solutions masks a lot of conditional thinking that emerged in the focus groups. By experience and instinct, people know the devil is in the details. For example, teachers are anxious to remove the persistent troublemakers, but they are just as insistent that these children be retrieved, not forgotten. In their search for reestablishing accountability over student behavior, teachers also insisted that common sense not be lost—that gum chewing, for example, not be treated as the equivalent of a capital offense.