

TEACHING INTERRUPTED

Do Discipline Policies in Today's Public Schools Foster the Common Good?

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Teaching Interrupted: Do Discipline Policies in Today's Public Schools Foster the Common Good?

Executive Summary

Too many students are losing critical opportunities for learning—and too many teachers are leaving the profession—because of the behavior of a few persistent troublemakers. What's more, say teachers, today's misbehaving students are quick to remind them that students have rights and their parents can sue.

These are some key findings in *Teaching Interrupted: Do Discipline Policies in Today's Public Schools Foster the Common Good?* based on national random sample surveys of 725 middle and high school teachers and 600 parents of middle and high school students. The surveys offer a detailed look at the discipline issue, exploring its causes, the effectiveness of current policies, the impact on school climate and receptivity to various solutions. *Teaching Interrupted* was underwritten by Common Good, a non-partisan policy group focusing on legal issues in the United States today.

A Culture of Second-Guessing

According to the study, teachers operate in a culture of challenge and second-guessing—one that has an impact on their ability to teach and maintain order. Nearly half of teachers (49%) complain that they have been accused of unfairly disciplining a student. More than half (55%) say that districts backing down from assertive parents causes discipline problems. Nearly 8 in 10 teachers (78%) say that there are persistent troublemakers in their school who should have been removed from regular classrooms.

Both teachers and parents support a variety of remedies, ranging from more special schools for misbehaving students to removing monetary awards for parents who sue.

Discipline: An Old Story

Discipline has been a recurring theme in public opinion research on public schools for years, and *Teaching Interrupted* suggests that educators have made only limited progress addressing it. The issue continues to bedevil teachers, concern parents and derail learning in schools across the country.

It's almost unanimously accepted among teachers (97%) that a school needs good discipline and behavior in order to flourish, and 78% of parents agree. It's also widely accepted among both groups that part of a school's mission—in addition to teaching the three R's—is to teach kids to follow the rules so they can become productive citizens (93% and 88%).

Yet, the observations of both teachers and parents collected in this study suggest that today's school discipline policies may not be working in the interest of the common good. For example:

- *The vast majority of both teachers (85%) and parents (73%) say the school experience of most students suffers at the expense of a few chronic offenders.* Most teachers (78%) report that students who are persistent behavior problems and should be removed from school grounds are not removed.
- *Students pay a heavy price academically when schools tolerate the chronic bad behavior of the few.* Most teachers (77%) admit their teaching would be a lot more effective if they didn't have to spend so much time dealing with disruptive students. Similarly, many parents (43%) believe their child would accomplish more in school if teachers weren't distracted by discipline issues.
- *Lack of parental support and fear of lawsuits are ever-present concerns for many teachers.* Nearly 8 in 10 teachers (78%) say students are quick to remind them that

they have rights or that their parents can sue. Nearly half (49%) say they have been accused of unfairly disciplining a child. More than half (52%) say behavior problems often stem from teachers who are soft on discipline “because they can’t count on parents or schools to support them.” Nevertheless, approximately 7 in 10 teachers (69%) and parents (72%) say it’s just a handful of parents in their own school who challenge or threaten to sue when their child is disciplined.

- *Many teachers say documentation requirements go beyond common sense.* Although relatively few teachers (14%) reject the need to document incidents of misbehavior as too cumbersome, more than 4 in 10 (44%) say the requirements in their own school “go beyond common sense” and are used primarily to protect the schools from potential lawsuits. The overwhelming majority of teachers (79%) would reserve the use of special hearings—where witnesses are called and lawyers are present—for only the most egregious discipline cases.
- *Student discipline and behavior problems are pervasive.* More than half of the teachers surveyed (52%)—and 43% of the parents—report having an armed police officer stationed on their school grounds, and large numbers indicate that discipline is a concern in their own school. On the whole, the findings suggest that the schools are doing a good job responding to the most serious behavior problems, like drugs and guns, but that they should be doing a lot better when it comes to minor violations of the rules, such as talking out, horseplay, disrespect and the like.
- *Student discipline takes a toll on teachers.* More than 1 in 3 teachers say they have seriously considered quitting the profession—or know a colleague who has left—because student discipline and behavior became so intolerable. And 85% believe new teachers are particularly unprepared for dealing with behavior problems.
- *Problems with student behavior appear to be more acute in urban schools and in schools with high concentrations of student poverty.* Compared with their counterparts, teachers in these schools are more likely to cite student discipline as a top problem, more likely to say it is driving teachers out of the profession and more likely to indicate it has a serious negative impact on student learning.

The Main Culprits

Topping the list of causes of behavior problems in the nation’s schools is parents’ failure to teach their children discipline (82% of teachers and 74% of parents). Second on the list is: “There’s disrespect everywhere in our culture—students absorb it and bring it to school” (73% and 68%). Other Public Agenda research shows that only about a third

of parents say they have succeeded in teaching their child to have self-control and discipline, while half say they have succeeded in teaching their child to do their best in school.

Along with inattentive parents and an overall culture of disrespect, teachers and parents also attribute behavior problems to: overcrowded schools and classrooms (62% of teachers and 54% of parents); parents who are too hasty in challenging school decisions on discipline (58% of teachers and 42% of parents); districts that back down from assertive parents (55% of teachers and 48% of parents); and teachers who ease up on discipline because they worry they may not get support (52% of teachers).

Open to Many Solutions—from Alternative Schools to Limits on Litigation

Despite multiple and complicated causes, the discipline problem is not insurmountable, according to the teachers and parents who participated in this study. In fact, majorities of both teachers and parents voice support for all of the ideas tested in the surveys, although some garner much more intense backing than others. The number of respondents who show “very” strong support (as opposed to “somewhat” strong) indicates the intensity of support. The proposals fell into the following categories:

Dealing with “persistent troublemakers”

- Seventy percent of teachers and 68% of parents strongly support 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 support this idea somewhat (Total support: 93% teachers; 89% parents).
- In addition, 46% of teachers and 33% of parents strongly support giving principals a lot more authority to handle discipline issues as they see fit, with

- another 38% of teachers and 37% of parents supporting this idea somewhat (Total support: 84% teachers; 70% 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).

Putting more responsibility on parents

- A strong majority of teachers (69%) say 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).

Limiting lawsuits on discipline

- Forty-two percent of teachers and 46% of parents strongly support 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).
- Fifty percent of teachers and 43% of parents also strongly approve 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).

Consistently enforcing the little rules

- Both groups show high levels of support for the “broken windows” approach—strictly enforcing the little rules so the right tone is created and bigger problems are avoided: 61% of teachers and 63% of parents strongly support this, with another 30% of teachers and 25% of parents supporting this idea somewhat (Total support: 91% teachers; 88% parents).
- Parents, in particular, think dress codes are a very (59%) or somewhat (25%) good idea (Total support: 75% teachers; 84% parents).
- Most teachers believe putting more of an emphasis on classroom management skills in teacher education programs would go a long way toward improving student discipline and behavior: 54% say this would be a very effective solution and another 37% somewhat effective (Total support: 91% teachers).
- Teachers also believe that treating special education students just like other students, unless their misbehavior is related to their disability, is a good approach: 65% of teachers say this would be a very effective solution, while another 29% consider it somewhat effective (Total support: 94% teachers).

About Common Good and Public Agenda

Teaching Interrupted was conducted by Public Agenda for Common Good, a bipartisan organization whose mission is to call attention to America’s “lawsuit culture.” Public Agenda is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization that examines public thinking about a wide range of social and political issues. As an organization, Public Agenda takes no position on the role litigation plays in public school discipline policies or in any other area of American life. Common Good gave Public Agenda complete freedom to use its own judgment and expertise in conducting and reporting this research. The purpose of this document is to report the views of parents and teachers on this subject, not to endorse them.