

Inside Education

Part 1 Discipline: Has school discipline become undisciplined? (It will be very important to read the end of Part 3)

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Any educator can tell you that discipline is by far the most challenging of all issues facing teachers, administrators, and schools in general; that's why teachers rank it as their number one problem. In its twenty-two year existence, the Annual Gallup Poll has identified "lack of discipline" as the most serious and difficult problem facing the nation's educational system; without discipline learning becomes an orphan to disruption.

Numbers will add a reality to the problem: In a survey taken by the American Federation of Teachers "66 percent of the members reported having been verbally abused by a student, 32 percent had been threatened or assaulted, and 20 percent had administrators refuse to remove a disruptive student." Data from Indicators of School Crime and Safety, 2001, indicates that teachers were the victims of 1,700,000 non-fatal crimes at school; and what is important to note is that this number only includes disciplinary problems that were reported to police.

The reality is that discipline problems are the major reason why teachers leave the profession within the first five years. Better pay will certainly not solve this problem, but perhaps hazardous duty pay would help to compensate school personnel for what they have to endure day in and day out.

However, there is a rather disturbing issue surrounding this problem. When principals were surveyed (Violence and Discipline Problems in U.S. Public Schools 1996-97), 43% perceived discipline issues as no more than minor in their school, 41% indicated it was a moderate problem and only 16% perceived at least one discipline issue as a serious problem. How is it that teachers and the public polls report discipline as the number one school problem, but only 16% of the principals see it as a serious problem? This difference in perception may help explain why discipline is so undisciplined.

Another reality is that discipline is a global problem. An article from Malaysia, "Teachers' Union Faults Principals for Indiscipline," claims that they are aware of the problems created by the students, but they keep quiet until the situation gets out of control.

David Lucas, a retired teacher, believes that "the main reason for teacher shortages is that of pupil behaviour and no politician seems to have the courage to address this issue and admit this fact to the public." He is referring to discipline in England where he was a teacher for 37 years. He further claims that discipline has gotten worse in the past five years.

In other words, since discipline is a worldwide problem, it is a societal problem—not just a school problem; and unchecked, it becomes the breeding ground for school disciplinary problems. This is a critically important distinction not emphasized in the literature and research concerning discipline. If there are no reforms in the societal culture impacting school misbehavior—and no such reforms are taking place--school attempts to improve discipline will be hampered. This is a major reason why the problem is getting worse, not better.

A hearing was conducted by a sub-committee of the U.S. House of Representatives in March 1999 concerning discipline and violence in schools. Testimony could be summed up in one statement: "Effective discipline policies and programs are critical to creating safe schools."

Bob Chase, President of the National Education Association, in an article Teaching Right from Wrong (it will be a separate article in this series), stated that: “Children’s capacity for goodness makes discipline possible, but their capacity for chaos makes discipline necessary...and learning cannot occur in chaos.”

The late Albert Shanker, who was president of the American Federation of Teachers, stated that “classroom disruption is more pervasive than school violence and just as fatal to learning.” Eventually, tolerating undisciplined behaviors leads to violence, and “nipping it in the bud” would certainly help to prevent more violent behaviors.

What’s really interesting about all of this is that the students want structure and discipline. A Public Agenda survey reported: “Teenagers from all racial and economic groups complain bitterly about lax instructors and un-enforced rules...and they are unhappy in classrooms where disruptive students hold sway.” Earlier Public Agenda polls had revealed that teachers, parents, and the general public want the same thing the kids want.

So the question that needs to be answered is “why aren’t they getting it?” There are, of course, many reasons. One reason is that discipline has been taken away from the teachers. In Florida’s Palm Beach County, teachers are now required to take charge of discipline; this may sound odd, but that is exactly what is happening. What took away their disciplinary responsibility? Discipline was relegated to administrators and police officers.

Another reason is that there is hesitation on the part of teachers and administrators to discipline. In urban schools, they get charged with discrimination. For example, a desperately needed bond issue to repair deteriorating schools in Cincinnati failed to pass. What played a large part in its defeat was a campaign by Baptist Ministers that “schools were unfairly punishing black children.” Deteriorating schools have been identified as a factor in contributing to unruly behavior, so what sense did it make to defeat the bond issue?

In suburban schools, parents are quick to drag in the lawyers. A reason for the increase in school lawsuits is zero tolerance policies which is an attempt to control discipline. Just consider what is happening in elementary schools: one-quarter of school principals surveyed by the American Tort Reform Association in 1999 had faced a lawsuit or out-of-court settlement in the previous two years. It’s even worse at the secondary level. How can schools be managed effectively under the weight of the cumbersome and jaundiced judicial system?

Yet, the facts are that “if disorder and disrespectful behavior are tolerated—make no mistake—they will proliferate; and, as more and more is tolerated overtime, what once was unthinkable becomes the norm.” The problem is that when things get bad enough, desperation sets in and, too often, desperate actions are considered for redress.

Next week Part 2 Discipline: Corporal Punishment