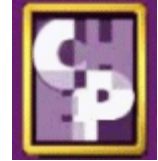




College of Human Resources, Education &amp; Public Policy

## Education Policy Brief

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# Discipline

Student misbehavior is a problem affecting schools not only in Delaware but also across the nation and around the world. Student conduct problems in the classroom interfere with teaching and learning and are thought to be a precursor to later school dropout and similar negative social outcomes. Student behavior problems are also thought to be a leading contributor to teacher stress and attrition. Largely for these reasons, school discipline has become a focus of recent policy initiatives. At the national level, the sixth National Education Goal states that "by the year 2000, every school in America will be free of drugs and violence and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning." At the state level, the Delaware State legislature recently created the Comprehensive School Discipline Improvement Initiative, which allocates state funds to schools to aid in their development of programs that address school discipline.

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### Research Findings:

#### What is Student Misbehavior?

Student misbehavior is any activity that interferes with teaching and learning. Not being prepared for class, talking in class, fighting, and tardiness disrupt the process of teaching and learning. Under this definition, misbehavior is also any activity that hinders the misbehaving student's ability to learn, such as excessive absenteeism, cheating, and alcohol and drug use. Behavior problems often appear in children as young as the early elementary years, peak in high school, and decline into early adulthood.

#### What Influences Discipline Problems?

##### *Academic Self-Concept*

- Children who *believe* they are poor students often have behavior problems.

- Student behavior often worsens as student achievement declines.

### ***Peer Influence***

- Students who spend time with problem or criminal children tend to be problem or criminal children themselves. The influence of a child's peer group is one of the strongest predictors of student behavior.

### ***Attitudes Toward and Involvement with School***

- Students who feel committed to their school often have fewer behavior problems at school.
- Students who are highly involved in school activities tend to be better behaved.

### ***School Size and School Climate***

- Small schools (often defined as schools with an enrollment of 300 students or less) usually have fewer discipline problems. The larger the school, the more disorderly it is likely to be.
- Schools with a positive climate tend to have fewer behavior problems. Components of a positive school climate are fair discipline and consistent supervision.

### ***Parent Involvement***

- Students whose parents are interested and involved with their education and activities are less likely to have behavior problems.
- Students whose parents have fair, nonabusive, and consistent discipline styles also tend to have fewer behavior problems.

### **Which Discipline Programs Work?**

**Discipline Programs.** Discipline programs range from helping students with self-control to restructuring schools to meet student needs. Empirical research on these programs is disappointingly sparse. However, many of these programs do have a common element that researchers agree is important to an effective discipline program – arming teachers with classroom management skills.

- ***Educators skilled in classroom management*** are often able to *prevent* disruptions from occurring. Preventive techniques include setting *clear expectations* of appropriate behaviors, *monitoring* the classroom continuously for signs of confusion and inattention, quick *intervention* when a problem arises, *consistent and fair* enforcement of classroom rules, and presenting well-paced and *well-prepared lessons*.

A challenge in the literature on school discipline is making sense of evaluative results when multiple programs or varying implementations have been employed. Several discipline methods have had some success, though interpretation should be cautious because results are based on so few data.

- ***Academically-oriented in-school suspensions*** programs that involve *parents* as well as school

staff have had some success in reducing discipline problems. Successful in-school suspensions programs should be separate from other classrooms, yet give students an opportunity to complete regular class assignments for credit and without academic penalty.

- Some schools have also had some success in reducing discipline problems by integrating *conflict resolution* and *peer mediation* strategies into the school curriculum.
- *Alternative schools* that allow students to fulfill normal academic requirements while learning life skills also have shown some success, though this may be due in part to their small size and individualized attention.

An analysis of national and international discipline programs showed that successful programs had a focus on helping students develop practical skills, promoting the development of caring human relationships, and providing experiences that lead to increased self-esteem. School-based programs are often more effective when administered by non-school agencies yet integrated within the school.

- *Prevention and early intervention* were the focus of successful programs, rather than remediation and treatment. In particular, early interventions aimed at changing the organizational culture, rather than at changing individuals, were more successful.

**Discipline Policies.** Comparisons of discipline policies have illuminated attributes that are common to well-disciplined schools, such as the *active involvement of the entire school community* (i.e., administrators, teachers, parents, students) in the development of a discipline policy.

- Such policies should 1) include *specific* categories of offenses, 2) allow flexibility of consequences for minor infractions yet non-negotiable consequences for serious offenses, 3) *communicate* the policy to the entire school community, and 4) *consistently enforce* the rules set forth in the policy.

#### Which Discipline Programs Don't Work?

- *Out-of-school suspension* is ineffective in remediating discipline problems because many students do not view it as a punishment. Removing the misbehaving student from the classroom prevents that student from learning and provides no means for preventing or reducing future misconduct (though it does provide some relief for the teacher and may serve as a deterrent for other children).
- *Corporal punishment* has been linked to school vandalism, increased violence, and higher rates of misbehavior. Corporal punishment can create negative attitudes in students, reinforce the kind of behavior it is intended to punish, and lead to increased discipline problems.

#### **Delaware Situation:**

In recent statewide polls, Delaware citizens and teachers expressed concern over school discipline. In particular, over half of educators polled indicated that student behavior kept teachers from teaching.

To address this issue, Delaware's Comprehensive School Discipline Improvement Initiative has implemented Alternative Education programs, School-Based Intervention Programs, and School and

Community Partnership Prevention Programs. These programs vary greatly from school to school.

While many of Delaware's schools would not be considered large, few would be considered small. In fact, the average high school enrollment (1,084 students) is over three times the size of a small school and the average middle school enrollment is over twice the size of a small school (760 students).

While many discipline methods are employed in Delaware schools, out-of-school suspension is widely used to handle student misbehavior. In the 1996-97 school year, there were about 1,281 elementary school; over 10,948 middle school; and almost 14,945 high school out-of-school suspensions.

### **Research Summary:**

While there is much we do not know about preventing behavior problems, there is also much we can glean from the existing research. Practices that foster a better academic self-concept in students, encourage positive peer relationships, increase school commitment and involvement, create a positive school climate, and encourage parental involvement might aid in decreasing discipline problems.

Discipline programs and policies should not be isolated from the wider school climate or from instructional practices in the classroom. Successful programs integrate services within the school and focus on classroom management techniques as well as consistency and fairness with students. Academically oriented in-school suspension, conflict resolution strategies, and alternative schools have shown some success in reducing discipline problems. Out-of-school suspensions and corporal punishment are often ineffective in combating school discipline problems and can further exacerbate the problems.

### **Policy Questions for Consideration:**

- To what extent are present efforts aimed at addressing student misbehavior focused on increasing a student's academic self-concept?
- Well-disciplined schools have discipline policies that are clearly stated, communicated to the entire school community, and consistently enforced. To what extent do Delaware schools do this?
- To what extent does Delaware's Alternative Education program allow students to fulfill normal academic requirements? To what extent does this program result in sustained behavior change?
- Delaware schools widely use out-of-school suspensions to reduce discipline problems. What effect, if any, is this having on student behavior and student achievement?

Classroom management skills are critical to successful discipline. How should preservice and inservice education effectively address classroom management techniques?

### **Bibliography**

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