

[edweek.org](https://www.edweek.org)

How to Manage Discord Over Student Discipline

Arianna Prothero

13-16 minutes



—Illustration by James Steinberg

Student misbehavior is a big source of friction in many schools. Educators offer ways to build consensus around discipline

The principal-teacher relationship faces a lot of potential stressors, from dealing with parents to disagreements over who has to do lunch duty.

But perhaps nothing causes more friction between principals and teachers than how to discipline students.

Teachers and principals alike—although to varying degrees—rank student discipline as the biggest source of disagreement between the two groups, according to a survey by the Education Week Research Center.

Principals and teachers frequently have competing priorities. Principals must adhere to district, state, or federal policies aimed at, say, reducing suspensions and expulsions. Teachers—whose performance is judged in part on test scores and other measures of achievement—are often focused on keeping order in their classroom.

"That's been the biggest frustration in the districts I have been at: teachers have come back and questioned the consequences that a student received, felt that they weren't severe enough," said Russell McDaniel, the principal

of the junior high school in the Celina Independent School District, a rural district in Celina, Texas. "You got to sit down and explain to the teachers ... with the policies we have in place, this is all I am allowed to do."

Principals who have been navigating these issues for a long time agree that communication, relationships, and training are key to creating the buy-in from teachers necessary to ensure that discipline does what it's ultimately supposed to: teach students how to behave and succeed in society, not create unnecessary animosity between principals and their teachers.

Nearly a quarter of principals and over half of teachers surveyed by the Education Week Research Center listed student discipline as a major source of friction in the principal-teacher relationship at their school. In contrast, the second-most selected issue—scheduling and planning period time—was cited as a major source of friction by only 14 percent of principals and 24 percent of teachers.

For teachers, tensions over discipline may arise out of a feeling that the stakes are higher for them to keep their classrooms under control, said Judith Kafka, a professor of education policy and history at the City University of New York.

"We have been going through an era of blaming teachers for a lot of society's failures. They have been feeling that not just from the principal, but from federal and state policies, from rhetoric," she said. "Especially in a context when teachers are told: 'We are going to judge you based on student test scores.' Then teachers are going to feel more pressure to say, ... 'I don't have time to deal with a child who is presenting challenging behavior because that's going to put us a whole day behind.'"

EXCLUSIVE SURVEY

52%
of teachers & **24%**
of principals

say that student discipline is a major source
of friction when it comes to the teacher-principal
relationship at their school.

SOURCE: Education Week Research Center, 2019

Shifts in Discipline Policies

Over the last decade or so, many schools shifted from strict, zero-tolerance discipline policies to supportive, more rehabilitative practices. That change, in part, was driven by concerns among civil rights advocates that black and Latino students and students in special education were punished more harshly than their white and general education peers—findings backed up by data.

During the Obama presidency, federal civil rights authorities issued guidance to schools that aimed to reduce disproportionately high rates of discipline for students of color—a policy that's since been rescinded by the Trump

administration. But many states and schools have stayed the course on using less-strict approaches that supporters say have led to a drop in overly harsh consequences for minor misbehavior.

But the move to rein in traditional forms of discipline like out-of-school suspensions can create real conflict, especially if teachers feel new policies have been sprung on them without adequate training and support.

That's how Dave Rodgers, a veteran teacher in the Visalia Unified School District in central California, felt when his district implemented Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports—a method that categorizes students into three levels, or "tiers," depending on the intensity of their behavioral needs. Those students with the most challenging behavioral problems—tier 3 students—receive more intensive supports.

"In my experience, we didn't have a clear plan on what the tiers were, what the steps were, and what do we do with these tier 3 kids other than send them back to class," he said. "I cannot provide the support that a tier 3 student needs—it's like asking me to fly a plane and I don't have any flight experience."

Rodgers sympathizes with principals who are under pressure to reduce suspension rates and juggle other administrative responsibilities, but he still wishes he had more training and follow-up on what disciplinary action was taken. "If a kid walks out of class because they don't like something you said or because you told them to get to work and they're having a bad day—where's my help?" said Rodgers. "What happened to that student? Were there any consequences?"

Administrators may not discipline students who break the dress code or routinely show up late for class, said Rodgers, but respecting those rules often matters to teachers.

"What I have seen as the biggest problems in my teaching career are tardies and absences, but the administration will tell us that's not something they can punish a student for or suspend a student for," he said.

Clear Expectations

While it may be too much to expect teachers and principals to always see eye-to-eye on discipline, communication, relationships, and training are key to making sure those disagreements don't become a major source of conflict, several veteran principals told Education Week. Especially if a school is changing its overall philosophy and approach to discipline, such as adopting restorative practices where staff members help students make amends with those who were impacted by their misbehavior or wrongdoing.

McDaniel, the Texas principal, said an essential part of good communication is having clear cut guidelines for who handles student misbehavior.

"I think the biggest thing is sitting down before the school year and getting a blueprint for what the classroom expectations are and what behavior a teacher is going to manage and what the office is going to manage," he said. "It's black and white—here's the expectations for the teachers, here's the expectations for the students, here are the steps, and here is a reward system built into it."

That clarity, he said, helps dispel confusion—and disagreement—over who should handle certain incidents and behaviors from the onset.

There are also more basic ways to improve communication, said John Boylan, the principal at Burrell High School in Lower Burrell, Pa.: just pick up the phone, for one. When a student is referred to his office, he explains to the teacher what disciplinary action he took and why—and he makes it a conversation rather than a one-way communication.

"I prefer to pick up the phone and talk. Emails can be misinterpreted," said Boylan. "It's great if it can be in the moment in real time."

Having clear guidelines and open lines of communication are important not only for dispelling confusion among teachers over what their responsibilities are, it helps parents know what to expect, too, said Joey Jones, the

principal of Robert Frost Middle School in Rockville, Md.

Jones is a strong believer that communication undergirds any successful discipline program. And, he said, an essential part of that is making sure everyone understands what the end goal is. "It goes back to communication," he said. "And what our collective role is: that a student learns in a safe environment."

Being able to iron out disagreements over student discipline often comes down to the relationships developed beforehand—both between principals and teachers and between educators and the larger school community, from parents to students to bus drivers.

One way to build relationships is through inclusion.

For Kerensa Wing, the principal of Collins Hill High School in Gwinnett County, Ga., teachers must be included in the restorative process—namely by asking for teacher input on the consequences. She has found it's meaningful to get students' input as well—and, subsequently, their buy-in—on discipline.

"We have a 'student expectations committee' where we allow teachers and students and administration to come together to discuss the local rules, that we really do have control over, to review those each year to make sure they're still relevant. Like we don't have a dress code thing that's just not relevant any longer," she said, calling it a best practice. "Just having those healthy discussions, and the teachers knowing they have input in those decisions, that helps as well."

Wing said staying attuned to teachers and the levels of experience they bring to the classroom helps her address problem spots before they arise. Wing said her greener teachers and her more seasoned teachers often require different supports and guidance. Newer teachers may struggle with consistency in discipline, she said, which can make students feel like they're being picked on.

For more veteran teachers, understanding the needs of a rapidly changing student body and increasing levels of poverty can be challenging to grasp, she said.

"I do think there are some generational gaps, but we are constantly trying to train, and help teachers have some perspectives, and get them out in the community."

Everyone, Wing said, has to have a willingness to change their thinking and perspective as needs evolve.

A Core Subject

Another important aspect to building relationships is making sure teachers, and the broader community, have bought into changes around discipline, said Nick Faber, the president of the St. Paul Federation of Teachers in Minnesota.

In the St. Paul district, schools were given the option to sign up as test pilot sites for using restorative practices as an approach to dealing with student misbehavior, said Faber.

"It's been organic rather than the district dictating stuff to you," he said. "Instead of waking up one day and having the district say, 'OK, everyone is a restorative site.' ... It created an atmosphere in these sites that it's not just another district mandate."

And that buy-in is often the difference between a successfully implemented discipline approach and one that is only adopted halfheartedly by staff.

While Faber certainly sees tensions between teachers and principals over discipline, in his experience, the two groups are more often aligned. When there is tension, he said, it tends to come from top-down directives issued from higher up the administrative line of command.

"Sure, there are instances where we have teachers who were sworn at in the classroom and then the kid is back the next day, and there is frustration around that," he said. "But overall, we find that the teachers and principals

want the same thing—and we find a lack of funding or a lack of will on the administration's part."

But communication and relationships will do little if teachers aren't given the basic tools to carry out a discipline regime—whatever it may be.

While the training required will vary depending on the specific school, the discipline philosophy it's using, and the students it serves, it's important that it's not a one-off thing, said Wing. It must be for all teachers and it must continue over time. Wing also provides specific trainings for teachers having trouble with classroom management.

There is also potentially a generational gap in understanding around restorative practices that principals need to be attuned to, said Boylan, the principal in Pennsylvania. Newer teachers are more likely to have learned about restorative discipline practices while in university, so training has to take into account that more seasoned teachers haven't had the same amount of exposure.

Training initiatives, though, should be a two-way street said Jones, the Maryland principal.

"It's about training, including school leaders; we need to be trained in how to support good student behaviors," he said.

But even in the best situations, discipline—and the tensions that it causes between principals and teachers—will always be a feature of school life, said Kafka, the CUNY academic who has studied the history of school discipline in the United States.

She said in the 1950s, newspaper headlines were blaring about a discipline crisis in the country.

"People often think that discipline is worse now than it was before—no matter when," she said. "We are constantly in a discipline crisis. I would question whether things are worse now."



The main issue is how to mitigate it—and put it in perspective. "You can go into very high-functioning schools, students have been admitted by selective criteria, and the number one thing that teachers are worried about is discipline," said Kafka.

But, it may help to remember that discipline isn't an extra thing schools have to deal with that gets in the way of teaching core subjects. Discipline is a core subject, Kafka said.

"I would argue it's a fundamental purpose of schooling," she said. "It's teaching them how to behave in a social world. Just like kids make mistakes in reading, in math, they make mistakes in behavior."

Vol. 39, Issue 09, Pages 21-23

Published in Print: October 16, 2019, as **Managing Discord Over Discipline**

[Back to Top](#)

