Administrators Rank Discipline Problems— Common and Serious

By Melvin E. Kaufman and David B. Center

Have discipline problems faced by secondary school educators changed significantly during the past three decades? If so, are these problems more or less severe than those reported in the past?

Are discipline problems related to demographic variables such as size and geographic location of the school or percentage of minority students?

Do principals and assistant principals share the same views of various discipline problems?

To assess these questions, a list of 27 discipline problems was generated with the assistance of a group of secondary school principals and assistant principals and sent to 500 randomly selected secondary school administrators in Georgia. The administrators were asked to first rank the five most common discipline problems and then to rank the five most serious problems.

A total of 292 administrators responded to the survey, represent-

ing a response rate of 58 percent. Table 1 presents the rankings for the most common problems. Table 2 presents the rankings for the most serious problems.

In descending order, the five most *common* discipline problems were: disruptive behavior, tardiness, defiance of authority, problem behaviors on the bus, and fighting. With the exception of tardiness, these problems all reflect physical and/or verbal aggression.

The second ranking indicated the five most *serious* problems were: fighting, disruptive behavior, defiance of authority, problem behaviors on the bus, and use of drugs or alcohol at school.

The most common problems generally were also rated as the most serious ones. The two exceptions were tardiness and use of drugs and alcohol at school. Tardiness, second in terms of being most common, was not ranked among the five most serious problems. Use of drugs and alcohol at school, while not ranked among the five most common problems, was ranked fifth among the most serious problems.

Discussion of the Results

Direct comparison with earlier studies is somewhat difficult, since the respondent group studies differ from survey to survey. Bearing in mind these differences, some significant changes appear to have occurred in the discipline problems

Melvin E. Kaufman and David B. Center are professors of education at Georgia State University, Atlanta.

reported in high schools during the past three decades. The highest rankings in earlier studies included failure to do homework, congregating in halls and lavatories, truancy, impertinence to teachers, and use of profanity. In the present study, profanity as a common or serious problem was ranked relatively low.

In the earlier studies, fighting and using drugs were ranked relatively low, but were ranked among the most serious discipline problems in the present study. This is congruent with the concern over the widespread increase in secondary school incidents of aggression and drug use reported during the last decade (Brown and Payne, 1988; Kaywell, 1987; Stover, 1988).

Given the extensive media atten-

tion focused on drug and alcohol problems in adolescence, it is interesting to note that the use of drugs or alcohol was not ranked among the most common discipline problems in secondary schools. While not denying the importance of substance abuse problems, it would appear that school administrators view a number of other discipline problems as both more common and more serious.

All 27 possible discipline problems were examined relative to demographic variables included in the survey. A substantially greater percentage of assistant principals viewed use of drugs or alcohol as serious; 36 percent for assistant principals and 15.7 percent for principals. In many schools, assistant

Table 1
Respondents' Ranking of the Discipline Problems: Most Common

1.	Disruptive behavior		16.	Assaults on other students
2.	Tardiness		17.	Use of drugs or alcohol at school
3.	Defiance of authority		18.5	Threats with a weapon
4.	Problem behaviors on bus		18.5	Vandalism of private property at school
5.	Fighting (mutual aggression)			
6.	Truancy		20.5	Sexual molestation
7.	Cutting classes		20.5	Carrying a weapon
8.	Dress code violations		22.5	Overt sexual behavior between students
9.	Use of profanity in class			
10.	Unsanctioned smoking at class		22.5	Selling drugs or alcohol at school
11.	Use of smokeless tobacco products		25.5	Exposing self
12.	Theft of private property		25.5	Theft of school property
13.	Sleeping in class		25.5	Assaults against school personnel
14.	Cheating on tests or assignments		25.5	Possession of pornography
15.	Vandalism of school property			

principals may have more direct daily contact with the problem than principals.

More males than females rated truancy as a concern—38 percent of the males and 23.4 percent of the females. The opposite relationship was found with respect to concern about carrying a weapon, with 27.7 percent of the females ranking this as a serious problem and 18.1 percent of the males.

Problem behavior on buses was considered a serious problem by the two smallest school systems—56.4 percent and 44.8 percent, respectively. This sharply contrasts with the low ranking for bus problems in the schools from the largest school population category (250,000+). In this group, only 24.3 percent rated

bus behavior as a serious problem. It is most likely that less densely populated areas require busing students over longer distances than do densely populated school districts; thus, total time spent on the bus may be a factor accounting for the greater concern about behavior on buses in less populated communities.

Defiance of authority was most often ranked as a serious problem in schools in the second smallest population category (2,500–4,999). A total of 72.4 percent of the respondents from this population category ranked defiance as a serious concern. With one exception, respondents from the remaining population categories selected defiance as a serious problem no more than 30–50 percent of the time, pos-

Table 2
Respondents' Ranking of the Discipline Problems: Most Serious

1.	Fighting (mutual aggression)	16.	Vandalism of school property
2.	Disruptive behavior	17.	Dress code violations
3.	Defiance of authority	18.	Threats with a weapon
4.	Problem behaviors on bus	20.	Sleeping in class
5.	Use of drugs or alcohol at school	20.	Cheating on tests or assignments
6.	Tardiness	20.	Vandalism of private property at school
7.	Truancy		
8.	Cutting classes	22.	Theft of school property
9.	Carrying a weapon	24.	Sexual molestation
10.	Use of profanity in class	24.	Overt sexual behavior between students
11.5	Unsanctioned smoking at school		
11.5	Theft of private property	24.	Assaults against school personnel
13.	Assaults on other students	26.	Possession of pornography
14.	Use of smokeless tobacco products	27	Exposing self
15.	Selling drugs or alcohol at school		

sibly because tolerance of defiance is less acceptable in sparsely populated areas.

Twenty-nine percent of urban respondents ranked assaults on other students as a serious problem. The next highest ranking of assaults as a serious problem was in suburban schools, and this occurred only about half as often as in urban schools (17.9%). Rankings of profanity as a common problem ranged from 9 to 35 percent, with urban schools most frequently reporting profanity as a common problem.

Schools with 50 percent or greater minority representation indicated that defiance of authority was more often a serious problem (61.6% versus 49.1%).

Conclusions

The nature of disciplinary problems has been changing during the past three decades with significantly more concern about direct physical or verbal expressions of aggression. Managing these problems very likely detracts from the primary mission of secondary schools: to educate youngsters and to prepare them for future citizenship, careers, and/or college. And, effective management of discipline problems is rarely a part of the formal training of most school administrators.

Therefore, most administrators probably need support both through training in behavioral management and in the effective use of such procedures as in-school suspension (Center and McKittrick, 1987). Institutions of higher education also need to address this apparent training deficiency in their preparation programs for administrators.

Families and the community need to provide greater support to schools by inculcating positive behaviors such as self-control, and values such as respect for the rights of others. Equally important is early intervention for these problems prior to a student's entrance into secondary school, by which time they may have become chronic.

References

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