

Los Angeles Times

Opinion: Letters

School discipline, but how?

May 13, 2007

Re "Learning discipline," editorial, May 7

Too often we hear "educrats" and politicians debate school reform without mentioning the civic responsibilities of students and parents. Each new proposal paints itself as the panacea that will bring excellence to education, yet our schools continue to struggle not for excellence but for simple adequacy.

Although few reasonable people would wish a return to the days when teachers brought rulers down across students' knuckles, it is clear that something must be done to persuade students to respect their teachers, themselves and their peers by behaving appropriately in the classroom. And parents must step up and accept their responsibilities.

I suggest that California expand its network of continuation schools and put some teeth back into school discipline policies by suspending or expelling the most disruptive students. And if our school administrators cannot summon the courage to stand up to furious parents and banish these students, perhaps it is time we jettisoned the administrators. We need to get serious about the real problems in our schools. Recess is over.

NEAL STANIFER

Bakersfield

Your editorial suggests that L.A. Unified remove "troublesome or troubling students" from regular schools and place them in separate locations, referring to discipline policies "embraced" in New York. But these policies have generated anger from parents, students and advocates in New York, denying students their human rights to high-quality education, dignity and equity.

Many discipline sites and so-called Second Opportunity Schools in New York provide no real instruction and create environments that resemble detention facilities. African American and Latino students are disproportionately targeted. Advocates for Children of New York has a class-action lawsuit pending in part concerning inadequate services for students with disabilities in these alternative sites.

To make L.A. Unified safer and more productive, schools need better training and support for staff to prevent and resolve conflict, along with access to mediation and counseling to address the causes of student behavior and keep kids in school.

ELIZABETH SULLIVAN

Education Program Director

National Economic and Social Rights Initiative, New York

The editorial misrepresents the efforts of the LAUSD to improve its district discipline policy. This policy does not eliminate any established disciplinary procedures for addressing disruptive behavior, but it emphasizes proactive strategies for defining, teaching and supporting appropriate student behaviors. This

approach, which is well grounded in research, has been successfully implemented in districts nationwide and is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as an effective practice.

Unfortunately, the editorial board has taken a stance that harsher punishment is the only answer to disruptive behavior. The board has only to look to the recent findings of the gang violence report to see that punishment has not been successful. Public education has an obligation to teach and model the appropriate social behaviors that will help students to be contributing members of our society.

DONNALYN JAQUE-ANTÓN
Executive Officer
Educational Services, L.A. Unified School District

I taught in a district adjacent to Los Angeles for 30 years and faced situations that you wrote of in your editorial on L.A. schools' discipline policy. I am gratified that you recognize the need for better classroom discipline because without an orderly environment, teachers cannot teach and kids cannot learn. Improving discipline would do more to raise test scores than any other thing done to fix our schools.

GEORGIE GRUTBO
La Habra Heights

Los Angeles Times

Opinion: Editorial

Undisciplined LAUSD

Students and teachers are being punished by L.A.'s policies -- and lack thereof -- for dealing with behavior problems.

May 7, 2007

THE DAYS WHEN school was taught "to the tune of a hickory stick" are over, thankfully. Whacking unruly or unprepared kids is no way to teach. Yet when it comes to discipline in Los Angeles schools nowadays, the hickory stick has given way to a metaphorical egg noodle.

The result is that behavior problems frustrate teachers and hinder motivated students in many L.A. schools. A recent California survey commissioned by the state's Department of Education found that teachers leave the profession primarily because of discipline issues —disruptive students and, occasionally, rude parents.

Consider the following: A boy sexually harassed a girl at Marina del Rey Middle School last year, so his teacher reported his behavior to his mother. Mom's response? She burst into the classroom and gave everyone the finger.

Then there's the case of the Audubon Middle School teacher in South Los Angeles who took a laptop computer away from a boy. The student responded by overturning his desk and screaming at the teacher. Veteran public school educators will shrug — uncivil behavior is par for the course.

In 1994, the L.A. Unified School District recognized the need for a uniform discipline policy to deal with cases such as these. The district, in a typical display of alacrity, is just now, 13 years later, getting around to implementing one. What it's come up with is as weak as it is late. The policy calls for teachers to praise positive behavior rather than resorting to punishment. Critics say it's too soft. Departing school board member David Tokofsky aptly calls it the "34 strikes and you're out" policy.

Worse, implementing the plan will take three to five years. That's way too long, and it ensures that many more teachers, weary of their jobs and harassed by students, will leave the district, deepening its malaise.

Studies show that well-run schools have a few items in common: Their administrators walk the campus. Their students help set campus rules, and those rules are enforced. Teacher discipline is backed up by principals, and principals' actions are supported by the central office.

Charter schools have an advantage in this area, with leeway to boot unruly students (and their parents) that regular schools lack. Nonetheless, some of their methods can be adapted.

Steve Barr, founder of Green Dot charter schools, contends that discipline must be strictly and consistently applied. Green Dot, for instance, bars gang members, regardless of their academic aptitude. One brilliant, straight-A student was required to leave, Barr said, because his presence endangered others by gang members coming to look for him after school.

This leads to an aspect of discipline reform that L.A. Unified should consider — removing troublesome or troubling students to either a different part of the campus or a separate location entirely. Discipline policies embraced by New York City schools allow for this, and it frees teachers to teach.

It also shows that school officials, from the top down, are serious about school rules. Without that, teachers leave and schools fail.