



Safe and Orderly Schools

In poll after poll, parents, teachers and school staff say school safety and order are their highest school priorities. Educators know that other efforts to improve schools will not be effective without an orderly and safe learning environment.

Fortunately, public schools are among the safest places for children. Studies show that only a very small fraction of all the violent crimes involving children occur in school. We must never feel comfortable, however, resting on the knowledge that schools are relatively safe environments for students and teachers. We must constantly strive to make schools the safest environment possible. The students we have been charged to educate and the school staff the AFT represents deserve nothing less.

Schools can reduce the level of student aggression simply by improving the orderliness of their classrooms. Working closely with teachers on students' behavior management skills in the early grades can yield substantial future benefits, including a reduction in both the dropout rate and the incidence of crime.

To continue good behavior developed in the earliest grades, schools must maintain a safe and secure environment. Teachers and school staff, through their unions, can play a key role in establishing effective discipline and safety policies, and can advocate for building facilities that are both safe and conducive to learning. The AFT has identified the following essential

elements to ensure that our schools are safe and orderly:

- **A discipline code that is supported by the entire school community** must be enacted and its guidelines and rules taught to all students. The plan needs to be rigorously and fairly enforced; this requires a real effort by district officials, both appointed and elected. Their charge should be to provide school employees with the support they need to help enforce the code and to make sure children benefit from it.

A well-designed plan should be proactive rather than reactive, have clear and functional rules, set high expectations for children, involve parents and all staff in the development and implementation, and require data collection and frequent program evaluation. Several AFT affiliates have formed oversight committees to monitor the proper implementation of their districts' discipline codes.

- **Research-based prevention and intervention strategies** should be used by each teacher and every school community. Many children with persistent behavior problems lead very unpredictable lives. Teachers and school staff can help offset this by providing an organized environment, one that is predictable and stable, which can replace the feelings of insecurity, mistrust and discomfort that can lead to disruptive student behavior.

A predictable environment, the heart of effective classroom management, is one in which instructional techniques, classroom arrangement, rules and procedures and well-established schedules are well thought out and mutually supportive. Students and teachers benefit when classrooms and entire school communities plan and implement routines and rewards that are focused on building a supportive, positive environment with high behavioral expectations for all. The AFT offers school employees extensive training in classroom management, anti-social behavior and teacher expectations through its ER&D (Educational Research and Dissemination) program. These techniques are research-based and field-tested. School districts should offer classroom management training to all staff. Even the most effective classroom management practices will be less effective, however if they are not practiced in the context of a well-defined discipline policy.

- When a child continues to act out in spite of prevention measures it becomes necessary to use **interventions, such as social skills training, social problem solving or anger management training** to help reshape the behavior. The continuous checking of children's progress over time allows adults to adjust their interventions and to improve their effectiveness. It also is helpful to develop individual behavior plans for children who present more serious behavior problems and to maintain written records of specific events to assist in tracking behavior.

A system that provides behavioral or academic support, mentoring, skill development, and assistance for these at-risk students should be designed to help them meet the behavioral expectations of the school. These supports are necessary if classroom teachers are to focus their efforts and talents on teaching the many, rather than disciplining the few.

- **Alternative placements for chronically disruptive and violent students.** These range from settings where students are

taught social skills and kept abreast of their academic program to environments where a range of social and psychological services are offered to what are known as "wraparound" programs. Good wraparound programs link the student and his or her family to community-based social service agencies, law enforcement, courts and corrections. All parties join together to create an individually tailored, comprehensive treatment plan for the student.

- **School safety plans that protect students and teachers from dangers that come from outside the school.** Each plan should be developed by a school safety committee composed of a variety of employees, including custodial and grounds staff, front office personnel, bus drivers, teachers and support staff. The plan should include specific procedures to be followed in various emergencies, and the features of the plan should be practiced regularly.
- **A commitment to high standards for safe buildings.** Children and school staff must not be placed in dangerous environments that affect their health or interfere with optimal teaching and learning. The high expectations we hold for all of our students should be evident in the schools they attend. Resources should be targeted to the schools most in need of repairs.

Making our schools safe and orderly is a **shared responsibility. School administrators, teachers, staff and parents** must work together, but that is often not enough. The behaviors we see in schools reflect the behaviors children see in the surrounding community. To create safe and orderly schools, we need to bring **business, religious and civic groups** into our schools to help us develop a positive school climate. Of course, we also need to make sure that teachers and school staff, through their unions, play a key role in establishing effective discipline and safety policies.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Encourage the union to establish a labor/management school-safety committee, urge your negotiating team to push for measures in the next contract that support safe and orderly schools as well as effective professional development. Or ask your state legislators to introduce or support school building legislation. Consider collecting your own data

on violations of school discipline codes and polling your members on their experiences with school safety and order. Contact your union, your school district, your legislator and share AFT's solutions for safe and orderly schools with them. School safety should be on everyone's agenda, and every member of a school community can play a role.

SAFE AND ORDERLY SCHOOLS: EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

In **Texas**, the AFT state affiliate worked with the Legislature to pass the Safe Schools Act, which allows a teacher to remove from class a student: (1) who repeatedly interferes with the teacher's ability to communicate effectively with students or with the ability of the student's classmates to learn: or (2) whose behavior is so unruly, disruptive or abusive that it seriously interferes with the teacher's ability to communicate effectively with students in the class or with the ability of the student's classmates to learn. If a student is removed under this provision, the principal may not return the student to the same teacher's class without the teacher's consent unless a placement review committee determines that such placement is the best or only alternative available.

Toledo, Ohio, has pioneered a highly successful approach to the challenge of modifying problem behavior. The contract between the Toledo Federation of Teachers and the Toledo Public Schools establishes a Behavior Specialist Program. Three teachers who are specialists in behavior management are available to respond to student referrals from classroom teachers. A behavior specialist consults with the teacher, reviews school records, observes the student at work and, with the teacher, develops interventions appropriate for the student. The specialist and teacher then meet with the student to explain the interventions and to begin implementing them. They then contact the parents, any social service agencies that are involved and, if necessary, physicians to include them in the process and to share pertinent information.

The specialist meets weekly with the teacher and student to monitor the interventions and make modifications as needed. The specialist then contacts the student's parents to update them on the status of the interventions and share other relevant information regarding both behavioral and academic performance. If the student does not respond to the interventions, he or she will be referred to the school support team for further evaluation to determine if a different educational program/setting would better meet the student's needs.

According to yearly district evaluations of the Behavior Specialist Program, many students respond positively to the behavioral interventions. Their teachers are able to teach again, and the students experience behavioral and academic success in their current educational settings. This kind of specialized help is necessary if regular classroom teachers are to focus their efforts and talents on teaching the many, rather than just disciplining the few.

RESOURCES

“Discipline and School Safety,” AFT’s Discipline and School Safety Web page at www.aft.org/topics/discipline/index.htm.

Setting the Stage for Strong Standards, June 2003, www.aft.org/pubs-reports/downloads/teachers/settingthestage.pdf.

“Heading Off Disruptive Behavior: How Early Intervention Can Reduce Defiant Behavior—and Win Back Teaching Time,” by Hill M. Walker, Elizabeth Ramsey, and Frank M. Gresham, *American Educator*, Winter 2003-2004, www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/fall04/prevention.htm.

Setting Strong Standards, June 2003, www.aft.org/pubs-reports/downloads/teachers/settingstrong.pdf.

Building Minds, Minding Buildings: Turning Crumbling Schools into Environments for Learning, December 2006, www.aft.org/topics/building-conditions/downloads/minding-bldgs.pdf.

For more information, contact Kathy Buzad at kbuzad@aft.org.



A Union of Professionals

American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO
555 New Jersey Ave. N.W.
Washington, DC 20001
202/879-4400
www.aft.org