

The Discipline Dilemma – Classroom Management Skills are Part of the Solution

Before Congress left town for their long summer vacation a group of 62 Democrats sent a [letter to Education Secretary DeVos](#) asking what concrete steps she is taking, to “reduce exclusionary and aversive discipline in public schools around the country.”

The letter cites data showing that black students and students with disabilities tend to be suspended or expelled from school at higher rates than other students. To solve this problem, the Democrats want fewer suspensions and expulsions. In recent years, [prompted by a 2014 “Guidance Letter”](#) from President Obama’s Departments of Education and Justice, many school districts have restricted educators from using suspension as a discipline tool.

Teachers have their own point of view on this issue. In May, [a survey of members by the California Teachers Association](#) (CTA) showed that nine out of ten teachers felt that efforts to replace suspension and expulsion with other discipline strategies were not working well, and that they needed additional training and supports. The CTA President said, "What's happening is these students are being thrown back into the classroom and nothing has been done to deal with their behavior."

Research backs up teacher concerns about the negative effects of reducing suspension and expulsion. A [recent Manhattan Institute study](#) analyzes the effects of Mayors Bloomberg and de Blasio’s efforts to reduce suspension and expulsion in New York City Public Schools between 2012 and 2016. Their analysis of teacher and student surveys lead to a conclusion that de Blasio’s limitations on the use of suspension made schools less orderly and safe – with students reporting higher instances of fighting, drugs and gangs. This effect was largest in the schools with over 90% minority students. In short, it appears that limiting suspension, at least in New York City under de Blasio, had a negative impact on the school climate, and this negative impact was worse for the group it was intended to help.

An interesting aside is that Congress really has very little power to rule out disciplinary methods that school districts can use. The [Supreme Court refused to ban corporal punishment](#) as cruel and unusual punishment in both 1977 and 2008. Today [22 largely rural and southern states still permit paddling](#) even though the more liberal states have abolished use of the paddle as a disciplinary option. So, it is unlikely that the courts would go along with completely banning suspension and expulsion.

The heart of the issue is that no matter what discipline strategies are used the sanctions tend to fall more heavily on disadvantaged students, which all too often correlates with minority students. Some would say this is caused by racial biases of teachers and administrators while others would say it is because the ravages of poverty lead to students acting out. Despite the

desires of Congressional Democrats, we are not likely to sort out these cause and effect issues any time soon. But this does not mean that we cannot address the problem.

So, what is the answer to this dilemma? I believe that there are four essential pieces:

1) Decisions about student discipline policies should be made at the level closest to the parents. This means that local school district officials should be held accountable by the local community to develop and implement effective school discipline policies including how and when sanctions like suspension, expulsion and corporal punishment are used. Parents should never be told that discipline strategies have been ruled out or required because of a mandate from Washington DC. All authority to discipline students should flow from parents.

2) All teachers must be trained and empowered to become experts in classroom management. They must be experts at devising and implementing discipline plans that incorporate rules, procedures, consequences and rewards that work together to establish a healthy and productive classroom learning environment.

If you feel that this is an area in which you need more training CEAI has formed a partnership with Teach 4 the Heart to offer an excellent online classroom management class from a Christian perspective. For many of you there is still time to enroll and cover the material (about 10 hours of instruction) before the critical first days of school. **You can register for Classroom Management 101 [here](#).** **You will receive a course completion certificate when you are finished that, depending on your district, you may be able to present for continuing education credit.**

3) Districts must find ways to ensure that teachers who work with students from high poverty communities have excellent classroom management skills and are provided with extra supports for them to succeed at this difficult work. Extra supports may mean lower class sizes, as well as time out and school suspension and expulsion programs that are staffed by well trained professionals. Extra supports also mean academic supports for students who need them. Even the best classroom management system will fail if the students are not academically capable of doing grade level work. Well-staffed remediation programs and robust special education supports for students with disabilities must be readily available in the most challenging schools

4) Christian teachers and administrators, when implementing classroom management strategies, must display both the justice and mercy modeled by Jesus. We need to realize that we live in a fallen world and that all of us – including our students – have been tainted by sin and will at times do things that are wrong. We should never make excuses for their wrong doing – it is evil – and we must realize that disciplining children is a blessing to them,

For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.

It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. (Hebrews 12:6-11).

However, we must also be ready to forgive when students exhibit the marks of repentance.

For more information on what the balance between mercy and grace can look like in your classroom I would refer you to [Making a Difference: Christian Educators in the Public Schools](#) by Donovan Graham.

Do you have other ideas on solutions for the discipline dilemma? Please share your comments below. We can all improve our practice and grow in understanding by listening to the prayerful thoughts of other Christians.

Tidbits from Around DC

Christians from across the DC region have been blessed to worship alongside Vice President Pence and his family as they explore churches in the area. My daughter who attends a large church has seen the VP and his family on several different occasions.

Pray for the new administration that the families of those who have moved to DC can find church homes where their families faith can grow, and that their children, starting a new school year, will be blessed with supportive new relationships.

Here is a [prayer for wisdom for President Trump](#) that you may find helpful this month. Clearly the trying times our nation faces require supernatural wisdom.

Teacher march on Washington DC underwhelms. A July 22 March on the nation's capital to protest President Trump's education policies organized by the NEA and AFT failed to produce many teachers. Media reports indicate that less than 200 teachers showed up for the rally.

CEAI is interested in your thoughts. Members are encouraged to enter comments below. Personal comments may be addressed to the author at JMitchell@ceai.org.

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