1776 Project Foundation

Restoring Order to the Classroom

Summary

The first thing that a mason does when constructing a foundation is to place the cornerstone. Every other stone the mason lays is in reference to that stone. The entire edifice is determined by its setting.

There is a reason that the terms *edifice* and *edification* sound so similar. Both find their root in a Latin term that means "to build." To be edified is to be "built up" by instruction, uplifted through knowledge. But that is only possible through safe and stable classrooms, which are the cornerstones on which a child's education is built.

The academic edifice stands or falls based on whether schools can cultivate a welcoming and healthy learning environment. When students and teachers feel physically secure, outcomes improve. When they do not, achievement declines.

These were considered uncontroversial and nonpartisan facts until recently. However, a different perspective has gained traction in classrooms across America, one that emerged from the tumultuous environment of academia in the 1970s. It is a combination of a permissive attitude toward disruptive behavior and a culture of disciplinary apathy. It wears different names, but it is perhaps best known today as the "restorative justice" model, which rose to prominence at the turn of the century. And though it is in some cases well-intentioned, the retreat from safety and order has had a negative impact on everything from academic performance to staff retention and recruitment. If a school district wants to tackle the root cause of these issues, it must adequately address the disciplinary situation within every classroom. The restorative justice approach makes that task harder to achieve.

In 2024, CENTEGIX, the largest provider of wearable safety technology for K-12 education, published a national survey of K-12 educators, school administrators, and district administrators. Among the respondents, 84 percent say that safety has a direct impact on student achievement, and 83 percent say that students have "some level of concern for their safety while at school."

And yet, despite safety being a top-of-mind issue for students and teachers alike, 74 percent of respondents expressed that they "do not feel supported by their employer to handle emergency situations at work." That has more consequences than just declining academic performance.

According to 77 percent of respondents to the national survey, school safety also impacts teacher retention and recruitment. Nearly half said that they have considered leaving or have left a job due to feeling unsafe. Now, consider that the Learning Policy Institute estimates that 1 in 8 teaching positions are currently unfilled or filled by a teacher who is not fully certified for the role. Teacher shortages are a perennial problem for a variety of reasons, and hostile work and classroom environments exacerbate the issue even further.

The Restorative Model

In a way, the current system of lenience and indifference toward disruptive, even violent behavior in the classroom is an overcorrection that occurred in response to an overcorrection.

At the same time that cities nationwide implemented broken-windows policing amid the crime waves of the 1980s, schools around the country began to embrace a policy of "no excuses." Both approaches were based on the idea that low-level disorder gives rise to more and ever-intensifying chaos. A car parked on the street with a broken window invites more vandalism because it signals an absence of order. A classroom where students talk over teachers with impunity signals that the rules against bad behavior are not enforced.

There is ample evidence that the broken-windows model contributed to dramatic drops in crime. But public support waned as it began to be perceived as taking an excessive, even discriminatory turn. Likewise, parents recoiled at students being punished for wearing the wrong kinds of socks and being suspended for the most trivial infractions. Then there were concerns over the so-called "school-to-prison pipeline," which became a key fixation of President Barack Obama.

Under his administration, schools were forced to embrace the "disparate impact" approach to decision-making, which meant that disciplinary enforcement was flagged as illegal if it had "disproportionate" statistical effects among different racial and ethnic groups. The policy proved to be paradoxical: the people who suffered most from Obama's anti-discrimination efforts were minority students, whose teachers could no longer reign in their disruptive peers.

Once again, the pendulum swung too far in the other direction. Boundaries gradually eroded. Expectations were lowered. Fear of discrimination resulted in a deterioration of behavioral standards for students across America.

To date, more than 32,000 schools have adopted restorative justice practices. And yet, even its proponents struggle to provide a concrete definition of the overarching philosophy beyond vague platitudes. "There is no one definition for the term," admits the progressive Justice and Prevention Research Center. "Generally, RJ practices are based on principles that establish a voice for victims, offenders, and community in order to address offender accountability for the harm caused (rather than the act itself) and to develop a plan to repair relationships."

In practice, restorative justice means that "mediations" between students and staff and calls home have replaced real disciplinary action, even for serious infractions. And while some students can and do benefit from this model, its fatal flaw is that it has proven incapable of restraining the worst offenders, who understand that the system will not do more than slap them on the wrist.

See, for example, Origins High School in New York City. There, pupils who threatened a Jewish teacher and performed Nazi salutes in the classroom were merely sent to a "mediation room," which failed to deter them.

What happened at Origins High School is not an isolated incident. Since adopting the restorative model, New York City has spent $100 million to see it implemented. The result? Incidents requiring a response from the New York Police Department's school safety division have more than doubled since 2016.

At Hazelbrook Middle School in Oregon, a 13-year-old girl was viciously ambushed from behind and beaten by another student. A video of the altercation went viral, adding insult to injury for the victim. The girl's mother, Krista Kiniv, blamed the school district for creating the conditions that led to the attack. She noted that the student who assaulted her daughter had previously attacked other girls at the school without consequence due to its "restorative justice" policies that protected her from expulsion. Kiniv also alleged that the assailant, who appeared to be female, was actually a "biological male." The district's response was to essentially criticize

the Hazelbrook community for its outrage at the incident and the system that allowed it to happen.

At Young Achievers School in Boston, an eight-grade girl was [viciously beaten](#) during recess by a group of students. She was knocked to the ground, kicked and punched and had hair pulled out. According to her mother, the girl had been bullied for weeks, and the attack was in retaliation for "telling on them." Not only did the school fail to deter those students; it also failed to notify the mother about the subsequent physical assault, and she was only made aware of it after her daughter called from a cell phone. When the mother arrived at Young Achievers, staff barred her from the building and called the police on her when she said that she wouldn't leave without answers about the incident. In a public statement amid the ensuing scandal, Young Achievers affirmed its adherence to "progressive discipline measures," including "Restorative Justice." The mother noted that no one from the school was willing to meet with her to discuss whether and how the students who attacked her daughter would be disciplined.

In Las Vegas, a series of violent attacks sparked outrage from parents who [blamed restorative justice](#) for the chaos. They complained that it tied the hands of administrators, preventing them from holding offenders accountable. Under the new protocols, a student could only be eligible for expulsion for infractions involving weapons. Not for starting multiple fights. Not even for attacking faculty. In one instance at Anthony Saville Middle School, a boy was [sexually assaulted](#) in a locker room by another student. When he fought back, a group of kids joined in and began to beat him, kicking him in his private parts repeatedly. The school refused to take any serious measures against the attackers. Then he was brutally attacked again. The boy's parents had no choice but to pull him out of Saville for his own safety.

Incidents like these have become the new norm all over America.

By 2023, more than 70 percent of educators [reported](#) a spike in disruptive behavior compared to 66 percent in 2019, according to a survey by the EdWeek Research Center. This trend dramatically accelerated after the pandemic, and there is no indication that it has abated.

A [survey](#) by the National Education Association found that "disruptive and even violent behavior became so rampant during the 2022–2023 school year that many educators cited student behavior as a top concern—second only to low pay." Similarly, in an [analysis](#) published in

Education Week, more than 4 in 10 educators reported that at least one teacher in their district had been physically attacked by a student.

By failing to foster safe and welcoming classroom environments, these models of alternative forms of discipline have also contributed to declining student achievement.

The latest report from the National Assessment of Education Progress shows that K-12 test scores in reading and math have plummeted to astonishing lows. Nearly half of all high school seniors are testing below basic proficiency in both subjects. The report also notes that behavioral issues, including absenteeism, have steadily risen.

None of this should come as a surprise. Students cannot learn, and teachers cannot teach, when bad behavior goes unpunished. Indeed, a key study published in the top-tier Journal of Adolescent Health made a direct connection between safety and outcomes. The team of researchers behind the study found that "students who felt safer were more attentive and efficient in the classroom," and "reported fewer symptoms of depression, such as feeling unhappy and having difficulty enjoying themselves."

Toward a New Approach

Policymakers and administrators need not shy away from advocating for a new model to restore sanity and safety to the classroom. Parents and teachers certainly aren't.

In 2023, J.L. Partners conducted a series of polls for the 1776 Project in Pennsylvania and Virginia ahead of school board elections. In both states, test scores and school safety topped the list of issues that matter most to voters.

State-level legislation to enhance discipline policies has also received widespread support from parents and educators who are concerned about declining academic achievement and classroom safety.

In West Virginia, Senate Bill 199 empowered teachers to remove students from the classroom who are threatening or intimidating others. The bill, which was signed into law by Gov. Patrick Morrisey in April, was a top request from teachers in the state who said that worsening student behavior was impairing their ability to teach.

Arkansas recently signed into law the Teacher and Student Protection Act, which prohibits students from reentering a classroom after being removed for violent behavior if their victims—teachers or students—are still present in that classroom. Eureka Springs Superintendent Brian Pruitt praised the legislation, stating that it provides teachers with "a sense of, of security and, and to know that they're actually being backed and supported."

In Ohio, a new law has provided district officials with guidelines for expelling students in a way that assuages concerns that expulsion could be abused, while also enhancing classroom safety. Previously, students under 16 could be readmitted unconditionally at the end of an expulsion. Now, if they are expelled for one of six reasons, including bringing a firearm to school or making actionable threats, they must see a mental health professional for an evaluation before being reinstated. The objective is to provide administrators with more disciplinary tools, and it was crafted with input from school superintendents. Gov. Mike DeWine signed it into law earlier this year.

These policies are being developed and implemented in direct response to a need. Data from the Pew Research Center bears this out:

- Sixty-six percent of teachers say that the current discipline practices at their school are very or somewhat mild.
- Sixty-seven percent say that they don't have enough influence when it comes to determining discipline practices.
- Thirty-nine percent say that school administrations don't have enough influence to set discipline policies.

The current system is not working, and as some states have begun to act, the federal government has also joined the fight.

President Donald Trump signed an executive order in April titled "Reinstating Common Sense School Discipline Policies." Linda McMahon, the Department of Education secretary, presented this measure as a corrective to policies that "placed racial equity quotas over student safety—encouraging schools to turn a blind eye to poor or violent behavior in the name of inclusion."

Restorative practices are not solving discipline issues. They are, in fact, exacerbating them by limiting the options available to educators and administrators. But it does not have to be this way. There are simple steps that can be taken to make classrooms safe again for teachers and students, and it is an issue with a broad base of support across the political spectrum.

Bringing Order Back to the Classroom

Restoring Order to the Classroom

Recommended Action Items for School Board Members

Develop and Enforce Clear, Consistent Discipline Policies

- **Adopt unambiguous codes of conduct with graduated consequences**: Review existing policies and data, including incident reports, suspension rates, and feedback from students, parents, and teachers. Rewrite student handbooks to define infractions (e.g., disruptions, threats, violence) and corresponding, tiered responses, from warnings to suspensions or expulsions, ensuring proportionality without quotas for racial parity. Explicitly prohibit reentry into classrooms where victims (teachers or students) remain present after violent incidents. (See Arkansas's model.) Schools should ultimately work toward implementing behavioral codes of conduct that are defined in a clear manner such that is easily understood by students and their parents in order to avoid any ambiguity and inconsistency.
- **Incorporate mental health evaluations for reintegration**: For serious offenses (e.g., threats or weapons), require expelled students under 16 to undergo professional evaluation before eligible for readmission, with a one-year probationary period and behavior contracts, as in Ohio's law, reflected in their revised code. In addition, create a "re-entry plan" that includes relevant administrators, teachers, or support staff to ensure everyone is on the same page of the expectations.

● **Reject mandatory restorative justice district-wide**: End the practice of "healing circles" or mediations that delay accountability for misconduct. Prioritize consistent processes and consequences, such as in-service work suspensions, to deter repeat offenses and protect learning environments. Schools must reject social-emotional learning and community repair models of restorative justice and instead place the utmost premium on safety and order.

2. Empower Teachers and Administrators

● **Grant removal authority for disruptions**: Empower teachers to immediately remove threatening or intimidating students from class without prior approval, providing alternative settings like transitional rooms with counseling until behavior improves, similar to West Virginia's approach. This includes adopting well-defined "zero-tolerance" policies for certain behavior that are consistently enforced.

● **Mandate communication and follow-through on referrals**: Require administrators to inform teachers of referral outcomes (e.g., consequences imposed) via email or in-person debriefs, and never return students without a documented penalty, to build trust and reinforce authority.

● **Establish referral tracking and trend evaluation protocols**: Create FERPA compliant systems to monitor teacher referrals from submission to imposed consequences, assessing overall effectiveness; provide explicit guidance that initial spikes in referrals due to heightened expectations will not penalize schools or teachers, encouraging consistent enforcement, with longitudinal data expected to show declining behavioral incidents over time. Consistency and documentation are key. Training teachers and administrators on how to develop behavioral databases ensures that disciplinary practices comply with state and federal requirements.

● **Provide professional development on routines and expectations**: Offer training in structured classroom management, clear behavioral norms, and de-escalation techniques, ensuring all staff enforce schoolwide routines (e.g., locked doors, hall monitoring) to minimize downtime and chaos.

3. Enhance Physical and Operational Safety Measures

● **Hire dedicated security personnel**: Recruit full-time, trained law enforcement or security officers for high-risk schools, equipped to handle assaults, drugs, or weapons, with immediate police notification for suspected illegal activities.

● **Implement off-site options for suspended students**: Direct expelled or habitually disruptive students to alternative academic centers with therapy and monitoring, holding parents accountable for partial costs if applicable, to prevent unsupervised idleness.

- **Conduct annual safety audits**: Partner with a neutral body for anonymous teacher surveys on climate and discipline efficacy, publicizing results to guide policy tweaks and counter underreporting of incidents.
- **Mandate analysis of workers' compensation data for student-related injuries**: Require risk management to routinely review claims data to identify patterns in employee injuries caused by student behavior; require monthly, quarterly, and annual reports detailing trends, financial costs, and recommendations for enhanced teacher support measures, such as expanded medical leave or trauma counseling.

4. Increase Parental and Community Involvement

- **Form mandatory parental advisory committees**: Require district-wide committees with dedicated agenda time at every board meeting to voice safety concerns, providing an anonymous channel for teachers to contribute input.
- **Hold parents accountable**: Enforce policies like requiring parental accompaniment for suspended students, community service in lieu of suspension, or billing for administrative time spent on disruptions, to foster shared responsibility.
- **Bolster character culture**: Embed honesty, respect, and accountability, into the district and school culture, by holding high standards and expectations for staff, students and parents, involving all parties in workshops to align home and school expectations, reducing tolerance for low-level disorders.
- **Community engagement**: Publicly emphasize the benefits of these changes, such as improved academic focus, physical safety, and student mental health. For instance, stricter disciplinary policies can help reduce issues associated with intense peer pressure. Address concerns about over-punishment by collecting feedback from parents, students, and educators through surveys to demonstrate both fairness and effectiveness.

5. Monitor Outcomes and Address Retention

- **Track metrics beyond disparities**: Evaluate policies using data on attendance, achievement, teacher retention, and incident rates (not just suspension stats), rolling back ineffective reforms if disorder rises.
- **Prioritize teacher support to combat shortages**: Use audit feedback to address retention drivers like unsafe environments, offering incentives for high-need schools and flexible certification for retired military personnel in security or mentoring roles.
- **Resist external pressures**: Defend local policies against advocacy groups pushing leniency, focusing on student safety over equity optics, and seek state funding protections for enforcement efforts.

School board members can implement these strategies by proposing a broad resolution, such as the *"Restoring Order in the Classroom" Resolution*, which supports follow-up policies,

positioning themselves as proactive stewards of safe learning environments. These actions often come with broad bipartisan support as evidenced by recent polls and reforms.

By boldly and visibly leading the charge–starting with the board's unwavering commitment to hold the superintendent accountable, school boards can reset the district's tone, reframe expectations around high standards for both students and staff, and signal a clear dedication to restoring order in the classroom.

Implementing these policies with unwavering consistency, from initial adoption through ongoing monitoring, will cascade this cultural shift from the board to the superintendent and school-based administrators, ultimately restoring classroom order, boosting student achievement, and improving teacher retention.

School boards should collaborate with state legislators for legal backing and allocate budgets accordingly, prioritizing high-impact changes like teacher empowerment to drive swift, measurable progress within one academic year.