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ABSTRACT

Findings from a study that examined the ways in which secondary-school administrators deal with student misconduct are presented in this paper. A secondary focus is the effect of school size and community type on administrators' perceptions and actions. A survey mailed to 100 middle and 100 secondary-school administrators from 302 Indiana school districts elicited 89 responses. No significant relationship was found to exist between school size or community type and the ways in which administrators handle student misconduct. The extent of discipline problems was not affected by school size and community type. Administrators most frequently used the conference to handle misconduct and employed a limited number of options for handling minor offenses--such as conferences, parental notices, detention, suspension, and expulsion. The data did not reflect unreported student misconduct. A conclusion is that administrators appear to deal with student misconduct in a fairly uniform way, using conventional methods. Also, the legal context for school discipline, which is concerned with student rights, has had a homogenizing effect on administrators' responses to student misconduct. One table is included. (Contains 13 references.) (LMI)

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Discipline in Secondary Schools:

How Administrators Deal with Student Misconduct

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Discipline in Secondary Schools: How Administrators Deal with Student Misconduct

Introduction

Pupil discipline continues to plague the minds of parents in the United States. The American public consistently ranks student behavior as a leading problem according to annual Gallup polls (Elam, 1984; Elam et al, 1991).

Nostalgic remembrances of the way schools used to be include orderly classrooms, firm but fair teachers, and administrators who dealt with youthful indiscretions swiftly and judiciously. Now schools are seen as places where discipline continues to deteriorate because administrators must adhere to restrictive legal guidelines and our transient society discourages strong community support.

In an earlier era schools exercised complete authority over pupils, providing rules were not capricious or arbitrary. The current overwhelming concern with pupil behavior has developed over a period of time when judicial interpretation of the concept of "in loco parentis" has changed, redefining the limits of authority by teachers and school administrators.

The current direction of courts, which dates to the 1970's, has resulted in a much more protective view toward the constitutional rights of students. The First Amendment guarantees the rights of students to worship (or not worship) as they choose, speak and write their opinions, gather in groups peaceably, and protest against official actions they deem unfair. The Fourteenth Amendment protects students from unreasonable search and seizure

and provides that rights of students to property and liberty can not be taken away without *due process of law*.

The "due process" provision of the Fourteenth Amendment has proven particularly important for schools because common disciplinary situations that administrators and teachers handle require attention to constitutional rights. For example, students must be given an adequate notice of a rule or regulation, a fair and impartial hearing must be available to students, and students may appeal decisions made by school administrators (Wayson et al, 1982).

At the heart of the issue is the question of whether educators can establish and maintain effective learning environments while attending to the individual student's rights of freedom, justice, and equality. Complicating matters is an eroding spirit of cooperation between schools and parents which is generally attributed to larger, more impersonal, schools and more transient communities. Parents are blaming schools for not dealing with discipline problems effectively, and schools are blaming parents for lack of involvement.

Statement of the Problem

The legal context of school discipline has become a prominent consideration in the design of any system of rules and sanctions and in administering punishment in all public schools today. Indeed, one might expect that the legal influence has had the effect of standardizing procedures for dealing with student misconduct. Moreover, educators and parents are likely to believe

that discipline is a greater problem in larger schools and urban communities. The assumption is that large, urban schools are impersonal and do not have a sense of community, whereas small, rural schools operate on a personal level and enjoy community stability. How administrators actually deal with student misconduct, and the extent to which school size and community type is related, is the focus of this study.

In this study the researchers posed five questions that are central to an informed discussion on school discipline. First, what type of misconduct is considered major, as opposed to minor? Second, how do administrators respond when students commit various types of misconduct? Third, are there any differences by community type and school size in what is considered major and minor. Fourth, are there any differences by community type and school sizes in the action taken by administrators when misconduct occurs. And fifth, what proportion of students in school actually commits offenses classified by administrators as major?

Procedure

The researchers developed a survey instrument to ascertain how school administrators deal with various types of misconduct. One dozen administrators were interviewed in spring, 1988, to identify common offenses. The same 12 administrators also identified typical action taken by school officials when misconduct occurs. The list of offenses and the list of responses by school officials was then arranged in a matrix format so that an administrator being surveyed could indicate "no response," or check any one or more of

the responses on the survey form. The administrator being surveyed also was asked to indicate whether each offense was considered "major" or "minor" in terms of the seriousness of the offense. The survey form was then circulated among six administrators who were asked to critique the survey instrument, both in terms of the clarity of instructions and the appropriateness of the offenses and responses included in the instrument. After validation, a total of 61 separate offenses and a total of 28 responses were included in the instrument.

A survey instrument was sent to 200 middle school and secondary school administrators randomly selected from 302 school districts listed in the Indiana School Directory. The random samples were stratified, with survey instruments sent to 100 middle school principals and 100 secondary school principals. Only one survey instrument was sent to a single school district. The instrument was mailed and collected during the spring, 1988. Responses were received from 89 school principals.

First, the researchers performed the Chi Square test to determine if there were any differences according to school size or community type in whether school administrators perceived an offense as "major" or "minor." Each of the 61 offenses was tested twice, once with school size as the independent variable, and a second time with community type as the independent variable. School size was given four categories for the purpose of conducting the tests: very large (greater than 1,200 pupils), large (800 to 1,199), small (400 and 799), and very small (less than 400).

Community type also was given four categories for the purpose of conducting the tests: urban, suburban, small city, and rural.

Next, the researchers sorted the responses using a multi-level frequency table. In this manner, the researchers were able to examine the number of times and percentage each response was given for each offense. The multi-level frequency table was constructed in a manner that allowed the researchers to observe whether any given response was utilized more by a particular school size or school type.

Next, the researchers identified those offenses which were considered "major" by a majority of all of the administrators responding. A total of 26 were identified. Another survey was conducted in the spring, 1992, with 100 middle school and secondary school administrators. In the second survey the administrators were asked to estimate the proportion of their respective student bodies that was disciplined in the past year for each of the 26 offenses. Finally, the Chi Square test was performed to determine whether there were any differences between school size or community type and the proportion of the respective student bodies that was disciplined.

Analysis of Data

Two Chi Square tests were performed for each offense--one for school size and one for community type--in order to determine if there were any differences according to school size or community type in whether a given offense is perceived by administrators as "major" or "minor." Analysis of the data from the Chi Square tests

produced only five statistically significant results at the .05 level.

Listed below are the findings that were significant when school size was compared.

1. Possession of drugs-first offense:

   The majority of administrators from very large (more than 1,200 pupils), large (800 to 1,199 pupils), and small (400 to 799 pupils) school sizes considered the offense "major." The majority from very small schools (less than 400 pupils) considered the offense "minor." $X^2(3, N= 85)=10.3873$, $p=.0155$

2. Minor theft-repeat offense:

   The majority of administrators from very large (more than 1,200 pupils), large (800 to 1,199 pupils), and small (400 to 799 pupils) school sizes considered the offense "major." Very small schools (less than 400 pupils) considered the offense "minor." $X^2(3, N= 88)=10.7814$, $p=.01297$

3. Flouting class rules-repeat offense:

   The majority of administrators from very large schools (more than 1,200 pupils) and small schools (400 to 799 pupils) considered the offense "major." The majority of administrators from large schools (800 to 1,199 pupils) and very small schools (less than 400 pupils) considered the offense "minor." $X^2(3, N= 86)=9.6912$, $p=.0213$

Listed below are findings that were significant when community type was compared.

1. Harassing others-repeat offense:

   The majority of administrators from urban, suburban, and small city communities considered the offense "major." The majority from rural communities considered the offense "minor." $X^2(3, N= 84)=16.0868$, $p=.00190$

2. Disregarding the safety of others-first offense:

> The majority of administrators from urban, small city, and rural communities considered the offense "major." The majority from suburban communities considered the offense "minor." $X^2(3, N=81)=10.7750$, $p=.01301$

The notable observation is that only five out of 61 offenses produced differences. This relative consistency suggests that school size and community type have very little influence in determining whether an administrator perceives an offense as major or minor.

Next, the multi-level response tables were inspected to identify noticeable trends in the types of actions taken by administrators for each given offense, and to notice if any trends were observable with respect to school size and school type. Since the administrators who responded to the survey could indicate more than one action per offense, performing Chi Square tests was not possible. A review of the data from the multi-level tables resulted in the following general observations by the researchers:

1. Actions taken in response to offenses are consistent among the four school sizes and four community types.
2. Administrators have a very strong tendency to escalate the severity of the action in response to an offense when students are involved in repeat offenses.
3. Administrators from small schools rely on verbal reprimands of students, student-principal conferences, and principal-parent conferences more than do larger schools.

4. None of the administrators responding indicated that the cooperation of community agencies is enlisted as an action taken for an offense. The only type of agency contacted as a result of an offense was law enforcement.

5. A relatively small number of consequences predominates. Verbal reprimands; disciplinary notices sent to parents; conferences; after school detention; out-of-school suspension; and expulsion were cited as leading consequences by a majority of administrators responding.

6. Loss of privileges is used infrequently. In no instance did a majority of administrators indicate that loss of privileges was used for any given offense.

7. Only 11 out of 61 offenses resulted in corporeal punishment by more than 10% of the administrators responding. Corporeal punishment is used by administrators for the following offenses and with the following frequencies:

   a. Fighting (14%)

   b. Minor theft of school property (10.5%)

   c. Insubordination (16.1%)

   d. Profanity-first offense (13.8%)

   e. Profanity-repeat offense (16.9%)

   f. Disrupting class-repeat offense (14.9%)

   g. Harassing others-repeat offense (14.8%)

   h. Obscene gestures-first offense (10.5%)

   i. Obscene gestures-repeat offense (17.2%)

   j. Disregarding safety of others-repeat (12.8%)

8. If the offense is perceived as "minor" and occurs in the classroom, the teacher takes the action against the offense. Only in repeat offenses that are "minor" do administrators take action.

Administrators perceived a total of 26 offenses out of a possible 61 as "major." Of these 26 major offenses, administrators reported that 17 of them result in severe consequences, *i.e.*, either corporeal punishment, out-of-school suspension, expulsion, or notification of a law enforcement agency. Table 1 lists the major offenses and identifies whether each offense typically results in a "severe" consequence.

Also reported in Table 1 is the proportion of the student body that administrators report are disciplined for these major offenses. Only three offenses--unexcused absences (repeat), flouting class rules (repeat), and disrupting class (repeat)--were reported by administrators as involving more than 5% of their student populations. Administrators reported that all the other offenses involved less than 5% of their student populations. Table 1 reveals that, while there may be a large number of offenses that are considered major, only a small segment of the student population is reported as being disciplined for major offenses. Moreover, when the Chi Square test was performed to determine if there were differences between school size or community type and the proportion of the respective student bodies actually disciplined, no statistically significant differences were observed at the .05 level.

Table 1

Major Offenses Receiving Severe Consequences

Offense	Severe Consequence	Per cent/Student Body
Unexcused absence (repeat offense)	No	Between 5 and 10 %
Smoking	Yes	Less than 5%
Possession of drugs	Yes	Less than 5%
Sale of drugs	Yes	Less than 5%
Fighting	Yes	Less than 5%
Unprovoked assault	Yes	Less than 5%
Possession of a weapon	Yes	Less than 5%
Major theft of school property	Yes	Less than 5%
Minor theft of school property	No	Less than 5%
Major theft of personal property	Yes	Less than 5%
Minor theft of personal property	No	Less than 5%
Major vandalism of school property	Yes	Less than 5%
Minor vandalism of school property	Yes	Less than 5%
Major vandalism of personal property	Yes	Less than 5%
Minor vandalism of personal property (repeat offense)	Yes	Less than 5%
Insubordination (repeat offense)	Yes	Less than 5%
Traffic violation (repeat offense)	No	Less than 5%
Disrupting class (repeat offense)	Yes	Less than 5%
Profanity (repeat offense)	No	Less than 5%
Dress code violation (repeat offense)	No	Less than 5%

Cheating (repeat offense)	No	Less than 5%
Flouting class rules (repeat offense)	No	Between 5 and 10%
Disrupting class (repeat offense)	No	Between 5 and 10%
Harassing other students (repeat offense)	Yes	Less than 5%
Obscene gestures (repeat offense)	No	Less than 5%
Possession of pornographic material (repeat offense)	Yes	Less than 5%
Disregarding the safety of others	Yes	Less than 5%

Summary and Conclusions

The findings from this study are revealing from two perspectives.

First, one might expect to find significant differences among school sizes and community types. The way that administrators deal with student misconduct, however, does not appear to be significantly different when school sizes or community types are compared. Nor are there differences among schools of different sizes or community types with regard to the extent of the problem.

Although the study did not attempt to examine why administrators deal with discipline the way they do, one can speculate that the influence of legal protection of students' rights has led to heightened awareness of legal issues relating to student discipline in administrator training programs. That all administrators--small schools-large schools, rural schools-urban schools--complete relatively standardized training programs might explain the congruent perceptions and actions.

Second, the findings from the study reveal that the substantial portion of student misconduct is dealt with by conference--teacher-student conference, student-administrator conference, or teacher/administrator-parent conference. What we still do not know is what these conferences mean as a consequence from the student's point of view. That is to say, are the conferences seen by students as counseling, or are they seen as punishment? Or, are the conferences really of any consequence with regard to changing student behavior?

Moreover, very few options for dealing with minor offenses were identified by administrators. Conferences, sending discipline notices to parents, detention after school, out-of-school suspension, and expulsion constitute nearly all of the methods used by administrators for dealing with misconduct. Loss of privileges, school or community service, and other consequences of an educative nature are not widely used by administrators.

One should be cautious before concluding that pupil discipline in schools is not as problematic as perceived by the public. True, school administrators perceive a large number of rules infractions as "major," indicating a willingness to address problems. And it is also true that few students are reported as being disciplined for major problems. However, the data from this study do not reflect the proportion of the student population which might be engaged in misbehavior that goes unreported.

Although school discipline is a perennial concern of the public, school administrators appear to deal with student

misconduct in fairly uniform fashion and with conventional methods. The homogenizing effect that the legal context for school discipline has for administrators was clearly evidenced, and the anticipated differences between school size and community type was not observed.

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