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ABSTRACT

Findings from indepth studies of discipline policies in three middle schools are summarized. Although all the schools were in a single urban district, significant differences were identified among them. The written policies of each school varied in the elaboration and emphasis of various themes in district policy, and the schools varied in the responsibilities they assigned to the student behavior specialist. The schools also varied in suspension rates and disciplinary referrals. The school with the highest number of suspensions and referrals had a codified, strictly enforced discipline policy. The school with the least number of suspensions and referrals did not have elaborate descriptions of rules, but the principal and teachers shared standards and were able to use discretion in handling individual cases of misbehavior. Rather than providing conclusions about effective discipline policies, these three case studies illustrate the problems of administrators in trying to balance teachers' needs for protection and students' needs for correction. (MLF)

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# School Discipline Policy: A Problem of Balance

by Kenneth Duckworth

During the past decade, researchers enumerating the characteristics of effective schools have often emphasized the importance of an orderly climate and lack of class disruption. At the same time, many observers have been reporting that our nation's public schools are falling short in the area of discipline.

What is an effective school discipline policy? One answer to this question might appear to be a policy that minimizes the severity and frequency of student misbehavior in a school. I shall argue, however, that the level of student misbehavior alone is problematic as a measure of policy effectiveness. To define an effective discipline policy requires diligent probing into the variety of interests present in the life of schools. It may be that an effective discipline policy is one that manages to maintain a balance among these interests.

At the Center for Educational Policy and Management, my colleague John deJung and I recently completed a study of school discipline policies. The study focused on policy at the school level rather than at the district or classroom level to illuminate the contribution of school administrators to school discipline effectiveness and to search for implications for school improvemen Since we have elsewhere presentec our findings in full (deJung, Duckworth, and Lane 1984), I will here summarize the results of the study and draw implications for school administrators.

The article will begin with a look at the socioeconomic makeup of the three schools and a description of district discipline policies. I will then attempt to sketch portraits of the three schools, emphasizing the differences in their histories and discipline policies. After that, I will compare student misbehavior and student and teacher attitudes toward discipline and discipline policies at the three schools. Finally, the article will examine the differences among these schools to take a new look at the question, What is an effective discipline policy?

*The author, Kenneth Duckworth, wishes to thank John deJung, Jo Ann Mazzarella, Jane Arends, and Richard Carlson for their contributions to the preparation of this article.*

### A Study of Three Middle Schools

Our research took the form of indepth case studies of discipline policies in three schools during the 1982-83 school year. Middle schools were chosen because discipline problems are commonly more frequent at that level. We conducted case studies using a variety of research procedures, including analysis of written documents and interviews with administrators and teachers,

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questionnaires for teachers and students, and analysis of school records on disciplinary actions.

From a single urban district in the western United States, we selected three middle schools serving large numbers of students from low-income families. We gave the schools the fictitious names Fort Hudson School, Lake School, and Roberts School. Each included grades six to eight and served 625 to 750 students. In each, between a fourth and a third of the student body was eligible for the federal free lunch program.

*The district regulations articulated two distinct goals: protection and correction. As we learned more and more about the three schools, the need for balancing these two goals began to suggest itself.*

Despite our intent to study schools with comparable student bodies, the schools were different in some ways. Fort Hudson School had the largest proportion of students in the federal lunch program and the largest proportion of black students—more than one-third of the students. Lake School served mostly low-income white students. At Roberts School, approximately one-fourth of the students were black, but more students came from middle-class homes than at the other two schools.

All three schools served large numbers of potentially "difficult" students. Differences in the communities led us to expect that Roberts School would have somewhat fewer discipline problems than the other two schools. This expectation was confirmed by differences among the three schools' rates of student suspension during the two years prior to the study. In each of those years, Roberts School had suspended approximately 1 percent of the student body; Lake had suspended about 7 percent (equivalent to the district average for middle schools); and Fort Hudson had suspended about 14 percent. These differences, however, seemed too large to be explained by differences in the characteristics of the student bodies of the three schools. They suggested possible differences in the effectiveness of discipline policies.

**Understanding School Discipline Policies**

The written policies of each school reflected the common law and regulations shared by schools in the same state and district. Virtually all the areas of student behavior prescribed (required) and proscribed (prohibited) were common among the three schools.

The district regulations articulated two distinct goals: protection and correction. The first goal was the protection of a school's teachers and students from unruly students. This goal reflected the work interests of teachers as well as safety concerns of parents. The second goal was the correction of unruly students. This goal reflected the interest of the community in educating all students and keeping them in school. As we learned more and more about the three schools, the need for balancing these two goals began to suggest itself.

The district teachers' association agreement set forth the teachers' right to protection by authorizing them to remove unruly students from class. Suspension is one way schools accomplish such removal, but this district, in response to community criticism, had developed a policy of providing inschool alternatives to suspension. The policy required that such inschool alternatives were to be supervised by a special nonclassroom teacher, funded by the district, whom we will call the "student behavior specialist." According to district policy, this person was not to administer discipline but, among other things, was to supervise students participating in inschool alternatives to suspension.

In spite of all these commonalities, the schools' written policies varied in the elaboration and emphasis of various themes in district policy. The schools also varied in the responsibilities they assigned to the specialist, as will be described below. These differences alerted us to the possibility that effectiveness of discipline policy might take on different meanings in different situations.

**Fort Hudson School**

Fort Hudson School had undergone some dramatic changes. Under one principal, the school had evolved over ten years from a rural school on the outskirts of the city to an urban school within that city's boundary. The rural school's students had been all white; the urban school's students were now integrated.

For a long time, the principal had based his selection and direction of the faculty on his philosophy that individual faculty members ought to provide the adult role models absent in many urban students' lives. He believed that the new student body lacked many of the characteristics students need to thrive in school, and this belief permeated the teachers' thinking too.

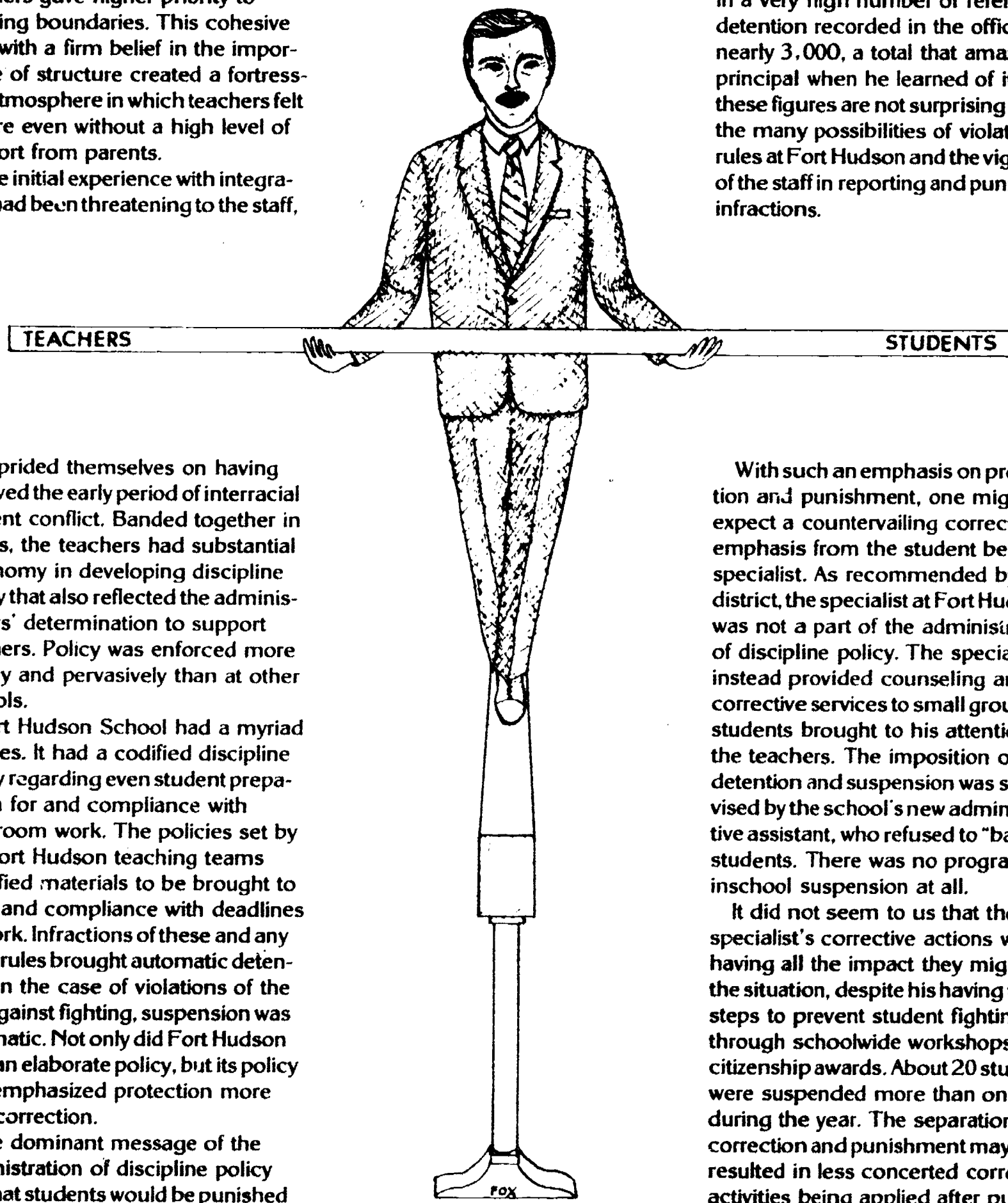
Because of these student deficiencies, the teachers believed that their students needed structure. When asked to choose between the importance of teachers defining and preserving structural boundaries for

behavior versus bending the rules to meet individual circumstances, these teachers gave higher priority to defining boundaries. This cohesive staff with a firm belief in the importance of structure created a fortress-like atmosphere in which teachers felt secure even without a high level of support from parents.

The initial experience with integration had been threatening to the staff, who prided themselves on having survived the early period of interracial student conflict. Banded together in teams, the teachers had substantial autonomy in developing discipline policy that also reflected the administrators' determination to support teachers. Policy was enforced more strictly and pervasively than at other schools.

Fort Hudson School had a myriad of rules. It had a codified discipline policy regarding even student preparation for and compliance with classroom work. The policies set by the Fort Hudson teaching teams specified materials to be brought to class and compliance with deadlines for work. Infractions of these and any other rules brought automatic detention. In the case of violations of the rule against fighting, suspension was automatic. Not only did Fort Hudson have an elaborate policy, but its policy also emphasized protection more than correction.

The dominant message of the administration of discipline policy was that students would be punished for misbehavior and removed from school if they "refused to respect the rights of others." The results were evident in a high suspension rate and in a very high number of referrals to detention recorded in the office—nearly 3,000, a total that amazed the principal when he learned of it. Yet these figures are not surprising given the many possibilities of violating rules at Fort Hudson and the vigilance of the staff in reporting and punishing infractions.




With such an emphasis on protection and punishment, one might expect a countervailing corrective emphasis from the student behavior specialist. As recommended by the district, the specialist at Fort Hudson was not a part of the administration of discipline policy. The specialist instead provided counseling and corrective services to small groups of students brought to his attention by the teachers. The imposition of detention and suspension was supervised by the school's new administrative assistant, who refused to "babysit" students. There was no program of inschool suspension at all.

It did not seem to us that the specialist's corrective actions were having all the impact they might on the situation, despite his having taken steps to prevent student fighting through schoolwide workshops and citizenship awards. About 20 students were suspended more than once during the year. The separation of correction and punishment may have resulted in less concerted corrective activities being applied after punishment. Instead, the counseling efforts seemed to operate independently

from disciplinary actions, with little mutual reinforcement between protective and corrective efforts and with uneven follow-through on correction.

**Lake School**

The situation at Lake School, which had suspended substantially fewer students than Fort Hudson, was fundamentally different. Five years earlier, Lake School had been converted from an elementary school to a middle school, and the current principal and many of the current faculty had come to the school at that time. The principal reported that many of the teachers initially assigned to the new middle school had espoused a punitive and even "arbitrary" ideology of discipline that was not compatible with his philosophy. The teachers had succeeded in installing an elaborate set of prescriptions and proscriptions of student behavior comparable to the existing policy at Fort Hudson. At the same time, written policy included a program of inschool suspension and correction run by the student behavior specialist.

*The specialist seemed to be more concerned about helping students avoid getting in trouble than about urging them to take advantage of their education.*

Thus, on paper, this school's policy was well balanced between protection and correction.

In practice, however, the policy functioned differently. The principal characterized some of the clauses in the written policy as overly punitive. Instead of strictly enforcing the policy, he attempted to deal with students on an individual basis emphasizing conflict resolution before resorting to punishment. Lake had no schoolwide detention, and the administrative personnel had virtually abandoned the written policy of inschool suspension and correction. The result seemed to be an emphasis on "cooling off" and limited counseling as dominant administrative responses to student misbehavior. The enforcement of policy at Lake School seemed to limit both protective *and* corrective actions set down in written policy.

The principal had pressured teachers to take responsibility for resolving disciplinary problems in the classroom rather than using the office as a court of first resort. In some cases, the principal would return a referral to a teacher with critical comments on it. However, some teachers apparently continued to refer students to the office in large numbers. The Lake School office had recorded about 1,300 referrals during the year.

At Lake School the student behavior specialist had primary responsibility for handling student disciplinary referrals. Many teachers perceived a lack of coordination and inconsistency in enforcement, perhaps as a result of the deterioration of the previously close working relationship between the specialist and the principal. Both the principal and the specialist seemed ambivalent about their right to expect students to be motivated by school, and, in fact, the principal professed sympathy with students who were too mature to be stuck in middle school. The specialist seemed to be more concerned about helping students avoid getting in trouble than about urging them to take advantage of their education. It appeared that the specialist often tried to shelter students from the consequences of their misbehavior. The specialist's frequent response to a referral was to sequester the student for an hour or so for a "talking-to" instead of imposing penalties. According to some teachers, this had created a group of unruly students who were "counseling-wise" and seen as "local heroes" by their peers. The school did suspend students regularly, but the specialist reported that suspension was used less often than the written policy directed. Lake suspended about 7 percent of its students during 1982-83—the same rate as in previous years.

The situation at Lake was complicated by teachers' and administrators' discouragement about correction of unruly students. Teachers' reluctance to engage in problem-solving with difficult students could be traced to teachers' perceptions that parents would not support such problem-solving. Administrators also disparaged parent attitudes and rarely tried to involve parents in corrective responses to student behavior. Furthermore, at Lake School the teaching team structure seemed to operate unevenly and the staff was not cohesive. Thus the staff was left without collegial or administrative support to compensate for lack of community response.

**Roberts School**

The policy at Roberts School, where virtually no students had been suspended, was altogether simpler. The general procedures were similar to those at Lake School, but written policy was brief and did not have elaborate descriptions of prescribed and proscribed behavior. Instead, administrators and teachers articulated standards and expectations, and administrators, because of these shared standards, were able to use discretion in handling individual

cases of misbehavior. As at Lake School, Roberts did not run after-school detention, but misbehaving students were assigned work-service. There was an unwritten policy of not suspending students.

Roberts School, like Lake School, had been reorganized as a middle school five years earlier. However, the Roberts principal apparently had more influence in recruiting the initial faculty and so reported less disparity in faculty and administration views on discipline. The principal had managed to create staff consensus around both rules and the way the administrative staff enforced those rules. For this reason he was successful in counterbalancing some teachers' preference for more protection with an individualistic approach to punishment and correction. Rules were widely enforced, but suspension was used sparingly—only four students were suspended during 1982-83. Roberts had recorded only about 675 referrals during the year of the study. One reason for this low number may be that administrative policy left the filing of an official record of a referral as a matter of teachers' discretion.

A key ingredient in this picture of policy implementation was the close working relationship between the principal and the student behavior specialist. The principal's expectations for behavior were articulated and enforced by the specialist. Likewise, the specialist conveyed to students the principal's belief in the importance of "shaping up" and getting an education. This element of positive educational expectations was distinct at Roberts. Roberts' specialist believed in confronting students and having them work out their "debt" to the school in various service activities. He also emphasized the importance of demonstrating to students that he cared about their educational future.

**Comparing the Schools**

There were some clear differences among the schools. Fort Hudson's policy was the most elaborate of the three schools, focused much more on protection, and was enforced more strictly and pervasively. Its administrator and staff were cohesive and more firmly united in the importance of creating structure for students than was the staff at Lake School.

Although the Lake School written policy was better balanced between correction and protection than Fort Hudson's, the enforcement of the policy seemed to limit both protective and corrective actions set down in the policy. The principal at Lake School seemed to emphasize correction while the teachers had a strong preference for protection. This difference, rather than creating a balance, instead fostered lack of coordination and consistency. The situation was complicated by teachers' perception that parents and community were not supportive.

At Roberts School the principal, working with a staff predominantly hired by him, had fostered wide agreement about behavior standards. There was a shared consensus about rules and how they were enforced. For this reason the Roberts principal was more successful than the Lake principal in counterbalancing teachers' need for protection with an individualistic approach to punishment. An important factor here was the close relationship between the specialist and the principal who both emphasized the importance of students getting an education.

**Measuring Misbehavior**

The preliminary indicators of differences among these schools in instances of misbehavior—the rates of suspension—were confirmed during 1982-83, when four students were suspended at Roberts, 49 at Lake, and 172 at Fort Hudson (where 22 students were suspended twice). Yet the low figure at Roberts reflected an unwritten policy against suspension, and the high figure at Fort Hudson at least partially reflected a rule about automatic suspension for fighting.

*Lake School had recorded about 1,300 referrals, nearly twice as many as Roberts. Fort Hudson had recorded about 3,000 referrals, more than twice as many as at Lake and four times as many as at Roberts.*

Similar differences were found in the measures of the severity and frequency of discipline problems obtained from school office records on the numbers of disciplinary referrals of students during the 1982-83 school year. Roberts School had recorded about 675 referrals during the year. Lake School had recorded about 1,300 referrals, nearly twice as many as at Roberts. Fort Hudson had recorded about 3,000 referrals, more than twice as many as at Lake and four times as many as at Roberts. The distribution of referrals among the student body also revealed differences: about 20 percent of Roberts students, 48 percent of Lake students, and 61 percent of Fort Hudson students had received at least one disciplinary referral during the year. From these differences one might conclude that Roberts had the fewest problems and Fort Hudson the most. Correspondingly, we might infer that Roberts had the most effective policy and Fort Hudson the least. Yet these records of referrals,

like the suspension data, reflected differences in school policy and enforcement strategy as well as actual rates of student misbehavior. We looked for corroborating evidence.

The student questionnaire asked each student to report how many times he or she had been kept after school and how many times he or she had been sent out of class. Given the differences in numbers of student disciplinary referrals in the office records, we expected that three times as many students at Fort Hudson as at Roberts would report having been kept after school. Instead, to our surprise, the *same* percentage of students at Roberts as at Fort Hudson—64 percent—reported that they had been kept after school. Furthermore, only 25 percent of the students at Lake School reported detention.

Two inferences might be made from these data. First, because neither Roberts nor Lake provided a schoolwide detention room, it appeared that Roberts teachers spent considerable time keeping their own students after school, while Lake teachers spent little. Second, the level of student misbehavior at Roberts may have been higher than the office referral records suggested. That it wasn't actually as high as that of Fort Hudson, however, was suggested by our discovery that 37 percent of the Roberts students kept after school were being punished for the rather minor infraction of talking in class, while only 10 percent of the Fort Hudson students were punished for this minor infraction. A second reason we believe that misbehavior at the two schools was not really equivalent came from the findings of the teacher questionnaire presented below.

Regarding being sent out of class, 43 percent of Lake students reported that they had been sent out of class compared to only 31 percent at Fort Hudson and 24 percent at Roberts. These findings suggest that Lake School teachers, instead of keeping students after school, were sending them to the office during the day. These findings too suggest that the level of misbehavior at Lake may have been at least comparable with Fort Hudson, but once again teacher questionnaire data shed additional light on such comparisons.

**Measuring Satisfaction**

We turned to other data from the student questionnaire to ascertain possible effects of different schools' rates of punishment on students' morale. At each of the three schools, about half the students thought that there were too many rules, about 40 percent thought that teachers were too strict, and about one-third thought that rules were *not* fairly enforced. There was little evidence that resentment was greater among the Fort Hudson students (who received more punishment) than students at the other two schools. Moreover, when we visited classes, assemblies, and playground activities, we sensed that Fort Hudson students liked their school and many of their administrators. Evidently, the high rates of detention and suspension at Fort Hudson had little negative effect on student morale.

Our image of significant differences in the volume of student discipline problems, somewhat blurred by the discrepancies between the official school records of discipline referrals and students' self-reports of punishment for misbehavior, was restored by the findings of the teacher questionnaire. The large majority of teachers at both Fort Hudson and Lake Schools indicated that discipline was a "major" problem at their schools, while only 30 percent of the teachers at Roberts characterized discipline as a "major" problem at that school. However, at Fort Hudson School—and only there—a substantial proportion of teachers saw discipline problems as decreasing.

*We found that teachers' satisfaction with discipline policy seemed related to the relationship between the principal and the teachers.*

The teacher questionnaire also asked about teachers' satisfaction with the way discipline policies were working. Fort Hudson teachers were the most satisfied with current policies, the school's philosophy of discipline, and the administrator's management of discipline. This finding, counterposed to the high level of referral and suspension, probably indicated teachers' solidarity in the presence of threat (as evidenced in the surviving perception that discipline was a major problem). Roberts teachers were nearly as satisfied as Fort Hudson teachers, while a substantial proportion of Lake teachers were dissatisfied. The source of dissatisfaction at Lake seemed to be perceptions that penalties for breaking rules were too light and that some students got away with breaking rules more than others, which is congruent with the picture of policy enforcement drawn above. Thus, while the teacher questionnaire data confirmed our inference that Roberts School had an effective policy, it also suggested that Fort Hudson School, in spite of its record of high discipline referrals, had an effective policy in the eyes of its

teachers. Unfortunately, at Fort Hudson the features of the policing system so satisfying to teachers were disturbing to district officials and to political leaders of the black community. Thus the principal was in the situation of pleasing his teachers and displeasing his superiors and constituents.

**Conclusion**

Rather than providing black-and-white conclusions about effective and ineffective discipline policies, these three case studies provide illustrations of the problems of administrators in trying to balance teachers' needs for protection of instructional efforts with students' needs for correction of behavior, particularly where students must overcome problems brought to school from home or the neighborhood.

At Fort Hudson, the balance swung towards protection, possibly because the staff at one time had been the most threatened by students. The principal and staff were united in their emphasis on protection. The result was a positive attitude toward an elaborate policing system. In addition, while students were more frequently punished, they were not more resentful of policy. Nonetheless, such a policing system was apparently unacceptable to others in the central office or community.

The Lake School study indicates the pitfalls in a principal's attempt to avoid the sort of policing system used by Fort Hudson School. Perhaps such an attempt to swing the balance towards correction would have worked had the administrators been more aggressive in involving parents and more positive about their expectations for students, as well. In any event, there was a general lack of consensus-building at Lake School, such that even teachers who had supported the general policy came to feel betrayed by the office's handling of referrals. The principal had not persuaded the teachers of the educational values underlying his preference for a corrective rather than protective strategy of discipline.

Consensus-building, in contrast, seemed to have been accomplished at Roberts School. The principal there seemed to have resisted the development of a teacher-protective policing system but to have done so with the support of the teachers. The principal believed that students should be and could be corrected; moreover, as his specialist said, "kids need to be in school, to realize that they need to get an education." Perhaps as a result, the teachers talked about "expectations" rather than rules at the classroom level.

*Rather than providing black-and-white conclusions about effective and ineffective discipline policies, these three case studies provide illustrations of the problems of administrators in trying to balance teachers' needs for protection of instructional efforts with students' needs for correction in discipline.*

What, then, *is* an effective discipline policy? We began by defining an effective policy as one that minimizes the severity and frequency of student misbehavior in a school. One unanticipated problem with this definition, however, was that the actual level of misbehavior not only is difficult to measure but may, in fact, be a function of a school's policy and its enforcement. In particular, official records of misbehavior must be supplemented by teachers' and students' reports. Furthermore, it does not follow that frequent disciplinary actions are associated with student dislike of school. If policy is enforced consistently, students may accept strictness.

We discovered that another measure of an effective policy, teacher satisfaction with the policy, was quite independent of the number of disciplinary infractions. To our surprise, teachers may be very satisfied with a policy at a school with a high number of student infractions. Teachers' need for protection may cause them to be pleased with a system in which many students are punished by suspension from school.

More specifically, we found that teachers' satisfaction with discipline policy seemed related to the relationship between the principal and the teachers. At both schools where teachers were satisfied with policy, administrators and teachers communicated well, and either administrators were consistent about policy enforcement or teachers seemed to understand why administrators handled problems as they did. At the school with the least satisfied teachers, administrators and teachers appeared to be at odds with one another: the principal did not always accept teachers' referrals, and there was neither staff solidarity nor a shared positive philosophy of education.

We began to suspect that teachers' satisfaction with a policy oriented to correction rather than protection might be related to the role parents were expected to take regarding discipline. Where school punishment is de-emphasized and correction emphasized, it appears to be very important that administrators obtain parental support for teachers' efforts.

We began to see that the effectiveness of policy depends on who is

looking at the policy. At Fort Hudson, the teachers and administrators were pleased with a policy that the district office and segments of the community found to be disturbing. Teachers' needs for protection from unruly students were being satisfied, but the community's need to keep students in school as much as possible was not being satisfied.

Thus, we were left, not with simple answers to a simple question, but with a complex network of factors that must be balanced in order to consider a policy effective. Because of this complexity and because the case studies show how questions about policy must be posed in terms of individual school conditions, we cannot offer simple prescriptions for practice. Instead, the implications for administrators may be stated better as a series of questions they might ask about their own schools and the policies they are developing:

- What are my teachers' needs for protection from unruly students? How can I reduce the level of threat they perceive without creating a bureaucracy of discipline?
- How persistent are we as a school staff in interpreting students' discipline problems for them in terms of their need for an education? How can disciplinary penalties and efforts to correct students' attitudes and behavior complement one another?
- How can I increase the incentives for teachers to work out as many disciplinary problems as possible with students and their parents?
- How consistent and effective are my own and my assistants' responses to student disciplinary referrals?

## Reference

deJung, John; Duckworth, Kenneth; and Lane, Carolyn. "Student Discipline Policy in Middle Schools." Eugene, Oregon: Center for Educational Policy and Management, University of Oregon, 1984, 272 pp.

*Editor's Note: An abridged version of the above report, approximately 125 pages in length, will be available from CEPM soon. For further information about the study, or about how to obtain the abridged report, contact Jo Ann Mazzarella, Coordinator of Communications, Center for Educational Policy and Management, College of Education, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403.*

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