

# Two Steps to Restoring School Safety

By Max Eden

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## Key Points

- Policymakers have tied teachers' hands and undermined their authority in the classroom by mandating "restorative justice" practices.
- To counter this problem, state legislatures should establish a body to conduct annual audits of school safety and climate through anonymous, open-ended teacher surveys.
- Also, state legislatures should mandate that every school district establish a parental advisory committee on school safety, with an agenda item at every board meeting to raise problems and concerns.

Conservatives should be for school safety.

It sounds so easy that it should go without saying. After all, who could be against school safety?

But the sad fact is that the progressive-minded education establishment has subordinated safety to "social justice."

Education advocates insist, against the evidence, that disparities in school discipline by race and disability status primarily reflect "institutional racism" and teachers' "implicit bias," not differences in student behavior driven by broader societal inequities. Based on this distrust and the fear that disciplining students does them serious harm, policymakers have tied teachers' hands and undermined their authority in the classroom.

The *New York Times* provided the following telling and representative anecdote about how progressive "restorative justice" policies play out in the classroom:

Simon Whitehead, a former physical education teacher at Southwest High School in

Minneapolis, said he had watched the district's discipline policy changes play out in his classes. Name-calling escalated to shoving, and then physical assaults. Profanity was redefined as "cultural dialect," he said.

"It threw the school into complete chaos," he said. "The kids knew they weren't going to go home."

Mr. Whitehead said he learned not to call his students out in front of their peers. He did not use the word "detention," but rather "quality time." Eventually, he would just "sweep a lot under the rug."

The discipline model that he said had worked for him for 25 years—a warning, then a consequence—was no longer recognized by his bosses. He retired last year, labeled a racist.<sup>1</sup>

This new status quo has been a disaster. Study after study after study has documented harm to

learning,<sup>2</sup> and school survey after survey after survey has suggested harm to school climate.<sup>3</sup>

And yet, progressives have assumed virtually unassailable moral high ground on this issue with one simple trick: By claiming their policies are intended to fight racism, any pushback against them is labeled an (at least) implicit defense of racism.

Republican politicians tend to view education as an opportunity to display altruism. Faced with the prospect of accusations of racism from activist groups such as the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) or the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), it's unsurprising that there hasn't been much state-level legislative action to restore discipline. The strongest action taken thus far has been North Carolina's requirement that school districts reassess their discipline policies, which led to headlines such as "Senate Votes Against Policies to Soften Racial Disparities in School Discipline."<sup>4</sup>

The other major impediment to addressing these policies is that the problems they cause are not readily apparent—by design. Discipline reform was implemented by a system of obfuscation enforced by recrimination. The US Department of Education threatened invasive investigations and potential loss of federal funding based on school districts' discipline numbers. Superintendents passed down the pressure to reduce discipline to principals, who passed it down to teachers. Teachers who complained could be subject to retaliation from their principals, because their principals could be subject to demotion from their superintendents, because their superintendents could be subject to investigations and negative press coverage.

Although the Department of Education rescinded the "Dear Colleague" letter driving these investigations, the pressures to underreport have been baked in. What's more, many district leaders undoubtedly earnestly believe that reducing discipline is "social justice" and that safety and school climate problems encountered are growing pains felt by teachers who must get a grip on their implicit bias.

America's schools should not be governed by the whims of progressive groupthink. They should be governed by school boards that are responsive to parents' concerns about what's happening in their children's classrooms. But with teachers too intimidated to speak out and with school board members' tendency to defer to their superintendents,

the parental/ democratic feedback loop has been severed.

Although conservative state legislators may be reluctant to take direct aim at leniency policies, they can take two concrete, popular steps to repair that loop.

First, state legislatures should establish a body (ideally a nonprofit organization rather than a subdivision of a state agency) to conduct annual audits of school safety and climate through anonymous, open-ended teacher surveys. One could Google for hours in vain trying to find a teacher who went on record about discipline and safety problems, but when teachers have the opportunity to speak anonymously, they have horror stories to tell.<sup>5</sup> I've found only four school districts where teachers unions afforded their members this privilege. Here is a representative quote from each:

- Oklahoma City, Oklahoma: "We were told that referrals would not require suspension 'unless there was blood.'"
- Buffalo, New York: "I have never seen anything like it. The behavior is unreal. The students know they can get away with anything because there are no real consequences."
- Fresno, California: "Students are throwing rocks at teachers. When they are sent down to the office, they returned moments later."
- Broward County, Florida: "My life and the lives of my students were threatened this year and the child was in school the very next day."

Once these sentiments start circulating, the character of local news coverage changes. Rather than running puff pieces (e.g., "Student Suspensions Plummeted in This New Jersey School District. Here's How They Did It."<sup>6</sup>) on how suspensions are down and superintendents say that it's because schools are getting safer, local reporters start really sleuthing, publicizing teachers' concerns while protecting their identities (e.g., "Baltimore County Teachers: Culture of Leniency Leading to Violence").

Bad press may not necessarily be enough to convince a school board to reverse course. But constant haranguing by concerned parents just might.

So, second, state legislatures should mandate that every school district establish a parental advisory committee on school safety, with an agenda item at every board meeting to raise problems and concerns. This would encourage parental involvement and allow teachers another anonymous avenue to circumvent their direct superiors and have their perspective heard by the school board.

Faced only with the occasional admonishing letter from the SPLC or the ACLU, school boards are unlikely to rethink their policies. But faced with the constant, real concerns of teachers and students who don't feel safe in their classrooms, school

board members would be far more likely to recalibrate their approach.

State-level conservatives too frequently brush off education as a local control issue. But for local control to work, school board members must be well apprised of what's happening in their schools. These two actions can help make that happen and are certain to be perceived as altruistic and received with approbation.

After all, who could be against giving teachers a voice? Who could be against giving parents a seat at the table? And who could be against school safety?

## About the Author

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*The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author. They do not purport to reflect the opinions or views of AEI or the series coordinator, Frederick M. Hess.*

## Notes

1. Erica L. Green, “Why Are Black Students Punished So Often? Minnesota Confronts a National Quandary,” *New York Times*, March 18, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/18/us/politics/school-discipline-disparities-white-black-students.html>.
2. Matthew Steinberg and Johanna Lacoë, *The Academic and Behavioral Consequences of Discipline Policy Reform*, Thomas B. Fordham Institute, December 5, 2017, <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/research/academic-and-behavioral-consequences-discipline-policy-reform>; and Catherine H. Augustine et al., *Can Restorative Practices Improve School Climate and Curb Suspensions? An Evaluation of the Impact of Restorative Practices in a Mid-Sized Urban School District*, RAND Corporation, 2018, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2840.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2840.html).
3. Max Eden, “Backsliding on School Discipline: How de Blasio’s Suspension Reforms Are Producing Classroom Disorder,” *New York Daily News*, March 14, 2017, <https://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/backsliding-school-discipline-article-1.2996805>; Max Eden, “Exclusive: How Safe Is My Child at School? New Interactive Map Allows Seattle Parents to Compare Classrooms,” 74, March 11, 2019, <https://www.the74million.org/article/exclusive-how-safe-is-my-child-at-school-new-interactive-map-allows-seattle-parents-to-compare-classrooms/>; and Max Eden, “Eden: New Report Touts Social-Emotional Learning to Boost School Safety. But School Climate Surveys Tell a Very Different Story,” 74, January 28, 2019, <https://www.the74million.org/article/eden-new-report-touts-social-emotional-learning-to-boost-school-safety-but-school-climate-surveys-tell-a-very-different-story/>.
4. Travis Fain, “Senate Votes Against Policies to Soften Racial Disparities in School Discipline,” Associated Press, April 18, 2019, <https://apnews.com/8499e87a0c159bb7b83b262e4c32d834>.
5. Max Eden, “Eden: Teachers Nationwide Say Obama’s Discipline ‘Reform’ Put Them in Danger. So Why Are the Unions Fighting DeVos on Repeal?,” 74, April 2, 2018, <https://www.the74million.org/article/eden-teachers-nationwide-say-obamas-discipline-reform-put-them-in-danger-so-why-are-the-unions-fighting-devos-on-repeal/>.
6. For example, see Hannan Adely, “Student Suspensions Plummeted in This New Jersey School District. Here’s How They Did It.,” *NorthJersey.com*, June 24, 2019, <https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/education/2019/06/24/new-approach-student-suspensions-plummet-nj-district-morris-restorative-justice-trauma/1456281001/>.
7. For example, see Chris Papst, “Baltimore County Teachers: Culture of Leniency Leading to Violence,” *Fox News*, June 11, 2018, <https://foxbaltimore.com/news/project-baltimore/baltimore-county-teachers-culture-of-leniency-leading-to-violence>.

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