

## About Addressing the Growing Discipline Problem

*Student misbehavior has increased since 2019, according to 70% of educators who participated in a recent survey by the EdWeek Research Center -- up from 66% in 2021. A survey also found teachers have seen a dip in student morale and motivation since the start of the coronavirus pandemic.*

<https://www.edweek.org/leadership/student-behavior-isnt-getting-any-better-survey-shows/2023/04>

A recent discussion shared on the internet focused on how schools are trying to “Fix the Growing Discipline Problem.” The discussion stressed that there are lots of possible remedies (e.g., *changing classroom culture, making discipline more proactive and less bureaucratic*), but it was noted that many states are headed down one particular path: They want to **crack down** on disruptive student behavior, often by removing students from school. The implications of such a trend are ominous and antithetical to the notion that schools intend that every student will succeed.

At one time, a heavy dose of punishment was the dominant reaction to misbehavior. Just prior to the pandemic, however, the stress was on developing a more positive approach in and out of the classroom. Still, even those strategies generally tend to rely on reducing disruptive behavior through social control techniques and pay little attention to the need to help teachers reengage the student in classroom instruction.

**Practices used in reacting to misbehavior often are potent only in the short-run; misbehavior is likely to reappear if the student is not intrinsically reengaged in formal instruction.**

An often stated assumption is that using social control practices to stop misbehavior will make students amenable to teaching. In a few cases, this may be so. However, the assumption ignores research on psychological reactance and the need for individuals to maintain/restore their sense of self-determination. Moreover, it belies the painful relapse rate and the realities that student misbehavior remains a large-scale, chronic, and increasing problem (along with learning and emotional problems).

The concern raised here is that many approaches to addressing misbehavior produce short-term outcomes because they tend not to include a focus on helping teachers enhance a student’s intrinsic engagement in classroom instruction and reengage students who have disengaged. As long as a student is not engaged in instruction, behavior problems are likely to occur and reoccur. As long as the emphasis is, first and foremost, on implementing social control techniques, too little attention is given to enhancing intrinsic motivation for instruction. In effect, the focus is on socializing desired behavior rather than helping improve student achievement and well-being.

From our perspective, it is evident that students who have become actively disengaged from instruction are among the most frequent discipline and learning problems. And in terms of the growing concern about mental health, we know that behavior and learning problems usually generate emotional problems.

**It is the case that all teachers have been taught something about engaging students. However, teachers tell us that practices for the reengaging students who have become disconnected from instruction rarely are a prominent part of pre- or in-service personnel preparation.**

While the press is for quick solutions, fixing the discipline problem over the long-term requires a shift away from practices that mainly stress controlling behavior. Research stresses practices that emphasize intrinsic motivation as the best way to enhance and sustain engagement in instruction and reengage students who have become disengaged. This shift from overrelying on extrinsic to emphasizing intrinsic motivation needs to infuse instructional practices. It also needs to permeate the way student/learning supports are provided – as is reflected in efforts to develop a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for providing such supports.

The Center has online many resources focusing on these matters that can be used for staff discussion, continuing education, and planning. As a start, see, the following brief practice notes:

*Rethinking Discipline to Improve School*

*Climate* <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/disciplineclimate.pdf>

*Minimizing Referrals Out of the Classroom* <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/referralspn.pdf>

*Common Behavior Problems at School: A Natural Opportunity for  
Social and Emotional Learning*

<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practicenotes/behaviorsocialemot.pdf>

For more in depth presentations, see the following free resources:

> *Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*

> *Improving School Improvement*

> *Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change*

all three can be accessed at

[https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving\\_school\\_improvement.html](https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html)

As always, send all comments and questions, as well as requests for resources, TA, and coaching to [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu) .