

## **A new policy to keep students in line**

**L.A. district considers adopting uniform guidelines for meting out discipline. The emphasis is on 'positive behavior support.'**

By Charles Proctor, Times Staff Writer  
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The Los Angeles school district is considering adopting a uniform discipline policy that it hopes will increase parent involvement and decrease the number of office referrals, detentions and suspensions that administrators give to misbehaving students.

This would be the first such policy in the nation's second-largest district. Many schools have a generally agreed-upon code of conduct, but there is no single guiding document that spells out procedures for handling problem students. There is, however, a districtwide expulsion policy.

The discipline policy, which would apply to elementary, middle and high schools, emphasizes "positive behavior support" — a kind of behavior modification program that marshals administrators, parents, teachers, community groups and even other students to not only reprimand troublemakers, but also explain why their actions are wrong and what they can do to correct them.

The new policy, which proponents say is based on recent social research, also stresses intervention. Administrators might encourage a parent to sit in on a student's classes, draw up a daily "behavior report card" or convene students to discuss discipline issues. The goal, officials say, is to preempt potentially problematic student behavior.

The Los Angeles Board of Education is scheduled to discuss the policy Tuesday. Marlene Canter, the board president, said she supports the proposal but voiced concerns about how it would be put into effect. "It's one thing to write a great policy; it's another thing to have to implement that policy," she said.

The district, which has more than 700,000 students, faces numerous challenges getting parents involved in their children's education. As students move from elementary school, parental participation tends to drop off, leaving much more in the hands of teachers and administrators.

Some parents and officials say that discipline at many schools is too reactive. Administrators, overwhelmed by large classes, might dole out suspensions as a first — as opposed to last — resort because there are few or no guidelines. The lack of a uniform discipline policy also means that punishment for the same offense can vary widely from campus to campus.

Officials who helped craft the policy studied school districts in other regions — such as Dallas and Florida — that already use positive behavior support. Those districts saw a 50% reduction in office referrals and an increase in student achievement, trends that L.A. Unified hopes to replicate, said Nancy Franklin, the district's coordinator for behavior support.

Last year, district schools issued 72,868 suspensions, each lasting an average of 1.5 days. In 2004-05, the district gave out 79,690 suspensions.

About 10% of L.A. Unified schools already are testing the discipline plan on their campuses, to mostly positive reviews, Franklin said.

Walter Reed Middle School in North Hollywood, which adopted the so-called positive behavior support about two years ago, has seen a 26% drop in suspensions this school year and an increase in attendance from 93% in 2003-04 to 96.5% in 2005-06, said Rodney Wright, the school's Title I coordinator. Teachers also report that students are more mindful of the rules and more receptive when they are told to obey them.

Teachers clearly post the behavior they expect in their classrooms, and they make it a point to issue rewards.

Well-behaved students can earn "Wolf Tickets" — named after the school's mascot — which they can redeem for school supplies and posters in the student store or cash in at the "Wolf Arcade," where they can play vintage video games.

Teachers also reward one another. Every week, the staff recognizes two teachers, administrators or staff members who have accomplished something noteworthy. "Students can see that we're not only praising them," Wright said, "we're praising one another."

The district's proposed policy has already drawn support from some parents infuriated at what they regard as heavy-handed discipline at schools. Students on the receiving end of such chastisement may become more prone to miss class or drop out entirely because they feel they are misunderstood. Parents also are concerned that administrators aren't giving suspended students a fair shake.

Naomi Haywood is one such parent. She believes her 16-year-old son, Jonathan Hargrove, has been suspended twice for fights he did not start because the school he attends, Fremont High School in South Los Angeles, has a zero-tolerance policy for fighting.

An angry Haywood said administrators should have proactively removed her son from classes where other students provoked him, alerted her of her son's problems before it was too late and listened to Jonathan's side of the story — steps the new discipline policy contains.

"This [new] policy opens the doors and builds bridges that have been broken down over the last 20 or 30 years," Haywood said.

Stories like Haywood's are not unique, said Rosa Hirji, projects director for Community Asset Development Re-defining Education, a parent-based organization that backs the policy.

The group conducted interviews with about 50 parents from schools with high suspension rates. They found that, in many instances, administrators suspended students for relatively minor infractions; that students believed they weren't given a chance to explain themselves; and that parents weren't always notified when their children were given informal punishments, such as being sent to the dean's office or kicked out of a classroom.

"Schools, teachers and administrators have to reorient themselves and think about prevention," Hirji said. "They have to think about creating a climate where students, teachers and parents are engaged and respected in the schools."

Officials expect the policy to do that, but they acknowledge that it won't be a silver bullet for the district's discipline problems. Some administrators say students have an important role.

Larry Higgins, the principal at Fremont High, recalled a recent incident in which two girls got into a hair-pulling fight in the hall. Higgins separated them and sent both to the office.

"But what I really got angry about," he said, "is two guys laughing and watching this whole thing. I said, 'You know, you could have intervened.'"

## *Dealing with misbehavior*

*The Los Angeles Unified School District is considering a new discipline policy that emphasizes parental involvement and a proactive approach by teachers and administrators. Some examples of misbehavior and the suggested response:*

### ***Minor Misconduct:***

- *Classroom disruption (speaking out, out of seat, etc.)*
- *Defiance/profanity*
- *Harassing other students*

### ***Teacher/Administrator Response:***

- *Use positive reinforcement*
- *Assign a mentor or peer tutor*
- *Work with parents to make a "behavior report card"*

### ***Moderate Misconduct:***

- *Under the influence of alcohol/drugs*
- *Theft*
- *Sexual harassment*

### ***Teacher/Administrator Response:***

- *Convene a group of students to discuss*
- *Encourage parents to visit the classroom*
- *Assign in-school suspension or detention*

### ***Major Misconduct:***

- *Possession of a firearm or explosive*
- *Causing serious physical injury*
- *Robbery or extortion*

### ***Teacher/Administrator Response:***

- *Report to law enforcement*
- *Convene parent conference*
- *Suspension and/or expulsion*