

L.A. Board of Education adopts discipline policy aimed at reducing suspensions

By Angie Green and Joel Rubin, Times Staff Writers
February 28, 2007

The Los Angeles Board of Education on Tuesday adopted a new, districtwide discipline policy aimed at decreasing the number of students suspended and kept after school for misbehaving.

The unanimous vote Tuesday evening ushers in the first such policy for the nation's second-largest district. Although the district already has an expulsion policy in place to deal with the most violent and egregious discipline cases, principals and teachers have had no formal policy to rely on for guidance on other discipline problems.

"This is not going to work miracles on its own," said board member Marguerite Poindexter LaMotte, before casting her vote. "It's going to take [everyone] to make this work.... We need to train parents. We need to train students. There is a morass out there of students disrespecting authority."

The new discipline policy takes a distinctly holistic approach to correcting student misbehavior that emphasizes intervention. Instead of merely correcting and punishing students, teachers will be expected to explain why a behavior is wrong and give an alternative.

Parents will be asked to participate by sitting in on their child's class or meeting with the teacher. In some cases, a mentor may be assigned to the student.

"We don't just leave it to ... 'Oh, don't do that,' and punishing the behavior, because punishment does not change the behavior," said Donnalyn Anton, the district's executive officer of educational services.

With no coherent policy on the books, teachers and principals have often been criticized for being too reactive and uneven in how they handle discipline cases.

The new policy aims to standardize responses, but has led some to question whether its focus on positive reinforcement will stray too far from ensuring that there are consequences for a student's actions.

Some of the suggested responses to a student harassing a classmate, for example, are to assign a peer tutor and have parents help write up a "student behavior report card."