



Policy Brief: School Safety

Schools Struggle to Prioritize Learning Amid Rising Discipline Challenges

When parents send their children to school each day, they expect more than just a good education—they expect a safe, structured, and supportive environment where learning is the top priority. Classrooms should be orderly and focused on academic instruction that equips students with the knowledge and skills they need to become productive, well-rounded adults.

For this to happen, schools must be free from violence, bullying, harassment, and the negative influence of substance abuse. Teachers must be able to teach without also being the primary disciplinarians in their classrooms. Unfortunately, this is not the current reality in many Delaware schools. A significant portion of school budgets and staff time is now being spent on managing student behavior instead of supporting academics.

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Why It Matters

We didn't get here overnight.

In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) changed discipline practices. This bill required states to report data on school discipline, encouraging schools to find alternatives to suspensions and expulsions. The new approach, known as “restorative justice”, emphasized dialogue, rehabilitation, and reconciliation rather than punishment.

While well-intentioned, the result was a move away from “zero tolerance” policies, encouraging schools to consider a student’s background, trauma, and disabilities before issuing disciplinary action.

It turns out restorative practices sounds compassionate, but they haven’t worked out well. For the last 10 years, academic scores have tanked, especially for low performing students who are the ones this policy intended to help.

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Why It Matters

These changes led to an escalation in classroom disruptions and violence. By removing or reducing consequences for negative behavior, schools have unintentionally created environments where a single student can derail an entire class, and teachers feel powerless to act. No one can learn or teach in this kind of chaos.

Under this policy, students are afraid to walk the hallways, fearing bullying or assault. Teachers and principals are leaving the profession at alarming rates, citing stress, lack of administrative support, and ongoing student violence and disrespect. Without consistent and equally applied disciplinary policies and support structures, schools cannot fulfill their academic mission.

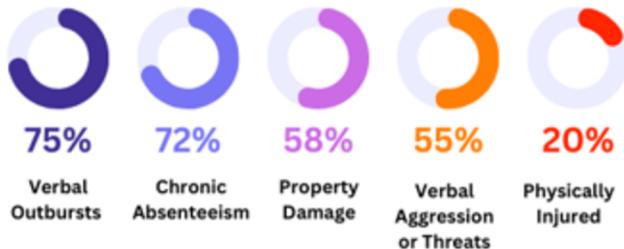
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Why It Matters

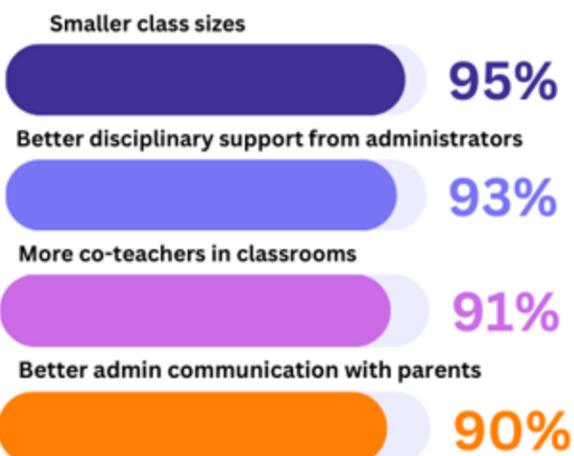
Not even teachers feel safe in their classroom

DSEA Educator Survey

Student Behaviors That Teachers Experience



Top Actions Teachers Support



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Why You Should Care

School Safety is a Prerequisite for Student Achievement: Students Can't Learn in Chaos

When order and safety break down in schools, the consequences are swift and far-reaching:

- Students can't focus or learn in chaotic classrooms.
- Teachers, overwhelmed by constant discipline issues, face burnout and high turnover.
- Struggling students often fall further behind, leading to low self-esteem, disengagement, behavioral problems, and chronic absenteeism.
- It steals from instruction time.

These challenges are reflected in student outcomes. Delaware ranks fourth from the bottom in overall student proficiency, according to the 2024 Nation's Report Card. Time spent managing behavior—along with increased non-academic programming—is cutting into critical instructional time and stalling academic growth.

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Why You Should Care

Minority and Special Needs Students Suffer As Seen by Declining Achievement Scores

The impact is even greater on minority students and those with special needs, who consistently post the lowest scores on state assessments. In 25 Delaware schools—most in Wilmington—proficiency in Math or English Language Arts is in the single digits. This is a clear failure to uphold the conditions necessary for learning.

School safety is not a side issue—it is central to student success. When students feel emotionally and physically secure, they are more likely to attend, engage, and achieve.

NOTE: Delaware education operates under local control, which means operational decisions – including those related to student conduct and discipline policies – are made at the school, district and charter school level. DDOE does not have the authority to override individual student conduct and discipline decisions.

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Our Position

Every student deserves a safe, supportive, and orderly learning environment. Every teacher deserves the ability to teach without constant disruption.

School boards can create conduct policies that incorporate proven strategies to eliminate the triggers for student misbehavior, such as cell phone bans.

The minority who disrupt the classroom should be removed from the classroom and addressed individually, so that instruction can continue for the rest of the class.

Administrators need to look for alternate strategies to address chronic outbursts while continuing efforts to engage such students in their education.

Neither the teacher nor the well-behaved students who want to learn should be involved in therapeutic work (such as restorative circles) as they are not qualified to do.

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What Must We Do?

School boards have a number of steps they can take with their policy work and superintendent to place appropriate accountability on students for their behavior.

Here are policy solutions propose the following policy solutions:

1. Ensure Physical Security on School Grounds

All schools should have effective safety measures in place to prevent and respond to violent incidents. This includes:

- A single point of access to the school building
- Adequate fencing and controlled entry
- Security staff trained to de-escalate and respond to threats

A district could decide the training and use of school resource officers (SROs) and constables in schools to help protect students, teachers and staff is necessary

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WHAT MUST WE DO?

2. Restore Discipline and Accountability in the Classroom

Schools must maintain clear, consistent standards for student behavior. This does not mean reverting to harmful or discriminatory practices, but it does mean:

- Enforcing appropriate consequences for repeated or serious infractions
- Supporting teachers in managing their classrooms
- Evaluating the effectiveness of “restorative justice” practices and adjusting where needed

3. Expand Mental Health and Behavioral Support

Students who struggle with behavior often have unmet emotional or psychological needs. Schools should:

- Provide access to counselors, social workers, and behavioral specialists to those who need extra help
- Offer targeted support plans for students with repeated disciplinary issues
- Ensure these supports supplement, not replace, accountability

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WHAT MUST WE DO?

4. Offer Tutoring and Mentoring Programs

Students who fall behind academically are more likely to become disengaged and act out. Proactive academic support will help. Examples:

- After-school tutoring
- Peer mentoring and coaching
- Individualized academic interventions can help keep students on track and reduce classroom disruptions.

5. Strengthening Parent-School Partnerships

Building strong relationships between schools and families require a concerted effort. Here are a few examples:

- Communicate clearly with parents about behavioral expectations
- Involve families early when problems arise
- Use positive interventions that include parent input and participation

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THE BOTTOM LINE

School Safety and Appropriate Discipline Enables Students to Thrive

We must return to a basic but vital principle: Schools exist to educate. For this to happen, students and staff must feel safe and supported. Restoring order and safety in Delaware's schools will not only reduce teacher stress and improve retention—it will also allow every student to thrive academically.

By implementing common-sense safety and discipline policies, providing mental health supports when needed,, and holding students accountable in a fair and consistent way, we can build schools where learning flourishes, teachers stay, and children succeed.

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