

Today's lesson

Classroom disorder increases in Milwaukee and Madison after school administrators unveil a new discipline policy

By Dave Daley

Lunch break over, students at a Madison high school file into class. The bell rings. Only a little more than half the students are in their seats, but the teacher starts anyway, ticking off homework assignments.

Two students trickle in, one carrying a bag from a fast-food chain, the other a basketball under his arm. “Hey, man — gimme some fries,” calls out a student. The kid with the fast-food bag saunters over, bag open, warning his hungry classmate not to take too many. More students join in, begging for fries, too.

At the front of the room, the teacher struggles to stay on topic and get his students’ focus back on the lesson. The student with the fries is making his way to his seat, kids reaching into his bag as he passes, snatching fries, joshing him — “Wow, you are old!” — about his generosity.

The student is the center of attention. The teacher stares at him as he finally slides into his seat. The teacher picks up the lesson, just as three more late students trickle in, one eating a bag of Cheetos, a second munching a candy bar.

More calls ring out. “C’mon — some chips, dude, bring ’em over here.” The teacher stops. No one is listening anyway. Everyone’s attention is on still more late-arriving kids, half a dozen this time, the students laughing and calling out to one another as they saunter to their seats.

One of the late students sees the hard look on the teacher’s face. “Sorry, I’ll be quiet now,” he offers as he sits down.

Hunched over their desks, the top performing students — the good kids — are reading their books or doing homework, trying to concentrate as the hubbub swirls around them. Finally, 15 minutes after the bell rang, everyone is seated, and the teacher can pick up the lesson.

No one is disciplined for tardiness. Or for bringing food into the classroom. Or for disrupting class. The teacher does not bother writing up the late students — repeat offenders — even though habitual tardiness is an infraction of the school’s discipline code. There is no point filling out an office referral form; the teacher knows administrators will just ignore it.

Referrals lead to suspensions, a big no-no at district headquarters, where the emphasis is

Troubled students can't learn if they're suspended. But keeping rule-breaking kids in school is disrupting classes.



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION / ROBERT HELF

on holding suspension numbers down. Meanwhile, down in the trenches, in the classrooms, the teachers are pretty much on their own.

Welcome to the new world of Madison schools. This is a peek into the classroom of a Madison teacher who detailed the events of his typical day for Wisconsin Interest. The teacher, a 10-year veteran, asked that his name not be used. (Other teachers interviewed for this story had the same wariness.) “I like my job,” he explained.

The Madison Metropolitan School District, the state’s second largest with more than 27,000 students, is in its second semester of a kid-friendly discipline policy aimed at keeping rule-breaking students in school. But some are questioning it.

“Utter chaos,” says the teacher who struggles every day to get his students seated after the bell rings. “It feels like the inmates are running the institution.”

Madison’s new suspend-as-a-last-resort discipline policy mirrors a shift by schools across the country from tough zero-tolerance to a far less punitive approach that tries to keep kids in school under the mantra that children don’t have a chance of learning if they’re not in the classroom.

That more relaxed approach, which emphasizes teaching kids positive behaviors, is already in place in the Milwaukee and Racine school districts, where it is dramatically cutting suspension rates.

Like many schools across the country, Milwaukee is using the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports concept, which emphasizes teaching students what behavior is expected rather than meting out punishment after bad behavior.

Teachers tell students the rules — be respectful, be responsible — and what kind of behavior is expected, then reward positive behavior with praise. The training begins in pre-kindergarten, where the lessons seem to imprint better, and continues on up the grade levels.

In Milwaukee Public Schools, the state’s largest school district with 77,000 students, the drop in suspensions is nothing less

than spectacular: nearly 50% over five years. Underscoring the importance of MPS’ drop: 55% of MPS students are African American — the group hit hardest by suspensions, not only in Milwaukee but nationally, where three black students are suspended for every white kid.

Those three-to-one numbers are behind a major push by the Obama administration to bring suspensions down. In 2008, Milwaukee earned the dubious distinction of posting the highest suspension rate of any large urban school district, according to an advocacy group called the Council of Great City Schools. That was the year that nearly half of all ninth-graders in MPS were suspended at least once.

But over the next five years, operating under the positive-behavior framework, MPS slashed its suspensions 48%, from 26,309 in the 2007-’08 school year to 13,641 in 2012-’13.

The Racine Unified School District slashed its suspensions 30% between 2008 and 2013, not the big numbers Milwaukee posted but still significant gains.

That’s the good news. The not-so-good news? Critics say the intervention-not-suspension approach is not changing students’ behavior all that much, and when problem students are allowed to stay in the classroom, too often the students who are trying to learn suffer.

Madison teachers hit that point hard when they crowded into a Madison School Board meeting last October in what was, in effect, a mini-revolt against the policy. Teachers gave the board an earful, ticking off major problems, including:

- Students cursing, punching, kicking and even biting teachers daily, making classrooms unsafe.
- Aggressive students constantly disrupting classes, then allowed back in without the corrective discipline needed to show that bad behavior has consequences.
- Lack of staff or training to handle the sharp uptick in student disturbances, even with two-dozen new hires and \$1.6 million allocated to implement the new policy.

Teachers were blunt. “It’s not working — the theory does not match the reality,” David Wasserman, who teaches at Madison’s Sennett Middle School, told board members. Students “are smelling and sensing a lack of structure,” Wasserman said in a story reported by the Wisconsin State Journal.

Elvehjem Elementary School teacher Liz Donnelly echoed Wasserman. “It’s important that [suspended] students are brought back into the classroom as soon as possible,” said Donnelly, who also serves as an officer in the Madison teachers’ union. “But they also need to know there are consequences for their actions. And I think kids are figuring out that they’re not really going to get into trouble with this new policy.”

Teachers complained of a fall semester punctuated by daily fist-fights, kids bringing weapons to school “for protection,” and security staff walking away from conflicts between students, unwilling to take any action that might push up suspension numbers.

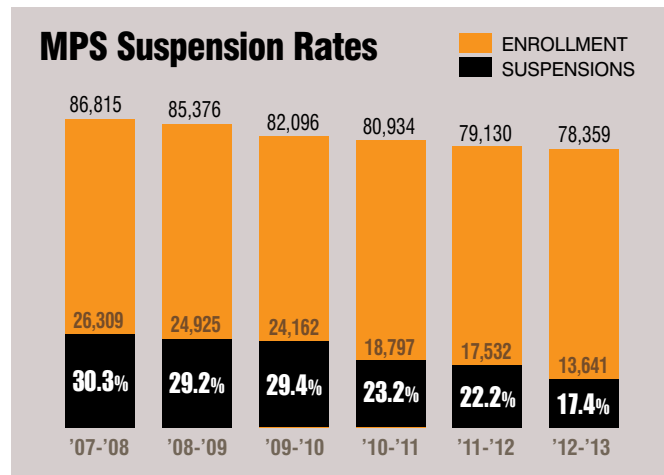
Acknowledging the complaints, Madison Schools Superintendent Jennifer Cheatham said a “stabilization team” was being put together to address problems. But Madison seems determined to push ahead with the new approach.

School districts across the country adopted zero-tolerance discipline policies in the wake of the 1999 Columbine school massacre. Zero tolerance, predictably, led to dramatic hikes in suspensions, an uptick that hit black students the hardest. Black students also account for more than a third of the students expelled from school, federal data show.

Researchers struggle to explain that striking disparity. One emerging theory: a subconscious bias by teachers that stereotypes black males as “dangerous.” “There are ideas in our head, even if we don’t want them to be there,” says Mica Pollock, an education studies professor at the University of California-San Diego and co-author of a study that found that higher minority discipline rates cannot be explained by the theory that minorities misbehave more.

Hidden bias, though, does explain the disparities. A black student is “overdisciplined,” falling victim to implicit prejudices without the teacher even realizing what is happening, Pollock says. “You’re disciplined for minor behavior, the discretionary kinds of judgment calls that are open to bias, where white kids doing the same thing might get much less discipline,” she adds. “Like wearing a hat wrong — if a white kid did the same thing, for the teacher it might be sort of annoying but not deeply threatening.”

Getting kicked out of school can be catastrophic in its long-term consequences on a student’s grades and chances of graduating from high school. “Studies show a single suspension in ninth



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

grade is correlated with a doubled chance of dropping out, and that suspended or expelled students are three times as likely to end up in the juvenile justice system,” Pollock says.

The study Pollock co-authored was published in December by the Discipline Disparities Research-to-Practice Collaborative, a group of 26 nationally recognized experts from the social science, education and legal fields who analyzed a huge body of recent research. In the end, the group issued a finding that it says “challenges virtually every notion behind the frequent use of disciplinary

policies that remove students from the classroom.”

Pollock said one interesting finding in the research is that a majority of Americans of all races — not just whites — unconsciously associate danger and criminality with black men. “We’re not talking about bad people,” Pollock added. “We’re programmed this way because of several centuries of history.”

There is a suspicion that some schools across the country are jimmying numbers to make their suspension statistics look better, especially with the top-down push from the Obama administration. That push has led to eyebrow-raising initiatives:

- Last year, Baltimore started offering cash bonuses to principals and teachers who keep suspension numbers down. The Baltimore teachers’ union chief blasted the bonuses, warning that physical abuse incidents — an automatic suspension — were going unreported as a result, putting teachers in danger. With suspension numbers cut in half, undaunted school officials say they will keep paying out the cash.
- In Minneapolis, then-Superintendent Bernadeia Johnson announced in November that her office would personally review any suspension that involved a black, Hispanic or Native American student — setting off cries of reverse-discrimination.

MPS teachers say the high number of minority suspensions has always been a hot-button issue in Milwaukee. One longtime teacher tells how a colleague authorized 20 suspensions on a day when the principal was away. The paperwork went to district headquarters, and every suspension was promptly thrown out.

Milwaukee School Board member Terry Falk, a retired MPS teacher who taught for more than 30 years, has heard similar stories over the years. “Suspension rates are always a little suspect,” Falk says. “We’ll send a kid home for the day — we won’t put it on the books. Everybody is under tremendous pressure to keep the numbers down.”

Falk says the sharp drop in suspensions at MPS is probably a combination of officials discouraging suspensions and the new positive behavior intervention approach. “There are fundamental changes happening in some schools — in others, no,” Falk says.

Discipline

“Some schools will say, ‘We can’t suspend kids anymore because the administration won’t let us.’”

Falk is an advocate of the new less punitive discipline approach. “We do have enough evidence to show that it works,” Falk says.

One longtime MPS teacher, who is white, sees the misbehavior of certain students as an understandable response to growing up in tumultuous and threatening circumstances. Too often, a black



Falk: Suspension rates are always a little suspect.

He says that such students feel “they have a lot less to lose by acting out.”

Kaleem Caire, former head of the Urban League of Greater Madison, makes the same point, saying that young black students endure multiple stresses in their daily lives. “The last thing our children need,” he wrote in a column for the *The Capital Times* in Madison, “is for the adults who should be showing them they are cared for to stand at a podium advocating policies that allow them to kick kids out of class.”

In an interview with *Wisconsin Interest*, Caire said that a huge problem for African American boys is the absence of male authority figures in their lives, including at school. Recounting a talk he gave at Hamilton Middle School in Madison last fall, he says he found himself “calling out” three black boys for refusing to follow the teacher’s instructions.

“When they came in, they were loud — the teacher was trying to get them to settle down,” he recalls. “They were clowning to get attention.

“I just lit into them,” Caire went on. “I told them, ‘It’s sad. If you have a 45-minute class period, and you lose 15 minutes because it takes you five to ten minutes to get you settled down, you’re robbing the rest of the kids in this classroom of an education.’ I said, ‘Do you think that’s right?’”

Caire said at first the boys giggled, and he tore into them even harder, saying, “‘This is serious business. Sit up straight when I’m talking to you.’ And they sat up. I said, ‘You guys have only so much time in a day to get an education.’”

Caire says he emphasized to the whole class the importance of an education and how teachers “put it on the line for you every day.” The civil rights leader, who is launching his own pre-school program in Madison, says one of the boys came up to him afterward and asked to give him a hug, saying, “I have never had anybody ever talk to me like that before.”

kid is coming from a one-parent home in a tough neighborhood with high crime and low incomes. “It’s more that the student lives in poverty and has a fragile home life,” the teacher says. The student is “not sure Mom is even going to come home tonight. On the bus to school, someone steals your lunch or makes fun of your shoes. You get to school. You’ve got a heightened adrenaline level. You come to school with this attitude, this disability. You don’t have the ‘soft skills’ to know how to behave appropriately.”

Racine schools have also seen a sharp drop in suspensions over the last five years — more than 30% overall. Implementing the same positive-behavior approach used in Milwaukee and Madison is partly responsible. There’s another reason, too — tough talk from the school district’s central office along with a suspension scorecard sent out each week to every school by the district’s top brass.

“The overall awareness of the suspensions and what kids are being suspended for makes people a little more careful and more proactive versus reactive,” says Eric Gallien, who oversees schools and principals in the Racine district. His district also modified its discipline code, moving disruptive behavior off the list of suspendable offenses and reserving suspensions for what the district labeled “aggressive behavior,” *The Racine Journal Times* reported.

Liz Donnelly, the Madison elementary school teacher, acknowledges that schools needed to take action given “the huge overrepresentation of African Americans” in suspension numbers. “You have to give kids second and third chances,” Donnelly said. “But if that doesn’t work, then you need to suspend.”

Donnelly says some Madison parents are voicing fears that under the new relaxed discipline policy, their child might be injured.

One longtime MPS high school teacher agrees. “We’ve over-corrected the other way — the past school year is probably one of the worst I’ve been in.” One of the biggest disruptions is kids using their cell phones in class — on paper, a suspendable violation



Caire: Black youth need more male authority figures.

of the MPS discipline code. But the teacher has stopped writing misconduct referrals that only get tossed out at management level.

“There’s nothing going to happen, and the kids know it,” the teacher says. “It’s hard to keep order in a classroom when the kids know there is no consequence to misbehavior. It’s a license for the other kids.”

Principals won’t even confiscate phones because of liability issues, and the teacher says the best he can do is ask the student to turn the phone over to him until the class ends.

“I’ll tell a kid, ‘I need you to put the phone away — let me hang onto the phone until the end of class.’”

If the student is quietly texting or listening to music through earbuds, the teacher says he usually does not step in. “We have to pick our battles, and earbuds usually aren’t worth the fight.”

The teacher notes that cell phones are whipped out as soon as a disruption occurs, for example, a fight in the hallway. “The kids want to get a video of it,” the teacher says. “And that’s an infraction right there.”

In one case, administrators took the phones away just long enough to erase tapes of the fight, then returned the phones. No one was disciplined, according to the teacher.

“Suspensions are down because we’re under pressure to keep the numbers down,” the teacher says. “It’s very frustrating. You have to hit a teacher or draw blood with a kid to get suspended

these days.”

Staff cuts this year are hurting, too. At his school, a quarter of the safety aide positions were eliminated. “We need more safety aides and more counselors,” the teacher laments. “The nonteaching staff needs to be beefed up.”

Bottom line: “Good kids are leaving the district because they’re being bullied and mistreated. And teachers feel more demoralized, feel that they’re not being listened to.”

Concerns about school safety still dog MPS. Last fall, School Choice Wisconsin released a report showing that juvenile arrests at MPS schools were 27 times higher than at city voucher schools and eight times higher than at non-MPS public charter schools. MPS officials, though, questioned whether any meaningful conclusions could be drawn from a log of 911 calls. They also pointed out that School Choice Wisconsin’s voucher schools are competing with MPS for students.



Donnelly: Kids figured out they won’t be disciplined.

For Milwaukee maintenance worker Dennis Koepke, there is no doubt about the problem. Milwaukee’s public schools lost the battle for his granddaughter, Jocelyn, the day she came home from school holding an icepack to her eye. MPS could not satisfactorily explain the injury — at first saying a boy in her pre-K class beat her up, then saying no, she fell down on the playground, he says.

Two years later, Jocelyn is attending the Shining Star Christian School, a voucher school at N. 66th Street and W. Fairview Avenue, just a block from her grandparents’ home in a working-class neighborhood. Jocelyn loves Shining Star and is enjoying the much smaller classes, where she gets more individual attention, says Koepke.

Michael Brickman, national director of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, an education policy think tank based in Washington, D.C., questions some of the suspension statistics provided by schools. “There is a gaming of the system and playing with numbers game, when in reality schools are no less disrupted and maybe even more disrupted because problems are not being addressed,” Brickman says.

Brickman also warns that schools pushing the new more-lenient approach risk out-of-control classrooms and potential harm to both teachers and students. Schools need to find a middle ground between zero-tolerance policies and the new almost-everything-goes approach, Brickman adds.

“The key here is to have a balanced approach so you don’t let one or two students ruin the chance of learning for the rest of the kids,” Brickman says. “It’s not fair if only one kid is causing a disturbance that causes the 25 other students to miss out on part of their education.”

The veteran Madison teacher who finds it a struggle every day to get students into their seats after the bell rings says he personally knows of two students who left Madison public schools this

year because administrators took no action after the students complained of threats and intimidation. And two good teachers are retiring early rather than deal with classroom disruptions that school officials find acceptable, the teacher adds.

Even when a teacher tries to discipline an unruly student, he’ll find other kids in the classroom with their phones out, grinning as they record the incident, the teacher says. To get a problem student removed from his classroom, the teacher says he now has to document all interventions he has tried — including calls to the student’s parents and the results of those calls — before school administration will back him.

In one case, the teacher said he documented a student for a week, then sent him to the principal’s office, only to have the kid returned to class 10 minutes later. Nothing happened. “Why would I send anyone else out or waste my time documenting their behavior? For me, that means I don’t have time to grade

a writing assignment, rework an average lesson plan or look for new material.”

Kids are learning to adapt to the chaos in the classroom, the teacher says, by enrolling in advanced placement and honors classes that the troublemakers avoid. But too many average students flooding into the advanced classes cannot meet the standards — so teachers begin dropping the standards, he says.

A colleague, the teacher adds, related this story: In the middle of a math class, the teacher is working out examples on the whiteboard,

her back to the class, when a female student yells, “Stop taking pictures of me!”

The teacher turns around and sees two boys with their phones out and the girl zipping her sweatshirt up to her neck. Over the next five minutes, the boys deny taking pictures while the distraught girl insists they did. All teaching has stopped. The teacher writes a pass for the two boys to take their phones to the principal’s office.

The interruption lasts even longer as the teacher takes time to type up a behavior report on the two students. Five minutes later, the boys are back, big smiles on their faces, and a note from the principal that reads: “I made the boys delete the photos.”

Summing it up: no consequences for the boys, who are now fearless. The girl feels violated, and the teacher lost control of the classroom. Suspension numbers are down, but at what cost?

“I fear that we are driving the gifted and talented middle-of-the-road kids out of our schools and into neighboring districts or private schools,” the teacher says. “Schools where teachers can teach and send a disruptive student out of the class.”

‘You have to hit a teacher or draw blood with a kid to get suspended these days,’ says a Milwaukee teacher.

Dave Daley has been a journalist for 30 years. He covered the Capitol for The Milwaukee Journal and legal affairs for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.