

Why some LAUSD teachers are balking at a new approach to discipline problems

By [TERESA WATANABE](#) and [HOWARD BLUME](#)

NOV 07, 2015 | 10:00 AM Los Angeles Times, Los Angeles, CA

In a South Los Angeles classroom, a boy hassles a girl. The teacher moves him to the back of the room, where he scowls, makes a paper airplane and repeatedly throws it against the wall. Two other boys wander around the class and then nearly come to blows.

"Don't you talk about my sister," one says to the other. The teacher steps between them.

When she tries to regain order, another boy tells her: "Screw you."

It's another day of disruption on this campus in the Los Angeles Unified School District, which has been nationally hailed by the White House and others for its leadership in promoting more progressive school-discipline policies. The nation's second-largest school system was the first in California to ban suspensions for defiance and announced plans to roll out an alternative known as restorative justice, which seeks to resolve conflicts through talking circles and other methods to build trust.

The shift has brought dramatic changes: Suspensions districtwide plummeted to 0.55% last school year compared with 8% in 2007-08, and days lost to suspension also plunged, to 5,024 from 75,000 during that same period, according to the most recent data.

The district moved to ban suspensions amid national concern that they imperil academic achievement and disproportionately affect minorities, particularly African Americans.

But many teachers say their classrooms are reeling from unruly students who are escaping consequences for their actions.

They blame the district for failing to provide the staff and training needed to effectively shift to the new approach — and their complaints are backed up by L.A. schools Supt. Ramon Cortines. He said the new discipline policies, which were pushed through by the Board of Education and former Supt. John Deasy and which he supports, were poorly executed. He compared the implementation to the flawed effort to equip students and teachers with Apple tablets.

"I will compare it to the iPad," Cortines said. "You cannot piecemeal this kind of thing and think it is going to have the impact that it should have. Don't make a political statement and then don't have the wherewithal to back it up."

It's called the devil in the details. Sometimes it means stopping what you're doing and then do it right in a few places, and then do it right everywhere.

Alex Caputo-Pearl, president of United Teachers Los Angeles, said the union backs the new approach and that teachers with sufficient support have used it effectively at such high schools as Augustus Hawkins in South L.A. and Roosevelt in Boyle Heights. But widespread complaints from teachers without such support have prompted union plans to start its own training.

"We're now carrying the consequences of ... not enough staffing to make it work and a lot of frustration," Caputo-Pearl said.

The most assertive supporters of restorative justice on the school board are Steve Zimmer and Monica Garcia. Both said the effort is essential to improving academic achievement, as important as instructional practices and financial management.

"This literally changes kids' lives and their experience in school," said Zimmer, the board president. "We have to get this right."

Zimmer questioned reports of deteriorating discipline, saying such problems existed before the policy was enacted two years ago and resulted from numerous factors at a school.

But board member Richard Vladovic said a hasty rollout had the potential to make things worse.

Teachers with a high number of students with discipline issues are walking a fine line between extreme stress and an emotional meltdown.

"We have not provided all the training we should, but that's been historic in education," he said. "It's called the devil in the details. Sometimes it means stopping what you're doing and then do it right in a few places, and then do it right everywhere."

Only 307 of the district's 900 campuses have so far received training under the district's five-year restorative justice plan, according to Earl Perkins, assistant superintendent of school operations. Last year, the district only budgeted funds for five restorative justice counselors until community pressure pushed officials to increase that to 25. This year, 20 more counselors were added for a total \$7.2 million in spending.

But that covers less than a third of the district's 181 secondary schools, where discipline problems are the most acute.

Community groups that monitor the issue say it is unclear how schools are coping with unruly students under the suspension restrictions — in part because the district has not released data on how many, for instance, are referred to the administrative office and what happens to them afterward. At Manchester Elementary and Markham Middle School in South L.A., principals reportedly sent disruptive students home without recording them as suspensions, but Perkins said no such reports have surfaced this year.

Sylvester Wiley, an L.A. Unified police officer for 32 years, said schools are increasingly calling police to handle disruptive students. "Now that they can't suspend, schools want to have officers handle things, but we constantly tell them we can't do this," he said. "Willful defiance is not a crime."

At Los Angeles Academy Middle School in South L.A., teachers have asked for an after-school detention program, but one has not yet been established. They say they are overwhelmed by what they consider ineffective responses to students who push, threaten and curse them. The stress over discipline prompted two teachers to take leaves of absence in the last two months.

"My teachers are at their breaking point," Art Lopez, the school's union representative, wrote to union official Colleen Schwab in a letter obtained by The Times. "Everyone working here is highly aware of how the lack of consequences has affected the site. Teachers with a high number of students with discipline issues are walking a fine line between extreme stress and an emotional meltdown."

Lopez wrote that many teachers felt that administrators were pushing the burden of discipline onto instructors because they can no longer suspend unruly students and lack the staff to handle them outside

the classroom. Associated Administrators of Los Angeles, which represents principals and others, declined to comment.

Michael Lam, an eighth-grade math teacher, said he has seen an increase in student belligerence under new discipline policies.

"Where is the justice for the students who want to learn?" he said, speaking at a recent forum held as part of the process to select the next superintendent of schools. "I'm afraid our standards are getting lower and lower."

Cortines, 83, said he broke up a fight between students last year at Markham Middle School, which he said was "out of control" toward the end of the school year.

"There were just a lot of problems" and not only with restorative justice, he said. "I don't think we provided the proper support for the administration. I don't think we did proper monitoring."

Cortines said the situation has improved at Markham. Principal Luis Montoya said change would take time, but that progress should pick up this year because the district has provided a full-time staff member for the restorative justice program and a teacher has been named to help lead the efforts.

But some teachers are dubious, in part because high staff turnover has stymied efforts. A highly regarded restorative justice counselor was let go in January because foundation funding ran out, and 10 of the 11 teachers on the school's restorative justice task force last year have left the campus.

Schools with enough staff and training, however, report success. At Jordan High School in Watts, for instance, suspensions have dropped to just one as of October compared with 22 during the same period last year. The school has launched a well-staffed program led by a dean and two counselors, who meet with troubled students in a designated room featuring posters offering pointers about the practice, such as speaking and listening with respect.

At Gardena High School, Principal Rosie Martinez said the school began using restorative justice last year, with all teachers asked to hold discussion circles to build a sense of community and trust. When students misbehave, they are sent to resolve their conflicts with coordinator Deborah Moore.

"It's a slow process getting everyone on board," said Daron Andrade, dean of students. But she added that the new approach seems to have reduced arguments and fights.

Students who have experienced the restorative practices say they have helped.

Nataya Ross, 17, and Maya Smith, 16, were both referred to restorative justice circles after getting into campus fights. The students took turns sharing their feelings about the conflict and how to make things right.

"When I first heard of the circle, I thought it was useless," Nataya said. "Now I think it is good. Me and my best friend were in the circle, and we got good in two minutes. We just had to get a lot of stuff off our chest."

Maya also thought the circle was "dumb" at first. "But it actually helped," she said. "It made me mature just a little. I think I'm way better than how I was last year."

The students said some teachers believe the new approach has exacerbated discipline problems. But they also said restorative justice has the potential to help all students, if they are exposed to it.

Full funding to spread the practice to every campus is the district's ultimate goal, Perkins said.

"We have to teach our students how to be good citizens ... they don't need to miss instructional time to make this happen," he said.

[Teresa Watanabe](#)

Teresa Watanabe covers education for the Los Angeles Times. Since joining the Times in 1989, she has covered immigration, ethnic communities, religion, Pacific Rim business and served as Tokyo correspondent and bureau chief. She also covered Asia, national affairs and state government for the San Jose Mercury News and wrote editorials for the Los Angeles Herald Examiner. A Seattle native, she graduated from USC in journalism and in East Asian Languages and Culture.

[Howard Blume](#)

Howard Blume covers education for the Los Angeles Times. He's won the top investigative reporting prize from the L.A. Press Club and print Journalist of the Year from the L.A. Society of Professional Journalists chapter. He co-hosts "Deadline L.A." on KPFK, which the press club named best radio public affairs show in 2010. He teaches tap dancing and has two superior daughters.