

Legislative Committee Hears Testimony on Problems with Classroom Discipline

As I discussed in my last column, the legislature recently reassembled in Jefferson City for the annual veto session. In addition to its official purpose of giving the legislature a chance to override the governor's vetoes, this brief September session is often used as an opportunity for special interim committees to meet and hear testimony.

One such committee to which I have been appointed is the Joint Interim Committee on Teacher Support, Regulatory Reduction and Accountability. This committee was charged by the legislature with examining issues relating to the administrative burden on teachers and with looking for ways to promote flexibility and innovation in the classroom.

In addition, the committee was directed to review problems involving student discipline. Indeed, student discipline was the primary subject of the committee's first meeting last week here at the State Capitol in Jefferson City. During this hearing the committee heard testimony from teachers who commonly deal with discipline problems in the classroom and the testimony we heard was sobering. One teacher stated that the decline in discipline over her long career meant that it was now more difficult to teach a class of 20 students than it used to be to teach a class of 30. Another teacher, this one at the beginning of her career, testified that she had been kicked, hit and spit upon during her first year of teaching. This revelation is all the more disturbing for the fact that she was teaching a class of kindergarten students. I am pleased to report that none of these teachers was from Jackson County. However, I am not naïve on this subject. I have heard from teachers in our school districts that student discipline is, perhaps, the greatest challenge teachers face.

In previous generations there was a general respect for teachers and for adults in general. Youngsters knew that disobedience and outright obnoxious behavior would not be tolerated at home or at school. How well many of us remember the discipline that was lovingly but firmly meted out for bad behavior when we were kids. Unfortunately, times have changed. Today the general decline of discipline in the home is having serious effects in the classroom because kids that were never taught to mind Mom and Dad will certainly not mind the teacher.

Another factor making teaching all the more difficult is the lack of support by parents. There was a day when parents presumed the teacher was correct and both parents backed him or her up in matters of discipline. I remember being sent to the principle in Junior High by one of the school's most strict teachers. At the time, I thought it was unjust and made that case to my horrified parents. They were not convinced by my arguments and I faced their wrath. My parents' unequivocal message to their 13 year old son was that they expected my behavior to please even the strictest teacher in the school. Because they backed the school, I changed the way I handled myself in that class. That was the way most families handled things 25 years ago. Sadly the current trend seems to be parents who rush to defend even misbehaving youngsters. We hear reports from

teachers and administrators who face the ongoing prospect of frivolous lawsuits filed by parents who feel that their child has been singled out for punishment.

Lack of student discipline is a huge issue that educators have to deal with every week. We must work toward addressing this problem. First, the legislature needs to make sure that teachers are given the full backing of the State when administering measured and prudent discipline while at the same time protecting them from the threat of frivolous lawsuits. We must make sure that the consequences of disruptive behavior are sufficiently severe that would-be problems are deterred. Also, the institutions that train our teachers must make sure that they are providing teachers in training the tools they need to manage discipline problems. However, the more important yet more difficult solution is a societal one that begins at home. Parents must step up to the plate and make sure that their children know that misbehavior both at home and at school will not be tolerated.

Teaching children is a difficult job under the best of circumstances and it is made infinitely harder when there are discipline problems in the classroom. We ask a great deal of our teachers and we give them one of society's most important jobs. They are frequently criticized. Instead of pointing fingers at them maybe all of us parents need to take a hard look in the mirror to make sure that we and our kids are part of the solution and not the problem.

As always, if you have any questions or comments, please write to me at matt_bartle@senate.state.mo.us or call my office at (888) 711-9278.