

Letter from a Teacher

In 1999, a group of us attempted to address the issues of safety and discipline in our schools. In doing that, we decided to survey the teachers starting with a few simple issues: discipline policies and dress codes.

We wrote up and printed the survey and began distributing them through the teachers' mailboxes in the offices. We honestly didn't know that we weren't allowed to communicate directly with teachers in this manner. By the end of the day, the surveys had been pulled but a few had gotten through.

Knowing our teachers were afraid to openly speak their minds, the survey indicated they could mail their responses back to me including any comments they would like to make and they would remain anonymous.

I received the following letter reproduced here unchanged:

Dear Mrs. Young,

Thank you for taking an interest in discipline issues in the Caldwell School District. I am a mother and a teacher. I believe that we have to work together to set higher expectations for all children in the area of academics and behavior.

It seems that the answer is straightforward. Parents, teachers and administrators should sit down together and define a set of standards. When I speak with parents, they almost uniformly want their children to get a strong education in the basics and they want their child to be on their best behavior in class. They are very critical of practices such as extra credit, letting students turn in work well after it is due, students disrupting class, rudeness in the halls, nasty language on notebooks, etc.

Notice that I've mixed academic and discipline issues together. This is on purpose. First of all, parents put the two together. Secondly, as a teacher and mother, one can't happen without the other. Without discipline, a home doesn't function and a classroom doesn't function. As adults, we have a responsibility to teach our children self-discipline. That is the glue that holds a civilized society together. All adults have that responsibility.

Why isn't it happening? Why do adults back down? Let me tell you what happens to me when I set high expectations. Children whine to their parents. Parents then, come after the teacher. I have been told how mean I am, what a terrible teacher/person I am, how I damage children's self esteem, and more. Thirty years ago, there would have been no question if a child were disciplined; they would have gotten in twice as much trouble at home. Now it is the teacher who gets in trouble. Many administrators are getting exhausted from dealing with this and I think it leads to less support for teachers.

So what do we do? I think you have begun that process by reaching out with your survey. I wish you success. Some how we all have to begin to trust each other enough to sit down and hammer these issues out. I think it hasn't been done before because people are afraid of disagreement and the old fashioned practice of scolding other people's kids has stopped. Well, disagreement is fine with me. I think we can talk our way through it and find some common ground. And maybe, it's time we started looking out for other people's kids and put some pressure on parents who let their kids run wild.

What if every building had a parent-teacher-administrator committee formed to study and discuss discipline issues? After the ground work was done, the groups could meet together and have public presentations. If we could get enough people to support the plan, then teachers and administrators would know two things. They would have to enforce the policies AND when they did, they would receive full support to do so.

In answer to your survey, I would say “yes” on all options.

Thank you for caring.