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School board responses: Kindergarten behavior crisis

If severe behavior issues have emerged in your kindergarten and primary grades — the type of behavior that puts staff and other students in physical danger — you are not alone. Districts nationwide are scrambling to cope with this alarming trend of disrupted instruction from students who have trouble managing their emotions and behavior.

Districts are implementing a variety of programs and tactics in response to this trend, including teacher training, emotional/behavioral classroom curriculum, parent workshops and “transition classrooms” with specially trained instructional assistants. As district leaders implement these emerging programs to address the problem, how we talk about “these bad children” needs to be carefully framed, or you’ll have angry parents from both sides at your board meetings as you grapple with short-term solutions to avert a crisis.

If you haven’t experienced these rumblings, you’re lucky. Regardless, now is the time to be proactive. In Oregon, teachers — not school boards — have claimed the public spotlight and therefore have framed the issue. That puts many boards in the position of reacting, not leading. The Oregon Education Association, representing 44,000 teachers, released a report calling classroom disruptions a “significant and growing problem,” and calling this trend “unprecedented,” seeping into traditional, not just special education, classes.

While teachers are often considered the most credible sources of information, school boards need to step up — in response to problems emerging, but preferably before, because taxpayers have entrusted YOU with the moral responsibility to provide a safe learning environment.

Tips to get ahead of the issue and claim a leadership role

It’s your role to elevate this issue: Do it calmly and openly, without blame — and not in executive session (unless specific cases need attention). Ask your school leaders to gather data and report during a board session. Do this before you need to address behavior issues with immediate corrective action — which could put board members on the defensive, and force you into budget increases without much lead time to digest and debate.

The frame game: Frame it as a collective sense of urgency — create a long-term plan, because behavior in primary grades affects later learning ... and graduation rates. Find research to support spending money now to save later. Explore training in ACES (Adverse Childhood Experiences) and TIP, (trauma-informed practices). Understand what “serious physical harm,” means and define when to physically restrain a child.

The blame game! Recognize that talking about severe behavioral problems will elicit strong emotions — from blaming parents and threatening expulsion, to expressing outrage like

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Washington State
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“why are five-year-olds stabbing each other and screaming obscenities?” These aren’t the questions to ask, and the debate will only lead to more blaming. Turn the discussion into action: The bottom line is these children need help at the basic, social level before they can learn — nothing less, so what can we do to help?

And be clear that “these children” are your children, too, and their success contributes to the success of the whole district. Be sure to remind parents that it is important to support all kids with the tools they need to be successful rather than targeting and disparaging students who have special behavioral needs.

Focus on building your parent relationships

Districts can reduce anger and frustration among parents by helping them understand the issues around the higher rate of behavioral issues that teachers and schools are addressing. It is important to develop relationships with families before they enter school and strengthen partnerships with local programs, like clubs, after-school programs, social service groups so you can build trust and create opportunities for conversations. Talk to them about the behavioral issue as a whole and the tactics you are using to address it.

Topics to discuss...lowering class size, temporary staff and coaches, counselors, student mentors, early childhood evaluations for ages three to five to identify special needs and IEP needs.

Reach out to all parents — not just parents of children with behavior issues. Imagine the emotional reaction parents may have when they realize their child’s classroom is so disruptive, learning has come to a halt, period. They’ll come to you for answers. Share information with them frequently and offer a way for them to communicate with the district when they have questions or input.

The name game: As you craft solutions, avoid the term “behavior” in naming programs. Try neutral labels like Transition Classroom, or “Ready for School.”

Know state laws: State departments of education usually govern discipline laws, such as when children can be physically touched. For example, Oregon law limits when a teacher can physically restrain students to when “serious physical harm” could occur. As a result, districts have told teachers to handle these incidents using methods like “classroom clears.”

Gather data: If you’re not tracking this data, start now. In Oregon, it’s been difficult to quantify how much the problem of disruptive behavior has grown because most districts don’t keep uniform data about student outbursts. But data looking at teacher injuries offers insight.

Lastly, realize that when a child is screaming or having a melt-down (often called “deregulation” by educators), they’re crying for help ... and it’s our job to help them.