

Better School Safety and Discipline

Once you learn to quit, it becomes a habit. The harder you work, the harder it is to surrender.

Vince Lombardi

For the past ten years, the Escambia School District has experienced a declining enrollment. For many families, the choice to send their children to private schools or to educate them at home is directly connected to safety and discipline in schools.

We must improve the safety and discipline in the public schools not only to prevent declining enrollment but to insure better quality instruction and academic achievement.

There are a number of key elements to improving school safety and discipline. The first is a new approach to discipline.

All schools will be required to develop and implement a school-wide discipline plan. This plan can and should be customized to the needs of each school community. The plan will be published and posted in each classroom, so that all students, teachers and parents in that school will know the

rules and the penalties for breaking those rules. Everyone will clearly understand the expectations for behavior and the consequences of noncompliance.

Additionally, we will ask community leaders – including law enforcement and faith-based leaders – to help resolve neighborhood discipline problems. Many discipline problems in our schools are the result of disagreements which begin in the home or the neighborhoods and spill over into the schools.

A public/private coalition will help stabilize many communities, allowing our students to focus more on education when they are at school. This approach will need some fine tuning, but I believe it can make a significant difference in changing the culture and minimizing disruption during the school day. The standards will be set with help from the neighborhoods, and those who break the rules will be disciplined. Again this program is simple, straightforward and accountable.

Creative consequences will need to be developed. Schools have lost many of the effective consequences of the past. When I was a student, the threat of three licks from the principal's paddle was

sufficient to keep my behavior in line. No, I am not recommending a return to corporal punishments (although I have spoken with many during the campaign that suggest this as an option). I am suggesting that consistent enforcement of fair and equitable consequences for the breaking of established rules must be a priority in every classroom in every school.

One of the few consequences used by schools today is out-of-school suspension. However, this practice has become ineffective in deterring inappropriate student behaviors. As a matter of fact, the Escambia County School District suspends students at a rate almost double the state average as was indicated on a previous chart. When students are suspended from school, they are given failing grades for all subjects missed during the suspension period.

Don't misunderstand my resolve for dealing with serious behavior incidents – there are some actions committed by students that absolutely demand they be separated from the general population. For the serious infractions, there must be consequences that match. In these instances, discipline must be swift and sufficient to insure the

safety of the school environment.

Several of our high schools receive low grades due to the performance of students in the lower quartile. It is no secret that the lowest performing students are likely to be the ones that are chronically absent and are more likely to be suspended from school. Here is a profound statement – so simple that everyone can see the truth in it: If a student is not present in the classroom, that student has a difficult time keeping up and learning.

Community services, on-campus work detail and in-school suspension are among some of the options that might be more effective in changing student behavior for many of the minor offenses. In-school suspensions can allow for students to receive instruction not only in subject matter but also in how to behave within the accepted standards.

As Superintendent, I plan to establish clear expectations including a student disciplinary plan. School personnel, religious and community leaders will be asked to help develop this plan. Furthermore, we will seek greater parental input and support in both the development and implementation of a better discipline plan.

Training for school administrators, faculties and support personnel will focus on prevention. Intervention strategies will be clearly defined and consistently applied.

As schools improve their ability to provide clear standards for discipline, great dividends will be realized in student achievement. The school district's journey toward excellence **requires progress** in the area of discipline and safety.