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Posted 5/11/2004 12:00 PM Updated 5/11/2004 10:15 PM

Study: Pupils pay academic price for unruly classrooms

By Fredreka Schouten, Gannett News Service

WASHINGTON — Rude behavior by students is disrupting public school classrooms and driving teachers out of their jobs, says a report out Tuesday.

More than three out of four middle and high school teachers surveyed by the non-partisan research firm Public Agenda said they could be more effective in the classroom if they weren't spending so much time dealing with unruly students. Nearly 80% said there are serious troublemakers in their school who should have been kicked out of regular classrooms.

And more than one in three said they either have seriously thought about leaving teaching because they are tired of dealing with behavior problems or know a teacher who has quit for that reason.

"Teachers are spending large amounts of time off task," said Ruth Wooden, Public Agenda's president. "A lot of it tends to be a few troublemakers who tyrannize the rest of the class."

Teachers also described a climate in which many parents and students routinely challenged their decisions on discipline. Nearly eight in 10 said students are quick to point out their rights or that their parents can sue, the report found.

The two random national surveys of 725 middle and high school teachers and 600 parents come as schools and students face a greater push to improve academic performance or face tough consequences. The study doesn't indicate whether discipline problems are growing worse. But teachers, under new pressure to focus on raising standardized test scores, seem more frustrated with unruly conduct.

At the same time, budget cuts have reduced money for counseling and other alternative programs that temporarily remove disruptive children from class, officials with teachers unions said.

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"If you have an angry young man or woman, there's no counseling," said Vi Parramore, who runs the local branch of the American Federation of Teachers in Jefferson County, Ala.

Teachers themselves often lack the training to deal with discipline. An earlier Public Agenda survey of college professors who train teachers found that those professors gave a low priority to skills such as keeping order and training kids to be polite.

The problem is made worse when school systems assign inexperienced teachers to classrooms with the most difficult students, experts say. "We lose somewhere between 30 (percent) to 50% of teachers in the first five years, and this is one of the gigantic reasons why," said Jerald Newberry of the National Education Association.

Most teachers and parents surveyed by Public Agenda agree on at least one point: The chief cause of discipline problems in schools can be traced to parents' failure to teach their kids to behave.

The mail survey of teachers was conducted March 12-April 9. Parents were surveyed by telephone March 11-18. Each survey has a margin of error of plus or minus 4 percentage points.

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