EDUCATORS' PERCEPTIONS OF CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF

PROBLEMATIC PARENTAL BEHAVIOR IN KENTUCKY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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Introduction

Although a wide variety of research efforts use data from students to examine causes of school violence and victimization, few efforts examine victimization among teachers. Even when this research is performed, the findings typically focus on students as the perpetrators. Nevertheless, the emerging image of the "pushy parent" and anecdotal evidence from numerous sources causes one to question the amount and types of victimization among teachers that are due to problematic parents. This effort is an attempt to provide a more informed look at the topic of parental aggression toward teachers.

Because information regarding the existence of parental aggression toward teachers is lacking, we first devoted our efforts to the creation of a reliable and valid survey instrument to solicit information from those individuals most directly confronted with this issue: teachers and administrators. On February 16th, 2005, with the assistance of Jon Akers, Executive Director for the Kentucky Center for School Safety, we convened a focus group with ten individuals deemed representative of administrators and teachers in Kentucky public schools.[1] The focus group followed the structured group format (Morgan, 1997) and lasted approximately two hours. The purpose of the focus group was to solicit information regarding the following issues from participants: (1) Definition of parental aggression, (2) Forms of parental aggression, (3) Frequency and extent of parental aggression, (4) Issues around which parental aggression arises, (5) Current responses to parental aggression, and (6) Possible recommendations for dealing with aggressive parents.

The focus group was facilitated by a trained university professor. During the focus group, two separate researchers took notes of the session's content. Data obtained from the two researchers were then transcribed and analyzed. Information from those data was used to create the survey instrument used in this study.

Data collection

Given the nature of the sample under study, we felt that an electronic questionnaire would provide the most meaningful and timely data and yield the highest response rate. While an electronic questionnaire is currently not feasible with surveys of the general public, Dillman (2000) suggests that valid, reliable electronic surveys with members of organizations that have both access to the Internet and valid email addresses can be conducted with only "…minor coverage problems" (Dillman, 2000, p. 356). We felt that these "minor coverage problems" would be outweighed by the much higher response rate that we would achieve utilizing the electronic survey format.

In early July, we mailed a letter to the superintendents from all 176 public school districts in which we described the purpose and methodology of the study and asked for both the email addresses of all the school principals in the district and permission to send an email to each principal asking for their help in administering the questionnaire. We then sent three follow-up mailings approximately two weeks apart and phoned superintendents who did not respond to any of the mailings until we obtained a decision regarding whether or not they would allow their district to participate. In the end, 161 (91.5%) superintendents agreed to allow us to email the survey to all principals in their district. While a small number of the 15 superintendents that refused to participate stated that they had just been appointed as superintendent and did not want to create any

controversy at such an early point in their career, we did not formally query the superintendents regarding their decision. Eleven of the 15 districts had enrollments of less than 3,500 students.

Using an email distribution list of principals created from those email addresses the superintendents provided, we then sent an email containing an announcement letter to the principals in September. In this letter, we informed them of the purpose of the study, its importance, and their role in facilitating the administration of the web-based survey. We then sent an email containing the link to the web-based survey in early October to each of the principals and asked that they forward the email to all the teachers in their school.

In the days that followed delivery of the initial email, we discovered that there were a number of potential respondents who experienced problems with the online availability of the survey. After contacting both the agency responsible for the online data collection and the principals at some of the schools, we were informed that these problems were primarily due to the limited bandwidth of both the school districts and the server where the electronic survey was housed. As such, the questionnaire was: (1) moved to a server that had a larger amount of available bandwidth and (2) reformatted so that the user could scroll down and answer several questions on each page rather than answer one question per page as was originally designed. The revised web page became available in late October and, to our knowledge, few users experienced problems with completion of the online questionnaire after the change.

In an attempt to maximize participation to obtain the most valid data possible (Dillman, 2000), we sent two reminder emails at two week intervals to the principals.

The website was deactivated on December 9. After cleaning the data, the sample under study here consists of data from 7,101 respondents.[2]

Estimating a response rate for this research is difficult at best. Given our methodology, we assume (but have no way of knowing for sure) that each principal that received the aforementioned emails distributed those emails to all the teachers in the school where the principal was the administrator. If that is the case, then 33,106 teachers (the number of teachers in the 161 districts who agreed to participate in the research) had the opportunity to complete the questionnaire. Because the sample under study here consists of 7,101 respondents, our response rate is 21.4 percent. We feel that this response rate is conservative, at best.

Given that the response rate to the survey is conservative, we cannot be certain as to whether the results presented here are representative of the 161 school districts under study. We can say, however, that the data obtained from the demographic questions (for which we were able to collect data) show the teachers in the sample to be very similar to those throughout the state of Kentucky.[3] Additionally, given the exploratory nature of this research, we feel that the low response rate neither reduces the importance of this research nor decreases the substantive significance of the findings derived from this study. As such, while the findings presented here need to be taken in the context of this sample, we are fairly confident that future research efforts with larger, more generalizable samples will produce similar findings to those presented here.

Results

The results presented in Table 1 describe the demographic characteristics of the respondents in the sample. Given that the focus group was confident that the elementary

and middle/high school teacher experiences with problematic parents would be dramatically different, each of the following tables contrasts the experiences of those teachers from elementary schools with those of teachers from the middle/high schools. The majority of the respondents (91.2%) from the elementary school group (hereafter referred to as elementary teachers) and seven in ten respondents (70.9%) from the middle/high school group (hereafter referred to as middle/high teachers) were female. The vast majority of the respondents from both groups (96.7% and 95.7%, respectively) were white.

Almost one in four elementary teachers (24.2%) were between the ages of 21 and 30 while slightly more than one in four elementary teachers were between the ages of 31 and 40 and between the ages of 41 and 50 (27.3% and 25.9%, respectively). Over one in six respondents (17.6%) were between the ages of 51 and 60. Middle/high teachers were generally older; one in four middle/high teachers was between the ages of 21 and 30 and between the ages of 51 and 60 (19.0% and 20.1%, respectively). Slightly more than one in four middle/high teachers were between the ages of 31 and 40 and between the ages of 41 and 50 (28.2% and 27.5%, respectively).

The majority of respondents from both groups were married (77.6% and 74.2% respectively), while over seven in ten respondents from both groups had children (73.3% and 70.8%, respectively). Most of the elementary teachers and middle/high teachers had either completed a master's degree and were at the Rank II level (44.6% and 46.1%, respectively) or had completed a Master's degree and 30 hours of additional graduate work in an approved program and were at the Rank I level (31.4% and 32.7%,

respectively). Most of the remaining respondents from both groups (22.0% and 19.1%, respectively) were at the Rank III level (college graduates).

More than half of the elementary and middle/high teachers (53.0% and 54.9%, respectively) had worked in the field of education for more than 10 years. Slightly over one third of the respondents from both groups had worked in the field of education for over 15 years (36.5% and 37.5% respectively). Approximately one in four respondents from both groups had worked in education for less than five years (24.0% and 22.8%, respectively).

The vast majority of respondents from both groups indicated their primary role in the school where they worked was that of a classroom teacher (82.2% and 85.4%, respectively). Additionally, the vast majority also had jobs that entailed working at only one school in the district (91.7% and 93.4%, respectively).

The respondents from both groups were distributed across the population sizes of 2,500 residents or less (21.3% and 12.4% respectively), 2,501 to 5,000 residents (19.2% and 16.0%, respectively), 5,001 to 10,000 residents (13.7% and 14.7%, respectively), 10,001 to 25,000 residents (15.9% and 22.0%, respectively), 25,001 to 50,000 residents (11.4% and 14.5%, respectively), and more than 50,000 residents (10.6% and 12.0%, respectively). Thus, a larger percentage of elementary teachers were from rural districts.

From the elementary teacher group, approximately half of the respondents (48.8%) worked in schools with enrollments from 251 to 500 students and one in three respondents (33.4%) worked in schools with enrollments from 501 to 750 students. Almost one in eight respondents (12.0%) worked in schools with enrollments less than 250 students. Approximately three in ten middle/high teachers (29.5%) worked in

schools with enrollments from 501 to 750 students. From the middle/high teacher group, almost one in five respondents worked in schools with enrollments from 251 to 500 students and from 751 to 1,000 students (19.0%, both). Approximately one in ten respondents (9.9%) worked in schools with enrollments from 1,001 to 1,250 students and a small percentage of respondents (7.9%) worked in schools with enrollments from 1,251 to 1,500 students. As such, the middle/high teachers were more likely than the elementary teachers to work in schools with larger enrollments.

The results presented in Table 2 describe the level of parental involvement in the school at which the respondents worked. More middle/high teachers than elementary teachers stated that parents were not active in their child(ren)'s school. From the middle/high teacher group, over one in three respondents (35.6%) said they were more non-active than active, over one in five (23.2%) said they were mostly non-active, and a small percentage of respondents (6.5%) said they were overwhelmingly non-active. From the elementary teacher group, almost three in ten respondents (29.5%) said they were more non-active than active, slightly more than one in eight (15.3%) said they were mostly non-active, and a small percentage of respondents (4.0%) said they were overwhelmingly non-active.

The results presented in Table 3 reflect the respondents' perceptions of their interaction with the parents whom they interact the most. Most respondents from both groups felt that their interaction with parents was positive. More than two in five elementary teachers (44.8%) stated their interaction with parents was mostly positive, three in ten (30.1%) stated that it was more positive than negative, and a small percentage (7.5%) indicated their interaction with parents was overwhelmingly positive. The

majority of middle/high teachers felt that their interaction with parents was positive, with one third (33.6%) stating that it was mostly positive, another one in three (33.5%) stating that it was more positive than negative, and a small percentage (4.4%) stating it was overwhelmingly positive.

The results presented in Table 4 describe the respondents' views of the most important causes of the problems between the respondents and parents. Discipline was the most important cause of problems between respondents and parents for both groups, while grades played a larger role as a cause of problems for the middle/high teachers than the elementary group. Almost three in five elementary teachers (58.2%) and more than four in ten middle/high teachers (44.8%) thought that discipline was the most important cause. One in seven elementary teachers (14.4%) and one in three middle/high teachers (33.0%) thought that grades were the most important cause. Small percentages of respondents from both groups stated that special education issues (9.6% and 6.0%, respectively), other issues (7.5% and 4.2%, respectively), and attendance issues (4.0% and 4.6%, respectively) were the most important causes.

The results presented in Table 5 reflect the level of the interaction with parents in the last 12 months that the respondents would describe as problematic. The majority of the respondents from both groups (73.2% and 68.1%, respectively) stated that less than 10% of interactions were problematic. A small percentage of respondents from both groups (4.2% and 7.0%, respectively) stated that the majority of the interaction they had with parents in the last 12 months was problematic.

The results presented in Table 6 indicate whether or not the respondents received training in communicating with parents. More than half of the respondents from both

groups (55.1% and 51.2%, respectively) had received training in communicating with parents. The results presented in Table 7 describe the activities and characteristics of those respondents. The majority of the respondents from both groups regularly watch the television news (92.2% and 91.4%, respectively), regularly read educational journals (79.4% and 73.8%, respectively) and consider themselves to be conservative (79.5.% and 73.0% respectively).

The results presented in Table 8 indicate the respondents' perceptions of law enforcement and crime in school. From both groups, the majority of respondents agreed that assaults on teachers by students (92.5% and 86.2%, respectively), assaults on teachers by parents (79.8% and 70.7%, respectively), and the number of school shootings have increased in the past 10 years (92.1% and 84.3%, respectively). Approximately three in four respondents from both groups (73.5% and 79.3, respectively) stated that the law enforcement and/or security personnel at their school did a good job of providing assistance when needed to deal with problem parents.

The results presented in Table 9 describe the respondents' perceptions of the effects of parental behavior on the educational process. The vast majority of respondents from both groups (96.7% and 94.6%, respectively) indicated that aggressive behavior of parents in the school setting often damaged their child emotionally or psychologically. An equal percentage of respondents from both groups (96.4% and 94.8%, respectively) stated that parents often believed they had rights but were unwilling to take responsibility for the behavior of their children. Over three in five elementary teachers (62.6%) and more than half of the middle/high teachers (57.3%) agreed that, in today's society, schools were too concerned about giving a parent voice in the public school setting.

Over three in five elementary teachers (62.4%) and almost seven in ten middle/high teachers (69.3%) indicated that most parents at their schools were unaware of the procedures for dealing with concerns they had about their children in the school environment. An approximately equal percentage of respondents from both groups (61.1% and 61.6%, respectively) agreed that advocacy groups acting on behalf of parents had increased parent/teacher problems. More than half of the respondents from both groups (52.0% and 58.7%, respectively) also stated that advocacy groups acting on behalf of parents had increased the likelihood that a teacher would give a student a higher grade than they deserved to avoid conflict. Over one in three respondents from both groups (35.1% and 36.4%, respectively) agreed that advocacy groups acting on behalf of parents had increased teachers' fears that an unsatisfied parent would victimize them. Finally, three in ten elementary teachers (31.1%) and almost one in four middle/high teachers (24.6%) indicated that increasing participation opportunities for parents in the public school setting had increased problems teachers had with parents.

The results presented in Table 10 reflect respondents' perceptions of educational pressures in public schools. The majority of respondents from both groups (89.2% and 84.4%, respectively) indicated that the recent upsurge in drug use in Kentucky had increased the number of problematic parents because more parents were using drugs than ever before. Three in ten elementary teachers (60.6%) and more than half of the middle/high teachers (52.4%) agreed that pressure to increase CATS scores had increased problems they had with parents. One in five respondents from both groups (22.2% and 22.6%, respectively) stated that teachers generally were more likely to have conflicts with parents of other races than parents of their own race.

The results presented in Table 11 reflect the respondents' perceptions of parents of children in the school. The majority of respondents from both groups agreed that most parents with whom they interacted were amenable to their suggestions about their children (91.5% and 88.3%, respectively) and generally supported the decisions that they made regarding their children (90.2% and 87.1%, respectively). Over four in five elementary teachers (84.3%) and three in four middle/high teachers (75.0%) stated that they were comfortable conducting a parent/teacher conference alone in their classrooms. Similar percentages of respondents from both groups (82.5% and 73.0%, respectively) stated that most of the students that they taught had parents who cared about their children's success. Over two in five elementary teachers (43.8%) and more than one in three middle/high teachers (37.2%) agreed that most of the students that they taught were provided a good moral foundation at home.

The results presented in Table 12 depict respondents' perceptions of their own risk of criminal victimization by problematic parental behavior. Middle/high teachers perceived their risk of victimization to be higher than elementary teachers for each of the activities in question. Both groups felt that the most likely problematic parental behaviors that they would encounter were (1) parents using profanity directed toward them and (2) parents accusing them of "picking on" their child. More than one in four (26.8%) elementary teachers and one in three (33.5%) middle/high teachers perceived that it was more likely than not (score of 6 or greater) that a parent would use profanity directed toward them. Similar percentages of respondents from both groups felt that parents would accuse them of "picking on" their child (26.3% and 31.8%, respectively).

Approximately one in four teachers in both groups felt that it was more likely than not a parent would scream at them (23.7% and 27.9%, respectively). Approximately one in five respondents from both groups perceived that it was more likely than not that a parent would call them on the phone and harass them (19.9% and 21.9%, respectively) or accuse them of unfair grading practices (17.5% and 24.8%, respectively). Approximately one in eight elementary teachers and one in six middle/high teachers perceived that it was more likely than not that a parent would verbally threaten them (12.9% and 16.3%, respectively), accuse them of being incompetent at their jobs (12.0% and 16.5%, respectively), attempt to get them to change an absence from unexcused to excused (13.9% and 16.8%, respectively), accuse them of unprofessional behavior (11.5% and 16.3%, respectively), threaten to do professional harm to them by using their personal connections (11.4% and 16.6%, respectively), or threaten to try to get them fired (11.0% and 16.0%, respectively). Additionally, small percentages of respondents from both groups felt that it was more likely than not that a parent would send them an email threatening their jobs (8.1% and 14.0%, respectively), send an email threatening them with physical harm (2.2% and 3.3%, respectively), or push, hit or attempt to push or hit them (2.6% and 2.9%, respectively).

The results presented in Table 13 reflect avoidance and protective behaviors of respondents. Over one in five respondents from both groups (24.1% and 22.8%) agreed that they had considered changing professions because of problems they had with parents. Fewer respondents from both groups stated that they had avoided school events because they wanted to avoid parents with whom they had confrontations (14.0% and 11.2%, respectively) or had reduced their involvement in extracurricular activities

because they wanted to avoid problematic parents (13.7% and 15.6%, respectively). More than one in eight respondents from both groups (13.4% and 13.2%, respectively) agreed that they were less comfortable confronting a parent who was of a different race. Small percentages of respondents from both groups (1.7% and 2.6%, respectively) indicated that they had considered carrying a weapon to school to protect themselves.

Respondents indicated their fear of victimization by problematic parental behavior in Table 14. One in three respondents from both groups were afraid that a parent would slander their professional reputation (35.4% and 33.8%, respectively) or that a parent would verbally abuse them or call them names because of his or her dissatisfaction with decisions the respondent made concerning the children with whom they interacted (33.2% and 34.0%, respectively). Small percentages of respondents from both groups were worried that a parent would strike them (5.7% and 5.3%, respectively) or push or shove them (5.4% and 5.3%, respectively) because of the parent's dissatisfaction with the decisions the respondent made concerning their child.

The results presented in Table 15 reflect respondents' perceptions of administrative support at the school in which they worked. More than four in five respondents from both groups indicated that the principal at the school generally supported the decisions that they made (85.8% and 85.7%, respectively) and that the administrators at their school supported them in dealing with parent-teacher problems (83.7% and 83.6%, respectively). Three in five respondents from both groups stated that the superintendent (62.4% and 61.1% respectively) and the school board (59.1% and 58.1%, respectively) supported them in dealing with parent-teacher problems. Three in five elementary teachers (58.9%) and half of the middle/high teachers (48.2%) agreed

that the parents on the site-based council in their district were generally representative of the parents in their district. Over one in three elementary teachers (37.1%) and more than two in five middle/high teachers (42.2%) stated that the policies at the school where they worked adequately punished those parents who created conflict.

The results presented in Table 16 display respondents' perceptions of support from the school board and the criminal justice system and the factors that influence administrative support. More than one in three respondents from both groups indicated that either the criminal justice system (37.0% and 36.9%, respectively) or the school board (35.0% and 36.9%, respectively) was reluctant to prosecute those parents who violate the law on school grounds. Approximately one in five respondents from both groups (20.0% and 21.4%, respectively) agreed that frequent administrative turnover in their district made it less likely that administrators would support their decisions as a teacher in the classroom.

The results presented in Table 17 reflect the answers to a number of questions that were asked regarding the prevalence of problematic behaviors that respondents had experienced *in their careers*. As with perceived risk of victimization, middle/high teachers were more likely than elementary teachers to have been victimized by practically all of the activities in question. The most prevalent form of victimization for both groups was verbal victimization, as more than one third of the respondents from each group indicated that a parent of a child at the school had accused them of "picking on" their child (37.6% and 40.7%, respectively) or had screamed at them (34.5% and 36.0%, respectively) in their career. More than one in four respondents from both groups indicated that a parent of a child at the school had used profanity directed toward them

(26.6% and 30.5%, respectively) while more than one in five respondents from both groups indicated that a parent of a child at the school had called them on the phone and harassed them (22.1% and 22.0%, respectively) or accused them of unfair grading practices (21.2% and 27.3%, respectively) at some point in their career. Approximately one in seven respondents from both groups stated that a parent had accused them of being incompetent at their job (15.1% and 17.1%, respectively), had attempted to get them to change an absence from unexcused to excused (14.9% and 14.7%, respectively), had verbally threatened them (14.3% and 16.1%, respectively), had threatened to try to get them fired (13.7% and 18.1%, respectively), had accused them of unprofessional behavior (13.5% and 17.7%, respectively), or had threatened to do professional harm to them by using their personal connections (12.3% and 16.4%, respectively). However, few respondents from both groups had experienced a situation where: a parent detained or attempted to detain them in a location in which they did not want to be (5.3% and 4.8%, respectively); a parent sent numerous emails to harass them (4.8% and 9.2%, respectively); or a parent sent them an email threatening their job (4.4% and 8.5%, respectively). Additionally, few respondents from both groups had ever had a parent push, hit, or attempt to push or hit them (1.7%, both), damage their property at school or at their home (1.6% and 2.5%, respectively), or send them an email threatening them with physical harm (0.4% and 0.6%, respectively).

The results presented in Table 18 reflect responses to the frequency of incidents of problem behaviors *in the past 12 months*. One in three respondents from both groups responded that a parent had accused them of "picking on" their child (32.6% and 35.9%, respectively) or had screamed at them (30.0% and 31.8%, respectively). One in four

respondents from both groups (23.8% and 27.9%, respectively) stated that a parent of a child at the school had used profanity directed toward them in the last 12 months. Slightly fewer respondents from both groups had a parent call them on the phone to harass them (19.1% and 19.4%, respectively), or accuse them of unfair grading practices (18.2% and 24.1%, respectively) in the past 12 months. One in eight respondents from both groups stated that a parent had accused them of being incompetent at their job (13.1% and 15.3%, respectively), had attempted to get them to change an absence from unexcused to excused (12.9% both), or had verbally threatened them (12.1% and 13.9%, respectively) in the last 12 months. Slightly fewer respondents from both groups stated that a parent had accused them of unprofessional behavior (11.8% and 16.0%, respectively); threatened to try to get them fired (11.7% and 16.0%, respectively); or threatened to do professional harm to them by using their personal connections (10.9% and 14.4%, respectively) in the past 12 months. Small percentages of respondents from both groups had a parent detain or attempt to detain them in a location they did not want to be (4.6% and 4.2%, respectively), had received numerous emails to harass them from a parent (4.5% and 8.5%, respectively), had received an email threatening their job from a parent (4.1% and 7.7%, respectively), had a parent push/hit or attempt to push or hit them (1.4% both), had their property at school or at home damaged by a parent (1.4% and 2.1%, respectively), or had received an email threatening them with physical harm (0.3% and 0.5%, respectively) in the last 12 months.

The results presented in Table 19 reflect respondents' perceptions and knowledge of statutes designed to protect teachers and school personnel. More than one in five elementary teachers (23.0%) and less than three in ten middle/high teachers (29.7%)

agreed that, before they began this survey, they were aware that Kentucky Revised Statute 161.190 was in existence. Only one in five respondents from both groups (19.9% and 21.4%, respectively) stated that they felt that this law was effective in deterring parents from abusing teachers. However, slightly more respondents from both groups indicated that before they began this survey, they were aware that Kentucky Revised Statute 508.025 was in existence (28.5% and 34.0%, respectively) and that this law was effective in deterring parents from abusing teachers (30.7% and 33.2%, respectively).

Discussion and Conclusions

Using a sample of teachers from 161 public school districts in Kentucky, this study has begun the exploration of parental aggression toward teachers by assessing the perspectives of over 7,000 teachers regarding the prevalence and incidence of problematic behavior among the parents of the students that they teach and the impact of that problematic behavior on their activities and attitudes toward educational activities. Results from this study reveal that a substantial minority of teachers had been victims of verbal abuse and threats from parents and that a small percentage of teachers had experienced physical aggression from parents. Therefore, the results tell us that the problem of parental aggression was present for a number of teachers under study, but the aggression was almost always in the form of verbal aggression, rather than physical aggression.

Nevertheless, within the limitations of the sample under study, the results presented here suggest that a substantial amount of responding teachers had inaccurate perceptions of the amount of school violence and the risk they face from both parents and students. Approximately nine in ten respondents agreed that school shootings have dramatically increased in the past ten years and that assaults on teachers by students have also increased during that time period; in fact, neither of these statements is correct (DeVoe et al., 2004; Anderson et al., 2001; National School Safety Center, 2006). This finding, coupled with the fact that most of the available literature in the area of parental aggression against teachers is found in popular or trade magazines (e.g., Time, Good Housekeeping, Times Educational Supplement), further enforces the need for scholarly

research in this area. Based on the results of this research, teachers should be made aware that, while their profession does involve somewhat regular conflict with parents, most of this conflict is verbal, not physical. Providing training for teachers on how to avoid, prevent, and resolve verbal confrontations with parents, both at the university level as part of their training prior to entering the teaching career and at the local level as part of their in-service training, is thus essential in retaining teachers in the profession and giving them the confidence they need to deal with sometimes hostile parents.

A second contribution from this study regards the respondents' perceptions of the support they receive from the criminal justice system and the school board. One in three respondents agreed that both the school board and the criminal justice system were reluctant to prosecute parents who violate the law on school grounds and less than half of the respondents agreed that policies at their school adequately punished parents who create conflict. If these concerns are in fact justified, steps should be taken to address them. If parents are violating laws on school grounds, criminal justice officials should prosecute those individuals with the same vigor that they would if the crime occurred away from school grounds. Future research should attempt to gauge the validity of these concerns.

Thirdly, this research suggested that the primary cause of conflict between parents and teachers involved discipline of children in the schools and also suggested that attendance problems are important causes of conflict as well. Since both of these issues have policies and rules to guide them, it would appear that better communication with parents regarding discipline and attendance would be helpful. While most schools are continually making efforts to improve their communication with parents, there are several

steps that all schools should ensure that they are taking in this area. Some of them include: (1) acknowledging that these are generally the two areas that cause the greatest amount of disagreement and conflict between educators and parents; (2) making every effort to simplify and clarify all information that details the rules of discipline and attendance; (3) widely advertising these rules to parents, students, and the community at large; and (4) broadly disseminating the process through which parents can address their concerns regarding discipline and attendance issues with the principal and, if needed, the superintendent and school board. Schools should also ensure that this information is posted on their school website and disseminated to parents at every opportunity. This information may reduce the number of potentially problematic situations that arise. Parents who know the rules regarding these matters will be less likely to be verbally or physically aggressive toward teachers when their children violate the rules.

The results presented here further reveal that, despite the fact that a number of teachers have been involved in verbal conflicts with parents in their careers (and in the past 12 months), the vast majority of respondents were not fearful of interactions with parents nor have they reduced their involvement in extracurricular activities because of problematic parents. As such, it appears that most respondents realize that the vast majority of parents are not problematic parents and plan their activities accordingly. Nevertheless, approximately one in five respondents agreed that they had considered changing professions and had reduced their involvement in extracurricular activities because of problematic parents. As such, parental aggression remains a problem for some teachers and should neither be ignored nor taken lightly. We have described a number of steps above that may reduce parent/teacher conflict. Schools should consider

these steps and develop others to insure that teachers do not leave the profession of teaching or reduce their effectiveness as teachers because of this problem.

Finally, we close by revisiting the issue of research using teachers and school administrators as respondents. The low response rate of this study limits the generalizability of these findings. We are aware of no method, however, that would insure a high response rate among teachers and school personnel without incurring a substantial investment of time and financial resources on the part of both schools and researchers. Given the choice of available methodologies, we chose to attempt an electronic survey of teachers. Our decision was driven by the fact that contacting teachers by phone during the school day is virtually impossible; contacting teachers after school hours by phone is even more difficult as there are no lists available that provide home phone numbers of teachers. Mail surveys of teachers may have higher response rates than telephone surveys but would also be difficult for the same reasons described above. The results from this study further suggest the electronic surveys of teachers yield low response rates as well.

Based on our experience in this study and the experience of others in numerous studies with hard-to-reach samples such as this (see Dillman, 2000), it appears the best method to conduct this type of research in the future would be to personally interview teachers at the schools where they are employed. Given the hectic nature of a teacher's schedule when school is in operation, we suggest that the best time to conduct these interviews is either (a) immediately after the school day in a faculty meeting or (b) at some time during professional development training that most districts conduct regularly when school is not in session. While either method requires tremendous support from the

school administration, we suggest that it is vital that this research be replicated with a larger, more representative sample to determine whether the findings from this study actually reflect the experiences of teachers in general. Until we know for certain the amount, types, and ramifications of parental aggression against teachers, any methods to reduce this aggression may be futile.

Table 1.   Sample Characteristics (N=7,101)

Category		Elementary School		Middle/High School	
		Number	**Percentage**	**Number**	**Percentage**
Gender	Female	2,882	91.2	2,793	70.9
	Male	269	8.5	1,137	28.9
	Missing	10	0.3	10	0.3
Age	Less than 21 years	1	0.0	0	0.0
	Between 21 and 30 years	766	24.2	750	19.0
	Between 31 and 40 years	862	27.3	1,110	28.2
	Between 41 and 50 years	820	25.9	1,084	27.5
	Between 51 and 60 years	556	17.6	793	20.1
	Over 60 years	37	1.2	61	1.5
	Missing	119	3.8	141	3.6
Race	African American/Black	59	1.9	84	2.1
	White/Caucasian	3,058	96.7	3,770	95.7
	American Indian	11	0.3	15	0.4
	Hispanic American/Latino	7	0.2	12	0.3
	Asian or Asian American	2	0.1	10	0.3
	Other Race	6	0.2	18	0.5
	Multiracial	4	0.1	4	0.1
	Missing	14	0.4	27	0.7
Marital Status	Yes	2,453	77.6	2,925	74.2
	No	670	21.2	973	24.7
	Missing	38	1.2	42	1.1
Have Children	Yes	2,318	73.3	2,790	70.8
	No	811	25.7	1,116	28.3
	Missing	32	1.0	34	0.9
Education Level	Some college	7	0.2	12	0.3
	College graduate (Rank III)	697	22.0	754	19.1
	Master's (Rank II)	1,409	44.6	1,815	46.1
	Rank I	993	31.4	1,290	32.7
	Ed.D / Ph.D	27	0.9	43	1.1
	Missing	28	0.9	26	0.7
Years Working in Field of Education	Less than 3 years	283	9.0	350	8.9
	Between 3 and 5 years	475	15.0	548	13.9
	Between 6 and 10 years	702	22.2	840	21.3
	Between 11 and 15 years	521	16.5	684	17.4
	Over 15 years	1,154	36.5	1,478	37.5
	Missing	26	0.8	40	1.0

Table 1. (continued)

Job Title	Assistant Principal	33	1.0	88	2.2
	Coach	12	0.4	11	0.3
	Counselor	110	3.5	181	4.6
	Librarian	92	2.9	67	1.7
	Principal	166	5.3	122	3.1
	School Psychologist	19	0.6	9	0.2
	Superintendent	0	0.0	8	0.2
	Teacher	2,598	82.2	3,365	85.4
	District Staff	17	0.5	28	0.7
	Speech Pathologist	67	2.1	9	0.2
	Missing	47	1.5	52	1.3
Job Respon-sibility	One school	2,900	91.7	3,679	93.4
	Multiple schools	233	7.4	225	5.7
	Missing	28	0.9	36	0.9
Town Popula-tion	2,500 residents or less	672	21.3	490	12.4
	Between 2,501 and 5,000 residents	608	19.2	632	16.0
	Between 5,001 and 10,000 residents	434	13.7	579	14.7
	Between 10,001 and 25,000 residents	504	15.9	867	22.0
	Between 25,001 and 50,000 residents	360	11.4	572	14.5
	Between 50,001 and 150,000 residents	193	6.1	272	6.9
	Over 150,001 residents	334	10.6	474	12.0
	Missing	56	1.8	54	1.4
Enroll-ment of School	250 students or less	378	12.0	196	5.0
	Between 251 and 500 students	1,544	48.8	749	19.0
	Between 501 and 750 students	1,057	33.4	1,161	29.5
	Between 751 and 1,000 students	139	4.4	750	19.0
	Between 1,001 and 1,250 students	7	0.2	390	9.9
	Between 1,251 and 1,500 students	1	0.0	310	7.9
	Between 1,501 and 1,750 students	1	0.0	179	4.5
	Between 1,751 and 2,000 students	1	0.0	79	2.0
	Between 2,001 and 2,500 students	3	0.1	70	1.8
	Missing	30	0.9	56	1.4

Table 2.   What is the Level of Parental Involvement at Your School?

	Elementary School		Middle/High School	
	Number	**Percentage**	**Number**	**Percentage**
Overwhelmingly active	174	5.5	64	1.6
Mostly active	402	12.7	229	5.8
More active than non-active	480	15.2	412	10.5
About as active as non-active	545	17.2	647	16.4
More non-active than active	933	29.5	1,404	35.6
Mostly non-active	485	15.3	913	23.2
Overwhelmingly non-active	125	4.0	258	6.5
Missing	17	0.5	13	0.3

Table 3.   Description of Interaction with Parents of Children

	Elementary School		Middle/High School	
	Number	**Percentage**	**Number**	**Percentage**
Overwhelmingly positive	237	7.5	172	4.4
Mostly positive	1,415	44.8	1,323	33.6
More positive than negative	950	30.1	1,318	33.5
About as positive as negative	378	12.0	711	18.0
More negative than positive	131	4.1	327	8.3
Mostly negative	25	0.8	52	1.3
Overwhelmingly negative	6	0.2	14	0.4
Missing	19	0.6	23	0.6

Table 4.   Most Important Causes of Problems with Parents

	Elementary School		Middle/High School	
	Number	**Percentage**	**Number**	**Percentage**
Discipline	1,840	58.2	1,767	44.8
Grades	454	14.4	1,301	33.0
Special education issues	304	9.6	238	6.0
Other issues	237	7.5	165	4.2
Attendance issues	126	4.0	182	4.6
Curriculum decision	97	3.1	51	1.3
Sport	17	0.5	127	3.2
Extracurricular activities	12	0.4	38	1.0
Missing	74	2.3	71	1.8

**Table 5.   Percentage of the Interaction with Parents in Last 12 Months
                Described as Problematic**

Percentage of Interaction Described as Problematic	Elementary School		Middle/High School	
	Number	**Percentage**	**Number**	**Percentage**
<=10	2,314	73.2	2,684	68.1
11 - 20	226	7.1	297	7.5
21 - 30	231	7.3	273	6.9
31 - 40	66	2.1	86	2.2
41 - 50	122	3.9	231	5.9
51 - 60	21	0.7	45	1.1
61 - 70	14	0.4	44	1.1
71 - 80	59	1.9	113	2.9
81 - 90	27	0.9	52	1.3
>=90	8	0.3	23	0.6
Missing	73	2.3	92	2.3

Table 6. Have You Ever Received Training in Communicating with Parents

	Elementary School		Middle/High School	
	Number	**Percentage**	**Number**	**Percentage**
Yes	1,743	55.1	2,017	51.2
No	1,385	43.8	1,889	47.9
Missing	33	1.0	34	0.9

Table 7.   Activities and Characteristics of Respondents

	Elementary School		Middle/High School	
	% Agree	**% Disagree**	**% Agree**	**% Disagree**
I regularly watch the television news	92.2	7.1	91.4	8.0
I regularly read educational journals	79.4	19.8	73.8	25.3
I would consider myself to be conservative	79.5	19.1	73.0	25.5

Table 8.   Perceptions of Law Enforcement and Crime in the School

	Elementary School		Middle/High School	
	% Agree	**% Disagree**	**% Agree**	**% Disagree**
Assaults on teachers by students have increased in the past 10 years.	92.5	6.7	86.2	13.0
School shootings have increased in the past 10 years.	92.1	7.8	84.3	15.3
Assaults on teachers by parents have increased in the past 10 years.	79.8	18.6	70.7	27.3
The law enforcement and/or security personnel at my school do a good job of providing assistance when needed to deal with problem parents.	73.5	21.4	79.3	18.3

Table 9.   **Perceptions of Effects of Parental Behavior on Education**

	Elementary School		Middle/High School	
	% Agree	% Disagree	% Agree	% Disagree
Aggressive behavior of parents in the school setting often damages their child emotionally or psychologically.	96.7	1.3	94.6	2.6
Parents often believe they have rights but are unwilling to take responsibility for the behavior of their children.	96.4	2.4	94.8	3.8
In today's society, schools are too concerned about giving a parent voice in the public school setting.	62.6	36.9	57.3	42.0
Most parents at my school are unaware of the procedures for dealing with concerns they have about their children in the school environment.	62.4	36.9	69.3	29.8
Advocacy groups acting on behalf of parents have increased parent/teacher problems.	61.1	36.0	61.6	35.3
Advocacy groups acting on behalf of parents have increased the likelihood that a teacher will give a student a higher grade than they deserve to avoid conflict.	52.0	45.0	58.7	37.8
Advocacy groups acting on behalf of parents have increased teacher's fear that a dissatisfied parent will victimize them.	35.1	57.6	36.4	55.6
Increasing participation opportunities for parents in the public school setting has increased problems teachers have had with parents.	31.1	66.4	24.6	72.0

Table 10.   Perceptions of Educational Pressures in Public Schools

	Elementary School		Middle/High School	
	% Agree	**% Disagree**	**% Agree**	**% Disagree**
The recent upsurge in drug use in Kentucky has increased the amount of problematic parents because more parents are using drugs than ever before.	89.2	8.6	84.4	13.2
Pressure to increase CATS scores has increased problems in have had with parents.	60.6	36.9	52.4	45.5
Teachers generally are more likely to have conflicts with parents of other races than parents of their own race.	22.2	75.8	22.6	74.9

Table 11.   Perceptions of Parents of Children in the School

	Elementary School		Middle/High School	
	% Agree	**% Disagree**	**% Agree**	**% Disagree**
Most parents with whom I interact are amenable to my suggestions about their children.	91.5	6.8	88.3	9.3
The parents generally support the decisions that I make regarding their children.	90.2	4.2	87.1	6.6
I am comfortable conducting a parent/teacher conference alone in my classroom.	84.3	10.4	75.0	18.9
Most of the students that I teach have parents who care about their children's success.	82.5	16.1	73.0	25.1
Most of the students that I teach are provided a good moral foundation at home.	43.8	54.3	37.2	60.1

Table 12. **Comparison of Perceptions of Likelihood of Victimization**
By Problematic Parental Behavior

	Elementary School		Middle/High School	
	Mean	**% more than 5**	**Mean**	**% more than 5**
Use profanity directed toward me	3.85	26.8	4.41	33.5
Accuse me of "picking on" their child because of my treatment of the child	3.86	26.3	4.39	31.8
Scream at me	3.70	23.7	4.07	27.9
Call me on the phone and harass me	3.32	19.9	3.60	21.9
Accuse me of unfair grading practices	3.14	17.5	3.79	24.8
Verbally threaten me	2.70	12.9	3.07	16.3
Accuse me of being incompetent at my job	2.64	12.0	3.04	16.5
Attempt to get me to change an absence from unexcused to excused	2.58	13.9	2.83	16.8
Accuse me of unprofessional behavior	2.56	11.5	3.05	16.3
Threaten to do professional harm to me by using their personal connections	2.52	11.4	3.03	16.6
Threaten to try to get me fired	2.44	11.0	3.00	16.0
Send me an email threatening my job.	2.22	8.1	2.82	14.0
Send me an email threatening me with physical harm	1.58	2.2	1.83	3.4
Push, hit, or attempt to push or hit me	1.55	2.6	1.66	2.9

Table 13.   **Avoidance and Protective Behaviors of Respondents**

	Elementary School		Middle/High School	
	% Agree	% Disagree	% Agree	% Disagree
I have considered changing professions because of problems I have had with parents.	24.1	68.8	22.8	70.0
In the past school year, I have avoided school events because I wanted to avoid parents with whom I have had confrontations.	14.0	80.4	11.2	82.3
I have reduced my involvement in extracurricular activities because I want to avoid problem parents.	13.7	79.5	15.6	77.0
I am less comfortable confronting a parent who is of a different race than I am regarding the child's problem behavior.	13.4	80.3	13.2	79.9
I have considered carrying a weapon to school to protect myself.	1.7	91.6	2.6	90.2

Table 14.   **Respondents' Fear of Victimization From Problematic Parents**

I am afraid that a parent will … because of their dissatisfaction with decisions I make concerning their child.	Elementary School		Middle/High School	
	% Agree	% Disagree	% Agree	% Disagree
Slander my professional reputation	35.4	58.2	33.8	59.4
Verbally abuse me or call me names	33.2	60.4	34.0	59.1
Strike me	5.7	88.1	5.3	87.9
Push or shove me	5.4	87.9	5.3	87.8

Table 15.   Respondents' Perceptions of Administrative Support

	Elementary School		Middle/High School	
	% Agree	% Disagree	% Agree	% Disagree
The principal at my school generally supports the decisions that I make.	85.8	7.5	85.7	7.1
The administrators at my school support me in dealing with parent teacher problems.	83.7	10.0	83.6	9.8
The superintendent supports me in dealing with parent teacher problems.	62.4	16.7	61.1	18.5
The school board supports me in dealing with parent-teacher problems.	59.1	17.8	58.1	19.0
The parents on the site-based council in my district are generally representative of the parents in my district.	58.9	30.7	48.2	38.7
The policies at the school where I work adequately punish those parents who create conflict.	37.1	53.7	42.2	47.4

Table 16.   Respondents' Perceptions of Decisions about Support and Behavior

	Elementary School		Middle/High School	
	% Agree	% Disagree	% Agree	% Disagree
The criminal justice system is reluctant to prosecute those parents who violate the law on school grounds.	37.0	37.6	36.9	41.0
The school board is reluctant to press charges against those parents who violate the law on school grounds.	35.0	37.6	36.9	38.4
The fact that there is frequent administrative turnover in my district makes it less likely that administrators will support my decisions as a teacher in the classroom.	20.0	45.0	21.4	45.9

Table 17.   Prevalence of Problematic Behaviors in Respondents' Careers

In my career, a parent of a child at my school has…	Elementary School				Middle/High School			
	Yes		No		Yes		No	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Accused me of "picking on" their child	1,189	37.6	1,635	51.7	1,603	40.7	1,900	48.2
Screamed at me	1,090	34.5	1,742	55.1	1,418	36.0	2,106	53.5
Used profanity directed toward me	842	26.6	2,026	64.1	1,203	30.5	2,357	59.8
Called me on the phone and harass me	700	22.1	2,132	67.4	867	22.0	2,643	67.1
Accused me of unfair grading practices	669	21.2	2,160	68.3	1,076	27.3	2,438	61.9
Accused me of being incompetent at my job	478	15.1	2,346	74.2	673	17.1	2,830	71.8
Attempted to get me to change an absence from unexcused to excused	472	14.9	2,348	74.3	578	14.7	2,925	74.2
Verbally threatened me	453	14.3	2,402	76.0	636	16.1	2,913	73.9
Threatened to try to get me fired	434	13.7	2,402	76.0	714	18.1	2,805	71.2
Accused me of unprofessional behavior	426	13.5	2,388	75.5	699	17.7	2,809	71.3
Threatened to do professional harm to me by using their personal connections	390	12.3	2,444	77.3	647	16.4	2,882	73.1
Detained or attempted to detain me in a location I did not want to be	167	5.3	2,649	83.8	188	4.8	3,314	84.1
Sent me numerous emails to harass me	152	4.8	2,676	84.7	363	9.2	3,166	80.4
Sent me an email threatening my job.	139	4.4	2,713	85.8	334	8.5	3,199	81.2
Pushed, hit, or attempted to push or hit me	53	1.7	2,768	87.6	68	1.7	3,445	87.4
Damaged my property at school or at my home	51	1.6	2,773	87.7	98	2.5	3,406	86.4
Sent me an email threatening me with physical harm	12	0.4	2,833	89.6	25	0.6	3,515	89.2

Table 18.   Incidence of Problem Behaviors in the Past 12 Months

In the last twelve months, a parent of a child at my school has…	Elementary School				Middle/High School			
	Never/None		1 or more times		Never/None		1 or more times	
	N	*%*	*N*	*%*	*N*	*%*	*N*	*%*
Accused me of "picking on" their child	1,794	56.8	1,030	32.6	2,089	53.0	1,414	35.9
Screamed at me	1,885	59.6	947	30.0	2,270	57.6	1,254	31.8
Used profanity directed toward me	2,116	67.0	752	23.8	2,462	62.5	1,098	27.9
Called me on the phone and harass me	2,226	70.4	605	19.1	2,745	69.7	764	19.4
Accused me of unfair grading practices	2,255	71.3	574	18.2	2,563	65.1	951	24.1
Accused me of being incompetent at my job	2,411	76.3	413	13.1	2,901	73.6	602	15.3
Attempted to get me to change an absence from unexcused to excused	2,413	76.3	407	12.9	2,994	76.0	509	12.9
Verbally threatened me	2,474	78.3	381	12.1	3,000	76.1	549	13.9
Accused me of unprofessional behavior	2,442	77.3	372	11.8	2,877	73.0	631	16.0
Threatened to try to get me fired	2,465	78.0	371	11.7	2,888	73.3	631	16.0
Threatened to do professional harm to me by using their personal connections	2,490	78.8	344	10.9	2,960	75.1	569	14.4
Detained or attempted to detain me in a location I did not want to be	2,672	84.5	144	4.6	3,335	84.6	167	4.2
Sent me numerous emails to harass me	2,687	85.0	141	4.5	3,193	81.0	336	8.5
Sent me an email threatening my job.	2,722	86.1	130	4.1	3,228	81.9	304	7.7
Pushed, hit, or attempted to push or hit me	2,777	87.9	44	1.4	3,456	87.7	57	1.4
Damaged my property at school or at my home	2,781	88.0	43	1.4	3,422	86.9	82	2.1
Sent me an email threatening me with physical harm	2,837	89.8	8	0.3	3,521	89.4	19	0.5

- Totals across rows may not equal 100 percent due to rounding and missing data

**Table 19.   Respondents' Perceptions and Knowledge of Statutes Designed to
                      Protect Teachers and School Personnel**

Questions	Elementary School				Middle/High School			
	Yes		No		Yes		No	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Were you aware that the Revised Statute 161.190 was in existence before this survey?	728	23.0	2,108	66.7	1,169	29.7	2,352	59.7
Do you feel that the Revised Statutes 161.190 is effective in deterring parents from abusing teachers?	630	19.9	2,154	68.1	842	21.4	2,638	66.9
Were you aware that the Revised Statute 508.025 was in existence before this survey?	902	28.5	1,915	60.6	1,339	34.0	2,158	54.8
Do you feel that the Revised Statutes 508.025 is effective in deterring parents from abusing teachers?	972	30.7	1,789	56.6	1,307	33.2	2,127	54.0

Notes

[1]   The group consisted of the following personnel employed within the Kentucky public school system: three teachers, two principals, one associate principal, one superintendent, and one attorney. In addition, two principals who had recently retired from public education in the state also participated.

[2]   Given the data collection method that we used and the initial problems that were experienced by the respondents, we took a number of precautionary measures during the data cleaning stage to insure that there were no redundant or invalid cases. When we received the original data file from the website administrator where the questionnaire was housed, there were 7,831 cases included in the data file. We first deleted 12 cases that were missing data on all variables. We then deleted all cases in which the respondent only answered the first page of the survey. This page included mainly demographic information and questions requiring little time or thought for the responses. Although we have no way to know for certain, we felt that many of these respondents were in the initial group who attempted to complete the questionnaire after receiving the first email but were unable to do so due to the bandwidth problems described earlier. As a result, we deleted 496 cases from the original data file. We then sorted the data file using race, gender, age, and school enrollment; any case that matched other cases on those four criteria was then compared to the other case's responses throughout the questionnaire. If the responses were identical or almost identical for the remainder of the questionnaire, one of the pair of cases was deleted. Using this method, we deleted 72 records. We then asked respondents to identify his or her primary jobs in the school. Those 128 respondents that indicated their primary role was in a classified staff capacity (e.g.,

administrative assistant, custodian, bus driver) were deleted. Five respondents that stated their education level was less than high school graduate or high school graduate/G.E.D were deleted, as were 17 respondents who did not indicate the level of the school (elementary, middle, or high) in which they worked. After careful cleaning, then, the sample under study here consists of 7,101 teachers, counselors, librarians, school psychologists, speech pathologists, and administrators from 161 school districts in Kentucky.

[3]   We collected statewide data on the following variables: the percent of Kentucky public school teachers that were White; the proportion of Kentucky teachers that were female; and the education levels of Kentucky public school teachers. The table below compares the proportions statewide with those of the sample under study here. It is evident that, proportionally, the sample under study here is remarkably similar to public school teachers throughout the state. If anything, the sample under study here slightly overrepresents females. Nevertheless, given the nature of the data available, we were unable to collect data on all variables of interest (e.g., tenure in education, enrollment of schools); it could be that our sample either under-represents or overrepresents certain groups for which we have no comparable data. As such, the generalizability of the findings presented here should be limited to the context of this sample.

	Study Sample	161 Participating Districts	176 Kentucky Public School Districts
Percent Female	79.9	77.4	77.4
Percent White	96.2	95.1	95.7
Education Level			
Percent Rank I	32.2	NA	33.2
Percent Rank II	45.3	NA	45.6
Percent Rank III	20.4	NA	20.8