

Problematic Parental Behavior in Kentucky Schools

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Imagine the following headline in the Lexington Herald-Leader or Louisville Courier-Journal:

Government Demands Schools Display Zero Tolerance Posters Warning Parents of Prosecution for any Assault on Teachers or other Staff

If you read this, you may not be completely shocked, but you would probably be surprised. Nevertheless, that headline would not be unprecedented, as it appeared almost five years ago (on July 2, 2002) in a British electronic version of the *Guardian Unlimited* newspaper. This headline led into an article discussing the efforts by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers to distribute these posters in response to a “rising number of cases of assault” against school personnel by parents. Further searches of the Internet reveal that parental assaults against teachers have continued to be a topic of interest among British teacher advocacy groups and the British press in general.

Despite the similarities frequently found between the United States and Great Britain in so many other areas, the area of parental aggression against teachers is one in which there are marked differences between them in the media attention given this topic. With the exception of a 2005 article entitled “Parents Behaving Badly” published in *Time Magazine* (February 13 edition), the issue of parental misbehavior in the school setting has been all but ignored in both academic and professional literature. In “Parents Behaving Badly”, Nancy Gibbs suggests that teachers are concerned about an increasing number of “problem parents” who question grades and often harass teachers regarding the treatment their child is receiving at school.

Although there has been an enormous amount of attention, funding and research regarding school safety since the late 1990s, there has been very little given to the issue of problem parents in the school setting. Further, although a large body of research exists that recognizes that teachers and parents often work in adversarial relationships with one another, and research regarding parental involvement in youth sports and academic grades has resulted in a recognition that “pushy parents” are often present in the school setting, little research has been conducted on a large scale to examine the prevalence, causes and consequences of problematic parental behavior in the school setting. Given that some authors have determined that up to 70% of school administrators had been threatened by a parent and others have suggested that the strain of dealing with parents is the primary factor in the resignation of new teachers, it is important that teachers, parents and administrators openly discuss this issue and develop strategies to reduce these problematic behaviors in the school setting.

In the spring of 2005, I was involved in a project conducted by the Kentucky Center for School Safety where we engaged in a detailed investigation of school teachers and administrators’ perceptions of problematic parental behavior in the school setting. Using a focus group of educators, we developed an electronic questionnaire and sent that questionnaire in the fall of 2005 to principals from 161 participating public school districts throughout the state of Kentucky (visit the full report available at <http://www.kysafeschools.org/clear/issues/06ParentalAgressionfinal.pdf> for a detailed discussion of the methodology through which the data were collected). Some of the most relevant findings from the 7,101 educators who responded are discussed below.

The Good News

The majority of educators surveyed agreed that most of their interactions with parents were positive as the following tables indicate:

Chart 1. Description of Interaction with Parents of Children

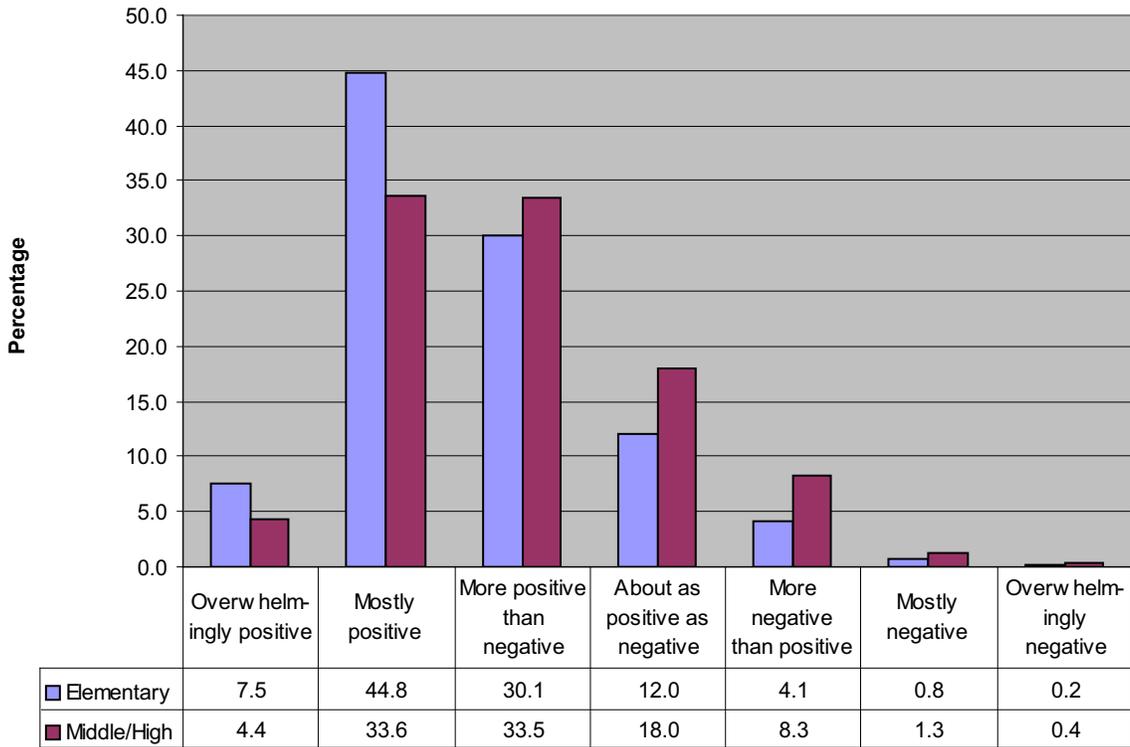
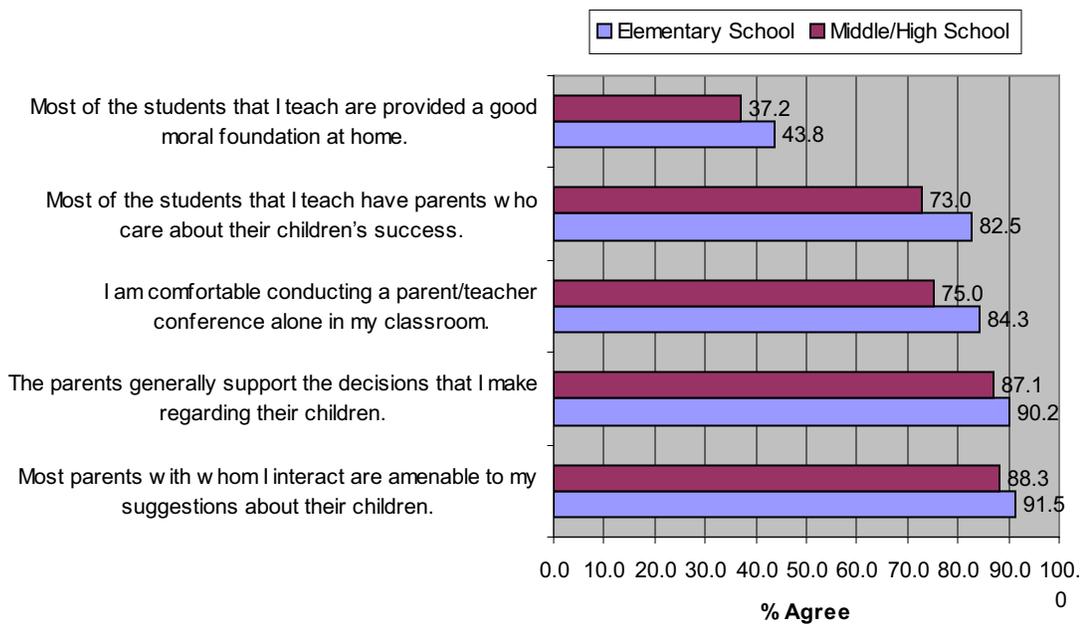
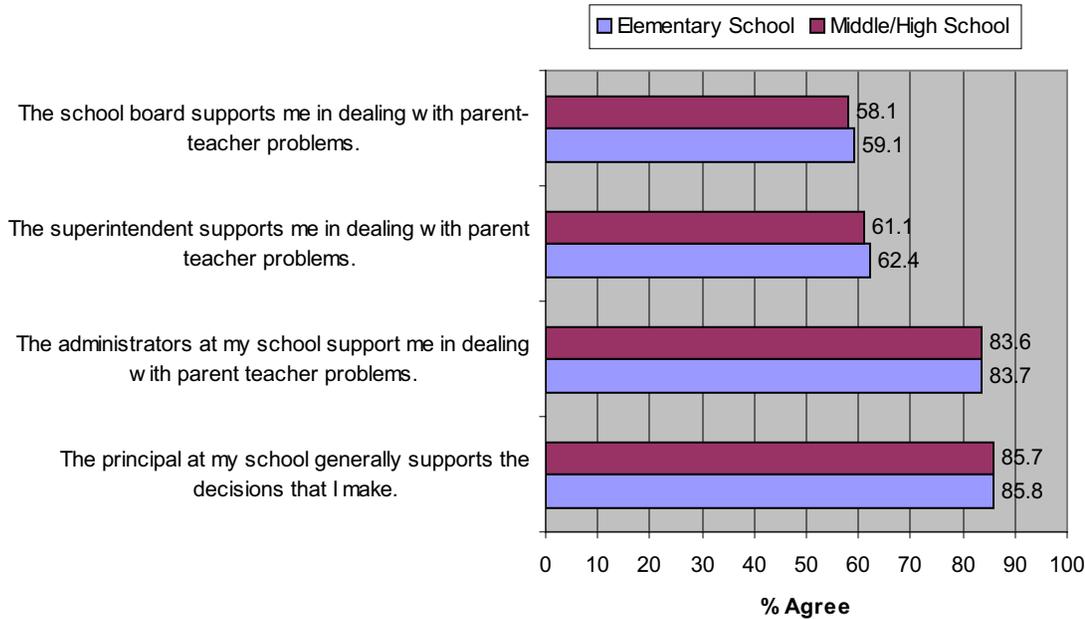


Chart 2. Perceptions of Parents of Children in the School



Also, most educators surveyed indicated that they felt the administrators at both the school and district levels were supportive of their daily work activities.

Chart 3. Respondents' Perceptions of Administrative Support



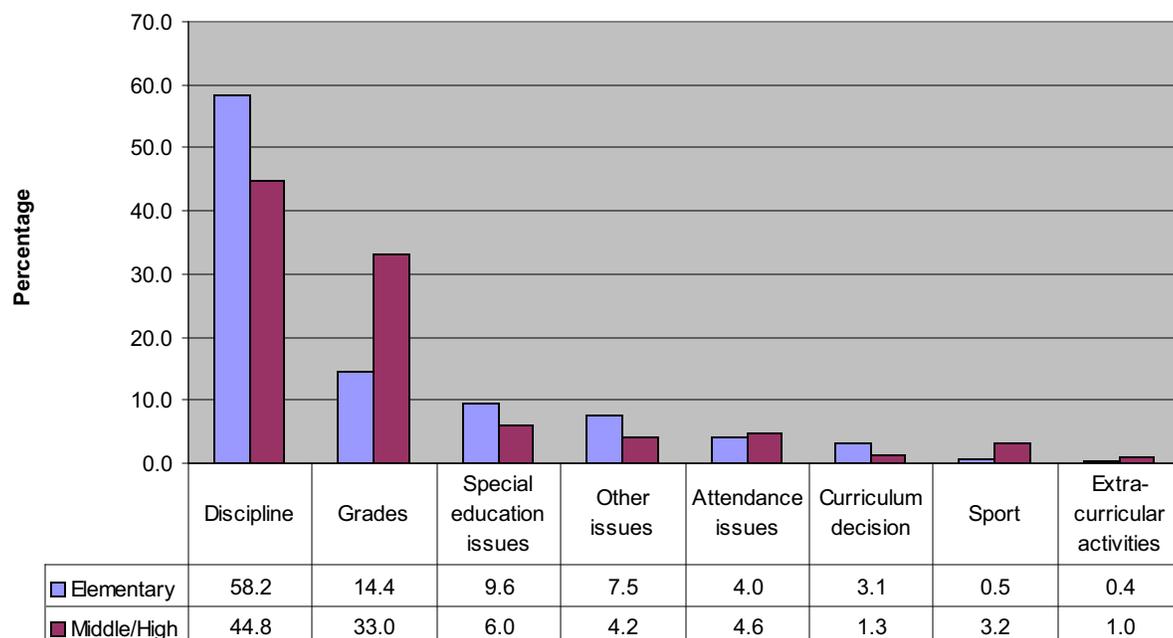
The “Not So Good News”

Despite the encouraging findings as mentioned above, the educator responses also revealed some areas of concern. These areas are discussed below.

Sources of Conflict Between Parents and Teachers

We first asked the educators to indicate the major causes of problems with parents (from their perspective). Student discipline and grades were cited as the issues around which most conflict develops in the school setting as indicated in the chart below:

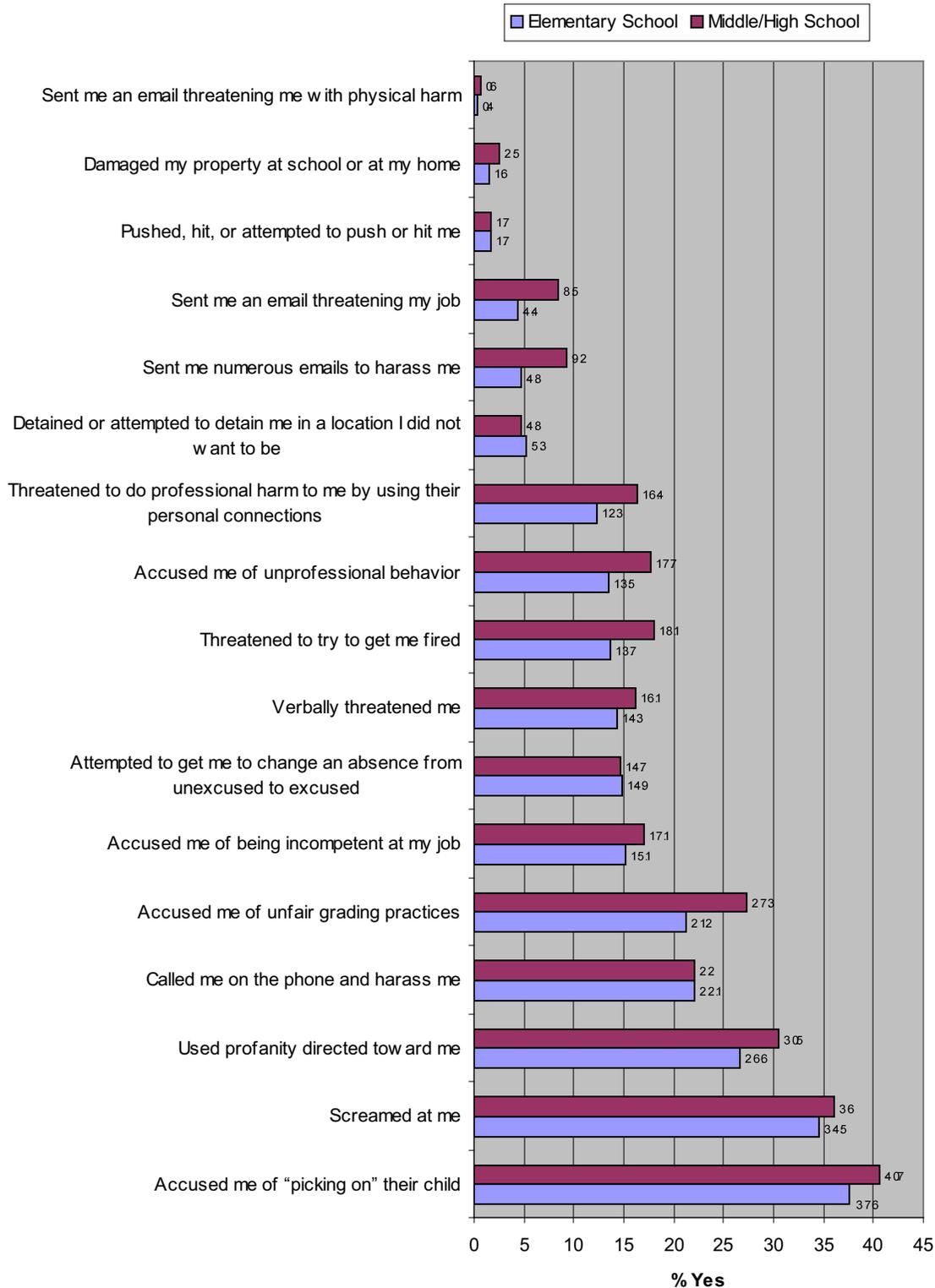
Chart 4. Most Important Causes of Problems with Parents



Prevalence of Problematic Parental Behavior in the School Setting

Educators were then asked a number of questions regarding the prevalence of problematic behaviors they had experienced *in their careers*. The most prevalent problematic behavior for both groups was verbal victimization. However, few respondents had experienced a situation where a parent: (1) detained or attempted to detain them in a location in which they did not want to be; (2) sent numerous emails to harass them; or (3) sent them an email threatening their job. Additionally, only a very small number of respondents had ever had a parent push, hit, or attempt to push or hit them, damage their property at school or at their home, or send them an email threatening them with physical harm.

Chart 5. Prevalence of Problematic Behaviors in Respondents' Careers

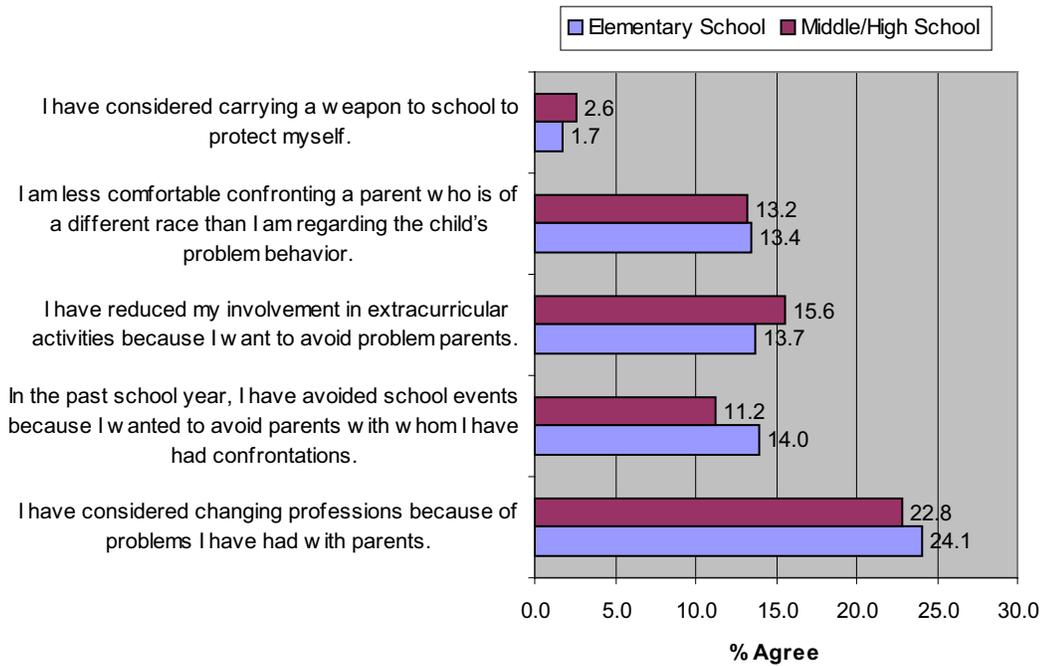


Consequences of Problematic Parental Behavior

We also asked the respondents about the consequences of problematic parental behavior. Unfortunately, the educator responses reveal below that problematic parental behavior does impact the daily lives of a small number

of teachers in a negative way.

Chart 6. Avoidance and Protective Behaviors of Respondents

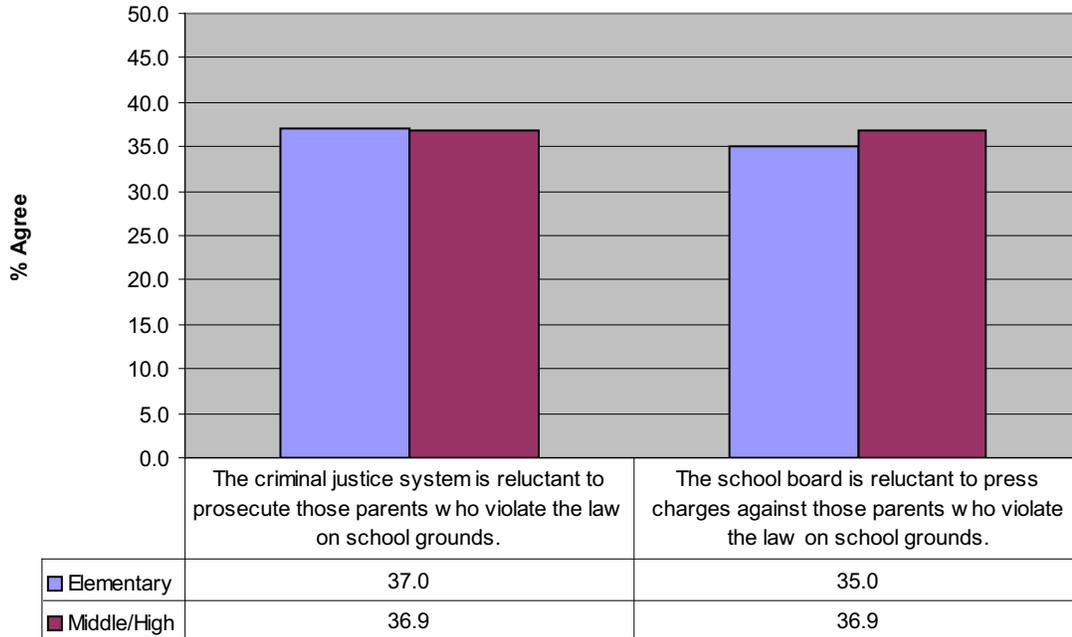


The Next Steps

The results from this study give reasons for both concern and encouragement. The results presented here suggest that, when teachers have problems with parents, teachers are far more likely to be victims of verbal abuse and threats from parents than physical aggression. Consequently, 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 essential in retaining teachers in the profession and giving them the confidence they need to deal with sometimes hostile parents.

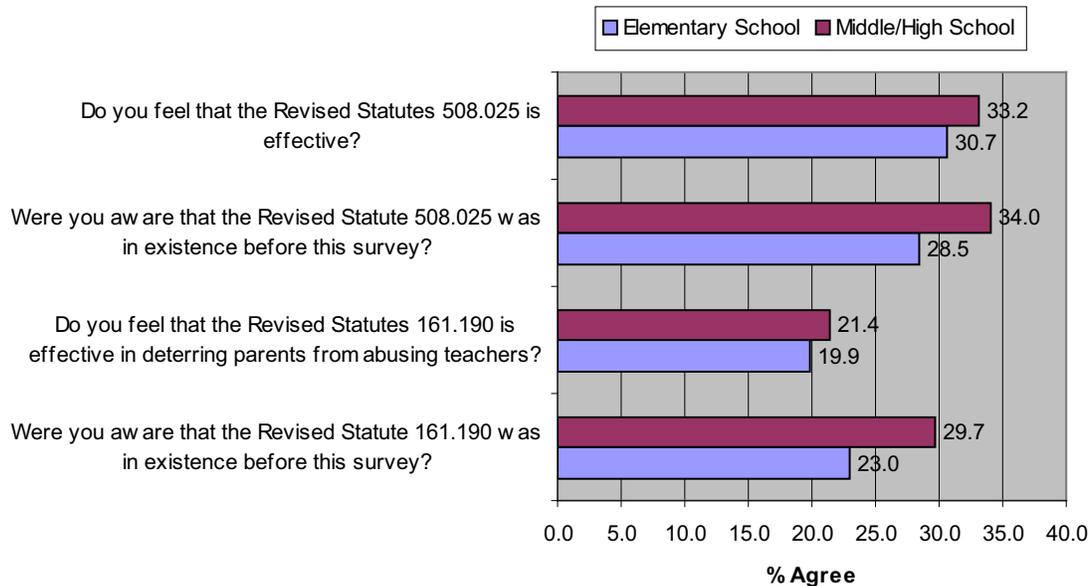
A second important finding from our survey of public school teachers suggests that a substantial minority (one in three respondents) feel that both the school board and the criminal justice system were reluctant to prosecute parents who violate the law on school grounds.

Chart 7. Respondents' Perceptions of Decisions about Support and Behavior



Additionally, less than half of the respondents agreed that policies at their school adequately punished parents who create conflict. This finding was particularly troublesome because Kentucky legislators have enacted two statutes (KRS 161.190 and KRS 508.025) designed specifically to protect educators from aggressive behaviors in their work environments. The fact that only about one in four respondents was aware that either of these laws existed is also troublesome.

Chart 8. Respondents' Perceptions and Knowledge of Statutes Designed to Protect Teachers and School Personnel



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. District and school-level administrators (if they have not done so already) should develop close working relationships with the county prosecutors, judges, and law enforcement agencies in their jurisdictions to insure that these officials are both aware of and concerned about criminal activities that occur on school campuses and are ready to act appropriately whenever these criminal behaviors occur.

The survey responses also suggested that the primary cause of conflict between parents and teachers involved discipline of children in the schools and also suggested that grades and attendance problems are important causes of conflict as well. Because all 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.

There are several steps that all schools should ensure that they are taking in this area, including: **(1) acknowledging that these are generally the 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.

Despite the concerns highlighted by the survey responses, the majority of the news we received regarding problematic parental behavior was encouraging. Our survey results reveal that most respondents realize that the vast majority of parents are not problematic parents, are supportive of parental involvement in the school setting, and are confident that both parents and school administrators are supportive of their decisions. Nevertheless, one in five respondents reported that they had considered changing professions and had reduced their involvement in extracurricular activities because of problematic parents. As such, problematic parental behavior 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.