

Good Behavior In School Is Not An Option

By Jerry Cammarata

For those who pay attention, the news media supply a steady diet of reports about the dangers of our New York City public schools, often creating the impression of a Wild West brawl where the sheriff is AWOL. These stories paint a highly exaggerated picture, but our underlying concern is clear.

Every parent, teacher and administrator and nearly every child want schools that are safe, where the threat of violence never undermines the spirit of inquiry and self-expression. Our children have a right to expect a superior education in a safe school. We fail them when we deliver anything less.

That is why I strongly endorse Chancellor Rudolph F. Crew's plan to reorganize the school discipline code, adding stiff penalties – including expulsion—for students who commit the most grievous offenses, and establishing a system of Second Opportunity Schools where troubled youngsters can get the help they need to turn their lives around.

More than anything else, the Board of Education must establish a standard for appropriate behavior and tell students: "Anything less is not acceptable." There can be no circumstances in which a student brings a weapon, especially a gun, into school. Nor should students ever believe that attacking fellow students or school staff, or possessing drugs on school property, will be tolerated.

An expulsion policy tells kids that they will not be welcome in school when they cross the line. How can we expect students to meet the rigors of higher academic standards if we do nothing to evict the troublemakers? How can we teach students to master complex conceptual problems when we do not expect them to know the difference between right and wrong?

The new policy calls for mandatory expulsions for the most serious offenses, and allows principals and superintendents to recommend expulsion in other instances. Every expulsion will be subjected to a case-by-case review by the central Board of Education, and parents will always have the right of appeal. The Chancellor will ensure that every decision is made with compassion after a careful review of the facts.

Let's be realistic: we are talking about a very small fraction of our student body. Last year, only nine students would have received mandatory expulsions. Another 630 committed offenses for which the expulsion option would have been available, though a less-severe punishment would probably have resulted. That's with a student population well over one million.

Most of our students come to school with bright eyes and eager minds. Don't we have an overwhelming responsibility to that great majority of children who know that school is a place for learning, not an arena for aggression and anti-social behavior? The core mission of this system is education, and we must have a discipline code that affirms our focus on the task of giving students the best possible academic preparation for their futures.

For those students who forfeit their right to continue in this system, we continue to work with the City's social service agencies and juvenile justice system to provide educational opportunities and counseling. Our duty is to teach students through the age of compulsory education, giving them the skills they need to reach their potentials. Students should not fall through the cracks with this kind of interagency responsibility.

In turn, students must recognize that the standards of good behavior and respect are not optional. Thus, the attention now paid to our comprehensive discipline code cries out for an emphasis on character development education for all grades across our 1,100 schools.

--Jerry Cammarata is the Staten Island representative on the Board of Education.