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A New Perspective on Aggression in the Schools: Exploring Parental Aggression Towards Teachers

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ABSTRACT

While a substantial amount of research has been devoted to identifying the causal influences and perpetrators of delinquency and victimization among students in the public school setting, similar literature focusing on aggression against teachers is typically concerned only with those instances where the students are the perpetrators. In an exploratory effort to add to that literature, we use data collected from a sample of 544 public school teachers in Kentucky to examine teacher perceptions of the prevalence, predictors, and consequences of problematic parental behavior in schools. Our results suggest that, within the limitations of the sample under study, a substantial minority of teachers had been victims of verbal abuse and threats from parents but only a small percentage of teachers had experienced any physical aggression from parents. In other words, while the problem of parental aggression was present for many of the teachers under study here, it was a problem of verbal aggression, not physical aggression, and resulted primarily from issues surrounding disciplinary actions. Additionally, many of the 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 disagreed that policies at their school adequately punished parents who create conflict. Implications of these findings for public school policies are also discussed.

A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON AGGRESSION IN THE SCHOOLS: EXPLORING PARENTAL AGGRESSION TOWARDS TEACHERS

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INTRODUCTION

Current research on the issue of school crime and student aggression is primarily focused on documenting the frequency of such actions as they relate to the victimization of other students and teachers. While a substantial amount of attention in the academic literature has been devoted to identifying the causal influences and perpetrators of such aggression against students, similar literature focusing on aggression against teachers is typically concerned only with those instances where the students are the perpetrators. Given the educational literature that recognizes an inherent conflict in the parent-teacher relationship, the emerging recognition of the "pushy parent" within society, and the incidents of parental aggression against school personnel, it seems logical that researchers would have thoroughly examined the issue of parental aggression towards school personnel. While researchers have begun to examine this issue sporadically throughout the United States, this issue has yet to be examined in the state of Kentucky. The current study sought to fill that void.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The issue of school safety, one that garnered national attention in the late 1990s, has sparked an enormous amount of response, especially in terms of research. Specifically, the recognition of the seriousness of this issue has resulted in a concerted effort among institutions to document the existence, types, and frequency of crimes and aggressive behaviors that occur within our nation's schools (DeVoe et al, 2004; *Monitoring the Future; National Longitudinal*

Study on Adolescent Health; School Crime Supplement; and *Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System*). However, the majority of information specific to the issue of student aggression has focused primarily on student-on-student behaviors (DeVoe et al, 2004 and *School Crime Supplement*) and only includes a small amount of information regarding aggression towards teachers (Callahan and Rivara, 1992; Johnston, O'Malley, and Bachman, 1993).

In addition to the abundance of research documenting the frequency and type of student delinquency and aggression, there is an increasing body of academic literature that has sought to identify the causal influences of aggressive behaviors among students. An increased focus on identifying predictors of student aggression has yielded a wealth of information regarding the influential nature of parents (Batsche and Knoff, 1994; Farrington, 1989; Hotaling, Strauss and Lincoln, 1989; Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986; Olweus, 1980; Paperny and Deisher, 1983; Patterson, Dishion, and Bank, 1984; and Trickett and Kuczynski, 1986) as predictors of such aggression within schools.

Within the broader context of school climate and safety, the educational literature has devoted a significant amount of attention to the parent-teacher relationship. Much of this literature has recognized the adversarial relationship that often occurs between these individuals (Anderson-Levitt, 1989; Attanucci, 2004; Fine, 1993; Katz, 1996; Lasky, 2000; Lightfoot, 2003; Lodish, 1994; Trumbull, Rothstein-Risch, and Greenfield, 2000). In response to this body of knowledge, researchers have also examined this relationship in an effort to develop appropriate methodology for dealing with the inherent conflict between parents and teachers (Ames, 1995; Epstein, 2001; Fenwick, 1993; Krumm, 1989; Rucci, 1991; St. John-Brooks, 2001).

Many of the efforts to address parent-teacher conflict have sought to facilitate methods for increasing the involvement of parents in the education of their children (Bell-Nathaniel, 1979; Moses and Croll, 1987; Peel and Foster, 1993), while others have been designed specifically to mediate conflict (Fouse, 1994; Rathbun, 1978; Rutherford, 1979) or provide advice for dealing with difficult parents (Lodish, 1994; Margolis, 1986; Margolis and Brannigan, 1986; McEwan, 2005; St. John-Brooks, 2001). Some efforts have been intensive, spanning numerous years and involving multiple strategies. Such was the case in a six-year project in Philadelphia designed to create and promote various strategies for involving parents in the educational system. At the end of the project, however, it was determined that parental involvement had not been significantly increased. Project leaders concluded that parents have little desire to get involved until a problem exists (Gold et al, 2001). While results such as those in Philadelphia seem to indicate a lack of concern on the part of parents, other researchers believe that parental frustration regarding a lack of knowledge about becoming involved in their child's education, rather than apathy, is the causal factor of anger and violence (Greene & Tichenor, 2003).

Much of the literature focuses on how to resolve the inherent teacher-parent conflict or improve parental involvement, yet little attention has been paid to the specific issue of parental aggression in education. This lack of attention is surprising given the studies that have identified parental attitudes as a significant source of stress for teachers (Brown, 1984; Headsfear, 2000; Moses, Slough, and Croll, 1987; Phillips, 2005). In fact, the strain of dealing with parents has been cited as a primary factor in the resignation of new teachers (Phillips, 2005). Further, numerous incidents involving parental aggression towards school administrators have

been documented. During 2001, 140 members of the National Association of Head Teachers reported being assaulted in the United Kingdom (Figures confirm, 2001; Rights culture, 2001). In Edinburgh alone, over 70 parental assaults of teachers occurred during 2004 (Meglynn, 2005). In the United States, Philadelphia experienced 57 such assaults in a six-month time frame (Phillips, 2005). In a 2001 study of school administrators in one Florida county, Trump and Moore found that 70% of respondents had been threatened by a parent. They identified three primary types of threats that occurred: verbal threats accompanied by intimidation, non-contact threats accompanied by intimidation, and intimidation with physical contact. While they felt that the study confirmed the anecdotal belief that parental aggression towards teachers existed in their district, they cautioned against generalizing beyond their district. They suggested that their study be replicated in other areas (Trump and Moore, 2001).

Recent incidents of parental aggression in relation to a variety of issues have seemingly increased, making the need to study this issue even more apparent. Parental involvement in issues such as youth sports and academic grades has resulted in the emergence of a typology of "pushy parents" (Beard, 1991; Estes, 2002; Frean, 2002). In support of excellence among their children, these "pushy parents" have been linked to a range of problematic behaviors, including relatively harmless acts of overextending their child's involvement in extracurricular activities to more serious acts of physical aggression and even murder (Freivogal, 1991; Kanters, 2002; Sports Illustrated, 2000).

Although society at large has recognized that "pushy parents" exist and the educational system has spent a significant amount of time developing strategies to address the inherent conflict in parent teacher relationships, the academic research in this area remains relatively

devoid of research that examines parental aggression towards teachers. Specifically, while some research has been undertaken, it has been limited in scope and geography. Further, no research examining this issue has been undertaken in the state of Kentucky. The current study seeks to fill that void by examining this issue within the context of Kentucky public schools.

RESEARCH GOAL

The primary goal of this research project is to conduct an exploratory analysis focusing on parental aggression towards teachers to learn more about: 1) what behaviors school personnel believe constitute parental aggression; 2) the causes and extent of those behaviors; 3) the current responses to the behavior; and 4) possible recommendations for dealing with aggressive parents

METHODOLOGY

Survey construction

Because information regarding the existence of parental aggression towards teachers is lacking, we first devoted our efforts on developing constructs to include in the survey instrument. The desire to create reliable and valid measures and the lack of academic literature on the topic led the researchers 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 lead researcher facilitated the focus group. During the focus group two separate researchers took notes of the session's content. At the conclusion of the group, all notes were given to one researcher, who then transcribed and compiled the notes. Data obtained from focus group transcripts were then analyzed within these areas for common themes.

During the analysis of the focus group data several themes emerged. The question concerning the conceptualization of parental aggression resulted in the identification of two themes surrounding the source of the conflict, as well as a suggestion for a more appropriate conceptualization of the problem. Specifically, participants stressed the need to frame the survey instrument to identify the issue from the standpoint of a problem versus a conflict. Also, two themes, communication and issues of control, regarding the source of the problem were identified. The question concerning the types of parental aggression experienced also yielded several themes. Specifically, themes surrounding verbal, property, and physical aggression were identified as the most common types of aggression experienced. The question concerning the frequency and extent of parental aggression yielded one primary theme that

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

suggested that only a small portion of the parents were problematic, yet dealing with these individuals consumed a significant portion of the teacher's time. For the question concerning the issues around which parental aggression arises, a total of seven themes emerged. The themes involved grades, discipline, special education, curriculum, absences, extracurricular activities, and negative media portrayal. When asked about the current responses to parental aggression, two themes became apparent. The first involved individual responses, while the second focused more on administrative responses. Finally, when asked about possible recommendations for dealing with aggressive parents, specific recommendations fell into the individual and administrative response categories.

Information resulting from these themes served as the basis for the development of the survey instrument. Specifically, each of the themes that emerged from the six focus areas provided the basis for the subcategories of information we sought to collect through the survey instrument. In the final survey instrument, there were a total of six main categories (aside from demographic data) of information we sought to collect; each of which closely approximates the six focus areas. Within each of the categories the specific questions to be asked were created from the various themes that emerged from each of the six original focus group questions.

Data collection

At the beginning of the project access to a database containing the email addresses for all the public school teachers in the state of Kentucky was guaranteed. Accordingly, the decision to utilize an electronic questionnaire was made. It was rationalized that this type of data collection 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 it is possible to conduct valid, reliable electronic surveys with members of organizations that have both access to the Internet and valid email addresses. For these groups, "…email and Web surveys may have 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 have achieved utilizing the electronic survey format.

Specifically, the decision was made to utilize a web-based survey. Respondents were notified of the survey via email and provided with a website address, which allowed them to access the survey. Once they entered the website, they were asked to read an informed consent statement. Individuals were required to provide consent before being allowed to participate in the survey. In an effort to allow for the accurate identification of a response rate (Grannello & Wheaton, 2004) the researchers originally planned for the website to be accessible via a personal identification (PIN) number. However, this plan was unable to be achieved due to limitations of the server on which the questionnaire was located. Several weeks into the project, the researchers received notice that access to the database containing email addresses for all public school teachers in the state would not be granted. Therefore, an alternative plan was developed. Utilizing a list of the approximately 44,000 teachers employed in public schools in Kentucky provided by the Kentucky Department of Education, a systematic sample was randomly generated. To make the confidence interval for the sample as narrow as possible (see Diekhoff, 1992), we decided to utilize a random start to select every eighth individual in the list, generating a final sample of 5,000 teachers. With the exception of Jefferson County Public Schools, all the districts used the same format for their email addresses. As such, we created email addresses for all of the ran-

domly generated teachers from the 175 districts outside Jefferson County. We then sent the list of teachers that were randomly generated from Jefferson County to the district office. District officer personnel provided the email addresses for the teachers from Jefferson County.

The Dillman method (2000) was followed to increase response rates. In early spring, an initial email was sent to all email addresses; three days later, another email was sent, which again described the purpose of the study, but this time included the following: (1) a link to the web site where the questionnaire was located; and (2) instructions on how to complete the questionnaire. After two weeks, a reminder email was sent to ask those who have not yet participated in the data collection effort to do so; finally, four weeks after the initial email and two weeks after the second email reminder, a third email was sent to ask that all who had not participated in the research effort to do so. The questionnaire was removed from the web site approximately eight weeks after the initial email was sent.

In anticipation of possible issues associated with the administration of an online survey, we intentionally collected a larger sample than needed. Of the original sample of 5,000 email addresses 437 were identified as unusable[2]. After removing those unusable addresses, a total of 4,573 email messages sent; 938 of those messages were sent to obsolete or incorrect addresses[3]. Of the 3,635 requests actually delivered to a working email account, a total of 544 responses to the survey were received for a response rate of 15%. The low response rate is indicative of the literature, which suggests that lower response rates generally result from online versus pen and paper survey administrations (Handwerk, Carson, & Blackwell, 2000; Matz, 1999; Sax, Gilmartin, & Bryant, 2003; Tomsic, Hendel & Matross, 2000; Underwood, Kim & Matier, 2000).

We realize that the low response rate limits the generality of these findings beyond the respondents who completed the survey. As this research is the first to use a randomly generated statewide sample of teachers to examine parental aggression toward teachers and their response to it, this research is completely exploratory. Further, the sample under study here generally matches the demographic profile of public school teachers in Kentucky along race and gender lines, suggesting that no response bias is not an issue (See Krosnick, 1999 and Dillman, 1991 for more information regarding this issue). Consequently, while we were desirous of a much higher response rate, we do not feel the low response rate obviates either the significance of the study or the implications of the findings from this study.

Despite this caveat, however, this research is responsive to several gaps in the literature regarding parental aggression toward teachers. In general, we know almost nothing about: (1) the prevalence or incidence of parental aggression toward teachers; (2) the impact that aggression has on teacher behaviors; or (3) teachers' attitudes and perceptions of parental involvement in the schools. While we realize we do not provide definitive answers to these issues, we feel this exploratory study lays a foundation for future work in this area, and thus makes a significant contribution to the literature.

2 During the initial test email it was discovered that 437 email addresses were duplicate entries of other address contained in the sample.

3 A total of 4357 email request were sent to the list of randomly selected teachers throughout Kentucky and another 604 were sent to individuals within Jefferson County.

4 Based on Date provided by the Kentucky Department of Education, for the 2004-2005 school year, 80% of Kentucky teachers were female and 96% were white. See Table one for a comparison of the race and gender characteristics of the sample under study with those figures. Based on a Population of 44000 public school teachers in Kentucky, the confidence interval for our sample was calculated as 4.18% at the 95% confidence level.

RESULTS

As reflected in Table 1, three in four respondents (75.0%) were female while the vast majority of the respondents were white (94.3%). Most were married (71.1%) with children (74.1%). Over half the sample had a Master's degree (52.0%) with one in three (33.1%) also having completed at least 30 hours postgraduate education beyond their Master's degree. The average age of the respondents was approximately 43 years and most respondents had a number of years of experience in the education field (15.4%). Most of the respondents' (88.2%) duties were primarily as a classroom teacher although almost one in ten respondents (9.4%) were also involved in coaching. The vast majority of respondents (93.0%) also worked at only one school. Almost half (43.9%) of the respondents worked in elementary schools while approximately equal percentages worked in middle (25.9%) and high (29.8%) schools. With the exception of the population group representing cities of 50,000 to 150,000 (where only 6.3% of the respondents resided), respondents were evenly distributed across all population groups. Given that only four cities in Kentucky have a population of more than 40,000 (Bowling Green, Lexington, Louisville, and Owensboro) and both Lexington and Louisville have populations of over 150,000 (United States Census Bureau, 2000), the small percentage of teachers from the 50,000 to 150,000 population group is to be expected.

Table 1.   Descriptive Statistics for the Sample

	N=544 (percent)*
Gender	
Male	79 (14.5)
Female	408 (75.0)
Race	
African American/Black	14 (2.6)
White/Caucasian	513 (94.3)
Asian or Asian American	2 (0.4)
Multiracial or Other Race	3 (0.6)
Current Marital Status	
Married	387 (71.1)
Unmarried	145 (26.7)
Do You Have Children?	
Yes	403 (74.1)
No	130 (23.9)
Education	
College graduate (Rank III)	75 (13.8)
Master's degree (Rank II)	283 (52.0)
Rank I (Master's with at least 30 hours postgraduate education)	177 (32.5)
Ed.D.	2 (.4)
Ph.D.	1 (.2)
Mean Age	43.1
Mean Years in Education Profession	15.4

Table 1 (continued)	N =544 (percent) *
Job Title	
Assistant Principal (No Teacher)	3 (.6)
Coach and Teacher	51 (9.4)
Counselor and Teacher	1 (.2)
Librarian and Teacher	2 (.4)
Principal and Teacher	1 (.2)
Teacher Only	480 (88.2)
Coach, Counselor, & Teacher	2 (.4)
Librarian Only (No Teacher)	1 (.2)
Principal (No Teacher)	1 (.2)
Untitled Job working with 2 or more schools	2 (.4)
Number of Schools	
My job entails working at an individual school	506 (93.0)
My job entails working with several schools within a district	37 (6.8)
Grade Level	
Elementary	239 (43.9)
Middle	141 (25.9)
High	162 (29.8)
School Location (town/city)	
Less than 2,500 residents	85 (15.6)
Between 2,501 and 5,000 residents	74 (13.6)
Between 5,001 and 10,000 residents	76 (14.0)
Between 10,001 and 25,000 residents	100 (18.4)
Between 25,001 and 50,000 residents	63 (11.6)
Between 50,001 and 150,000 residents	34 (6.3)
Over 150,000 residents	94 (17.3)

*   Percentages across rows may not equal 100 due to rounding and missing data.

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Table 2.   Perceptions and Experiences of Teachers in the Educational Setting

	% Strongly Agree	% Agree	% Somewhat Agree	% Somewhat Disagree	% Disagree	% Strongly Disagree
School shootings have increased dramatically in the past ten years.	43.9	30.5	14.9	5.0	4.2	1.1
Assaults on teachers by students have increased in the past ten years.	33.8	31.1	23.0	6.4	4.2	1.3
Assaults on teachers by parents have increased in the past 10 years.	16.9	22.6	25.9	18.0	11.4	4.4
The law enforcement/security personnel at my school do a good job of providing assistance when needed to deal with problem parents.	14.5	27.2	18.9	13.4	8.8	8.3
The criminal justice system is reluctant to prosecute those parents who violate the law on school grounds	10.7	12.1	16.7	21.7	21.7	13.6
The policies at the school where I work adequately punish those parents who create conflict	3.1	12.5	21.7	21.9	16.2	18.6
The school board is reluctant to press charges against those parents who violate the law on school grounds	8.5	10.5	19.9	25.4	16.9	14.7
One of the primary missions of law enforcement officers in the school setting is to protect teachers from parents.	3.5	5.3	15.8	20.6	33.5	20.8

*   Percentages across rows may not equal 100 due to rounding and missing data.

The respondents were asked a wide variety of questions regarding their perceptions of various issues surrounding their employment in the area of education. The results presented in Table 2 reflect the perceptions of teachers about issues directly affecting schools or the education field in general. Their responses indicate that, despite empirical evidence suggesting that victimization rates in schools have remained relatively stable over the past 10 years (DeVoe et al., 2004), the vast majority of respondents agreed that: (1) school shootings have increased (89.3%); (2) assaults on teachers by students have increased (87.9%); and (3) assaults on teachers by parents have increased (65.4%). Despite this perception that crime problems in school have increased, the respondents were generally satisfied with the methods used by law enforcement and security personnel at their school to deal with problem parents, as three in five (60.6%) respondents thought those groups "...did a good job of providing assistance when needed to deal with problem parents." Generally, they were also satisfied with the entities charged with responding to crime in schools, as approximately three in five respondents *disagreed* that the criminal justice system (57.0%), the policies at the school where they worked (56.7%), and the school board (57.0%) were reluctant to "press charges" or "punish" parents who violate the law on school grounds. Furthermore, three in four respondents (74.9%) disagreed that the primary job of law enforcement officers at school was to protect teachers from parents. As such, while the respondents feel that crime problems in school are on the rise, they generally have positive views about the measures in place to deal with problematic parents at their individual school.

Table 3.   Perceptions of Risk of Teachers

On a scale from 1 to 10 where 1 means that it's not at all likely and 10 means its very likely- how likely do you think it is that a parent will commit any of the following behaviors towards you **during the next school year?**	Mean	Percent More Than 1	Percent More Than 5
A parent will...			
Accuse me of "picking on" their child because of my treatment of the child	4.01	76.4	26.9
Scream at me	3.87	73.5	25.3
Use profanity directed toward me	3.79	70.4	23.0
Accuse me of unfair grading practices	3.39	68.1	19.6
Threaten to try to get me fired	2.99	56.1	16.3
Call me on the phone and harass me	2.96	60.2	14.6
Verbally threaten me	2.83	59.2	13.7
Accuse me of unprofessional behavior	2.69	48.8	14.0
Threaten to do professional harm to me by using their personal connections	2.68	50.0	12.9
Accuse me of being incompetent at my job	2.62	49.1	13.0
Attempt to get me to change an absence from unexcused to excused	2.19	33.4	9.6
Send me an email threatening my job	2.02	39.4	5.6
Damage my property at school	1.72	27.6	4.0
Detain or attempt to detain me in a location I did not want to be	1.69	28.6	4.8
Push or attempt to push me	1.59	26.4	3.4
Send me an email threatening me with physical harm	1.55	25.2	2.2
Hit or attempt to hit me with an open hand	1.45	20.0	2.6
Damage my property at home	1.42	18.3	2.2
Trespass on my property at home	1.42	18.1	2.8
Hit or attempt to hit me with a closed fist	1.42	18.8	2.6

The respondents were then asked a series of questions designed to assess their perceptions of the likelihood of interaction with problematic parents in a wide variety of settings over the next 12 months. The results derived from the responses to these questions are presented in Table 3. Overall, most of the respondents did not feel that they were at great risk of dealing with problematic parents, although parents felt they were most likely to have a parent: 1) accuse them of "picking on" their child (mean = 4.01); 2) scream at them (3.87); 3) use profanity directed toward them (3.79); and 4) accuse them of unfair grading practices (3.39). Respondents felt they were at little risk of criminal victimization by problematic parents. Consequently, the respondents in this study do not appear to be overly concerned that problematic parents will create difficulty for them in the future.

Table 4. Perceptions and Experiences of Teachers in the Educational Setting

	% Strongly Agree	% Agree	% Some-what Agree	% Some-what Disagree	% Dis-agree	% Strongly Disagree
The administrators at my school support me in dealing with parent teacher problems	39.7	28.5	14.2	8.3	4.0	3.7
I am comfortable conducting a parent/ teacher conference alone in my classroom	33.6	35.5	15.6	5.1	4.8	3.9
I am less likely to sponsor an extracurricular club because sponsorship increases my chances of having to deal with the problem parents	11.4	11.6	13.6	12.5	25.9	23.3
I am afraid that a parent will slander my professional reputation because of their dissatisfaction with decisions I make concerning their child	7.9	8.6	16.2	11.4	24.6	29.0

I am afraid that a parent will slander my professional reputation because of their dissatisfaction with decisions I make concerning their child	7.9	8.6	16.2	11.4	24.6	29.0
I have reduced my involvement in extracurricular activities because I want to avoid problem parents	4.8	4.0	9.2	7.7	19.1	52.9
I have considered changing professions because of problems I have had with parents	4.4	6.1	6.4	5.1	17.6	58.1
I am afraid that a parent will verbally abuse me or call me names because of their dissatisfaction with decisions I make concerning their child	4.4	6.6	13.8	11.4	26.8	34.7

Table 4 Continued

In the past school year, I have avoided school events because I wanted to avoid parents with whom I have confrontations	3.7	3.3	3.9	9.4	27.9	50.0
I am less comfortable confronting a parent who is of a different race than I am regarding the child's problem behavior	2.0	2.9	5.7	9.4	26.8	51.5
I am afraid that a parent will damage my property at school because of their dissatisfaction with decisions I make concerning their child	1.1	1.7	3.9	6.1	27.2	57.2
I am afraid that I will be pushed or shoved by a parent at my school because of their dissatisfaction with decisions I make concerning their child	.9	.9	3.1	6.6	28.7	57.0

I am afraid that I will be pushed or shoved by a parent at my school because of their dissatisfaction with decisions I make concerning their child	.9	.9	3.1	6.6	28.7	57.0
I am afraid that a parent will strike me at my school because of their dissatisfaction with decisions I make concerning their child	.6	.7	3.7	7.2	26.8	59.0
I am afraid that a parent will damage my personal property away from school because of their dissatisfaction with decisions I make concerning their child	.6	.7	3.5	5.1	25.2	62.5
I have considered carrying a weapon to school to protect myself	.4	.7	.6	2.2	8.3	85.5

*   Percentages across rows may not equal 100 due to rounding and missing data.

Teachers were then asked a series of questions regarding their perceptions of safety in situations involving problematic parents. The responses to those items are presented in Table 4. The vast majority of respondents indicated that they were comfortable conducting a parent/teacher conference alone in their classroom (84.7%) and that the administrators at their school supported them when dealing with problematic parents (82.4%). Additionally, most respondents *disagreed* that they would be less likely to sponsor an extracurricular club because of problematic parents (61.7%) and that they had avoided school events in the past year to avoid confrontations with parents (87.3%). Furthermore, most respondents (86.7%) disagreed that they were less comfortable confronting parents of races other than their own about a child's problematic behavior. Respondents were also asked a series of questions regarding their fear of specific actions by problematic parents. In each case, the vast majority of respondents disagreed that they were afraid of the interaction with problematic parents, although one in three respondents (32.7%) agreed that they were afraid a parent would "slander" their professional reputation and one in four respondents (24.8%) agreed that they were afraid a parent would "verbally abuse" them because of the parent's dissatisfaction with the treatment of their child. As such, with few exceptions, most respondents were not overly concerned with behaviors of problematic parents.

Table 5. Prevalence and Incidence of Teachers' Interactions with Problematic Parents

	Percent Ever	Percent one or more times in the past 12 months	Percent more than three times in last 12 months
Accused me of "picking on" their child because of my treatment of the child	49.3	36.8	4.6
Screamed at me	45.0	33.1	8.5
Used profanity directed toward me	34.4	24.8	10.0
Accused me of unfair grading practices	33.1	23.3	5.6
Called me on the phone and harassed me	23.9	16.5	5.4
Verbally threatened me	21.1	15.1	1.9
Accused me of being incompetent at my job	21.5	15.4	1.4
Threatened to try to get me fired	20.4	14.7	2.5
Accused me of unprofessional behavior	19.7	14.9	2.5
Threatened to do professional harm to me by using their personal connections	18.9	14.0	2.7
Attempted to get me to change an absence from unexcused to excused	11.2	8.6	2.3
Sent numerous emails to harass me	9.2	7.7	3.4
Detained or attempted to detain me in a location I did not want to be	8.5	7.0	0.6
Sent me an email threatening my job	7.0	5.9	0.8
Pushed or attempted to push me	3.7	2.0	0.0
Damaged my property at school	3.3	2.6	0.4
Trespassed on my property at home	2.4	1.3	0.0
Damaged my property at home	1.1	0.7	0.0
Hit or attempted to hit me with an open hand	1.1	0.4	0.0
Hit or attempted to hit me with a closed fist	0.9	0.6	0.0
Sent me an email threatening me with physical harm	0.4	0.4	0.0

The responses presented in Table 5 depict the lifetime prevalence and 12-month incidence of victimization by parents among the teachers in this study. In their lifetime, almost half (49.3%) of the teachers had a parent accuse them of "picking on" their child and scream at them (45.0%). Additionally, approximately one in three teachers (36.8% and 33.1%, respectively) had experienced those behaviors at least once in the past 12 months. One in three teachers also had a parent direct profanity toward them (34.4%) and accuse them of unfair grading practices (33.1%) at least once in their career; about one in four had experienced both of those behaviors in the past 12 months, and one in ten teachers (10.0%) had a parent direct profanity toward them three or more times in the past 12 months. Other relatively common parental behaviors included parents calling teachers on the phone and harassing them (16.5% of teachers had experienced this behavior in the past 12 months), parents verbally threatening teachers (15.1% in past 12 months), parents accusing teachers of being incompetent at their job (15.4% in past 12 months), parents threatening to get teachers fired (14.7% in past 12 months), parents accusing teachers of unprofessional behavior (14.9% in past 12 months), and parents threatening to do professional harm to teachers by using their personal connections (18.9% in past 12 months). Thus, the teachers in this sample had been involved in a wide variety of verbal conflicts with parents, both in their careers and in the past 12 months.

Despite the anecdotal evidence presented earlier, however, few teachers in this sample had experienced any sort of property damage or physical confrontations in their careers. In their careers, less than one in 20 respondents had a parent push or attempt to push them (3.7%), damage their property at school (3.3%) or home (1.1%) or trespass on their property at home (2.4%), or hit or attempt to hit them with an open hand (1.1%) or a closed fist (0.9%). As such, the parental aggression experienced by this sample of teachers was far more likely to be verbal aggression than physical aggression.

Table 6.   Issues Involved in and Causing Problems with Parents

Issue...	Percent saying the issue was involved when a problem arose with parents	Percent saying the issue caused the most problems with parents	Mean ranking of importance of issue in causing problems with parents (1-8)
Discipline	80.0	45.4	6.06
Grades	69.3	34.4	5.86
Attendance	30.5	3.5	4.53
Special education decisions	28.5	10.1	4.00
Curriculum decisions	8.3	2.2	3.05
Sports	9.7	2.4	2.65
Extracurricular activities	5.0	1.5	2.30

Finally, respondents were asked to provide their opinion regarding the issues that were most likely to be involved in causing conflict with parents. The overwhelming majority of respondents (80%) stated that discipline issues were involved in their conflicts with parents and almost half of the respondents (45.4%) stated that discipline was the issue that caused the most problems with parents. Over two in three respondents (69.3%) stated that grades were often involved when issues with parents arose and one in three respondents (34.4%) stated that grades were the issue that caused the most problems with parents. Respondents indicated that attendance (30.5%) and special education decisions (28.5%) were also issues likely to be involved in creating problematic interaction with parents.

Discussion

Using a sample of teachers from throughout the state of Kentucky, this study has begun the exploration of parental aggression toward teachers by assessing the perspectives of over 500 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 although a substantial minority of teachers had been victims of verbal abuse and threats from parents, a very small percentage of teachers had experienced any physical aggression from parents. In other words, while the problem of parental aggression was present for many of the teachers under study here, it was a problem of verbal aggression, not 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 need to 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. Almost half of the 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 these problems. If parents are violating the 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. Schools can be proactive in preventing these problems by: (1) creating clear rules regarding attendance and discipline; (2) enforcing these rules consistently

and without favoritism; (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. At the very least, a clear discipline code and clear definitions of excused and unexcused absences and the process for remediation of these issues should be thoroughly explained in the student handbook. Schools should also post this language on their school website and disseminate this information 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 a number of 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 six 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 or 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 is over 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.

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