

## Judging School Discipline

Richard Arum

A rigorous analysis of a commonsense observation: diminish discipline, and learning decreases

Richard Arum has had a multifaceted career. He started out as a classroom teacher, and then wrote this serious, methodologically complex analysis of the evolution of classroom discipline. His next book, *Academically Adrift*, was for more general audiences and his most recent, in 2016, is a collection of essays on improving quality in American higher education.

His experience in the classroom led him to write *Judging School Discipline*. He observes that during the brief period of the late 1960s through mid-1970s, a time which he calls the "student rights contestation period," when legions of lawyers actively attacked the school discipline process. These were the last years of the Warren Court, a time which had seen a great expansion of civil rights for minorities, criminals and women. The courts stepped in to second guess teachers and school administrators.

There is always a trade-off between the rights and interests of individuals and society. Sometimes society must give in, tolerating somewhat unsavory behavior on the part of individuals. At other times individuals must give in. The balance swung radically toward individuals. Typical cases involved students wearing black armbands to protest the Vietnam War, students with facial hair, and students in violation of school dress codes. Many cases involved drugs, alcohol. At issue were the schools' rights to monitor student behavior, open student lockers and so forth. With regard to violence and disruptive behavior, the courts took issue with the teachers' competence to assess threats and judge levels of violence.

Arum frequently quotes Emile Durkheim, one of the fathers of the field of sociology. He begins a chapter with this particularly relevant quote: "The aim of education is, precisely, the socialization of the human being; the process of education, therefore, gives us in a nutshell the historical fashion in which the social being is constituted. The unremitting pressure to which the child is subjected is the very pressure of the social milieu which tends to fashion him in its own image, and of which parents and teachers are merely the representatives and intermediaries."

And he continues: "the nature and function of school discipline ... is not a simple device for securing superficial peace in the classroom—a device allowing the work to roll on tranquilly." Schools, instead, are often the first social institution outside the family responsible for contributing to the process of molding youths for productive adult roles in society. Discipline, according to Durkheim, "is essentially an instrument—difficult to duplicate—of moral education."

What happened was that the schools lost the moral authority to confidently discipline children. The students knew it, and pushed the limits ever farther. The teachers and administrators knew that society did not have their backs, would not support them in upholding the level of discipline necessary to raise proper adults. They did the very logical thing and gave up.

The upshot was that the quality of education declined. Arum set up an elaborate statistical analysis drawing on more than a thousand court cases, questionnaires and interviews with teachers and assessments of changes in written policy as the independent variables, and looking at measures of educational attainment as the dependent variables. His analysis shows that diminished school discipline led to worse educational outcomes.

In its attempt to be methodologically rigorous the book manages to be somewhat ponderous and difficult to read. In hindsight, 20 years after publication, most of his points would be readily conceded. The question then is what to do. Unfortunately, once the schools conceded their moral authority it is impossible to regain. There are several complicating factors, among them the changing demographics of the school population and the changes in social attitudes among the parent population. The upshot is that although Arum does an excellent job of describing the problem, and a fairly good

job of enumerating policies that might help restore some school discipline, it simply has not happened. And Arum probably knew as much when he wrote the book in 2003.