

**Responding to
Serious Indiscipline
in Schools**

An ASTI Information Leaflet

INTRODUCTION

Section 29 of the Education Welfare Act, 2000 requires school management to ensure that each school has a Code of Discipline in operation. School management is also required by the Health, Safety and Welfare at Work Act, 1989 to promote and protect the health, safety and welfare of its employees. Teachers' professional skills and the consistent implementation of the Code generally constitute effective responses to problems of student indiscipline. However, teachers need support when serious breaches of discipline occur. These Guidelines will assist teachers to respond to serious breaches of school discipline.

WHAT ARE SERIOUS BREACHES OF SCHOOL DISCIPLINE?

Circular M33/91 - Guidelines towards a Positive Policy for School's Behaviour and Discipline - states that aggressive, threatening or violent behaviour towards teachers is regarded as "serious or gross misbehaviour and may warrant suspension". Serious breaches of school discipline policy include assault by students on teachers and other students, verbal abuse /offensive language against teachers and other students, sexual and other forms of harassment, threats and intimidation of teachers and other students, carrying offensive weapons, supplying or using illegal drugs, intrusions into the school/classrooms by adults with the intention of confronting teachers.

EFFECTS ON TEACHERS?

Serious breaches of school discipline policy can have profound negative effects on teachers. Teachers subjected to abuse or intimidation report experiencing fears for their safety, lack of a sense of dignity at work, intense feelings of anger, fear, humiliation or shame, isolation and depression. Some teachers may never reveal the nature of the incident or its impact on them. In such cases, the confidence of the teacher has been undermined, his/her sense of personal safety violated and the perpetrator has been not been sanctioned.

HOW TO RESPOND TO SERIOUS BREACHES OF DISCIPLINE?

Planning is the key to managing serious breaches of discipline. This may seem paradoxical in that violence and aggression are unpredictable and often isolated incidents. However, planning for such contingencies is the most effective means of ensuring that teachers know how to respond when serious breaches actually occur. Having a Plan for serious breaches of school discipline enables the staff to react quickly and effectively and to maintain control of the situation.

WHO SHOULD DEVELOP THE PLAN?

The ASTI School Steward should request the convening of a staff meeting to discuss how best to respond to potential serious breaches of discipline. Arising from this discussion, a representative Committee should be formed to develop a Serious Incident Plan. The Committee should set a feasible deadline for drafting a plan for presentation and adoption at a staff meeting.

IS THERE A TEMPLATE FOR THE PLAN?

Circular M18/99 - Guidelines on Violence in Schools - should form the basis of the Plan. It provides specific instructions in relation to:

- ♦ The measures to be taken to prevent or minimise the risk of violence against teachers
- ♦ The measure to be taken to support staff who have been assaulted or subjected to violence and to prevent a recurrence of the incident
- ♦ The duty of School Management Authorities to provide a safe environment for employees and to ensure their safety and welfare and the duty to consult with school staffs on measures

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WHAT SHOULD A TEACHER DO WHEN CONFRONTED WITH A SERIOUS BREACH OF DISCIPLINE?

The "golden rule" is to act in a professional manner by trying to Calm Down the situation and immediately Seek Assistance.

- ♦ Keep your voice low, look the student directly in the eye and stay outside his/her "personal space"
- ♦ Motion the other students to move away from the scene and, if necessary, to summon help.
- ♦ Try to reason with the student along the lines of " this is an unacceptable situation, you need to calm down, we will continue this conversation in the Principal's Office"
- ♦ When help arrives, continue to try and calm the situation as you begin to direct the student towards the Principal's office

THE PRINCIPAL MUST RESPOND IMMEDIATELY

What happens next should be in accordance with the sanctions in the school discipline policy. The steps outlined in Section 5 of the Violence in Schools Circular should be followed including, where appropriate, reporting the incident to the Gardai. It may be necessary for the Principal to reiterate to students the school policy of "zero tolerance" of any threatening, violent or abusive behaviour towards teachers.

WELFARE OF TEACHERS MUST BE SECURED

Depending on the nature of the incident, the teacher may require to be relieved of his/her classes for the remainder of the day or week. Immediate medical assistance or counselling may also be required. In accordance with Circular M18/99, Guidelines on Violence in Schools, the details of the incident should be recorded in an Incident Book kept for this purpose in the Principal's office. Depending on the nature of the incident, existing staff agreements, such as ASTI Agreement on Sexual Harassment, may also need to be activated.

It is highly advisable that the teacher, as soon as is possible, make a personal written record of the incident in the event of future appeal hearings or litigation.

The Principal should inform the staff of the actions taken in response to the incident and re-assure staff of the support of the school management.

STAFF SOLIDARITY

In the event of serious breaches of discipline, it is important for the staff to demonstrate solidarity with their colleague. The significance of such solidarity cannot be overstated. It sends a strong message to school management that staff will not accept certain behaviours from students. In the aftermath of a serious breach of school discipline, it may be necessary for staff to review the implementation of school discipline policy and the implementation of Circular M18/99, Guidelines on Violence in Schools. This Circular empowers staffs to take pro-active measures to ensure a safe working environment. Experience has demonstrated that determined collective action by teaching staffs can bring about improvements in their daily working environments.

ROLE OF THE ASTI

Serious breaches of school discipline have implications for all teachers in the school. The ASTI School Steward should offer to support his/her colleague and to be available, if requested, to accompany them to meetings with the Principal or others. The School Steward should also strive to ensure that the Principal responds quickly and effectively to the incident. The School Steward may also decide to convene a meeting of ASTI members to discuss appropriate steps to support their colleague. The School Steward may also decide to communicate the incident and concerns of staff to the relevant Industrial Relations Official in ASTI Head Office. The ASTI is committed to defending the rights of teachers and to improving their working environments in schools.

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RELEVANT DOCUMENTS

- ♦ Circular M33/91 - Guidelines towards a Positive Policy for School's Behaviour and Discipline
- ♦ Circular M42/93 - Guidelines on Countering Bullying Behaviour in Primary and Post-Primary Schools
- ♦ Circular M18/99 - Guidelines on Violence in Schools
- ♦ Section 29, Codes of Behaviour, Educational Welfare Act, 2000
- ♦ ASTI Charter of Rights for Teachers, 2004.



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