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Handcuffing School Agents

A City Council bill meant to place under a microscope the conduct of School Safety Agents in handling student discipline has the unfortunate effect of putting the onus on the employees who perform that difficult job.

Though the bill's sponsor and the New York Civil Liberties Union haven't said as much, it's fair to conclude that the primary source of tension exists in the city's high schools rather than in the lower grades. At that level, the Safety Agents are dealing with adolescents who are sometimes inclined to bristle at any authority figures telling them to mind their manners or submit to something—such as a search—that they find intrusive, and are less likely to appreciate the potential consequences of their actions if they resist loudly or violently.

The bill's supporters object to what they describe as the "criminalization of discipline" so that what away from a school might be nothing more than two kids fighting turns into an arrest. Unfortunately, there have been far too many cases where a gardenvariety fight later is escalated into something more deadly. Those of us older than today's high schoolers remember an incident at Jefferson High School when two students were shot to death by another one shortly before then-Mayor David Dinkins arrived for a scheduled visit.

Some of the measures proposed in the bill may be desirable, including making data on disciplinary cases by number and by race available. But to essentially invite students to initiate complaints against the Safety Agents runs the risk of being grossly irresponsible and curtailing their ability to do their jobs properly.



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