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# No More Haves and Have-Nots

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*A North Carolina elementary school makes sure no students are left out of school activities.*

At Winter Park Elementary School, the ice cream is free! This Wilmington, North Carolina, school's free ice cream is one of the many ways it puts the needs of the whole child first.

It all began with a change in plans. After 35 years in public education, I was preparing for retirement in 1997 when the opportunity to become the principal of a small school in an old building was more than I could resist. In the years previous, the Winter Park building and additional mobile units had housed almost 700 students. Everyone dreamed of the new building that was slated to open for the new school year. However, between the planning for and completion of the new building, the student body had already outgrown the new facility. Consequently, 300 disappointed students were left behind at the old Winter Park.

Although the building was old, the staff would be entirely new. A carefully selected panel of parents and educators looked for teachers with a passion for lifelong learning and a commitment to students.

## Establishing Our Beliefs

Summer sessions before school began gave parent representatives and staff members an opportunity to explore our basic values and beliefs. We found commonalities that bonded us into a cohesive force

for re-creating Winter Park Elementary. Making learning meaningful, addressing individual learning styles, and meeting the social and emotional needs of children emerged as the basic principles of the school mission statement: To provide an emotionally safe environment and meaningful learning experiences to develop joyful and productive lifelong learners.

## Creating Equity

To provide an emotionally safe learning environment, we needed to level the playing field so students could focus on interacting and learning. We are a Title I school with approximately 45 percent of our students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch. Our school district includes several trailer parks, one housing project, and several middle-class communities. We occasionally have homeless families in our district. Several practices soon came under scrutiny because they created haves and have-nots.

One the first school practices that we began to understand as unfair was the selling of ice cream in the cafeteria on Fridays. Parents managed the ice cream box, selling ice cream to students who could buy it. They began to tell me about the problem of students with no money wanting ice cream. Initially, the parents bought ice cream for those who did not have the 50 cents. That practice, however, proved unacceptable—not because of the financial burden on parents, but because of the discomfort it caused some students. A few parents got so upset that they refused to work at the ice cream box. (Good for them!) I considered cutting ice cream totally, but on investigation I learned that the Food Service Department needed the revenue from ice cream sales. The solution was to purchase ice cream for all children on two Fridays a month. Buying ice cream for all children twice a month generated enough funds to satisfy Food Service, and all students got to enjoy the treat.

We paid for the ice cream in several ways. Individual parents, businesses, or families made significant donations. One time we collected spare change to help pay for it. But the most support came from our parent teacher association (PTA), which began to include ice cream as a standard item in its yearly budget.

As we continued to look at our practices, we realized that our somewhat typical school often made students painfully aware of their lack of money. At the end of our second year, I began to question the practice of selling anything at school. One experience made a big impression. On the last day of school, students received their yearbooks, and small groups of students would bring their yearbooks to the office for me to sign. A student in one group said to me, “Mrs. Huguelet, I would like you to sign my yearbook, but I left it at home today.” I knew very well that she had not bought a yearbook and that she was covering this fact up so the other children would not know that she could not afford one.

When I discussed this incident with parents and staff, they unanimously agreed to change another practice. Since that time, the PTA has provided yearbooks free to every student. The PTA keeps the yearbook simple and fairly inexpensive, but everyone gets the same free yearbook.

We also began to think about school supplies, book fairs, contests, and fundraisers. As we revised policies and practices, we always considered the socioeconomic levels of our families. Again, actual experiences often sparked action. One fall just before school started, a parent said to me, “I need to start looking at sales and going to different stores to find the best buys on school supplies.” I asked her how much she paid for supplies for each of her children, and she said, “About \$85.” This parent was well able to buy supplies for her children, but I wondered about the parents who did not have that much money.

As we examined the situation, we found that by using funds allocated from federal, state, and local budgets the school could provide supplies for all the students. There were even some advantages for

teachers. They could specify exactly what supplies students needed for their classes and know that all students would have them. I know that many schools find a way to provide supplies for students who cannot afford them, but the issue was not just whether students had supplies. It was about whether students could concentrate on learning and making friends instead of being distracted by the embarrassment of having less than their classmates.

## Financial Support

You may ask how we pay for all the extras we provide for all students. Amazingly, when our school began to focus on practices that match our beliefs about children and public education, we were able to find the money. Funds from the state and district support some activities. The PTA, individual parents, and local businesses provide additional funds.

Our PTA established a fall “Make It Happen” campaign, during which the PTA asks each family that can to donate \$35. Parents know they will not be asked to buy school supplies or participate in any other fund-raisers. The PTA tries to get as much participation from families as possible, realizing that some parents are financially unable to participate.

## Additional Practices

The free ice cream, yearbook, and school supplies are only a few ways that Winter Park strives to promote equity among students. These are some of the other policies we’ve established:

- All field trips are free to all students.
- The T-shirts the school designs about every two years are free to all students.
- We never collect money from students for gifts for anyone.
- The school provides all supplies for required projects.

- When parents or any adults come to school for lunch, they eat cafeteria lunches. (Some working parents cannot bring fast-food lunches for their children; therefore, we ask all parents to refrain from bringing fast-food lunches to school.)
- Book fairs are held after school hours to avoid putting children in a situation of seeing books they want and not being able to buy them.

We also turned our attention to forced competition. Winning may have value for winners, but the negative effects on the losers makes competition in elementary schools questionable. Instead of promoting contests, we focus on celebrations, performances, and events that display and celebrate the talents of all our students. Recognizing that some students enjoy competition, we make contest information available to interested students. Pervasive competition has given way to a more collaborative and creative atmosphere.

## From Philosophy to Practice

During my eight years at Winter Park, there was a major emphasis on professional development. Staff members formed study groups to read, discuss, and apply ideas from the best educators. The ideas of Alfie Kohn became very important to us. We studied *Punished by Rewards* (1993) and *Beyond Discipline* (1996), and we implemented his basic ideas.

We also spread the word by printing the following statement in our school and parent handbook:

Staff and parents of Winter Park have a very specific philosophy about creating an emotionally safe learning environment at our school. We strongly believe that all children at our school should have access to all the benefits and activities that the school offers. No one should ever feel uncomfortable because he/she can't participate in whatever is happening at school.

Therefore, we do not ask students to bring money to school to buy anything or to pay for any activities. We provide everything free—from school supplies to field trips and yearbooks. The benefit to the school as a whole is that all children feel emotionally comfortable for learning and forming social relationships. Every person in our school community is equally respected and valued. All students and all adults are winners!

In the handbook, this statement is followed by a list of the specific practices we've implemented to ensure equity among our students.

## An Emotionally Safe Learning Environment

A 1st grade teacher related a story of a student who recently transferred to Winter Park from another school. He said, "The day is so much shorter at this school." The length of the day is the same at both schools. Winter Park's focus on an emotionally safe learning environment is the basis for its success, and students such as this one have noticed the difference.

There are not many places in our society where children from diverse backgrounds have the opportunity to learn and interact without feeling uncomfortable. Our communities, our country, and the world need citizens who are educated, confident, and valued. We need citizens who have learned to value others from different economic, social, and ethnic backgrounds. Winter Park is making strides toward developing such citizens.

## References

- Kohn, A. (1993). *Punished by rewards*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.  
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