A Positive Note on Schools and Discipline*

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In schools with effective discipline, rules are openly developed and clearly announced. Administrators and teachers enforce the rules fairly and consistently.

Relying on schools to resolve social problems has long been a fundamental characteristic of American society. As a result, we become especially concerned when the schools themselves present problems for society. Sometimes, as in the case of Sputnik or "Why Johnny Can't Read," we are troubled by the school's failure to provide the technological and cultural literacy we feel is necessary in modern society. In other cases we become alarmed because the school seems unable or unwilling to socialize the young to an understanding and acceptance of social controls. While our solutions are often expressed as curriculum innovations—driver safety programs to reduce auto accidents, drug or sex education when we think they pose significant social problems, or values clarification in the aftermath of Watergate—they usually represent an attempt to redefine or reaffirm the school's socialization responsibilities.

When faced with violence and vandalism in the schools, it is tempting to ignore school-specific aspects of school crime. Instead we look for explanations and solutions in what we know about crime rather than in what we know about schools. As a result, we are likely to view school crime from the same personal and institutional perspectives that have failed to control crime in the rest of society.

Crime in schools differs from crime in the streets. It disrupts the learning process and diverts resources from educational purposes to crime control, and, through the socialization process that takes place in schools, it can have a lasting effect on youth.

School Governance a Factor

There is abundant evidence from recent research that school governance is the major factor in determining the level of crime and disruption in schools. Where school governance is measured by the students' perception of the school as maintaining order and the teachers' perception of their ability to maintain order in class, there is less dollar property loss in those schools that show positive relationships. Where there is good coordination and mutual support between administration and faculty, there is also less property loss. Conversely, where teacher behavior indicates a lack of respect for students and where there is strong competition among students within a school, property loss increases. Also, school crime and disruption are reduced in schools where students identify with their teachers, have access to teachers, and where ethnic and racial harmony are high.

School governance is one of the many concepts in education that is susceptible to a variety of definitions and interpretations depending on one's ideological position. It can be and has been used to describe a system of social controls in a school ranging from participatory democracy to authoritarian and bureaucratic control. What I am describing here, however, is a pattern of school governance that has a number of very distinctive features.

Principal Is Key Element

While the principal's style of personal leadership is important, the ability to establish order in the school is equally important. "Firmness, fairness, and consistency" are usually mentioned by students and

school personnel as important to the structure of order. What they are describing is a governance system in which discipline, sanctions, and rewards are dispensed in an even-handed fashion. Students and faculty know the consequences of specific acts and understand that exceptions are rarely, if ever, made.

While the principal is a key element in establishing and maintaining the structure of order in schools, the teachers' relationship with the administration and with students is also important. Some principals delegate considerable responsibility and authority to assistant principals, while others do not. Inevitably, however, successful principals are educational leaders and not simply "managers." Also, the principal should lead the school by example, put in long hours, and not arbitrarily side with teachers or with students.

Establish Rules

A firm, fair, and consistent structure of social control is communicated through rules. How these rules are made and enunciated also differentiates successful schools from those that continue to have major problems with school crime and disruption. The report most frequently heard in successful schools is that rules are carefully and openly developed, clearly announced, firmly enforced, and consistently applicable to everyone. In unsuccessful schools, on the other hand, rule enforcement in the academic areas tends to be highly arbitrary and serves disciplinary rather than educational ends.

Far from being simply the victim of external social forces, schools do play a distinctive role in the school crime problem, which is demonstrably different from that of the family, the community, or society-in-general.

We may never be able to "teach" solutions to the problem of school crime as part of the school's curriculum. However, we can change the social organization of schools by altering the ways in which students are sorted, adjusting school size and design, and re-examining the manner in which school rules are made and enforced. Such changes also have the significant advantage of being within the school's own span of control and thus require no drastic societal adjustments. E_L

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