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Characteristics of Schools with Good Discipline

Good discipline is a melting pot of positive factors including, among other things, high rates of student success and strong principal leadership.

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The reasons some schools succeed in handling discipline problems while others fail are often elusive. It is almost as though some elixir has been parsimoniously distributed to selected teachers and administrators. The research of the Phi Delta Kappa (PDK) Commission on Discipline would suggest, however, that differences in effectiveness are not due to esoteric skills—success is simply the result of teachers and administrators using what they already know.

The PDK Commission began in 1979 to investigate the discipline phenomenon by identifying exemplary schools: schools where discipline was not a significant problem. Based on a review of data regarding each school's demographic and program characteristics, commission members found several distinguishing features of schools with effective discipline practices. The five most salient characteristics discussed in this article should provide a basis for understanding how other schools might better deal with discipline problems.

Characteristic 1—All faculty members and students are involved in problem solving. A positive school environment is not fostered by including some individuals and excluding others in solving problems. Schoolwide (and even some classroom) problems are not simply the domain of one or two individuals; they are the responsibility of all who work in and use the school. Discipline codes in exemplary schools tend to be developed from the input of many students, teachers, and administrators. Students are given meaningful ways of being involved in the leadership of the school, and teachers are afforded the autonomy necessary for developing rele-

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vant learning experiences. Maintaining a positive school atmosphere is everyone's responsibility; although the various parties may have different roles, they have a mutual responsibility to establish and deal with problems.

In the past year and a half, our school has worked on a new Discipline Code, which was developed by a committee made up of parents, teachers, students, and administrators. After the code was created, workshops were presented to parents during an evening meeting, and an entire day of school was spent teaching the code to the students. Members of the committee worked with groups of 25 students, answering questions and explaining rules and regulations in the code. A workshop was also provided for the teaching staff and school monitors. We now have a Review Committee of teachers, students, administrators, and parents who updated the code to make sure it is being properly implemented.—ROY C. KETCHAM HIGH SCHOOL, NEW YORK.

When problems arise in exemplary schools, teachers and administrators think before they act; they search for solutions, not victims. One school included in the PDK study, for example, solved its graffiti problem by developing a program where students painted murals on the walls of the school halls. The program, coordinated by an art teacher, not only beautified the school, but also drastically reduced the graffiti and vandalism.

Characteristic 2—The school is viewed as a place to experience success. One of the most significant findings of the Beginning Teacher Evaluation Study (BTES) was the role success plays in the

growth of students.¹ High rates of success are important for student academic and social growth. Success contributes to positive student self-esteem, which in turn translates into positive student behavior. Schools that provide opportunities for students to learn concepts, practice skills, and experience some degree of academic success tend to have fewer discipline problems.

Building on basic skills developed in the elementary grades and anticipating the differentiated curriculum of the higher grades, our program focuses on developing each student as a competent, self-disciplined learner. Students are constantly reminded that we expect excellence in all things.—FALLSTAFF MIDDLE SCHOOL, MARYLAND.

The expectation and opportunity for success are fundamental to school life: Teachers must give respect if they want to receive it; they must expect success to help students achieve it; and they must foster student leadership if they want students to learn decision-making skills.

During the 1979–80 school year, we held a student leadership conference day which was devoted to training students in the areas of communications skills, community development, decision making, interpersonal cooperation, and goal setting. During the day, students moved from one workshop to another listening to guest speakers and parents from the community who volunteered to help. Our goal was to develop student leaders who were capable of being involved in committees in the classrooms where student leadership was needed. Many of the students who participated in this workshop will be giving workshops next school year for other students.—ROY C. KETCHAM HIGH SCHOOL, NEW YORK.

Characteristic 3—Problem solving focuses on causes rather than symptoms. Teachers and school administrators

must develop an understanding of the factors that contribute to discipline problems. Treating symptoms without dealing with causes is analogous to giving a chronically sick person aspirin without attempting to identify the cause of the illness.

Teachers and administrators in exemplary schools tend not to define problems in terms of specific student behaviors, such as fighting; rather, they look at student behavior as symptomatic of other problems. Excessive student fighting, for example, may be caused by overcrowded school conditions. Student aggressiveness, manifested through sarcasm, may be the result of student frustration: they may find assignments too difficult or learning activities irrelevant. Although teachers and administrators cannot always know the causes of discipline problems, faculty members at exemplary schools are constantly seeking an understanding of and information concerning student behavior.

For example, one school made separate lists of causes and symptoms (see Figure 1). Problem behaviors (or symptoms) evidenced at the school are listed in the left-hand column; possible causes for those behaviors, which were identified by the staff, appear in the center column; and activities to ameliorate problems are in the right-hand column.

Too often, misbehavior is treated as a student problem resulting from cultural factors, peer-group pressure, or genotypic tendencies. Treating symptoms rather than causes makes misbehavior more narrowly a student problem. Behavior is too complex to be dealt with so simplistically. Treating causes rather than

Figure 1. Sample Lists of Causes and Symptoms of Discipline Problems.

Symptoms	Causes	Activities
Extensive vandalism of property	Lack of student involvement	Written rules and definite consequences
Disrespect for people	Lack of rules on attendance, discipline	Staff cooperation
Failing test scores	Lax follow-up for disruptive behavior	Consistent enforcement of rules and regulations
Student disinterest in school	Staff not working together	Better supervision in all areas; strict enforcement of hall passes
Lack of school spirit	Extensive exceptions made	Support of staff by administration
Lack of participation in school activities	Wishy-washy leadership	Communication and meetings with parents
	Limited activities in community	Student handbook
	Staff concerned with self-preservation	News articles on school policies and practices
	Parent apathy and disinterest	

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symptoms places ownership for discipline problems on the shoulders of *all* school participants. The efficacy of the holistic approach is obvious: teachers must assess their own behavior and classroom activities as well as the overt behavior of students.

Characteristic 4—Emphasis is on positive behaviors and preventive measures. The schools in the PDK study focus on rewarding rather than punishing behavior. Punishment is used by teachers and administrators as a last resort and only after rules and procedures have been clearly communicated to students. Faculty members in exemplary schools seem to understand what Nietzsche meant in *Genealogy of Morals* when he suggested that punishment tames man but does not make him better: they recognize the limitations of punishment. Teachers and administrators in exemplary schools constantly seek ways to help students feel better about themselves. Emphasis on rewarding positive

behavior has surfaced in numerous other studies. According to Rohrkemper and Brophy,

Teachers with greater ability to handle difficult students used more total rewards, including more symbolic rewards and contracts; more total supportive behavior, including more comforting and reassuring of students; and more unique supportive methods. In addition, high ability teachers used punishment less than the other teachers. . . . Not only did less effective teachers invoke punishment more, they also failed to provide support and encouragement as often as teachers rated higher.²

Exemplary schools do not concentrate their efforts on formal rule enforcement or punishment programs. Instead, they engage in a wide range of activities to enhance the self-perceptions of students and to maintain the support and confidence of staff members. They use award or honor days, positive messages to parents, and special programs to recognize student accomplishments. Such reinforcement is supported by more subtle methods that teachers use in the

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classroom. Though reinforcement mechanisms vary greatly in magnitude and quality, they consistently aim to help students maintain a positive image of themselves.

The most important factor in any discipline plan is the use of positive reinforcers for good behavior. Throughout the building, we stress verbal praise and positive notes home. We also have a monthly "Good Guy Movie" for students who have faithfully remained within the parameters set by teachers. The movies are feature films purchased by the PTA. Each teacher has developed positive reinforcement strategies. Some use an "honor roll" system; others drop marbles into a jar when they see appropriate behavior. Each of these methods results in a positive consequence when a goal has been reached. Notes are also sent home from the principal entitled "Your Child Was Sent to the Principal Today," describing the child's good behavior.—LEE ELEMENTARY, WASHINGTON.

Characteristic 5—The principal is a strong leader. Numerous studies have highlighted the relationship between strong leadership and student achieve-

ment.³ Similarly, the principal plays a prominent role with regard to discipline, and no person has as great an impact on the school atmosphere. Teachers look to the principal for support and leadership. They want someone who provides direction yet is tolerant of instructional autonomy.

The principals described in the PDK study possess a form of tender strength. They make their positions clear but they do so in non-Machiavellian ways. They influence the staff and students without dictating. They are, as the following example suggests, a source of constant positive strength

Last year, before Mr. Martin came here, it was a disaster. In just a few months, he has turned the whole school around. Look how excited the staff is! He really has made a difference. Of course, desegregation helped a little, and he brought in his whole team, Stephie and Bones (vice principals); they work together like clockwork.—HART JUNIOR HIGH, OHIO.

It is one thing to suggest that the principal should provide support, and quite another to accomplish it. Lightfoot, in her description of exemplary schools, not only reinforces the notion of the principal's importance but also sheds light on how such a posture of effectiveness is accomplished.

The first thing Benson did as principal was visit and talk with every member of the faculty, classified staff, and custodial staff. He asked each person what he or she thought needed changing, and refused to get involved in "old stories" and bitter battles from the past. . . . Benson was eager to cast a wide net. . . . His leadership began subtly, listening for direction from the collective body, working behind the scenes to create alliances, and carefully, but willingly, delegating responsibility to others. . . . As one faculty member said, "He is the best listener . . . I can just feel his support and confidence."⁴

Conclusion

These five characteristics only partially represent the findings of the PDK Commission. Numerous other factors and concepts emerged and are discussed in the *Handbook for Developing Schools with Good Discipline*.⁵

Perhaps the most significant finding emerging from this study is that there is no single recipe for success. Exemplary schools are successful because teachers, administrators, and students put all of their energy into creating a positive atmosphere. Those who have been looking for simple solutions to the disci-

pline problem will probably not find them in the PDK Commission study. On the other hand, those who are willing to re-examine their current practices and try new approaches may discover the Commission's findings a useful guide to action. □

¹C. Denham and A. Lieberman, eds., *Time to Learn* (Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Education, 1980).

²M. Rohrkemper and J. Brophy, *Teachers' General Strategies for Dealing with Problem Students* (East Lansing, Mich.: The Institute for Effective Research on Teaching, 1980), p. 14.

³J. Shoemaker and H. Fraser, "What Principals Can Do: Some Implications from Studies of Effective Schooling," *Phi Delta Kappan* 63 (November 1981): 178-182.

⁴S. L. Lightfoot, "Portraits of Exemplary Secondary Schools: Highland Park," *Daedalus* 110 (Fall 1981): 62.

⁵W. W. Wayson, G. DeVoss, S. Kaeser, T. Lasley, and G. S. Pinnell, *Handbook for Developing Schools with Good Discipline* (Bloomington, Ind.: Phi Delta Kappa, 1982).

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