

High Standards for Effective Discipline

RICHARD L. CURWIN AND ALLEN N. MENDLER

Contracts between teachers and their classes help students understand what is expected of them and why.

We estimate that student off-task behavior results in an average loss of 15 to 25 percent of instructional time—clearly a large chunk of a student's education. While it would be unwise to try to eliminate *all* forms of misbehavior—since students need opportunities to test limits—both teachers and students function best when limits and expectations are clearly defined.

Schools must reject the hypothesis that they are powerless to overcome unruly student behavior and poor achievement. The Ford Foundation's recognition of 92 inner city high schools for making positive changes attests to the ability of the school to powerfully influence students' actions and decisions.¹ The key variables are high academic and behavioral expectations with clear values and norms facilitated by an energetic principal and involved teachers.

Negotiating Classroom Rules and Consequences

Including student input in the development of standards is particularly important. The use of a "social contract" is one way.²

Developed jointly by the teacher and students, a social contract is composed

of rules and consequences that describe acceptable and unacceptable classroom behavior. Social contracts include six specific elements:

1. *Flag rules.* These rules are developed by the teacher *without* student input and constitute the minimum behavior requirements for a well-run classroom. An example might be: "No fighting; differences are to be expressed by *telling* how you feel."

2. *Negotiable rules.* The teacher and students together decide whether or not to adopt these rules. Teachers need to stretch their limits to increase the number of negotiable rules without compromising order in the classroom.

3. *Consequences.* Again, teachers determine consequences without student input. We advise using a range of consequences for each rule, beginning with a mild one and leading to more serious consequences. Positive consequences

Richard L. Curwin is a Faculty Development Specialist, Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, New York; and Allen N. Mendler is a certified school psychologist and psychotherapist, Rochester, New York.

should also be included to reward students for good behavior. In all cases, consequences should be instructional rather than punitive, and regarded as natural and logical extensions of the rules.

Effective consequences are critical to the social contract process. If consequences are not enforced, students will not believe in the rules. If the consequences are too harsh or are unrelated to rules, students will experience them as punishments and feel alienated, resentful, and hurt. Improper punishments create power struggles, a need for students to save face, and a desire to reproach the teacher in front of peers.

4. *Rules for the teacher.* Most plans for classroom management explain in detail what students must do in the classroom. When students are given the opportunity to set standards for the teacher (albeit in a limited way), they feel a sense of commitment to all rules and consequences and, therefore, are more inclined to follow them. Teachers do not have to accept any rule that

would make the classroom unlivable, or that is incompatible with their beliefs, teaching styles, and needs. Two examples are: "the teacher will return written papers within three days" and "the teacher will not yell at students in front of their classmates."

5. *Student-developed rules for students.* This step allows students further input into the development of a social contract.

6. *A vote to determine which rules to enforce.* All rules, including those developed by the students, are voted on by the class. Except for flag rules, all rules must ultimately be accepted by at least 75 percent of the students. With this degree of student involvement in both the development and decision making of rules and consequences, the teacher can expect a high degree of compliance—in a positive, dynamic sense, not blind obedience.

Students Benefit

The most effective classroom contracts are those that are supported by a clear

set of guidelines and are used throughout the school. With modifications, the social contract process has been used as an effective model for helping schools develop a building or districtwide discipline policy.

Students want structure, enjoy being challenged, and benefit from high teacher expectations, particularly when they are included in the planning and decision-making process. If expectations are too low, students will miss the opportunity to take responsibility for themselves in a productive way. The structure of the social contract gives students the opportunity to see a limited democracy in action with the expectation that they will be contributing and responsible citizens. □

¹"Hope Stirs in the Ghetto," *Time*, April 25, 1983, p. 95.

²Richard Curwin and Allen Mendler, *Discipline Book: A Complete Guide to School and Classroom Management* (Reston, Va.: Reston Publishing Co., 1980); and *Taking Charge in the Classroom* (Reston, Va.: Reston Publishing Co., 1983).

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