

Managing the Culture of the School

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In recent years educational leaders have received what at first appears to be contradictory advice regarding rules. On the one hand, authors of studies of violence and vandalism in schools have indicated that administrators can reduce problem behavior by developing rules that are clear, firmly enforced, and equitably administered (National Institute of Education, 1978; Gottfredson and Daiger, 1979). On the other hand, recent critics of American schools have pointed to the increasing bureaucratization of school life (Wise, 1979).

The dilemma is how to construct a system to govern student performance and behavior that is clear and just without becoming overly bureaucratic.

Expectations and Consequences

In an examination of the strategies used in four high schools to manage compliance through the use of rules, we found that administrators and teachers appeared to employ two basic approaches to rule making (Natriello, 1982). The first approach was based on a rational perspective; rules involved consequences for individual infractions. The second was based on a social or cultural perspective, resulting in rules that defined the values and expectations of the school community.

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Rules that specify consequences may be less effective than rules that confirm expectations.

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Rules invoking consequences for individual students involved the juxtaposition of student behavior with an organizational response; for instance, “students who are tardy for class more than three times must stay for detention one day for each time they are tardy.” This rule specifies a student behavior (tardiness), an organizational response (detention), and a rate of exchange (one detention for each tardy). In contrast, rules that defined expectations were based on a clear image of the school as an institution with a special meaning whose members possessed special cultural identities. They emphasized that failure to perform in a manner characteristic of the school and its members would result in loss of membership. Brief examples of the use of rules defining expectations in two of the four high schools illustrate the approach.

Setting Expectations

One of the four schools, Washington High, serves a middle- and upper-middle-class community in a major metropolitan area in the Midwest. The students perform above the national means in both the verbal and math sections of the Scholastic Aptitude Test, and over two-thirds of the students plan to continue their education beyond high school.

Administrators and teachers interviewed at Washington High place little emphasis on rules and regulations that involve consequences. Instead, the primary strategy for obtaining student compliance is “setting expectations.” As an administrator put it, “Defining behavior is a big mistake. People tend to gravitate toward minimal acceptable behavior. It’s important for us to use nebulous expectations, to deal in generalities.” This philosophy applies to teachers as well. Administrators argue that a great many specific rules take the onus off teachers. One of the teachers spoke of

guidelines, the principal’s expectations, and professional respect accorded to teachers.

An important feature of “setting expectations” is discussing those expectations without mentioning consequences. A specific illustration was provided by a teacher who told of a student misbehaving in the hall. “There is no written policy. If a student is not doing what’s expected in the hall, the student is told, ‘That’s not expected.’” Another teacher explained that the policy emphasizes positive attitudes. “The administration accents the positive to the point where the kids don’t believe it, but try to live up to it just to hear it.”

Conveying expectations to students is a subtle process although the expectations themselves come through loud and clear. Characteristics of this approach are illustrated in an announcement about the annual Christmas concert, which was read over the intercom by the principal:

This evening and tomorrow evening Washington High will present its Thirteenth Annual Christmas Choral Concert. All of you are invited to attend. This program is always a highlight, first because of its quality and, second, because of the special audience that attends. More Washington graduates come back for the Christmas program than almost any other event. Some graduates and parents who will be here have seen all the previous annual concerts. [No other activity has this holding power year after year]. Because of the nature of the choral presentation and because of the make-up of the audience, a special atmosphere is needed. With that in mind—and so Washington students who are performing will be able to do their very best work—I’d like to ask for your help. If you attend the Christmas Choral Concert and are sitting in the bleachers next to or close by students from the junior high schools or elementary schools, please take it upon yourself to ask them to remain absolutely quiet and to not leave and return during the program. Ask them to meet the Washington standard of dignity that you have established so well.

This message to students presents a clear image of standards associated with a special school and its special students, members of a common culture. Although this approach is successful in encouraging student compliance, it is not without its dangers. As the principal put it, “If we ever had to go to court, we would lose.”

Becoming Professional with Mrs. James

A second example of the use of rules affirming expectations is presented in the case of Mrs. James. The theatre teacher at Jefferson High School, Mrs. James taught both acting and stage production classes and directed the school’s theatre program. She enjoyed great autonomy and had the “trust of the administration.” Students took her classes as electives, and she had control over their entry into her program.

Although Mrs. James mentioned no rules and regulations, she had very clear expectations that defined a “professional”—a member in the theatre community. One, for example, was, “No actor yells at another actor.” She observed that in theatre work it is important for “everybody to know their job and what to do” for things to work properly. Since she structured the schedule so that students were in some kind of performance every two weeks, the audience or potential audience was a great force in compelling students to perform and behave to their best ability. She noted that “in the theatre the whole person is looked at every day.”

Mrs. James also discussed the importance for actors and theatre students to learn to follow the orders of a director. She appointed student directors for each project and expected other students to take direction well. Again, she stressed that this was part of the professionalism of an actor.

“Rules affirming expectations focus on desirable student performance or behavior rather than on noncompliance.”

Expectations in the Creation of School Culture

The examples from Washington High and Mrs. James' theatre program illustrate some basic features of rules affirming expectations that provide a greater understanding of their form and function. First, they are directed to an entire group of students, as opposed to the single student or type of student to whom rules invoking consequences are typically addressed. Second, rules affirming expectations focus on desirable student performance or behavior rather than on noncompliance. Third, they are general, while rules invoking consequences are very specific. Fourth, they use loss of membership in a group or the entire institution as a penalty for failure to comply, while consequence-invoking rules impose particular penalties. Fifth, rules affirming expectations require individuals to make nontrivial decisions regarding their performance and behavior in the organization. This, again, is in contrast to rules invoking consequences, which clearly define undesirable behavior.

These differences suggest several reasons why school leaders might want to avoid using elaborate sets of consequences, and work instead on strengthening the culture of the school through expectations. First, administering rules and regulations invoking consequences quickly becomes a complicated business and takes a great deal of administrative time. As Barth (1980) notes, "When a day's work is required to respond to a three-second rock thrown through a window, the cases accumulate faster than they can be disposed of" (p. 398).

Second, the tasks expected of students in schools, particularly academic tasks, are often too complex and unpredictable (Natriello and Dornbusch, 1984) to be handled with great dispatch with specifically defined rules. Student performance and behavior that is acceptable or

desirable in one situation may be unacceptable in another situation. Specific rules involving consequences may not be adaptable to changing conditions.

Strong school cultures should obviate the need for rules invoking consequences. While it may be more difficult to establish a culture supportive of the educational process in schools that serve low-income populations, and while such situations may require greater reliance on rules invoking consequences, there is no reason not to employ rules that affirm the expectations of the school as well.

Because strengthening school culture through rules that affirm expectations is consistent with the public schools' historical reliance on normative or moral bases of order (Etzioni, 1975), it may be the most useful and practical strategy for administrators. □

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