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one

Creating a Positive Learning Environment

> Behavior and academic achievement are inextricably linked. A student's academic success in school is directly related to the student's attention, engagement, and behavior. The higher the expectation for scholarly behaviors and the better the supports for students experiencing difficulties—whether mild, moderate, or severe—the more academic success can be achieved.
>
> — Austin Buffum, Mike Mattos, and Chris Weber

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This claim by Buffum, Mattos, and Weber (2009, p. 111) is a call to action for educators across North America as we respond to the challenges we face in educating students in the 21st century. We believe that academic and behavioral performance go hand in hand. One study (Hawkins, Catalano, Kosterman, Abbott, & Hill, 1999) found that when schools raised their level of academic achievement, behavior problems decreased—and when schools worked to decrease behavior problems, academic achievement improved.

We must focus on these two foundational pieces—academic achievement and behavior—if we are to promote success for all students. Moreover, we must do so while facing the challenges we encounter as educators through collaborative, cooperative work with our colleagues—the practice of professional learning communities (PLCs). We acknowledge that this practice is one to which we must continually commit.

We do make a difference. As educators, we have to believe that statement. Every child who enters our classrooms at the start of a school year will be different by the end of that school year. The question is, how will our students change? By the end of the academic year, will they simply be one year older? Will they simply have a year's worth of new facts in their heads? Will students merely spew back the facts we want to hear, or will they be independent thinkers, mature enough to tackle the academic and social challenges ahead of them? The answers to these questions come from the

actions of the adults within a school. What we do with students and how we do it, from the beginning to the end of the school year, are critical. The research (Barth, 2006; Fullan, 2005) on school improvement is clear—it is the shared experience and common approach to addressing emerging and evident needs of our students that will move us forward.

To be effective in helping all students learn, the adults in a school must come to agreement on what is most important. We must have crucial conversations about what we believe about how students learn. We must collaboratively establish norms regarding how we will work and learn together. Collectively, we need to commit to common expectations for both student and adult behavior. We need to ask:

- What are our common expectations for how students behave?
- What are our common expectations for how staff work and interact? What about parents and other community members?
- What do we know about best-practice and high-yield strategies that make a difference in student learning?
- What collective commitments will we make to ensure that the very highest levels of adult and student behavior become a reality in our school?

The answers to these questions create the foundation for moving a school forward.

As the focus on collaboration in these questions suggests, effective teaching is not a solo act. Robert Marzano (2003, 2007) and DuFour et al. (2010) clearly illustrate that collaborative planning, collective inquiry, and shared commitments enhance the effectiveness of both teaching and learning. Whether we look at behavior, discipline, attendance, or academics, schools that operate as PLCs have the best chance to measurably improve student performance (Buffum et al., 2009).

PLCs ensure that all students have access to a quality education. It is not enough to be satisfied with the success of students who are easy to reach and easy to teach. As educators, we have a fundamental responsibility to support the individual and collective needs of all students. Our schools are no longer built on the premise of learning for some; rather, we now focus on learning for all. We have similarly advanced from learning for overall subgroups to learning for every single child. This commitment is documented in legislation such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) and similar initiatives in most states and provinces. Response to intervention (RTI), a key component of the reauthorization of IDEIA, represents a philosophy and framework for ensuring that every student receives the support he or she needs to be successful.

Legislation, however, is relatively easy to craft; it is more difficult to ensure that this philosophy and framework become a practical reality in schools and classrooms. Our students come to us with challenges that are different from those of previous generations, and they face unique challenges for their futures.

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Educators must make a commitment to approach these challenges in a positive way, by helping students find their passion as they prepare for a world vastly different from the one we faced. We cannot change the students who come into our schools; rather, we must change our approach to working with them. We must commit to proactively serving students by anticipating their needs. We can predict that students will experience frustration, confusion, and perhaps failure in the absence of clearly articulated routines, structures, and expectations for their learning environment. This book will help teachers and school leaders transform the research on student behavior into practical realities for superior school and classroom climates and cultures in which learning is primed to occur.

Over the years, as we have worked with many staffs in a number of school districts, our repertoire of strategies for improving student behavior and overall educational effectiveness has evolved. While there can be no complete, exhaustive list of strategies for making a difference with students, we hope that those presented in this book will help you and your school community get to a place where staff, students, and community members can answer "Yes!" to the following ten questions (Hierck, 2009a):

1. Does everyone in our school agree on why we are here?
2. Does everyone really believe we can make a difference for all kids?
3. In terms of making a difference, do we have a common schoolwide vision?
4. Are clear and specific schoolwide systems in place to make our vision a reality?
5. Are classroom plans in place that match the schoolwide systems?
6. Are individual student support options in place?
7. Do procedures in the office support the school, classroom, and individual plans?
8. Does every adult talk about these plans openly, regularly, and systematically?
9. Do we know, with measurable evidence, that the plans are making a difference?
10. If our plans are not making a difference, are we willing to try something new?

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In an era of educational accountability in which the public demands increasing levels of student safety and academic achievement, it is imperative that we find ways to create positive learning environments. Educators can have an incredible impact on the young people in their classrooms. It is both an awesome responsibility and a fantastic opportunity. The most successful educational institutions are those that create conditions for deep and meaningful learning. Schools that focus on the needs of students, enlist the shared expertise of educators, and invite parents to participate have the best chance of creating a positive learning environment.

two

Common Expectations

The first component for developing a positive learning environment where the majority of students are in the green zone (or moving toward the green zone) is common expectations. Common expectations are positively phrased school rules, codes of conduct, and mission statements that link behavior expectations to academic expectations. Students, staff, and parents know what the expectations are, everyone in the school uses a common language to describe the expectations, and adults in the school model the expectations.

In *A Basic School: A Community for Learning*, Ernest Boyer (1995) writes of the difficulty we face when all stakeholders do not share expectations:

> School is, above all else, a *community for learning*, a place where staff and students, along with parents, have a shared vision of what the institution is seeking to accomplish. There is simply no way to achieve educational excellence in a school where purposes are blurred, where teachers and students fail to communicate thoughtfully with each other, and where parents are uninvolved in the education of their children. (p. 15)

It is not always easy to keep a focus on common expectations with the ebbs and flows all schools experience as they deal with staff changes and the annual influx of new students. One of the keys to maintaining common expectations is to have a system in place that is sustainable, regardless of the players in that system.

Efforts to produce long-term change require a commitment of energy and time from all stakeholders. Every stakeholder must be involved and willing to make a difference. Schools must be willing to ask the difficult questions: Is student misbehavior a result of difficulties between students? Or difficulties within families? Or difficulties within the community? Or could we, the adults and professionals in the schools, change some of our practices to improve student behavior? If there is not a solid rationale for continuing a practice, then staff must be willing to drop the practice and replace it with something more in tune with the school's vision.

In this chapter, we'll use the example of a vice principal, Mr. Jones, and his school, Wilson Middle School, to highlight the importance and realities of holding a school staff accountable to common expectations.

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Wilson Middle School: Developing Common Expectations

New Vice Principal Jones faced many challenges as he prepared for the start of the school year at Wilson, a rural junior high school of 700 students. The previous year, the school hit bottom. Student unrest led to increases in almost every category of misbehavior. Staff dejection manifested itself in a "bunker mentality"—most staff were neither collaborating nor communicating nor striving to continuously improve; they were surviving, at least in a professional sense, from day to day. Parental disapproval and lack of support for the school and its programs resulted in widespread community disenchantment. The school was the subject of negative stories making the gossip rounds. Local real estate agents advised families against buying houses in the area. Many solutions were proposed, but all required somebody else to change. Finger pointing was rampant.

Pledging Commitment

Vice Principal Jones started on the path to improvement by establishing common expectations for all stakeholders through a series of meetings. Mr. Jones held initial meetings with individual staff members, and then consolidated the information and shared it in a whole-staff meeting. He held similar meetings with parents, students, and community members. This was not an easy process—it required teachers to let go of those strategies that they felt most comfortable with and to embrace new ones in the hopes that a better system would emerge. In a time when quick solutions were desired, Vice Principal Jones preached patience for the long term. Stakeholders pledged to hold firm on new agreements and to support the changes and encourage others during their struggles to adjust.

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Identifying Expectations and Creating Procedures

Vice Principal Jones sought to create a schoolwide disciplinary approach to which all stakeholders would commit. Teachers would create their own approaches to handling disciplinary issues in their classrooms, but within defined parameters linked to the overarching school expectations. In approaching behavior this way, Vice Principal Jones wished to emphasize and preserve autonomy in the classroom. To this end, he invited teachers to create a three-step process for their classrooms. The following is an example of one teacher's plan:

1. Identify the student who is not following the rule: "Jill, remember that you need to raise your hand when you want to contribute to the discussion."
2. Write the student's name on the board, and provide a reference to the desired expectation: "Jill, remember the rule we discussed as a class."
3. Remove the student from the classroom into the classroom of another colleague in close proximity and provide work for the student: "Jill, I need you to gather your materials and follow me into the hallway."

Any further misbehavior in the new classroom resulted in a referral to the office and the teacher contacting the student's parents to engage them in a plan to change the student's behavior.

In the three-step process, teachers first identify the concern, then follow up with a specific action that highlights that a change in behavior is needed, and then follow with a consequence. In the example, the teacher ultimately provided the student with a break from the familiar classroom environment. This proved to be a powerful deterrent at Wilson, and cases of further acting out in the school were quite minimal. Students whose misbehavior is caused by academic challenges can be redirected to a space that allows for their needs to be met—for example, in a room where an intervention teacher can support them.

Implementing Procedures

The vice principal kept each teacher's three-step process on file in the office so each teacher's approach would be familiar to him and so that parents could also know their child's teacher's approach. This made it easy for the office to support the classroom teachers and quickly clarified the idea that the responsibility to *create* a positive learning environment rested primarily with the teacher, the responsibility to *support* that environment rested primarily with the office, and the responsibility *to change the behavior* rested primarily with the student—with support from the home and school.

As the year progressed at Wilson, Vice Principal Jones and the staff continued to develop their common expectations and face issues through their new lens of collective accountability. Some issues took more than a school year to resolve, and it was important not to get caught up in doing everything all at once.

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Revising Procedures

One issue concerned the school's approach to dealing with late students. The traditional response was to punish the offender with detentions, which sent chronic offenders on the path to eventual removal from school. Staff members were committed to trying something new, and they recognized that there was not an adult among them who could make the claim of never being late—especially for staff meetings! The staff became more focused on how they could respond to student lateness in a more constructive way. This resulted in an agreement to implement a structured response to late students. The school would take action only after a student exceeded five unexcused tardies in a reporting period.

Initially, some feared this would lead to rampant tardiness. This fear did not materialize. (Remember the pyramid analogy and the notion that the greatest number of students will follow the rules.) The inconsistent application of the traditional response to lateness was now replaced by acknowledgment that issues occasionally arise that may keep students from being on time. Instead of immediate punishment, staff gave quiet reminders of the need to be on time and engaged