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A Discipline Program That Nurtures Christianity

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Parents, teachers, and students joined together at a Brookfield, WI, school to create

A Discipline Program That Nurtures Christianity

by Robert A. Fox, Colleen Terry, and Theresa A. Fox

Teachers, parents, and students frequently associate *discipline* with negative terms such as misbehavior, punishment, threats, guilt, and control. Yet a historical perspective on discipline reveals that it encompasses much more than only managing inappropriate behavior. Discipline comes from the word "disciple," which is defined as a pupil or student. Consequently, discipline really means to teach, which literally includes all of those things parents and teachers do everyday to help children reach their potential and to develop into moral and responsible human beings.

It was from this balanced, educational view of discipline that Colleen Terry, principal of St. John Vianney School in Brookfield, WI, decided to review her school's discipline policies and practices. She stated, "I inherited the present discipline system when I came here and decided it was time to conduct a comprehensive review of our discipline policies and practices."

At this suburban Catholic elementary school offering a K-8 program for 480 students, a variety of discipline practices were used, depending on the ages of the children. At the elementary level (K-3), each teacher used his or her own methods for maintaining a positive classroom (e.g. stars for completed assignments, loss of recess for disruptive behavior). In the intermediate grades (4-6), students received a conduct mark for unacceptable behaviors such as being disrespectful or being unprepared for class. Intermediate students who received five conduct marks in one quarter were required to serve a detention (one hour after school in a supervised activity). In the junior high grades (7-8), students received warnings or immediate deten-

tions for behaviors that interfered with a positive learning environment. Junior high students also had an honors lunch each quarter for students with good academic effort and no detentions.

Planning Stage

Terry formed a school discipline committee including herself, six teachers representing the intermediate and junior high grades, and two parent facilitators. A survey of students and parents was conducted regarding current school discipline. The results showed that most students felt there should be consequences for behaviors like cheating or being disrespectful; fewer students felt that being unprepared for class (incomplete assignments) should be dealt with in the same manner. Most students felt that appropriate school behavior also should be recognized. In an open comment section on the survey, one fifth grade student cautioned the committee to be careful with discipline because it could affect a child's self-esteem.

Responding parents indicated that discipline was an essential part of their children's education. As students did,

parents felt that behaviors such as fighting and cheating should have immediate consequences. Parents, like students, were less sure how academic-related behaviors such as incomplete homework should be managed. Most parents felt that students should be acknowledged for appropriate school behavior.

From the survey results and discussions at meetings of the school discipline committee, a number of problems with current discipline practices were identified:

- ❖ Student academic-related difficulties were handled the same way as behavior problems.
- ❖ Some definitions of behaviors that led to a conduct mark or detention were vague and inconsistently administered by different teachers.
- ❖ Communication regarding student discipline between home and school was not consistent.
- ❖ Intermediate students received no formal recognition for demonstrating appropriate school behavior.

In response to this systematic review, the committee decided to revise the school's discipline system, beginning with grades 4 through 8.

New Standards for Student Behavior

Concurrent with the work of the school discipline committee, a separate group of parents had formed to initiate a Respect, Spirituality, and Responsibility Program (RSR) at the school. Banners emphasizing this theme were placed around the school, and a newsletter was published including examples of

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Christian student behavior that parents or teachers had observed. Building on the RSR initiative, the school discipline committee concluded that the primary goal in developing new standards for student behavior was to help students grow in their development of the Christian characteristics of respect, spirituality and responsibility. A **respectful person** was defined as one who believes in the dignity and worth of all individuals and who acts accordingly; a **spiritual person** was defined as one who lives his or her faith; and a **responsible person** was defined as one who responds to meeting personal, school, and community obligations.

As part of the new standards, student behaviors inconsistent with being respectful, spiritual, or responsible were identified. In the category of respect, some of these behaviors included teasing, fighting, cheating, and disturbing class. For these behaviors, students would receive either one behavior check or one detention, depending on the severity of the behavior. If a student acquired three behavior checks during a quarter, a detention would be given. During the after-school detention, students would be required to reflect on their behavior and complete a one-page form answering a number of questions (e.g. What did I do? How did this affect others? What can I do differently in the future?).

Students who demonstrated difficulties in the category of spirituality, such as being irreverent during Liturgies, would be counseled by their teacher. If the problem persisted, a parent-teacher conference would be scheduled.

Finally, student behaviors in the category of responsibility included missing and incomplete assignments, tardiness,

not having appropriate materials for class, and others. For these behaviors students would be given a study check. If a student acquired five study checks during a quarter, the teacher would call that student's parents to develop a plan to resolve the difficulty.

Home-School Communication

Under the new standards of behavior, students who demonstrated growth in Christianity (defined as acquiring no detentions, two or fewer behavior checks, and two or fewer study checks in one quarter) would be invited to participate in an in-school celebration (such as an ice cream treat or special lunch). These students also received a special RSR Award certificate, signed by the homeroom teacher and principal, which they could take home to share with their families. To ensure accountability, all components of the new standards for behavior (including behavior checks, study checks, detentions, and student written responses during detentions) were printed on triplicate copy forms. One copy would stay with the issuing teacher, one copy would go to the student's homeroom teacher, and one copy would be sent home with the student to be returned the next day with the parent's signature. As one parent commented, "The new behavior system is instrumental in keeping the all important lines of communication open between faculty, students, and parents."

Evaluation

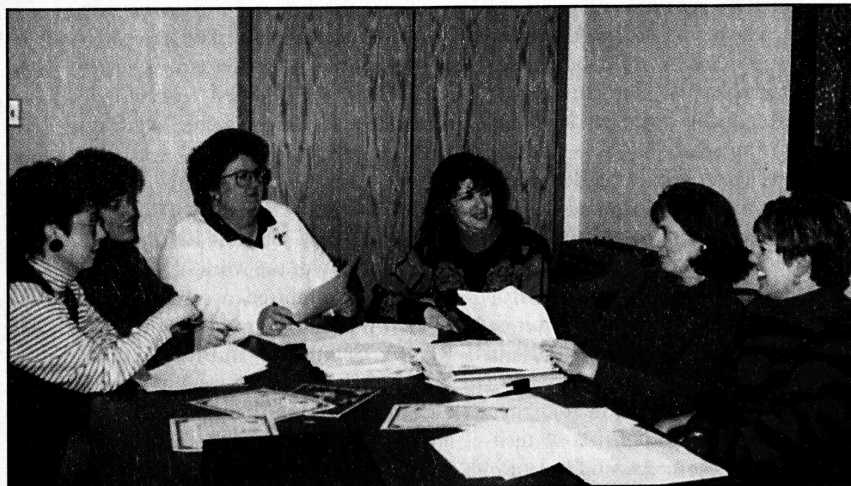
Student progress in the new discipline sys-

tem was evaluated each quarter. During the first year of implementation, an average of 75% of students earned the RSR Award each quarter (93% of students received two or fewer behavior checks, 92% received no detentions, and 77% received two or fewer study checks each quarter). A junior high teacher stated, "Our students have responded very favorably to this system. Earning the rewards at the end of each quarter has become very important to them."

Near the end of the fourth quarter of implementation, the discipline committee surveyed all parents, teachers, and students to determine their perceptions of the new system. The results indicated that 98% of parents and 100% of teachers responded favorably to the new standards. Even 84% of the students gave the new system a grade of C or better! One student said, "I like it because it gives you a goal." Another student offered a suggestion, "I think we should have a bigger treat at the end of the year."

The new standards of behavior were systematically developed and implemented with regular input from teachers, parents, and students. Our first year was very successful. Teachers reported that the new system requires more paperwork but that the extra effort is worth it because it acknowledges students' growth, sets reasonable limits for behavior, and facilitates parent-teacher communication. For individual students who had consistent difficulties with the new system, a Teacher Support Team was established to meet with the student, parents, and principal to develop an individualized program to help the student succeed. Our next goal is to introduce third-graders to a portion of the new system during their last quarter of the school year to help them get off to a good start in fourth grade.

The school discipline committee of St. John Vianney School, Brookfield, WI.



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