From Chaos to Consistency

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When one urban elementary school changed its culture from rowdy to calm, student achievement fell into place.

Although many educators have doubts about the No Child Left Behind Act, we can all agree with its basic premise—that many children in the United States are not receiving an adequate education. And we all question how we can change that reality. What actions can transform a struggling school into a place where students learn the concepts, values, and skills they will need to succeed in life?

Eight years ago, as the new principal of T. C. Cherry Elementary School in Bowling Green, Kentucky, I faced this question many times a day. To give you an idea of how bad the situation was, during the 1997–1998 school year we dispensed 880 disciplinary referrals. That same year, our students' average score on the CTBS/5 (the norm-referenced standardized test used in Kentucky) was in the 56th percentile (Kentucky Department of Education, 2003).

In the 2002–2003 school year, however, we handed out only 30 disciplinary referrals, and our students' average score on the CTBS/5 was in the 78th percentile. In recognition of our accomplishments, the U.S. Department of Education designated T. C. Cherry as a Blue Ribbon School, an honor awarded to only 233 schools across the nation that year. To achieve blue ribbon status, a school must either show dramatic improvement on standardized assessments in spite of at least 40 percent of its students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, or have students performing in the top 10 percent on state tests, regardless of background. T. C. Cherry satisfied both of these criteria, the only school in Kentucky to do so. That's quite a transformation in only five years.

How did we do it? In a word, culture. We changed the culture of our school from rowdy to calm, from irresponsible to responsible, from noncooperative to cooperative, from disrespectful to respectful. Our students became problem solvers instead of problem producers.

A Culture of Chaos

In September 1996, I was a brand-new principal eager to start the year, my head filled with exciting ideas and directions that I couldn't wait to share with staff and students. I anticipated a willing, attentive, and enthusiastic audience. Perhaps I was a bit naïve.

School opened that year with 270 students. Twenty-nine percent of them were on the free/reduced-price lunch program (a figure that has increased to 69 percent today), and practically all lived in the school's urban neighborhood, characterized by high rates of poverty and unemployment. Our school culture lacked order and consistency and had no established routines. For instance, on a given day one group of teachers would monitor breakfast and morning arrival and establish a set of rules for behavior; the next day, there would be another group of teachers with totally different rules for morning arrival.
I spent my days dealing with verbal and physical altercations. My jaws were permanently clenched, my head pounded, my heart ached. I felt desperate. As time went by, I began to dread my work. There I was, spending all of my time dealing with conflict and discipline, my unfulfilled dreams disintegrating amid the clamor in the hallways.

My staff, meanwhile, was frustrated and discouraged. They had little time for any real academic instruction. Student scores on state tests reflected this. Our students weren't learning. Teachers looked to me for answers, but I didn't have any. No one knew what to do.

Things muddled along in this manner for a while. Finally, in desperation, I called Western Kentucky University and found out about the Kentucky Instructional Discipline and Support (KIDS) project. I applied for a grant, and T. C. Cherry became one of eight KIDS pilot schools for the 1997–1998 school year.

The KIDS Project: Tools for Change

When we received the grant, I thought, “At last a savior will come to help us fix everything and make it right.” But as we all know, life isn't a fairy tale, and I didn't exactly get my savior. Instead, I met some knowledgeable people who had a workable plan.

That plan was based on the principles of Randy Sprick’s behavior management program, called Foundations: Establishing Positive Discipline Policies (Sprick, Garrison, & Howard, 2002). The Kentucky Department of Education contracted with Sprick to provide materials and training for the KIDS project using Foundations, which is a research-based, proactive discipline approach designed to teach students responsible behavior, thereby allowing teachers to spend the bulk of their classroom time focusing on academics. (For more information about the Foundations program, visit www.safeandcivilschools.com.)

Under the KIDS grant, our faculty and staff agreed to participate in three years of training and on-site coaching. Our first directive was to organize a leadership team and send its members to a series of training sessions. We came away with concepts for change and the tools to achieve that change. Many of the concepts we discussed were familiar, but the Foundations model presented them in a way that made them more cogent and useful. The model espouses the following five principles.

*Traditional approaches to discipline don't work.* In our first meeting, we took a hard look at our approach to discipline. When a teacher at T. C. Cherry caught a student misbehaving, he or she would typically react to that misbehavior by assigning a punishment intended to exclude the student from the school community, such as detention, suspension, or expulsion. This approach was characterized by three traits: It was reactive, punitive, and exclusionary. We learned that by reversing these characteristics and emphasizing a proactive, positive approach—and by explicitly teaching students our expectations for appropriate behavior—we could make a meaningful difference in our school culture.

*Use objective data to form policies and procedures.* As part of the program, we learned the value of surveys. By sending surveys out to students, parents, and staff, we were able to gather and analyze information that helped us identify areas that required immediate attention.
Involve the entire school community. For a change in school culture to be successful, those driving the change must scrutinize every aspect of the school and involve every member of the school in the process. School leaders must organize all school settings, from the hallways to the parking lot, to promote positive student behavior. All school personnel must share responsibility for encouraging such behavior.

Don't forget the classroom component. Although it helps to have consistent, positive, schoolwide policies that govern common spaces on campus—the halls, cafeteria, parking lots, and so on—most of a student's day is spent in the classroom. Each teacher needs to implement an effective behavior management plan in his or her classroom. Teachers should teach appropriate behavior just as they teach math, science, or social studies. By writing and using lesson plans with a proactive approach to teaching positive student behavior, our teachers gained more time on task for the other subject areas.

Safety breeds learning. A civil school is one in which everyone—students, parents, teachers, and staff—treats one another with respect and dignity. When students respect the needs of their peers, name-calling and pushing in the hallways come to an end. Students are courteous, generous, and cooperative. When teachers greet students by name and chat with them respectfully, students feel safe and comfortable—even loved. When they feel honored and safe, students stop misbehaving, and when students stop misbehaving, teachers have more time to focus on teaching. It's a natural progression.

Invaluable Resources

The KIDS project provided us with three invaluable resources: the Foundations program; a classroom management tool called CHAMPs; and confidence and commitment.

Foundations. We used the Foundations program to guide the whole school through designing and implementing a proactive schoolwide disciplinary policy. Foundations provides step-by-step guidance, forms, and worksheets to help school staff plan and write policies that let them be positive and consistent in every area of the school. We eventually created our Procedures and Protocol Handbook, a document that delineates responsibilities for every person and procedures for every activity at T. C. Cherry.

CHAMPs. CHAMPs is based on the theory that if students know how you expect them to behave, they will at least try to meet those expectations. The CHAMPs program helps teachers design a classroom management plan and teach their students how to behave during every activity and transition in the classroom. CHAMP is an acronym that stands for guidelines that teachers give students about each activity:

- **Conversation.** Are students allowed to talk to one another during this activity?
- **Help.** How do students get a teacher's attention and get their questions answered?
- **Activity.** What tasks are involved, and what is the objective of the activity?
- **Movement.** Are students allowed to move about, to get up to sharpen a pencil, for example?
- **Participation.** What does work behavior look and sound like? How do students show that they are fully participating?

Every teacher at T. C. Cherry is required to build and maintain a CHAMPs notebook and implement the lessons in it.
Confidence and commitment. These are intangible assets that KIDS gave us. T. C. Cherry’s staff had been unable to see past our school’s noncooperative culture for so long that we felt inspired by the clarity of our new vision for our school, and we developed renewed confidence and a commitment to make change work.

The First Step: Find the Trouble Spots

One of the fundamental tenets of the Foundations program is using objective data to drive change. The first thing our leadership team did after our initial meetings was to send out three surveys—one each for students, parents, and staff. The surveys question participants about how they feel in all the common areas of a school (such as the cafeteria, hallways, and playground); how they perceive one another (for example, do parents believe that the staff cares about students?); and how they feel about the school’s current behavior management procedures.

We got a 77 percent response rate. Once we compiled the results, we organized a staff retreat so teachers would have the time and the quiet to study those results. The staff actually placed bets on which area of the school would be perceived as the most poorly managed. When we looked at our analysis, we discovered that morning arrival was an exceptionally difficult and confusing transition, so we decided that our first step in improving the school’s culture would be to restructure this segment of the school day.

Good Morning

T. C. Cherry is an urban neighborhood school. Many students live close by and walk to school; on the way, there are plenty of opportunities for conflict to break out and spill over into the school grounds. To add to the confusion, many students arrive by bus and by car. Students used to arrive without any direction from us. They would congregate in the common areas and mill around with nothing to do—a perfect breeding ground for trouble.

To deal with this problem, the leadership team developed a comprehensive plan that manages everyone who enters the building, parents and staff included. This plan spells out in great detail the responsibilities of both adults and students. It covers every morning activity, from which door to use when entering the building to where to get supplies for cleaning up breakfast spills. We also developed lesson plans that teachers could use in their classrooms to teach the students these appropriate behaviors.

In addition, we added a morning assembly to our daily routine, during which we recognize special achievements, honor birthdays, make announcements, and generally start the day on a positive note. It would be easier, of course, to make these announcements over the intercom. But that doesn't produce a sense of community. When schools bring everybody together to recognize 100s on science tests and other achievements, students thrive. We have found that the thrill of some students being recognized every morning produces a striving toward excellence.

Students, teachers, and staff at T. C. Cherry know exactly where they should be and what they should be doing at any given time in the morning. Our students are meeting our expectations and then some. By changing our behavior from reactive to proactive, we have made mornings calmer and more productive. We are fostering an atmosphere of caring and community, which in turn encourages positive behavior.
Expanding Our Schoolwide Plan

From this beginning, T. C. Cherry's administrators and teachers have continued to build and improve our proactive, schoolwide behavior management plan. During the last seven years, we have addressed other problem areas, designing clear procedures and delineating responsibilities. We have codified all of these in our 70-plus-page Procedures and Protocol Handbook, which we review and revise every year. For example, the page from our handbook on positive expectations outlines ways in which teachers can use rewards to encourage good behavior:

- Positive verbal reinforcements are used daily, along with stickers, happy notes, treat jars, special privileges, and extra recess. Wall charts are used to record student success in homework assignments. The student of the week will be highlighted each week on the bulletin board. Individual behavior contracts will be constructed as needed. Homework certificates will be given to students who have completed daily homework.

We also opened our Cherry Pit store, which serves as a successful incentive for students to behave. When teachers witness a student behaving well in a common area of the school, that student receives a "Cherry Pit point." The points add up, and every Friday students can spend their points in the Cherry Pit store. This point system gives our students a sense of power and control: "Hey, I can behave, and if I do, I get things that I want!"

One of our most powerful steps was having teachers create CHAMPs notebooks for use in their classrooms. The CHAMPs notebook does for each teacher what our Procedures and Protocol Handbook does for the school: It identifies behavioral expectations and defines procedures and responsibilities. This system encourages teachers to think about each day, each activity, and each transition in a classroom, and to design proactive procedures that curb misbehavior. It takes a lot of time to design a notebook and teach the behavior lessons it contains. But teachers who put in this time upfront find that in the end they gain back all of that time and more to use on academic subjects.

The Payoff for Persistence

Installing a new management system in an old organization is never easy. There will always be those who resist. Fortunately, that old adage about not arguing with success applies here: As people saw the positive changes in our school culture, they found it harder to disagree with our innovations.

At the beginning, bringing in change was a struggle. But communication is key. Whenever the leadership team had a meeting, we assigned certain committee members to share the outcomes with other staff members. As this process went on, the entire staff began to feel involved and to believe in the system. Some staff left, but the staff members who remained are committed to this approach because they see good results and they believe their hard work is worth it.

The time we spent building a proactive, schoolwide behavior management program has paid off tenfold. Today at T. C. Cherry, we are doing the job we want to do most—educating our students. Most important, we have built a safe and civil school culture where our students feel valued and respected, empowered and confident—and where they know that the future is theirs.

References
