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# Christian School Discipline: A Collaborative Approach to Improving Student Behavior

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# Christian School Discipline a Collaborative Approach to Improving Student Behavior

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A Catholic elementary school systematically developed a comprehensive discipline program with input from the administrator, teachers, students, parents, and other members of the parish community. Developed around the themes of respect, spirituality, and responsibility, the program was systematically evaluated over the first year of a three-year period of implementation. Survey results of parents, teachers, and students indicate positive perceptions of the project by all three groups.

A suburban, Catholic elementary school systematically reviewed its discipline system, developed and implemented a significantly

revised program that highlighted positive as well as negative student characteristics and carefully evaluated its effectiveness. The program was consistent with the school's philosophy and religious character and included a strong home-and school-communication component.

Catholic schools often are recognized for their quality Christian education and emphasis on discipline (Convey, 1992). This general perception is supported by research that demonstrates fewer behavior problems in Catholic schools compared to public schools (Erickson, 1981; Jensen, 1986). Creating an environment where all children can learn does require that parameters for student behavior be developed and implemented in a consistent and just manner. However, too often school-discipline policies and procedures restrict their focus to negative deviations from acceptable student conduct.

As an alternative, a more comprehensive approach to school discipline attempted to nurture those positive student characteristics valued by the school and the larger community, as well as for setting reasonable limits for those challenging behaviors that interfere with each student's maximum development. Specifically, the study sought to document perceptions of varied school constituent groups toward the preexisting discipline program as well as the restructured program at various points in its development.

## **Methods**

The focus of study for this project was a suburban Catholic elementary school offering a K-8 program with two classes at each grade level (480 students). In addition, special programs were offered in enrichment, music, art, and physical education. Prior to initiating the present project, surveys were developed to assess the parents', teachers', and students' perceptions regarding the overall quality of the school. The survey items, adapted from a nationally developed tool to assess the quality of Christian education (NCEA, 1984), were reviewed and amended by the pastoral team, principal, teachers, School Board, and the Home and School Association prior to distribution. The total population of parents, teachers, and students was queried.

## *Initial Needs Assessment*

In assessing the overall school program, parents and teachers responded to each survey item (e.g., "The school's program teaches and promotes Christian values"; "The faculty works to meet the individual learning needs of the students") using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Students used a simpler agree/disagree response format. The response rates for completed surveys were 80% for the parents, 97% for the students, and 100% for the teachers. A summary survey score was computed for each respondent and could range between 0 (indicating a very negative perception of the school) to 100 (indicating a very positive perception of the school).

The summary scores were quite positive for all three groups: parents = 89%, teachers = 91%, and students = 70% indicating that the majority of parents, teachers, and students were supportive of the school's religious character, positive learning environment, and academic quality. However, analyses of individual survey items and written comments also revealed some areas of concern. For example, 20% of the parents, 29% of the teachers, and 23% of the students disagreed with the statement that "students respect others." Also, 10% of the parents, 19% of the teachers, and 17% of the students disagreed with the statement that "students are good sports."

## *Review of Preexisting Policies and Practices*

In initiating a general review of extant school-discipline policies and procedures, the principal indicated that she had inherited the ongoing discipline system from her predecessor and that it had remained largely unchanged for several years. A variety of discipline strategies was used, depending on the grade level of the children. At the elementary level (K -3), no general discipline" procedures common to all students were in place. Instead, each teacher had individual methods for developing a positive classroom (e.g., stars for completed assignments, loss of recess for disruptive behavior). At the intermediate grades (4-6), all students received conduct marks for behaviors such as being disrespectful to adults or fellow students and not being prepared for class.

Students who obtained five conduct marks in one quarter also received a detention, which required that they spend one hour after school engaged in some supervised activity (e.g., dictionary work; sitting quietly). At the junior-high (level 7-8), all students received a verbal warning or an immediate detention for behaviors that interfered with a positive learning environment. Detentions were served after school in a separate classroom from the intermediate students who also were serving detentions. Again, detention activities varied depending on the supervising teacher. Junior-high students also had an honors lunch each quarter for maintaining good academic effort and earning no detentions.

## *Second Needs Assessment*

In an effort to systematically review the existing systems for discipline used in the school and to address the issue of student respect and related issues raised during the initial survey, the principal established a "school discipline" committee including herself, a group of six teachers representing the intermediate and junior-high grades, and two facilitators who had backgrounds in psychology and education (authors of this article). The charge to the committee was to review the current discipline system in Grades 4 through 8 and to make recommendations. During the initial meetings of the committee, teachers indicated that the current discipline system was generally considered to be effective for the majority of students. They believed it helped students to develop self-control and create an atmosphere where effective teaching could occur. Limitations included a lack of clear definitions of inappropriate student behaviors, inconsistency in enforcing the discipline system, and limited formal procedures to acknowledge and affirm appropriate student behaviors. The committee recommended that a new survey of students and parents should be developed to evaluate their perceptions regarding the school's current discipline practices.

Separate discipline surveys were developed for students and parents. The student surveys were administered at school. Parent surveys were sent home (73% returned completed surveys). The results showed that the majority of intermediate students (96%) had

received one or more conduct marks for behaviors such as disrespect or being unprepared for class (i.e., most had experienced the current system). Both boys and girls reported that they had received similar numbers of conduct marks. Most students (87%) felt that discipline for behaviors like cheating or being disrespectful was warranted; fewer students (51 %) felt that being unprepared for class (incomplete assignments, not bringing the right materials, tardiness) should be dealt with in the same manner. Students did not like detentions, but 96% indicated that detentions were an effective deterrent for inappropriate behavior. Over 75% of the students felt that appropriate school behavior also should be recognized with a special lunch, no homework coupons, or a non-uniform day. In general, students took the surveys quite seriously with 88% of them adding written comments and suggestions on the surveys.

The majority of parents (72%) were positive regarding the school's present discipline system; 97% felt that discipline was an important part of their children's education. Similar to the students' responses, 99% of parents felt that behaviors such as fighting and cheating should be part of a discipline system. Parents, like students, were more mixed regarding how academic-related behaviors such as incomplete homework and being unprepared for class should be managed (e.g., 33% disagreed that incomplete or missing homework should result in a conduct mark; 41 % disagreed that being unprepared for class should result in a conduct mark). Most parents agreed with using after-school detentions (87%), and 65% felt that students should be acknowledged for appropriate school behavior. Many parents felt that communication between home and school could be improved so that they would know if their child was experiencing difficulties. The school discipline committee met to review these findings.

## *The New Model of School Discipline*

### *A Cooperative Venture*

Concurrent with the ongoing work of the discipline committee, a separate group of parents had formed to initiate a Respect, Spirituality, and Responsibility Program (RSR) at school. Banners

emphasizing this theme were placed around the school and examples of Christian behavior were published in a newsletter. The school-discipline committee, sensitive to the developing RSR Program and mindful of the survey results, decided to significantly revise the current discipline system for Grades 4 through 8 and, if possible, to incorporate the new RSR program in the revision.

An important assumption underlying the development of a revised discipline system was the critical importance of developing and maintaining a cooperative partnership between the school's administration, teaching staff, the parents, and the students. Working from this assumption, the discipline committee began by defining the long-term outcomes they were seeking for students. Building on the emerging RSR Program, the committee concluded that the primary goal in developing new standards for student behavior was to help students grow in their development of the following Christian characteristics: respect, spirituality, and responsibility. As such, a *respectful person* was defined as one who believes in the dignity and worth of all individuals, including oneself, and who acts accordingly. This definition included such student behaviors as being respectful and attentive to others' needs and resolving difficulties with others through talking.

A *spiritual person* was defined as one who lives his/her faith and accepts and relates well to others: the definition included characteristics such as having a reverent attitude towards prayer and Liturgy and a willingness to participate in special community-service projects. A *responsible person* was defined as one who confidently and competently responds to meeting personal, school, and community obligations while enjoying the satisfaction that comes from tasks well done. This definition included such responsibilities as completing school work on time and being prepared for each class. In order to acknowledge student growth in respect, spirituality, and responsibility, the committee recommended that students who demonstrated progress towards achieving these goals would be formally recognized each quarter through an in-school celebration (e.g., ice cream treat).

Just as it is important to celebrate a student's achievement towards developing a sound Christian character, the committee felt

that it also was important for students to learn when their attitudes and behaviors significantly departed from attaining this goal. As a result, specific inappropriate behaviors and consequences were identified for each RSR category. For student respect, behaviors such as teasing, fighting, cheating, disturbing class, and noncompliance were included as examples of deviations from attaining this goal.

Students who demonstrated these behaviors would receive either one *behavior check* or one *detention*, depending on the severity of the behavior (based on the teacher's judgment). If a student acquired three behavior checks during a quarter, a detention also would be given. Students would continue to serve detentions after school, supervised by a teacher. However, during the detention, students would be required to reflect on the behavior(s) that resulted in the detention and complete a one-page form that included 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 under the category of student spirituality, such as being irreverent during Liturgies, would be dealt with first by the teacher. If the problem persisted, a parent-teacher conference would be scheduled.

Finally, difficulties under the category of student responsibility included such faults as missing and/or incomplete assignments, tardiness, and lack of appropriate materials for class. For these behaviors, students would be given a *study check* to distinguish academic-related behaviors from those that earned a behavior check. If a student acquired five study checks during a quarter, a phone call would be made by the teacher to the student's parents to develop a plan to resolve the student's difficulty. If the difficulty persisted, a parent meeting would be held with the "Teacher Support Team" which included the student's teacher, other teachers who interacted with the student, the principal, and the parents.

Under the new standards of behavior, students who demonstrated growth in Christianity (defined as acquiring no detentions, two or fewer behavior checks, or two or fewer study checks in one quarter) would be invited to participate in an in-school celebration (such as an ice cream treat) and would receive a special



RSR Award certificate to take home to share with their families. Parents also were encouraged to acknowledge their child's accomplishment.

All components of the new standards for behavior (including behavior checks, study checks, detentions, and student 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. Home-room teachers would be responsible for keeping records for each student, for sharing this information with parents during regular parent-teacher conferences, and for summarizing this data each quarter for the principal to review. This recording system addressed the concern raised in the survey regarding improving home-and-school communication. It also insured student accountability, particularly for those who might decide not to share the behavior checks or study checks with their parents. In addition, the recording system also permitted a review of how teachers were implementing the program at the different grade levels.

Before the revised discipline program was implemented, the committee shared all of its components with members of the School Board and at an open meeting of school parents. All elements of the system also were included in the school's Parent Handbook and Student Handbook. Finally, the teaching staff, who were regularly consulted by members of the school discipline committee as the new system evolved, were in serviced before school began regarding the mechanics of implementing the new standards for behavior.

## **Results**

At the end of every quarter during the first year of implementing the new standards for behavior, data were collected including the number of behavior checks, study checks, and detentions each student had received. These data are summarized in Table 1.

According to Table 1, an average of 93 % of students received two or fewer behavior checks each quarter, 92% received no

detentions, and 78% received two or fewer study checks each quarter. The number of students earning an RSR Award also was tabulated. During the first year of implementation, an average of 75% of students earned the RSR Award each quarter (range = 67-78%). In order to continue to facilitate home-and-school communication, the principal sent all parents a letter each quarter summarizing the results of implementing the new standards for student behavior.

Near the end of the fourth quarter of program implementation, the school discipline committee developed and distributed a final survey to evaluate parent, teacher, and student perceptions. Over 95% of the parents supported the use of behavior checks, study checks, and detentions, 92% supported the RSR award, and 100% were positive regarding the improved home-and-school communication component of the new system. Some parents commented that the system should be introduced during the third grade and others felt that a phone call from the teacher, sooner than after five study checks had accumulated, would be preferable. Overall, the survey results indicated that 98% of the parents and 100% of the teachers responded favorably to the new standards. Student responses to the survey were more mixed; 64% agreed with the use of behavior checks, 72% agreed with detentions, 50% agreed with the study checks; 84% agreed with the RSR Award. When asked to give a letter grade for the new standards for behavior, students responded as follows: A = 11 %, B = 49%, C = 26%, D = 8%, and F = 6%. A number of students commented that the new system was more fair, eliminated detentions for academic-related difficulties, and helped students develop better self-control.

## **Discussion**

The new standards for behavior were carefully developed with input from the principal, teachers, students, parents, parish committees, and the pastoral staff. Insuring this regular and widespread input from all parties was considered essential to the program's success. Throughout its development, emphasis was given as much to positive student behavior as was given to negative behavior.

After a careful and systematic evaluation of the revised discipline system, the school-discipline committee was pleased with the results. On the positive side, the majority of students were experiencing success in the new system. Students experiencing consistent problems were being recognized early and given additional assistance. Moreover, the revised discipline system helped the school create a positive context within which effective academic and religious instruction could occur. Teachers felt that the program did not tie their hands but reinforced the importance and central role of professional teacher judgment in their interactions with students. Home-and-school communication improved through the regular sharing of students' progress and difficulties with parents.

On the negative side, the new discipline system increased the paper work for the teachers and the principal. However, it was generally felt that the improved home-and-school communication offset this increased work for the school staff. Teachers also were finding creative ways to streamline the paper work.

Insuring consistency in implementing the program by all teachers is an ongoing challenge, particularly when new teachers are hired. However, the objective nature of the discipline system and the recording procedures facilitate inservicing new staff and administrative monitoring of the program.

The program is now in its second year of implementation. Data obtained from the first two quarters are comparable to the first year of implementation with 71 % and 77% of the students, respectively, earning the RSR Award. The discipline committee continues to meet and discuss ways to improve the system. One future plan is to introduce third-grade students and their parents to the new system during the final quarter of the school year; detentions would not be included until the fourth grade. Another plan is to increase student input into the system. Teachers from the school-discipline committee will seek student input regarding the system and share their findings with the committee. When appropriate, the discipline system will be fine-tuned to accommodate relevant concerns and suggestions from students (e.g., new in-school celebrations for those earning RSR Awards, special honors for students who consistently earn RSR

awards). To what extent can the discipline system described above serve as a model for other Christian schools? Some caveats are in order. First, the research findings in this report are preliminary. Although initial results look promising, additional research collected at various points in the life cycle of the project will help establish the stability of the new approach over a longer stretch of time. Second, the findings are site-specific thus precluding generalization in a statistical sense to other populations. Clearly, additional research is needed before extrapolating the workability of RSR to other settings.

However, certain principles underlying the novel discipline approach described above have a universal application. The idea of collaboration in decision-making is both organizationally sound and supported by Scripture. In this regard, the effects of the RSR approach seem beneficial to parents, teachers, and students. The project fosters a greater degree of parental involvement in the school fellowship. Obviously, teachers feel empowered by discipline policies that reflect their perspectives. And to the extent discipline policies are supported by students, they are likely to feel more inclined to embrace them. School administrators considering such a system, therefore, are encouraged to involve all members of their school and community in the decision-making process as a means of enhancing the probability of the program's acceptance and success.

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**Table 1**  
*Number and percentage of students receiving behavior checks, detentions, and study checks during the academic school year by quarter.*

	1st Quarter		2nd Quarter		3rd Quarter		4th Quarter	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
<b>Behavior Checks</b>								
0	178	65	213	78	168	61	203	74
1-2	77	28	43	16	86	32	52	19
3 or more	19	7	18	6	20	7	19	7
<b>Detentions</b>								
0	253	92	256	93	253	92	251	92
1-2	19	7	16	6	20	7	21	7
3 or more	2	1	2	1	1	1	2	1
<b>Study Checks</b>								
0	75	27	108	39	107	39	126	46
1-2	117	43	116	42	108	39	102	37
3 or more	82	30	50	19	59	22	45	17