

# HORACE

## Behavior in a Thoughtful School: The Principle of Decency

***How people in a school behave to each other—in classrooms, halls, central office and faculty lounge—sets a tone that has profound effects on what students learn. What makes a school a decent place to be?***

WALK INTO A SCHOOL AND you can tell almost at once if it is a decent place to be. The signals are everywhere: in the way teachers and students speak to each other, the way work is carried out at every level, the way rules are made and bent and broken, even the slumps or smiles of the office or custodial staff. What is valued in a school comes across in a hundred subtle ways, rarely articulated. Yet in the end everything by which we conventionally judge schools may depend on it—whether students show up; what they strive for and achieve; how they use their minds to solve the problems that confront them.

Probably the most difficult to define of the nine principles Essential Schools hold in common is the seventh, which calls for decency, trust, and "unanxious expectation" as integral aspects of a good school. Depending on who they are, people may mean vastly different things by decency. Does a decent school hire teachers supplied by the district's bureaucracy, for instance, even if they share no common cause with the program? Does it assign them only as many students in a day as they can reasonably know individually? Does it ask students to memorize the Bill of Rights in history class, then order them to shut up and sit down, or else? Does it honor through rituals the intellectual and

social qualities it purports to value, and publicly expose those it condemns? How does it decide what is fair?

How individuals answer questions like these contributes to a definition of decency that cannot be pinned down to one aspect of what we have come to call school culture. Nor can it be isolated from the definition offered implicitly by the community, whose attitudes and expectations profoundly influence students long before they enter the doors of school. Instead, decency is a dynamic—a habit of mind and behavior that permeates a school and its surrounding context at every level, in both formal and informal ways. Exploring the elements of that dynamic, and the connections between these elements, can reveal much—not only about a school's outlook on what is desirable behavior, but about its commitment to other Essential School principles as well.

### Respect

"When a school's culture reflects respect for kids and their potential, that's a tone of decency," says Pat Wasley, a Coalition researcher who spends much of her time observing in schools and writing case studies about school change. "In good schools, teachers don't blame students for their deficiencies, but instead reflect on their role in

bringing them along." But over the last few decades, Wasley says, conditions in our society have changed to the point where the very norms of respect have altered as well. Teachers who no longer feel valued themselves grow used to an adversary atmosphere among teachers, administrators, parents, and students; they may devalue their students unthinkingly, passing along an ethic of thoughtless disrespect as a matter of course. This can show up as sarcasm or ridicule in the classroom, and as something close to despair as teachers talk privately among themselves.

Contrasting two public schools in the Coalition of Essential Schools offers a striking illustration of how pervasively and fundamentally the climate of respect in a district and community can affect teachers and students in the classroom. Both examples are well established schools in small cities; both started in the 1970s with a core of deeply committed and idealistic teachers, many of whom grew up in the district and are still teaching there today. Both serve no more than 500 students, housed in old but well-kept school buildings in poor sections of town. Both have a sturdy advisory system in place, which links each teacher to fifteen or so students; a casual, distinctly personal atmosphere prevails in the halls and classrooms of each.

But sit with teachers in the faculty lounge for long, and at one of these schools an underlying bitterness, anger, and ennui begin to emerge—attitudes which sometimes carry over into the classrooms in the form of low expectations and conventionally passive instructional techniques. "This school used to be my whole life," one teacher told me. "I would live here on weekends; the kids would call me Mom. Now I look around and kids are lying to me; they don't come through on their commitments; the parents don't come to conferences and exhibitions. I'm just not willing

## The Essential Schools' 7th Common Principle

The tone of the school should explicitly and self-consciously stress values of unanxious expectation (I won't threaten you but I expect much of you), of trust (until abused), and of decency (the values of fairness, generosity, and tolerance). Incentives appropriate to the school's particular students and teachers should be emphasized, and parents should be treated as essential collaborators.

to be everything for these kids that the world isn't willing to do. Not for this salary. Not at my age." She sighed and shook her head. "We're getting old," she said. "All of us idealistic young teachers are getting old and tired. And we have mortgages."

It was a comment echoed several times by her colleagues, explaining why they used traditional texts and worksheets instead of projects and presentations, why they limited their emotional investment in their students. "We used to teach across the disciplines, even if it didn't fit precise curriculum categories," one said. "Now the district and the state are insisting on strict adherence to our certification specialties; our evaluations and our jobs depend on it. It kind of takes the wind out of your wanting to try new things." Another teacher asked angrily, "What are these kids doing from two in the afternoon to ten at night? They're not reading; they're not doing their homework. I have to read to them in class to make sure they even know what we're talking about. You start sending me kids whose parents care about them; stop giving me 135 kids in a day, in classes of over 30 at a time. Pay me enough so I don't have to run a business in the rest of my time, just

to make a decent living. Then I'll talk about changing the way I teach."

What causes this kind of disillusionment to infect a school where so much else is going right? Overwhelmed and depressed by the scope of the task their society sets them, these teachers also feel ignored and unsupported by that same society as they struggle to meet the challenge. No one aspect of school culture, it seems, is separable from any other—which is why aspiring Essential schools often face such frustration as they attempt to move one step at a time toward school change. One cannot just change classroom pedagogy or expectations; one must also engage parents in raising their own expectations and asking their own questions. One cannot just excuse a school from certain district requirements; one must allow its teachers the appropriate autonomy and flexibility to shape their own program to meet the needs of their students. One cannot ask teachers to care about every student without limiting the number of students to a reasonable size. Without this kind of mutual respect in a community and a district, trying to engage students and teachers in fruitful academic work is as meaningless as the mother who lets her daughter go swimming but warns, "Hang your clothes on a hickory stick, and don't go near the water." If at any level the structure of thoughtful behavior breaks down—classroom, community, school governance, state control—the health of the school climate is at risk.

A few hundred miles away, another group of faculty sits together on a Friday morning, talking about their students as they do weekly at this time. This is a "last chance" school for students who have failed to thrive elsewhere in the system, and the problems they speak of are horrendous: one boy is involved in organizing a prostitution ring; a girl is pregnant for the sixth time in the past few years; a boy with serious learning

disabilities must be integrated into a small group project despite his functional illiteracy. Yet these teachers seem relaxed and optimistic. They speak almost lovingly of their students, even the problem cases; there is an underlying confidence that their school's system will serve them well. No classes meet on Fridays; many students are at work the school has helped arrange. Later in the morning, each teacher will pay a home visit to four or five of the students they advise, talking with parents if they are there, checking out how things are going. On class days, it is not unusual for a teacher to drop into another's classroom and lend a hand with a project or discussion. "We know each other so well that we can tell at a glance who needs a little support," one fifteen-year veteran of the faculty said.

This school and its district have chosen to radically redefine the structure and function of the school, so they might focus maximum attention on reorienting students towards succeeding in their lives. Kids come to this school by choice; many of them hold down jobs, have babies who come to the school's

day care center, and face grinding personal challenges at home. But students come only for the morning or the afternoon, four days a week, which brings class sizes down to manageable levels and allows teachers time to advise and plan. An intense focus on individual success permeates not just social-worker-style concerns, but fundamental intellectual interactions as well. Every piece of class work, every assessment, every report card comment is based on the teacher's intimate knowledge of what this student can be expected to accomplish, and how far he or she has come toward an expressly stated goal. And each semester, some thirty or forty students graduate, after a public exhibition of mastery, in an extraordinarily personal celebration that marks their satisfactory completion of academic work and their readiness to enter the world.

In what might be seen as desperate circumstances, this district acted to strip down this school to its barest function as these teachers define it: a mutual respect for the individual potential of each student, and a determination to allow that potential room to grow. With this as a guiding principle, teachers here seem not trapped but energized by the frustrating obstacles in their paths. Their district expects them to treat students as people worthy of respect, and models this by respecting their own need for the time and structure that allows it. Their principal has been with them from the school's start; her own young children play down the hall in the same day care program that students' children attend. The senior boy who shows us around brags of his favorite class, a student-run bakery and restaurant that integrates academics with job skills in a functioning business setting. In a large open library area, around a big table, teachers sit together and read eleventh-grade essays for a district competency test, comparing papers and chatting about how

their students measure up against district standards. There is an atmosphere of confidence and calm. These teachers are paid no more than the usual low salaries for the region, but they seem truly happy in their jobs.

More common, however, even within the Coalition, are schools that struggle with an overload of students, an undersupply of funds and time, and considerable division among their faculties as to the purpose and vision of the school. Even in schools from relatively untroubled communities, which may enjoy a reputation for excellence, fostering thoughtful and respectful attitudes is no easy task, especially if change is in the wind. Teachers may vie for the "best" students and courses. Out of fear for their own turf they may sabotage, undermine, or passively resist efforts to change. They may resent reform initiatives that fail to recognize them as equal partners. Add to this a measure of poor communication or disagreement over goals between community and school, and one has a recipe for mistrust that can easily cook into mutual disrespect.

## Intellectual Decency

How does that trust or mistrust, respect or disrespect affect what goes on at the heart of the school, the relation between teachers and students in the classroom? The intellectual tasks set for students, the ways students work with each other, the demonstration and assessment of their skills all reflect fundamental assumptions about what a school considers decent and valuable behavior.

A good place to start is by looking at the way a teacher exercises intellectual authority in how she organizes a course. Do classes revolve around information passively acquired through lectures and textbooks? Is getting the right answer always the most important thing? Unless students are asked to



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share in responsibility for their learning—to attain their own authority through exploring ideas on their own—they will rely only on hierarchical and authoritarian values, Essential schools believe. The best teachers are learners themselves, organizing their classes around questions whose answers remain open to continual investigation and debate. One of the curriculum's main goals then becomes that students learn respect for the opinions of others, and ways to evaluate them against other sources as they seek to form opinions of their own.

These classroom decisions also develop skills that translate readily to non-academic areas of life. "In the classroom we can show kids that they *must* listen, must be reflective, must accept individual responsibility for their own words and actions," says Bob McCarthy, CES's Director for Schools. "Then those habits spill over into the hallways and the streets. When I was a principal my goal was to teach kids to *think* before they act—to go to someone for dialogue and understanding before they retaliate."

Once again, however, it is impossible to separate a school climate from its context. To get to the point where both pedagogy and personal interactions reflect values of fairness and respect requires a sense of shared purpose and common cause among teachers, students, and administration that is rare in many high schools. If a school district commonly issues classroom directives to teachers because their superiors "know better" what constitutes good educational practice, if faculty meetings are conducted in paternalistic or authoritarian fashion, if simple civilities such as providing coffee and soda for an after-school meeting are ignored, a school's atmosphere can become poisoned with bitterness and cynicism. It is not surprising when teachers in such situations choose to shut their classroom doors and exercise

through little tyrannies the only power they are allowed to have. Students swiftly learn to manipulate the system to their own advantage, getting by somewhat as prison inmates do.

In this sense, instituting Essential School pedagogies—question-based, cross-disciplinary, and challenging to conventional measures of success—can prove a key domino in changing a system that depends on a rigidly hierarchical school structure. Teachers and students who discover a new autonomy, interdependence, and respect in the classroom

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***Students who learn respect for others' opinions in the classroom develop skills that translate readily to other areas of life.***

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may bring those same habits to the faculty meeting, the school board, and the voting booth. Indeed, the success of restructuring a school may depend ultimately on an atmosphere of mutual respect, where everyone is involved in articulating a new vision of what the school could be. If teachers, students, administration, and parents have gone through that long and painful process together, the school can step out of an atmosphere of repression and into a new ethos of trust.

But such habits must receive continual reinforcement, Ted Sizer notes. "You can't have a vice-principal bellowing '*Shut up and siddown because I say so!*' in a school based on empowerment and trust," he says. "And you can't base your whole assessment of students only on academic performance." During his own years as a high school principal, he notes, his staff used

the term "in good standing" to appraise a student who demonstrated both in academics and in his or her behavior towards peers and community the level of thoughtfulness the school explicitly expected.

### **Fairness in Grading**

A fair system of grading, in fact, is a critical and controversial factor in organizing a school around standards of decency. What happens at grading time, for instance, to collaborative learning approaches in mixed-ability groupings? Are students to be graded on the basis of their effort or their abilities, on how far they have come or how much they know and understand? Is a grading system fairer and more decent if its function is to sort and select students, or if its primary aim is to encourage a student to keep on reaching towards intellectual goals?

Some schools address this issue by spelling out what objectives each student is reaching for in a particular classroom endeavor. At Central Park East Secondary School in New York, for example, students in mixed-ability groups make contracts with the teacher to perform different tasks depending on whether they want a grade of "Competent" or "Advanced." Yet every student, in every class, is expected to learn to ask and answer these questions:

- From whose viewpoint are we seeing or reading or hearing? From what angle or perspective?
- How do we know when we know? What's the evidence, and how reliable is it?
- How are things, events, or people connected to each other? What is the cause and what is the effect? How do they fit together?
- What's new and what's old? Have we run across this idea before?
- So what? Why does it matter? What does it all mean?

How a teacher uses tests also raises questions about fairness. For example, collaborating on tests has conventionally been regarded as

cheating. But if the goal is to enable a student to use and discuss information in society, the ability to collaborate is a legitimate skill to test. In fact, many educators criticize conventional assessment techniques because they do not reflect what good schools want students to know and be able to do. Grant Wiggins, a researcher who has written about exhibitions for the Coalition, describes instead a theory of "authentic performance," which, he argues, could "test those capacities and habits we think are essential, and test them in context." Such a performance, he writes in *Educational Leadership*,

typically focuses on the essential skills of "inquiry and expression"—a synthesis that requires questioning, problem posing, problems solving, independent research, the creation of a product or performance, and a public demonstration of mastery. Significantly, there is often a component calling for self-reflection and analysis of what one has understood and learned.

The director of CES's exhibitions research project, Joseph McDonald, has written about one dilemma this raises for teachers: to balance a legitimate need to know where there are gaps in a student's knowledge with a faithfulness to the "authentic practice" of the domain being tested. He describes a young teacher in an Essential School struggling with this problem in an Earth Science class:

The problem concerned a meteorology unit. In her teaching, she had honored the authentic practice of meteorology by requiring her students to work together in the interpretation of data. But now it was time for her to find out how much each of them had learned, so that she might know who still needed to learn what." To conduct a traditional test, though, seemed to her likely to pervert the authenticity of the unit, and even undercut what her teaching had really taught. What could she do, she asked some older colleagues. . . . She should assign a single set of data to several small

groups, they suggested, require each group to present a forecast drawn from the data, and allow each group to hear all the other groups' forecasts. Then, they continued, she should hand copies of all the reports to all the students the next day, together with the following assignment: "These are the forecasts your colleagues prepared based on the data available to them. What they did not know, however, but which you now know, is that the winds have shifted (or a cold front is coming, etc.). . . . Now, working individually with all the data, old and new, and faced with cameras only 40 minutes from rolling, create your own forecast."

A fair assessment, McDonald argues, addresses both "warm" and "cool" aspects of performance; it both stays close to the actual practice of the discipline in real life and maintains a certain "apartness" that allows intellectual gaps to show up clearly. If instead grades are based on colder, less comprehensive criteria, they end up meaning much less—they are less authentic. As Ted Sizer has commented, in real life most of us know what is "on the exam," what we are expected to know and do. Students notice this difference acutely, and it contributes to their sense of fundamental hypocrisy about the ways they are judged in the traditional school structure. Ultimately, this can result in a chilling level of cynicism, which condones dishonest practices from grade inflation to cheating as practical tools in achieving the stated goal of success in school: to land at the top of the competitive heap.

### Making and Breaking Rules

How a school's rules are made and enforced is also a vital sign of its commitment to decency. "Every good school has certain non-negotiable rules—an absolute ban on violence is a good example, or an insistence on absolute honesty," says Ted Sizer. "They are part of the contract students and teachers enter

into when they join the school community." But once that fundamental agreement has been undertaken, schools can become an important forum in which to practice the principles of democratic justice they want students to learn.

Rochester's School Without Walls, for example, has adopted a simple and straightforward democratic process by which any member of the school community can initiate a change in school rules (aside from those required by law). (See page 6.) Almost all the rules, procedures, and guidelines in the school's student handbook were developed and refined using that process. In addition, students and teachers have open to them a clearly defined appeals process with which to resolve anything from a student's attitude of uninvolvedness to a teacher's evaluation of student performance or an administrator's supervision of staff. "I refer to the student handbook constantly and base my decisions on it," says Dan Drmacich, the program administrator at School Without Walls.

Some Essential schools have chosen a similar student governance system based on psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg's notion of the "just community," which focuses on helping young people learn to make moral decisions. To create conditions in which every student can participate on an individual basis, the just community relies on small advisory groups that discuss issues and delegate certain students to carry out their decisions. The object is to resolve conflicts and disciplinary issues in a way that makes sure people come to terms with their emerging understanding of social justice and decency.

How thoroughly this ethic of fairness can permeate a school's atmosphere can be seen vividly at University Heights High School, an Essential school in the Bronx whose 400 students and teachers take part in substantive issues and decisions from school policies to

## A Model for Student Decision Making

Major school decisions are made by students and staff voting on proposals: one person, one vote. Some decisions must be made by the staff because of law, education policies of New York State and the city school district, and the spirit and philosophy of the school.

The decision-making process was developed by the school community in 1976 in order to ensure a more effective process that involved the maximum number of students in decision making.

The process is designed to help students in:

1. Defining problems and needs
2. Presenting their view of problems and/or proposed solutions
3. Refining rough draft proposals
4. Coming to a clear understanding of what finally is proposed
5. Voting in an informed and reasoned manner.

For this process to work effectively all of the school community must be available at the same time. All extended classes must be in their rooms during the time allotted for the decision-making process, Friday mornings from 9:00 to 12:00. Proposals may not be distributed after 10:00 a.m.

**I. Identification of Need or Problem.** When an individual or group identifies an issue to be addressed (e.g., use of drugs or alcohol during school time, control of student-raised money, improving the decision-making process), the problem should be presented to his or her extended class during the Friday morning group session. After the group has clearly defined the problem or has developed a proposal to meet these needs, it can present its concerns to the school body.

**II. Communicating with the School Body.** The group sends representatives to each extended class: to point out the needs or problem requiring attention and to get the feelings of the other groups about the concern, or to present to them a draft proposal for reaction and/or amendment, if necessary.

**III. Refining of Final Proposal.** The group's representatives then return to their own group to report the concerns or feelings of the rest of the school body. This combined information can then be used to write the final proposal to be presented to the school body for decision. The final draft of the proposal should be checked with the program administrator to see if it has dealt completely with the issue and that it has been drafted in the appropriate form.

**IV. Presentation of Final Proposal for a Vote.** Copies of final drafts of proposals are to be sent to other extended classes for final discussion and vote. (The original copy of the proposal *must* be sent to the office for filing.) It is suggested that the representatives of the presenting group go with the proposal in order to explain or answer questions.

**V. Tallying of the Vote.** All extended classes report their vote to the school office where the tally will be made. Decisions are made on the basis of the grand total of the individual votes. This process can take as little as one day. However, complex problems or proposals may take longer.

**VI. Other Options for Identifying Problems and Explaining Proposals.** Since all groups meet at the same time for the same purpose, it is possible for:

1. People from two or more extended classes to form a problem-solving group to identify a problem or write a proposal.
2. Two or more groups to meet together, when both agree to, to share concerns and feelings.
3. A group to request a whole school meeting, which will be held if and when all groups agree to it. No extended class or problem-solving group has the right to demand of other groups that they stop doing what they are doing in order to listen to those who call the meeting. They may ask the other groups to come together to identify a concern or explain a proposal.

From the 1988-89 student handbook of School Without Walls, 480 Broadway, Rochester, NY 14607. (Tel: 716-546-6732.)

disciplinary matters. A student Fairness Committee meets weekly, for example, to listen to grievances brought by any member of the school community. "You can't always pinpoint what's fair by making a rule about it," says Shola Jiboyewa, a senior who sits on that committee. "It's going to be different in different situations. What we have is a *system* of resolving conflicts. We do it by listening to both sides. We tell our decision to both people, and we impose some form of restitution—we don't see it as punishment, because the goal is to make right what was wrong."

In conversation with Shola and his fellow students, it becomes clear that University Heights's emphasis on participatory decision making is deeply understood on a fundamental level. Students and teachers talk out issues in advisory groups, staff meetings, and schoolwide assemblies until agreement can be reached. A striking example of the dignity this accords them was played out at a routine afternoon policy meeting, which at least two dozen faculty members, students, parents, administrators, and district representatives chose to attend. One student complained of the new practice of inviting parents into the school for periodic breakfasts with advisory groups. "I don't want my parents running into teachers in the hall and finding out every little time I don't do good," he said. It was a gripe that could easily have been brushed off, but instead it received a respectful hearing and serious discussion—by the end of which the student had come to see parent involvement as one way of moving toward the job internships for which he had also lobbied.

Can such an approach work in a large public high school as well as it does in smaller schools? The person to ask in the Coalition is Judy Coddling, a powerful advocate for the just community model who formerly headed tiny Bronxville High School in suburban New York. Now she is principal of

California's 2,200-student Pasadena High School, where she is struggling to apply the same standards of participatory decision making to a radically different social and academic situation. "To make it work in a big school like this involves total restructuring of the school into smaller learning units or houses, made up of 300 to 400 students and ten or fifteen teachers," she says. "Then you can turn over all responsibility for non-curricular, non-personnel issues to the individual house, which may pass its own rules and develop its own procedures." Ideally, she adds, representatives from each house could then meet in a larger congress whose role is to govern the entire school, coming to agreement on certain schoolwide issues.

Codding is cautious and pragmatic about instituting such an ambitious governance system in a large city school plagued with serious problems already. "I believe it *can* work," she says. "But it will take a long time. You're talking about considerable restructuring, and you'll need a good deal of staff training in working with advisory units." The same warning comes from CES's Paula Evans, who heads the Citibank faculty program. "This approach is not something a school can just import wholesale," she says. "It's best to work first with other teachers who have tried participatory democracy in their schools, in order to consider the full range of dilemmas it presents."

Whether or not the just community model she favors is used, Codding points out, in a thoughtful school the student government should focus primarily not on social events and functions but on issues of fairness and justice. "If you don't do that," she argues, "you teach students that governing themselves is primarily a matter of self-gratification—what pleases *me*, what will be the most fun."

Some larger schools, especially those without a strong advisory group system, combine conven-

tional student councils with a more broadly focused representative governance system. At Parkway South High School in suburban St. Louis, class officers arrange school activities for the school's 2,000 students, but a larger elected body of up to 120 students sits in a General Assembly whose job is to raise and react to more substantive school issues, and several dozen more students sit on committees appointed by that group. Last year the Assembly created a student court, which now hears the kind of disciplinary cases usually resolved by assistant principals. At this point, says principal Craig Larson, perhaps 200 students in all are directly involved in their own governance. To involve everyone, he agrees, would require restructuring the school into smaller units, a prospect he says still worries many in the school community.

Whatever way it works, a meaningful system of student government can go a long way toward educating young people in the habits of responsible citizenship. "Even in a school where students are given less responsibility in the classroom," says CES's Bob McCarthy, "it provides a structure outside of the classroom that encourages a climate of empowerment." But McCarthy believes it is easier to create such student government structures if classroom practice has already taught students to take responsibility for their actions and respect the opinions of others. "Should it go step by step, or do we do things all at once?" he asks. "Ideally, one reinforces the other."

### Recognition and Rituals

Taking public notice of student excellence—in both academics and other areas such as community service—also fosters a culture of respect. Thayer High School, an Essential school in Winchester, New Hampshire, has arranged discounts at local stores and public

banquets for students who make the honor roll, a recurring and public benefit for doing well. And several smaller Essential schools honor each student at graduation ceremonies by a very personal tribute spoken by a teacher or adviser.

Another way to underline a school's commitment to decent behavior is its willingness to take strong symbolic steps when its standards are violated. Ted Sizer tells the story of a principal who called school to a complete halt one day after a racial incident, initiating discussion groups and assemblies instead. He was signaling the importance of the behavior just as clearly as those schools do who cancel classes for mourning on the day a student dies.

Community service projects also demonstrate an ethic of involvement and respect that can pervade a school's culture. Central Park East Secondary School sets aside a three-hour block each week for students to work in the community as teachers meet to plan. And at University Heights High School in the Bronx, the "family groups" that form the core of the school's advisory system go forth once weekly to help out in nearby old age homes, elementary schools, and even college classes for students of English as a second language. Marion Pearce, who coordinates the program, is already expanding it into an afternoon seminar called "Future Teachers," in which students tutor elementary and junior high school students on a daily basis. "It has a profound effect on their attitudes," she says. "One of my students came back one day enraged; she had overheard a kindergarten teacher say that a kid was dumb, within earshot of the child. We talked in class about the effects that has on a young child, and what we could do about it. One of the other students said that the same kind of thing had happened to him as a child; it had 'ruined seven years of my life,' he said."

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But is it a school's job to help students practice values like respect and thoughtfulness, and to meet their personal needs? Or should it stick strictly to academics? The answer, of course, is complicated by the widely varying ways in which our culture defines what is decent behavior; what some call decent others call authoritarian, what some call respectful others call irreverent. The least controversial path may be to keep one's nose in the textbooks, passing on received wisdom without asking how it might translate into social behavior. But to see students wake up and start caring about themselves and others in a climate like that at University Heights makes a powerful argument that a good education extends to every aspect of a student's life. "You can't learn if you are hungry, homeless, emotionally lost," says one CES staff member. "You can't learn if you don't believe you have control over your own life, or if you don't respect yourself." Parents bear the first responsibility for

things like this, Ted Sizer adds.

"But if they fail their children, the school cannot evade its own part, however reluctant it may be to take these things on."

In the end, thoughtful habits of mind show up equally in the classroom and in personal behavior, Sizer stresses again. "The principle of 'un-anxious expectation' means, in part, being able to admit that you are wrong," he says. "If a school has a secure climate, you can admit error in the halls as well as in physics class. You don't do that if you're afraid of sarcasm and punishment." In fact, the Essential School metaphor of teacher as coach may be extended to embrace the kind of behavior athletic coaches are known for demanding. A good high school coach is often held up as a model of decency—the leader of a team in which everyone has a personal part and a common goal. To stay on the team you abide by certain rules of behavior everyone accepts. And expectations are high; you're out there to do as well as you possibly can, to do credit to

yourself and your school.

"Good schools connect these things," Ted Sizer says about the habits of respect that he would like to see cross academic and social lines in every school. "They often don't even know they are connecting them." In truth, a climate of decency and respect is a pervasive but elusive thing, difficult to pin to any one policy or program. It may arise from structures, but it shows itself in motion—a brief conversation between two teachers passing in the halls, a parent who shows up to see his child perform before the class, a student's triumphant smile as a group project comes to its finish, an older boy huddled in council with a younger one. Because it cannot easily be quantified, the quality of decency is all too often ignored as we examine the strengths and weaknesses of schools. But inside schools, it cannot be ignored; decency is the very blood of a system, whose weakness or vigor may well determine whether a school will live or die. □



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