

Ethics in the Schools

Sexual harassment, bomb threats, bullying, cheating, thefts, substance abuse—all are common problems faced by our schools and by those of us who consult to school systems. Some would argue for zero tolerance, more police in the school hallways, metal detectors, and automatic suspension or expulsion of offenders. The problem with this approach is that the rules imposed are often resisted by students who may become even more defiant. A different approach is being tried in some schools across the nation and abroad which involves students having input into developing value systems and codes of conduct for their schools. The theory behind this approach is that when values are possessed by a community they are embraced. In addition, staff workshops are being held which encourage teachers to discuss core values within the curriculum and stimulate student discussion on ethical issues. There are special curricula in ethics designed for at-risk youth or those incarcerated.

I will share examples of some of the exciting things going on in schools in my area:

- The school newspaper of a small island school carried an article on cheating. The principal took it a step further and organized a forum on cheating for students in grades 6-12. Students discussed not just the obvious things about cheating, but the whole spectrum of cheating and whether, for instance, borrowing someone's class notes or looking at an old discarded exam constituted cheating. A lively and provocative discussion among students followed that explored the impact of cheating on individual students and the entire school.
- A social studies teacher in the middle school teaches understanding conflict and conflict resolution through the lens of American history. Students are encouraged to consider how historical conflicts might have been avoided and how they might have handled them using an ethical framework



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for decision-making. A high school history teacher teaching the civil rights movement locks his students, all of whom are white, out of the building. He tells them that this is his skating rink and he won't let them skate because he doesn't like their color. They argue and yell but he doesn't budge. After awhile they band together and stage a protest in which they chant, "End the hate, let us skate." Soon, the entire school takes note and he lets them in.

- Prior to our new regional high school opening last year, students were asked to develop a code of ethics for their new school. Forty-six students signed up for an all day session with the Institute For Global Ethics then went back to their respective classrooms to teach and help their classmates develop a code of ethics. They have also formed a student review board to consider violations of the code and they make recommendations to the administration as to how infractions should be handled. The school is now trying to modify the daily schedule to permit a community period in which all students will become involved in school activities or community projects. One such project involves students developing skits on harassment and how to deal with it, which they put on for middle school students. Activities such as these lead to heightened sensitivity to ethical issues, promote conflict resolution, make use of positive peer pressure, empower students, and help

students feel a sense of ownership and belonging to their school.

- Schools around the world are trying to involve students in combating the problem of bullying. Efforts include peer support to victims and not reinforcing the bullying behavior, as well as using drama to sensitize students to the impact of bullying. Students in the Diversity Tolerance Coalition at my local high school now do presentations to other classes on bullying. Perhaps most remarkable, is that some of the presenters are former bullies.

The Maine Chapter of the Institute For Global Ethics is exploring how to reach parents and the community at large, increase their awareness of values and ethics, and solicit their input on what values should be taught in our schools. We will also be exploring the importance of ethical role models, be they parents or teachers.

There are many useful resources available to schools and consultants to schools. Among them is the periodical, *Teaching Tolerance*, put out by the Southern Poverty Law Center. The State of Maine recently published a booklet entitled *Taking Responsibility: Standards for Ethical and Responsible Behavior in Maine Schools and Communities*, which can be obtained free of charge. The Institute For Global Ethics has a video designed for middle school students on *Tough Choices: Today and in History*, as well as materials designed for grades K-12 on Decision Skills. Contact these organizations directly and visit their web sites for more information about them and the resources they offer. ■

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