

A Combined Approach to Discipline ■ 100% Respect in NYC School ■ Assessing Student Threats

PRINCIPAL Leadership

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Mark Wilson

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**Safe
Schools,
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Students**



Please



Respect Me!



By Matthew Guldin

To turn around increasing incidents of negative behavior, an inner-city secondary school devised the 100% Respect! Campaign.

PREVIEW

Students and teachers developed lists of what respect means and committed to adopting respectful behavior.

In advisory groups, students and teachers role-play, self-evaluate, and critique one another on respectful behavior.

You know the problem: students bullying one another in every conceivable way, unwanted sexual advances made by boys toward girls as young as 12 years old, fights in the cafeteria, students cursing out their teachers, gang graffiti and colors.... These are just some of the negative behaviors that we all have seen increase within U.S. schools over the last decade or two. What's a school leader to do?

When confronted with an increase in such behaviors in fall 2005, the leaders and staff members of East Side Community High School—a small, grades 6–12, inner-city school serving the families of New York's Lower East Side—struggled to find a way out of this morass. A way that would give leaders, students, and staff members immediate and lasting results.

Finding that way is not easy. Old-timers often say that nothing can or will change because "their parents didn't teach them values at home." They may suggest a variety of zero-tolerance programs of questionable value. Younger staff members may suggest the opposite and push for fewer

punishments and more counseling sessions. Although sometimes effective with individual students, such strategies don't address the root challenge of changing the culture in a school.

Knowing that to make fundamental changes we would need to change the school culture and that such change usually takes place over a generation or two, we resolved to find or develop activities and structures that could become deeply rooted in East Side after a few years of concentrated effort. The social "cure" that we found—expounded first in 1967 by the Queen of Soul, Aretha Franklin—lay in taking seriously the chorus of her seminal hit, "Respect"—"R-E-S-P-E-C-T/Find out what it means to me"—and applying it fully to our school. We knew that everyone—young and old; Black, White, Hispanic, and Asian; male and female; gay and straight—wants and needs respect, but most don't know how others define it. We set out to create a process in which everyone in the school would define what respectful behavior looks and feels like to them and then create structures

that would help everyone work together to give one another 100% respect.

Our campaign has yielded some fairly positive results: During the 2005–06 school year, the middle level (grades 7–9) students earned 193 suspensions. After initiating the 100% Respect Campaign, behavior improved significantly: suspensions fell 45% the next year, and major suspensions dropped by 33%. As Schools Safety Sergeant Dinah Harvey said, "After doing the Respect! Campaign for about six months, you could sense a change in students' attitudes. Even the more 'hardcore' kids calmed down some, because adults were really listening to them." During 2007–08, suspensions fell another 6%.

Defining Respect

We began by deciding that the middle level grades were most in need of intervention and tailored our pilot program toward meeting the needs of those students and teachers. Because East Side is an advisory-based school, most Respect! activities were developed for advisory classes.

East Side Community High School

New York, NY

Grades: 6–12

Enrollment: 562

Community: Urban

Demographics: 60% Latin American, 30% African American, 8% Asian American, 2% European American; 73% free and 22% reduced-price lunch eligible

Administrative Team: 1 principal, 3 assistant principals, 1 dean of students, 1 head of guidance

Faculty: 49



school community is responsible for making the school better.

Most teachers don't have much experience in being self-critical in front of a class or inviting feedback from their

Phase I of the campaign focused on defining what respectful behavior looks like and all agreeing to follow the community's definition of what exactly respectful behavior means to all involved. This process establishes trust, opens communication between students and adults, and engages everyone in a democratic process. Each teacher broke their advisory class into small groups, and each group identified the dos and don'ts of respectful behavior in three areas: student to student, student to teacher, and teacher to student.

Once the groups completed the task, they combined their lists to create the three Respect! lists for their class. Those lists were then consolidated for each grade and student representatives from the Respect! committee presented them at gradewide town hall meetings for discussion and ratification as the behavioral guidelines for the grade. Of course, students don't know what respect means to the adults at East Side, so the staff members had input into the process as well. The teachers met separately and came up with their own lists, which

covered things that the students didn't address. These were included when we drew up the "Best of Respect!" lists and were presented as part of the town hall meeting.

Are we crazy to let students define what behaviors they want to see and not see from adults in the school community? Well, perhaps, but this reflects the core philosophy of the Respect! Campaign: adults demonstrate that they are taking students seriously and want to know what respect means to them. As senior Ordaine Ellison pointed out, "Knowing that the teachers have to listen to us as well as us listening to them, makes us feel more respected from the jump."

Personalizing the Guidelines

The key to making the guidelines a living document is to personalize them. If the guidelines are merely colorful signs posted in the hallways and classrooms, they quickly become window dressing. To make the Respect! Campaign guidelines real, all students and advisers evaluate their present behavior in light of the guidelines. Students choose three behaviors that they do well and three that could use some work from the student-to-student and student-to-teacher categories. The advisers measure their behaviors against the teacher-to-student guidelines. Everyone shares their evaluations with the class and chooses two or three behaviors to work on during the term. The advisers' open commitment to change is a model for students and stresses the value that everyone in the

students. It can be very unnerving, if not done properly. When conducted in a productive manner, however, it can create a strong bond between the adult and teenagers. For example, Mohammed Aminyar, an 11th-grade math teacher, said, "When it was my turn to receive feedback from my advisory on how well I had been doing on giving them 100% respect, I have to say I was very nervous...but it turned out to be a wonderful experience. My Respect! reps set up the session to make sure that I felt safe—just like I ensure the students' safety day to day. I received many wonderful compliments about my teaching style and my hard work at getting to know them, in addition to some feedback about things they'd like me to change.... It honestly changed my relationships with them."

This activity is followed up on with periodic sessions that we call "Rating Your Week." In them, students and teachers rate themselves on their progress—or lack thereof—toward treating others more respectfully. The ensuing class discussions can yield supportive feedback and give the adviser a sense of who needs to be spoken to privately and who might need a referral to counseling. These sessions are also a great time for members of the school's counseling team to come in and teach concrete skills for behavioral change (e.g., anger management techniques).

Broadening the Discussion

With everyone working on an individual level, we then broadened the

discussion to target more than just individual areas of change. We stepped back and looked at each grade to see what major challenges students were facing. Because each grade (or set of grades) is at a different developmental level emotionally, their focuses will differ. The students in grade 6 may need to concentrate their efforts on not “play hitting” one another or running in the halls. Ninth graders, who have outgrown those behaviors—we hope!—may have to work on not making inappropriate sexual comments or cutting class.

Last year, the sixth- and ninth-grade teachers met in team meetings and chose two or three behaviors from the student-to-student and student-to-teacher charts to establish as grade-wide goals. They then took those suggestions back to their advisories for discussion and approval. The teachers also included two or three behaviors that they wanted to improve in their practice (e.g., listen to both sides of a story, don’t yell at students when I am frustrated).

Two years ago, we began a series of schoolwide discussions about larger issues that we want everyone in East Side to deal with. For example, one program targeted the use of the “N-word,” which was widely used by our student body. Students and adults explored the issue in pre- and post-advisory activities and a multimedia presentation that included skits; music, dance, and spoken word performances; and a panel discussion. In the post-presentation advisory, students talked about what they learned, and those who were ready signed a pledge to not use the N-word. Staff members estimate that the use of the N-word has dropped by 50%. Because they took time to deeply explore an important issue, the students made a better choice.

Is It Replicable?

During the last two years, the East Side staff has begun to find out what R-E-S-P-E-C-T means to students, and they’ve gotten a better understanding of what respect means to staff members. The communication that has developed between adults and students has yielded many positive outcomes. For one, teachers are talking *with* their students, not at them. This factor, in and of itself, has helped students mature and staff members grow professionally. Of course, we’ve also seen the positive chain reaction of less acting out leading to fewer suspensions, which results in fewer removals and more time in class and on task, which has improved passing rates and standardized test scores. Another major factor contributing to improved academic outcomes was the prodigious effort that teachers have made to improve classroom instruction. Those efforts tie back to the guidelines “making better lessons” and “teaching to all students,” which are high on the students’ list of how teachers can show students respect.

The Role of Leadership

As with any other pedagogical initiative, the role of school leaders is essential. To successfully implement the Respect! Campaign, they must:

- View social and emotional learning as a valid part of the curriculum
- Make a long term commitment to changing the tone and culture of the school
- Prep staff members to seriously evaluate how they relate to their students and be ready to change their practice
- Encourage all staff members to listen to students—and model that behavior.

Principals across the country might wonder if the 100% Respect! Campaign could work in their schools, but if East Side can successfully adopt this approach with poor, inner-city kids of color in New York City, other schools can do it as well. They just need the resolve to make it happen. Once the resolve is there, programs can be shifted, monies reallocated, and schedules changed to get it done. But schools need the motivation to change and leaders who are willing to initiate it.

If everyone, as Aretha Franklin reminds us, needs respect in every area of his or her life and if educators are charged with developing the whole child, then they must make the commitment to the long-term change that the Respect! Campaign—or any other comprehensive social and emotional learning program—demands. Students desperately need life skills—such as listening, collaborating, thinking things through, planning, and controlling emotions—in addition to academics. And please remember that it’s been shown time and again that a strong social and emotional learning program lays the foundation for academic success (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Wahlberg, 2004). Educators must hold fast to that, take the long view, and maximize their students’ chances for success. **PL**

REFERENCES

- Zins, J. E., Weissberg, R. P., Wang, M. L., & Wahlberg, H. J. (Eds.). (2004). *Building academic success on social and emotional learning: What does the research say?* New York: Teachers College Press.

Matthew Guldin (matthewg@eschs.org) is the dean of students at East Side Community High School in New York, NY, and works with Cross Cultural Consulting Services to promote the 100% Respect! Campaign across the country. He is a former social studies/humanities teacher and assistant principal.