

# EDUCATORS + PARENTS + PARTNERSHIP = GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

by

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## *Introduction*

*A teacher was walking by our middle school basketball court after school one day and heard a middle school student repeatedly scream an inappropriate phrase at another student. Because the inappropriate language occurred on the basketball court and because I knew the student loved playing basketball, I decided a logical consequence would be to suspend his basketball playing privileges at recess, lunch and after school. In addition, I called the student's parents and explained the inappropriate behavior to them hoping they would reinforce at home the message I was sending at school. I believed that the student would learn more from the situation, if he received similar messages from home and school about his behavior. The parents' support was exceptional. They agreed with the consequences I gave and agreed to discuss the issue at home with their son. Because this student received consistent messages from his parents and school, I was confident that this situation would assist him in reflecting on the importance of treating others with respect. That day I left school energized.*

Unfortunately, not every story turns out with such a happy ending. I am a principal of a small international school in Addis Ababa the capital city of Ethiopia. The school serves a diverse student population with students calling over 50 different countries home. Most of the students are 3<sup>rd</sup> culture kids spending the majority of their lives outside of their home countries. A large portion of students come from diplomatic families and families associated with international aide organizations. Although our largest segment of students are Americans, we have many students from developing countries that someday will contribute to the business and political leadership of their respective countries. Many of the students, as they grow into adulthood, will have opportunities to bring their unique 3<sup>rd</sup> culture perspectives back to their home countries in order to educate and influence others.

Ethiopia itself provides a rich educational context. Students often take advantage of service learning opportunities outside of the classroom such as building houses through Habitat For Humanity, assisting at a local AIDS orphanage or raising money for issues of national concern such as the frequent famines that plague the country. In addition, living in one of the poorest countries in the world provides daily lessons of the inequities and dilemmas affecting the global community. Students leaving their homes are confronted with the realities of extreme poverty and disease. These factors provide students with opportunities to learn of the necessity of global citizenship. They also provide the faculty with the motivation to actively focus on nurturing these universal citizenship skills within our students.

Because my school is small and because of its generally positive atmosphere there are relatively few major disciplinary issues, which allows me to devote a considerable amount of time and energy addressing issues of misconduct constructively. I believe, when students misbehave, a learning opportunity is presented. As an educator, I consciously and deliberately strive to maximize the learning potential of such situations. Whenever possible I rely on logical consequences believing that students will learn more, when they see a connection between actions and reactions.

By striving to constructively address student discipline issues, I believe I am working to prepare my students for global citizenship. Although it seems reasonable to assume most parents share my goal and are working to insure the same outcome, sometimes, specific circumstances involving their children can create parent-educator friction. This is natural. Parents want to protect their children. It has been said that love is blind. I believe parents often love their children so intensely that objectivity suffers. In addition, parents may have had negative experiences at school and may carry that negativity into school issues related to their children. However, these issues must be overcome. For misbehavior to provide opportunities for children to learn and grow, children must receive consistent messages from school and home.

In the following paragraphs, I will provide two examples from my experience that illuminate this challenge and then I will outline six strategies to assist educators in creating parent partnerships. Preparing global citizens is too important of a task for parents and educators to be sitting on opposite sides of the table. We must find ways to make parents part of the solution.

### *Setting One: 8<sup>th</sup> Grade French Class*

Our French teacher approached me with concerns that five of her 8<sup>th</sup> grade students had cheated on their final examination. I brought the students to my office where all five of the students admitted to cheating on the test. I decided a logical consequence would be for the students to receive a zero for the exam. I liked this consequence because it directly related to the misbehavior. In addition, because the final exam was worth 10% of their semester grades, students would receive clear, explicit feedback of the consequences of dishonesty. I informed the students' parents of the misbehavior and outlined the consequences. Later that same day, parents of two of the five students came to my office to discuss the situation. Neither parent argued that their children had not cheated because based on their children's own testimonies this was not defensible. Rather they argued that their children should not receive zeros for the final exam even though cheating clearly occurred. One parent recommended that his child should be able to retake the exam without cheating and the other parent recommended that her child only receive zeros for the questions on the exam for which he admitted to cheating. A dynamic was clearly set up in this situation where students were receiving different messages about the misbehavior from school and home.

## *Setting Two: Violation of Off-Limits Area of School*

After school one day, a 10<sup>th</sup> grade student and a guest tried to gain access to an off-limits area of the school. Two members of our security staff witnessed this and informed the two boys that they would have to leave the area. The student became angry and argued with the security personnel becoming disrespectful and repeatedly directing inappropriate language at them. I decided that an appropriate consequence would be for the student to lose the privilege of staying after school and bringing guests on campus for a set length of time. I thought that this consequence was logical and would potentially assist the student in reflecting upon the effects of treating others disrespectfully. However, when I informed his parents of the consequences, it was obvious that they weren't pleased. His father told me that the problem must have been with the security personnel rather than his son even though his son had admitted to repeatedly using profanity during the argument. Although this was an excellent learning opportunity, I felt the beneficial effects, had been mitigated by the lack of support from his parents.

## *Educators and Parents Working Together: Six Strategies That Work*

What steps can educators take to minimize the possibility of such situations occurring? How can we best insure that parents and educators are working together to create global citizens? While I don't think you can create an environment that will completely eliminate the types of interactions described in the preceding examples, there are strategies that can be employed to minimize their frequency and intensity.

Because I am currently a principal some of the examples and some of the language would make it seem that the advice is meant for other administrators. However, before I became an administrator I spent five years teaching in public schools in America and an additional three years teaching overseas. I believe that the same strategies I use to address misbehavior now as a principal are fitting for teachers. Teachers know that most incidences of misbehavior aren't reported to administrators because they are addressed within the classroom.

Teachers often discuss discipline concerns with parents. The purpose of such communication is largely so parents reinforce the message, being sent at school, at home. The more effective your communication is, whether it is over the phone or in person, the more likely you will have a parent as a partner rather than an adversary. As you read through the following five strategies think about how you, as a teacher, can utilize these steps within your specific context. Think of a past situation involving student misbehavior in which you involved parents but things didn't work out the way you intended. Could you have made different choices? Could utilizing any of these strategies have resulted in a mutually beneficial win/win situation? Could these interventions help to put in place the building blocks for the development of global citizenship skills?

### **1. Be Proactive**

Ideally, the topic of the first conversation you hold with a parent will not be related to discipline. Building positive relationships with parents early in the year greatly assists in dealing with thorny challenges that transpire later. Positive parent/educator interactions act, as deposits that increase the level of trust a parent has in a teacher. When misbehavior occurs and parents are informed of the details, there is a far greater possibility that parents will support the teacher, if high levels of trust have been previously established. However, if you haven't proactively built positive relationships with parents there is a substantial risk that they will be skeptical and unsupportive of your description of the misbehavior and the consequences you propose.

### **2. Be Thorough**

Regardless of how effectively we manage classrooms, students, at times will misbehave. When misbehavior does occur, what can teachers do, before parents are contacted, to maximize parental support? It's important to thoroughly review instances of misbehavior to insure you have sufficient evidence supporting your case before parents are contacted. All teachers know that specific students can be, at times, exasperating. I've been in situations when my intuition told me a student misbehaved even though I didn't have physical evidence as confirmation. For example, lets say out of the corner of my eye I see a piece of paper fly across the room and turn my head to see Danny sitting and smiling smugly among the other members of the class. I know he did it. Well at least my intuition tells me he did it. Besides, he is always acting out and misbehaving. However, I didn't see him do it. My evidence is

circumstantial at best. What happens if I call Danny's parents and tell them that Danny is receiving detention for throwing paper? Then they ask me if I saw Danny throw it and I have to admit that I didn't but I know he did it anyway. At this point, I probably won't have Danny's parents' support and what is worse I will have potentially ruined any level of trust previously established making future situations requiring their support more difficult. It is necessary to check yourself to insure that you are being objective and you are able to provide parents with clear, reliable evidence to support your explanation.

There is another reason why teachers need to be thorough. Remember that parents are going to receive two versions of the events, one account from you and one account from their child. I've seen students convey one version of events to me and two hours later deny the version they told me and tell their parents an entirely different version that doesn't make them look nearly as guilty. Students are extremely creative, when faced with disappointing mom and dad. They know exactly the way to frame their explanation to have the greatest odds of their parents believing them. It's often less complicated for parents to believe their child rather than the teacher. If they believe their child, it just means the teacher is being unfair. However, if they believe the teacher, they may tell themselves that it means they aren't being good parents or their child is lying to them or their child is exhibiting anti-social behavior. Therefore, it is vital that you present parents with convincing evidence to make it difficult for them to disbelieve you.

### **3. Be Respectful**

You don't want any circumstances to blur the clarity of the situation. Therefore, it's important that you treat children respectfully before parents are called to discuss possible misconduct. If you have treated a child discourteously in past situations or if you have treated a child with disrespect in the specific situation under discussion, it is quite possible for parents to focus on your behavior rather than the behavior of their child. Remember that it is less complicated for parents to blame you. If you have treated their child unfairly, it might provide them the necessary justification to hold you responsible, instead of requiring their child to take responsibility for their actions.

### **4. Be Patient**

In those situations, when a student has truly exasperated you, it is important to stay calm and not say anything you will later regret. I can

think of many times when I impulsively gave students consequences. Invariably this occurred when I was so angry that my focus was on retribution rather than education. Sometimes it is necessary to take a time out and wait until you are less angry and more rational before determining consequences. Several times I have dealt with discipline and later wished I had been more patient and thoughtful. Had I been less impatient I likely would have formulated consequences that were more educative and more logical.

### **5. Be A Good Listener**

Active, respectful communication is an essential ingredient to any successful interaction. Parents often feel that their role is to strongly advocate for their child, to stand up for them in the face of adversity. When a parent is confident that they were genuinely listened to and heard, they frequently will be satisfied that they have fulfilled the role of advocate and are willing to work with the teacher as a partner. However, if a parent feels that you are not interested in their input or are not willing to hear their perspective, they will continue the role of advocate or disengage, neither of which will provide the dynamic parental support that is sought.

### **6. Be Diplomatic**

Often times in parent conferences I find that parents and I have different positions. To concentrate on these positions keeps the situation polarized in a win/lose framework. To address this problem, I consciously work to assist parents in seeing that although our positions may be different our interests are basically the same. For example, let's say one of my students continually turns in work late. I know the student is capable of submitting work in a timely manner and believe that she is being lazy. After several warnings I contact her parents and explain my concerns. It's possible that her parents won't see this as a serious matter. They might say, "What is the problem? So she turns in some assignments a few days late. Don't overreact!" One option is to strongly advocate my position and try to convince her parents that I am right. While this might work, it will more likely cause her parents to become further fixated on their position. Another option is to focus on what we have in common. We both want to prepare their child for global citizenship. Although in the preceding example we may have a disagreement on the specifics, by reframing the discussion around what we have in common, we are able to move from our adversarial positions to work as partners. Often when

parents see that our interests are similar and that we working towards the best interest of their child, they are more willingly to actively collaborate.

### *In Conclusion...*

Schools are being increasingly called upon to teach character education and instill core values as part of their educational program. Student discipline is one area that has potential for contributing to this educational goal, if it is done with dignity and done with education in mind rather than punishment and retribution. However, parents and educators must be willing partners. If the discipline students receive at school is not supported and modeled at home or worse is actively undermined, the chance of learning from such experiences is problematic at best. We as educators can do much to recruit parents as partners in student discipline. If we are going to prepare students to be productive citizens globally, parents and educators have to model it locally.

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For the past two years, Todd McKee has been secondary school principal at the International Community School of Addis Ababa in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. He entered education through the Teach For America program. His prior teaching experiences have included schools in Seattle, Washington, East Palo Alto, California and Saitama, Japan.

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