

Motivation toward Goodness

We have been engaged in a series of strategic planning input sessions during which parents, neighbors, parents of recent graduates, faculty and staff have shared insights and impressions of Friends School Haverford. One of the frequently mentioned aspects of the School that attracted families to enroll their children is the conduct and attitude of the students that visitors observed. *“I was impressed by the attitude of the older kids.” “I liked the interactions I saw between students.” “There was an informal but respectful atmosphere.” “Students clearly were engaged and looked happy.”* Needless to say, comments such as these are gratifying.

The past several weeks have presented opportunities for me to reflect on the behavior of our students and to discuss with them appropriate and inappropriate actions. We have had incidents of the use of bad words and disrespectful comments towards teachers. Several students have been sent to me because of spitting. And physical aggression has occurred in pre-kindergarten and the Intermediate School. All of these are important occasions in which to intervene, address problems, brainstorm alternatives, take restorative actions, and to move forward with a deeper understanding of human emotions and community life. My intention in each interaction is for students to know that school is a safe place for everyone and that people care about each other and how we treat one another. My hope is that children leave my office feeling better than when they entered and that they have a plan in place to address the problem and a greater awareness of tools to use should the situation occur in the future.

A great deal has been written about character education, student discipline, classroom management, rules in schools, logical and natural consequences, punishment, and outcomes. Alfie Kohn, in Beyond Discipline: From Compliance to Community, reviews many such programs in schools and teases out the beliefs about human nature and children that appear to underlie them. In Friends schools, the fundamental belief is a commitment to “that of God” in each person. For me this belief translates into a desire to seek out that spirit in myself and others, to expect a motivation toward goodness, and to go forward with an optimistic attitude. It is not a naïve belief that humans are incapable of selfishness, cruelty, or violence. Nor does it seek to eliminate conflict from our daily lives. Instead, it means that we are all capable of empathy and altruism and that conflict is an important opportunity to learn about human nature and community life.

A brief story comes to mind. For many years, students cut the corner as they traveled from the School House to Heritage House, creating a hard packed path up the slope to the porch. Grass would not grow, rain eroded the slope, washed the soil away, and created a muddy patch all the way around the building to the doorway into the Preschool classroom. We put physical barriers in place and exhorted students to walk up the stairway. It did not seem to work. Then one Sunday afternoon in the summer, my husband and I used our old rototiller to work up the soil. Before school opened, parents improved the topsoil with compost and mulch. At the last two fall workdays, we planted daffodil bulbs and shrubs on the slope. I can see this slope from my office windows and am happy to report that I rarely see a student run through the garden. It is not because we have posted a rule or barrier. It is

because other things – flowers and growing plants – are being cultivated in what had once been an abandoned corner.

At Friends School Haverford, we are cultivating a community that is not organized around a clearly posted set of rules for behavior and compliance. Instead, we are building a community in which students and teachers work together on “spirit documents” that describe the kind of community that we want to have and offer advice on how to achieve it. We emphasize and work on resolving conflicts at every level.

Kohn asserts, and I concur, that there are three main requirements for optimal human functioning: autonomy, relatedness, and competence. “Autonomy refers not to privacy but to self-determination, the experience of oneself as the origin of decisions rather than as the victim of things outside one’s control. Relatedness means the need for connection to others, for belonging and love and affirmation. Finally, the presence of competence on this list suggests that all of us take pleasure from learning new things, from acquiring new skills and putting them to use.”

Our aim is to create a community that fosters self-determination and integrity; is based on healthy and respectful relationships with peers, teachers, parents, and colleagues; and that is rich with opportunities to learn new things with a joyful spirit.

Of course, parents and families have their own unique approach to modeling and supporting the kinds of behaviors that make children good citizens. One that encourages the development of personal integrity will reinforce that which we seek to foster in the School community. Together we can provide increased opportunities for autonomy, relatedness, and competency for our children.

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