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# Developing a School-wide Code of Conduct in Elementary and Middle Schools

At our school we take pride in

- caring for and including others
- respecting people
- respecting and caring for property
- showing safety for self and others

— Draft of school code of conduct

Schools are complex places. Students, teachers, staff, administrators, parents, and often community members interact daily. Each school develops a particular culture.

Some schools let their culture develop on its own; other schools take steps to promote a culture that they value. In the latter instance, they seek to make the culture explicit to all members of the school community. One way of doing this is to develop a school code of conduct based on beliefs rather than rules.

Developing a school code of conduct is a process. It is *not* just a matter of adopting another school's code. Some schools involve students and the larger school community in developing their code. If the staff believes that inclusion of all members of the school community is important, then they will invite those members of the community to take part. This invitation can be stated explicitly in the staff's philosophy that all belong, all need to be welcomed, and all have something to contribute. A school that wants to build this kind of culture will work through a time-consuming — but rewarding — process.

We recommend that a school code encompass all school community members. When you develop a code of conduct that *explicitly* states that all students, staff, and parents/guardians belong, then you have a strong foundation statement to refer to when talking with students and adults about instances where certain members are excluded.

What follows is a process developed in one elementary school and used by many others. The outcomes of this process are particular to one school. Another school using the process would develop a different set of outcomes.

## Establishing the Process

In our province, all schools are required to develop a school-wide code of conduct. Schools use many different processes to do this: some involve

staff only; some, staff and students; others, a wider group of people. Some base their code on rights and responsibilities, others on rules, and others on beliefs.

One elementary staff decided to give everyone in the school community an opportunity to provide input into the school code of conduct. They decided to develop a long-term process that would take a year to implement and a lifetime to reinforce!

The teaching/administration staff met on a professional development day and decided that they wanted to

1. develop a code that was meaningful, understandable, easily referred to, and based on beliefs not rules
2. have students, parents, and non-professional staff take part in the process in order to develop ownership of the school code
3. develop a process that was meaningful to all members of the school community

They made the decisions knowing that having everyone involved in the process would encourage ownership. They believed that, if they were truly striving toward being an inclusive community, then all members needed to be part of establishing the philosophy and beliefs that would become the foundation for decisions made in the community.

They also recognized that involving more people would take more time.

## Implementing the Process

### 1. *The Public Invitation*

A school newsletter and a parent advisory council meeting invited parents to join with students and staff at a school assembly to begin the process of developing a school code of conduct.

### 2. *Assembly for Students, Staff, and Parents*

The school held an opening assembly that focused on

- a desire to build a caring and inclusive community
- the need to develop a code of conduct based on the beliefs of how we should treat each other rather than a set of rules on how we should behave

A question was posed to everyone: “What makes you feel safe and cared for at school?” With this question in mind, students, parents, and staff divided into groups of nine to twelve, each with an adult facilitator (teacher or parent). Each group was asked to brainstorm and record what made them feel safe and cared for at school. The session lasted ten minutes. If the brainstorming slowed, the teacher facilitators stimulated thinking through these questions:

How do you like to be treated?

How do you think you should be treating others?

How should property and things such as books and computers be looked after?

How do we keep ourselves and others safe?

What makes you feel good about school?

What does caring look like?

How would we want to treat adults coming into the school?

Once response cards were collected, the students were told they would be doing further work with the ideas in their classrooms. Parents were invited to meet in the staffroom with the principal to look at a variety of codes of conduct from other schools and to get a picture of what it was they were helping to develop.

3. *Classroom Work*

Each classroom was given approximately fifty cards. Their task was to sort and categorize the cards into five categories and come up with a name for each of these categories. The students were asked to try to develop at least one category name that no other group would likely come up with. The teachers found the strategy was successful with all grade levels. The charts of categories were then displayed in the hallways.

4. *The Second Assembly (one week after the first)*

Students, staff, and parents again gathered in the gym. Each class presented their charts of categories and read out the five category names. Category titles included such names as Put ups, No Breaking Hearts, Friendships, and Things We Want. The five categories from all of the classrooms were listed on the overhead and copies of this list were given to each classroom.

5. *Classroom Work*

Students worked to narrow all the category names to about five categories.

6. *The Third Assembly*

Students, staff, and parents gathered again. Each class presented their smaller list of categories. Some older students presented scenarios of student behavior on the playground to highlight some of the category names that they had developed. For example, one group did a skit illustrating respect and disrespect for school property.

7. *Special Classroom Task*

One intermediate classroom volunteered to take the category names and put them into the following general categories:

respectful behavior — respect people

respect property

friendship — keeping friends

no breaking hearts — including people

things we want (safety)

safety — a right to feel safe

respect for our school

helping

8. *Staff-Parent Meeting*

Staff and parents met to refine ideas further. They developed these points:

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9. *Student and Parent Forums*

Students in all the classrooms and parents at a parent advisory council meeting took all the cards that had been written at the first assembly, to ensure they would fit into one of these four categories.

The full code of conduct then read as follows:

The \_\_\_\_\_ Elementary School community believes that it is important to establish a warm, supportive environment. We do this by

- caring for and including others
- respecting people
- respecting and caring for property
- showing safety for self and others

Our code of conduct applies to all members of the \_\_\_\_\_ community. We use our code to teach and encourage positive behavior.

Actions that do not respect our school code of conduct will result in appropriate consequences.

The final two lines were added because district policy required the inclusion of something of this nature. However, over the last several years, lines like these have changed for many schools as they learn more about Restorative Practices. In those schools, the final two lines have changed focus: "Whenever possible, incidents will be resolved by discussion, mediation, and restitution. Every effort to support students and to determine the root causes of behavior will be made." This part of the code is much more positive and reinforces that the staff is working with students to learn more about their behavior, to take responsibility for it, and to fix their mistakes.

The code of conduct was distributed widely. It was printed and posted around the school and put on large boards and displayed on the playground and on the outside wall of the gymnasium, where it could be seen by people visiting the school. Parents were sent copies through the school newsletter and were thanked for their involvement.