



Codes Of Conduct

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Background

Among the many ingredients for successful schools is a student body that is not only eager to learn but also well behaved. Children are taught the difference between good and poor behavior from an early age, and ideally that training goes with them into the classroom. Teachers and school administrators are expected to serve as role models, and they also have an obligation to ensure that students meet certain conduct expectations.

Codes of conduct are designed to serve both the classroom and the individual. They outline students' rights, ensuring that no student will be penalized or singled out based on anything but a violation of established rules. They also outline students' responsibilities, thus letting individual students know that they need to meet certain standards for their own sake and that of the entire class.

"Conduct" covers such a wide variety of behaviors that establishing a formal code within a school system is a complicated matter. A violation of conduct rules can be anything from passing notes in class to carrying a concealed weapon into the building. It is up to the school administration, often working in conjunction with parents and students, to set rules and to enforce them.

A typical school code of conduct begins with an outline of rights and responsibilities for both the students and the faculty. It then lists different infractions (often categorized at different levels of severity) and prescribes appropriate disciplinary measures. It should also explain the student's right to appeal any disciplinary action.

It is important to remember that both the students and the faculty have rights and responsibilities. Students have the right to be informed of the school district's policies and regulations. They also have the right to know the academic requirements of each course and to be advised of their progress. Students have privacy rights as well; their personal possessions are generally off limits. If the school has reason to believe that a student is carrying something illegal, such as a knife, that becomes a different matter. Desks and lockers are school property, and schools can inspect them without student permission.

Teachers, likewise, have the right to be able to do their job without distractions. They also have the right to discipline students in an appropriate manner when necessary. Most codes of conduct are written with enough flexibility to allow teachers some leeway when choosing disciplinary action.

If a student is [ACCUSED](#) of committing a serious offense that results in suspension or expulsion, he or she has the right to appeal the decision under due process rules of law. No student can be singled out for punishment on the basis of race, sex, color, religion, [DISABILITY](#), or national origin. Moreover, in most cases, school [JURISDICTION](#) applies to the actual school grounds, but codes of conduct are valid when students are attending school-related functions off the actual school property.

Basic Conduct Issues

The classroom is designed to provide students with a structured environment in which they can learn. In most cases the classroom model works quite well, but it fails to take simple human nature into consideration. Children, even those who are normally well behaved, will try to test the rules for two simple reasons. First, they are away from their parents, which makes them feel independent even though a teacher may be watching them. For this reason, some students habitually come to class late or skip class altogether. Second, as children learn to socialize they seek ways to generate attention, even negative attention for being disruptive, for example, by always talking out of turn or playing the class clown.

In years past, schools offered courses in what was known as "civics." Civics courses often included instruction on the importance of integrity, honesty, and respect for others. Civics courses have fallen out of favor for the most part, although many schools do offer some sort of course work focusing on understanding values. Nonetheless, there are always students who will break the rules.

The point teachers and administrators stress is that even minor infractions can represent more serious behavior problems, and failure to offer discipline and guidance can lead some students to more disruptive or harmful violations.

Among the more innocuous types of behavior that constitute conduct violations are the following:

Repeatedly coming to class without appropriate supplies (books, gym clothes, etc.)

Leaving school property without permission

Defacing school property (vandalizing books, for example)

Wearing inappropriate clothing

Bringing radios or CD players to class

Truancy

Clearly each of these infractions warrants different punishment. Probably the most common punishment is still having the student stay after school. Faculty and administrators have a variety of other options, however. They can give a warning or reprimand, have a student conference, have a parent conference, change the student's class schedule, or impose a suspension. The student who brings a radio to class might benefit most from a reprimand (and from having the radio confiscated for the day). The student who cuts class regularly may require more direct involvement with teachers and parents. Students who drive to school could have their parking privileges revoked if they leave school grounds without permission.

More Serious Violations

When students commit more serious violations, a good code of conduct should be able to address the problematic behavior and prescribe appropriate punishment. Among those more serious violations are the following:

- Cheating or plagiarizing
- Using profane, obscene, or ethnically offensive language
- Possessing pornographic material
- Theft (from another student or from the school)
- Gambling on school grounds
- Threatening the safety of another student
- Fighting with another student

Students who commit these more serious offenses will face stronger punishment. But no school district wants merely to punish a student and let an incident drop, particularly in light of the heightened sensitivity to school violence. Intervention programs often begin with conferences between the student and his or her parents or guardians and teachers and school administrators. Discipline can be rehabilitative in form. Instead of being suspended from class, for example, a student might be assigned to do a community service project. Someone who vandalizes a school building may have to repair that damage instead of merely paying for it.

Violence and Other Extreme Behavior

For many years school violence was thought to exist only in poor inner-city schools, with most of that violence directed against specific students (gangs, for example). A series of highly publicized sniper attacks, many in affluent suburban schools, during the 1990s changed the public's perception of school violence. Although the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that in 1997 only 10 percent of schools reported any instance of serious crime, with 42 percent reporting no crimes at all, many believe that schools have become increasingly dangerous. What was particularly chilling about many of the attacks was often the students responsible were regarded as quiet and unassuming.

It is simplistic to say that a code of conduct would have kept some of the most deadly sniper attacks from taking place. That said, a code of conduct does send a clear message to students that certain behavior will not be tolerated, including teasing and bullying. Some of the students who killed their fellow students were said to have been bullied and taunted by their classmates over a period of years.

Identifying Troubled Students

Truly troubled students who might have tendencies to resort to extreme violence against their peers and teachers cannot be stopped simply by a code of conduct. What a code of conduct can do, however, is help identify behavior patterns in children early on. A youngster who is constantly disrupting class and breaking rules is clearly having trouble adjusting, and the school can work with the youngster and the parents to identify the problem. The class bully needs to be disciplined, but without some sort of additional action (such as counseling) the discipline becomes merely punitive. Not every troubled student will react violently, of course, but that does not mean the school has no obligation to reach out and help when help seems appropriate. Regarding serious crime, students who commit [FELONY](#) offenses are removed automatically from most schools; if under age these individuals may be placed in a juvenile detention facility where they can continue their education; if over 16 they can be tried as an adult for their crimes and imprisoned if convicted.

Conduct and Technology

The Internet has vastly expanded educational resources and opportunities for students and teachers. Students use the Internet both as a research tool and a means of communicating. The question responsible administrators and teachers need to ask is precisely what sort of research and communication the students are doing. There is a big difference between using the Internet to find biographical material of a local author, for example, and logging onto web sites to find out the latest gossip about a favorite pop music star. More dangerous still, some student use a school e-mail account to join a chat group. Teenagers in particular may feel that they possess enough maturity to make informed choices about what they are doing, but they may inadvertently lead themselves into harm's way. The not uncommon reports of adults being arrested for trying to meet up with minors they met in chat rooms are a red flag for most school districts.

Many districts avoid the issue by not providing students with their own e-mail accounts. They argue, quite convincingly, that student e-mail is difficult to monitor and ties up too many resources that could be used for other activities. A number of educators, however, believe that email has become so essential that students should be trusted with the responsibility until they do something to violate that trust. Software programs that filter e-mail and Internet sites is only a partial solution; a student who wants to view a particular site may be resourceful enough to be able to get past such barriers. Beyond those students who might willfully engage in irresponsible activity online, there are also students who may unwittingly create trouble for themselves or others. A student who is not computer savvy might inadvertently disclose personal information over the Internet, for example.

Acceptable Use Policies

Districts that do offer e-mail accounts to students have found that establishing an "acceptable-use" policy is essential to maintaining good "netiquette" among students. An acceptable-use policy begins by setting ground rules for when and how students can use the Internet and e-mail. Typically, students are expected to use appropriate language, to avoid off-limit sites and chat rooms, and to refrain from misuse of e-mail, such as spamming (sending unsolicited mass postings to hundreds of e-mail addresses). Students are also prohibited from using Internet information inappropriately (for example, downloading term papers or plagiarizing from web sites). Students are advised that the school has the right to review all electronic correspondence to ensure compliance with the established rules, and anyone violating those rules can be disciplined. For serious or repeat offenses, a student's Internet privileges can be revoked. Both students and parents are usually required to sign the acceptable-use policy.

Cell Phones and Pagers

The Internet is not the only high-tech tool that students have at their disposal. Cell phones are extremely popular with teenagers; pagers are perhaps less so. Some school districts do allow students to carry pagers for exceptional reasons, such as a medical condition that might require the student to contact help immediately. For general use, however, cell phones and paging devices are as distracting in a school building as they are everywhere else. Most schools have rules against bringing cell phones or pagers onto school property.

Getting Information

Although codes of conduct follow the same basic pattern, they vary not only from district to district but from school to school. The easiest way to find out about a particular school's code of conduct is to contact the school administration directly. Most likely, the school will have some sort of handbook listing the code, along with guidelines for punishing violations. Individual schools and school districts with web sites may also post

their conduct rules online.

Legislatures have taken initiative in formalizing codes of conduct, also. In New York, for example, the Safe Schools and Violence in Education Act (SAVE) was passed by the state legislature in 2000. It required all school districts to create a comprehensive code of conduct by July 2001. Among the key requirements for these codes is a clear definition of teachers' authority to remove disruptive students from the classroom.

Additional Resources

Helping Your Child Learn Right from Wrong: A Guide to Values Clarification. Simon, Sidney B. and Sally Wendkos Olds, Simon and Schuster, 1976.

Staying Safe at School. Chalet, Donna, Rosen Publishing Group, 1995.

Zero Tolerance: Resisting the Drive for Punishment. Ayers, Rick, William Ayers, and Bernardine Dohrn, editors, New Press, 2001.

Organizations

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

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Primary Contact: Gary W. Phillips, Acting Commissioner

National Education Association (NEA)

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National Governors Association (NGA)

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National School Boards Association (NSBA)

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