School as Caring Community

A nationally acclaimed program of the Oakland-based Developmental Studies Center teaches schools to foster development of the "whole child."

By Jean Tepperman

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"This used to be a pretty rough school," said fifth-grade teacher Judy Parker. "There was a lot of punishment and tough talk. What I knew about discipline was from my own childhood in New York. The teachers were tough, rough, rude. I was petrified."

But nine years ago, the Ruus School in Hayward joined the Child Development Project, a program of the Oakland-based Developmental Studies Center (DSC). "It was a big change," Parker said. "Suddenly we started treating the children in a nicer way." Teachers used counseling and class meetings to address problems. "You don't have to get angry when a child makes a mistake," Parker explained. "Our approach is to talk with the child, to teach."

"Treating children in a nicer way" sounds very different from the "get tough" tone of much current discussion about school reform. But in 15 years of experience and research in eight school districts in California and across the country, the DSC has shown that children who feel their schools are "caring communities" are more constructive and cooperative in their relationships with other students and teachers, more skilled at resolving conflicts, more responsible and motivated in their schoolwork, and less likely to develop "problem behaviors" like delinquency or drug use.

The Child Development Project (CDP) teaches schools how to become "caring communities," using:

- a reading program that uses literature to help children think through personal and social values
- a curriculum that's "worth learning" and teaching methods "that help students see why it's worth learning"
- an emphasis on cooperative learning
- classroom management methods that emphasize warm, caring relationships and de-emphasize rewards and punishments

Late bloomers

In a second-grade classroom in the Ruus School, the children, with their fifth-grade tutors, are sitting on the rug listening, while teacher Carol Pearcy finishes reading *Leo the Late Bloomer.* "Do you know anyone who's a late bloomer in some way?" she asks. A second-grader declares herself a late bloomer in reading. "I hadn't noticed that," Pearcy says, "but if you feel that way, you must be proud that you've started reading chapter books."

Another child announces he's also a late-bloomer in reading. This time Pearcy agrees. "Yes," she says, "but you've been working well with your tutor and this morning you read *Good Night Moon* all the way through, didn't you?" For answer, she gets a big smile and vigorous nod.

Pearcy explains the assignment: Second graders are to draw a picture of "something it took you a long time to learn to do, that you feel proud of," while their fifth grade tutors read to them and help with problems. At the end, tutors write a brief report on "What we did" and "what I noticed."

Pearcy circulates--listening, commenting, questioning. "Jason's noticed some things about your reading that I hadn't noticed," she tells one child.

One second grader just sits. He tells Pearcy he can't think of anything. She a word of encouragement and leaves, but soon returns. "Did you think of anything you're proud of?" No response. Pearcy bends over and whispers in the child's ear. He grins and starts drawing.

This brief lesson is rich with CDP principles. The discussion of *Leo the Late Bloomer*, part of the CDP literature program, makes it safe for children to acknowledge difficulties. Pearcy reinforces that safety by downplaying competition, noting each child's progress, not the relative difficulty of the books they had read.

The Ruus peer tutoring program, like many partner and group activities, is structured to guide children in developing greater skills and awareness in working together. The fifth graders are directed to observe and respond to the needs of their little tutees.

When one child failed to do the assignment, Pearcy whispered a suggestion, rather than scolding or threatening bad grades or punishment. The exercise led children to reflect on their own progress, a skill Pearcy reinforces by having them do periodic reviews of their own work portfolios and by ending

each day with a brief discussion of "How did we do?"in both learning and behavior.

In the fifth-grade classroom, Judy Parker says she assigns group projects that give everyone a role, although "I prescribe roles less as time goes on, because the children learn what's required: using a ?six-inch voice,' staying with the group, cooperating, keeping comments positive. I walk around with a clipboard and give kids points. After a while it just becomes part of their makeup." She encourages students to discuss with her or the whole class the problems they encounter in group functioning. According to CDP philosophy, the teacher doesn't dictate solutions, but asks questions that help children find solutions themselves.

Ways We Want to Be

A poster on the classroom wall lists "Ways We Want to Be in Room Eight," the CDP substitute for class rules. Early in the school year, Pearcy led the children in a discussion that created the list. "Kids say things like 'no hitting,' and 'no kicking,'" Pearcy says. "I help them generalize and turn it around to be positive: 'We want everyong to be safe.'" Throughout the year, children refer to the goals in class meetings called to discuss specific problems.

Creating and applying classroom goals teaches children that norms of social behavior "are not arbitrary standards set by powerful adults, but necessary standards for the well-being of everyone," wrote DSC researchers in a recent article in *Educational Leadership.*

By contrast, many "character education" programs are ineffective, writes Susan Black in the Dec. 1996 *School Board Journal*. Researchers say that exercises designed to instill a "list of virtues" have much less influence on children than their actual experiences in school. The CDP is also different from many schools' conflict-resolution programs, which try to teach students new patterns of behavior without changing the overall way the school operates.

My picture and their picture

The Child Development Project, says Ruus Principal Katie Lyons, encourages educators to "take a long view of children's development, both academic and social," to see discipline as a process of "teaching appropriate behavior," which she backs up with a system of giving or withholding privileges. Key to this perspective is "how you read intent," she says. "If a kid misbehaves, we

figure either he doesn't have the right skills, or doesn't understand, or is oblivious," rather than taking misbehavior as a declaration of war.

Lynn Dames, who teaches a CDP fifth grade in Eden Gardens, another Hayward school, contrasts this "developmental discpline" with "assertive discipline," in which the teacher creates "a stringent set of rules" with "consequences for each infraction." She says, "I was uncomfortable with that. If you drop your pencil, that's 10 minutes after school. But every kid has a different reason for dropping a pencil."

Dames also emphasizes the importance of teaching in improving behavior. "When I say, 'Get in line to walk to the library,' I'm making an assumption that my picture of a line matches what's in all 34 of those little brains," she says. "But I have to teach them--it doesn't mean three across, it doesn't mean turning around to talk to your friend. We're all building on past experience. They haven't had my experiences."

Worth learning

The Child Development Project aims to improve children's behavior by helping them understand the reasons for social norms. It advocates the same approach to academic learning-- emphasizing the "intrinsic motivation" that comes from "a curriculum that's worth learning" and teaching methods "that help students see why it's worth learning." One Ruus school corridor, for example, displays students' drawings illustrating "everyday uses of fractions, decimals, and percentages."

A "caring community" also helps kids learn academic subjects by helping them feel safe enough to consider new ideas and try new skills. Central to that safety is the teacher's acceptance, concern--and high expectations. Dames tells the story of one of her students who was falling far behind in a major year-end project. "My old reaction would have been scolding him, sending home a note, and expecting him to change." What she did instead was sit down with the student after school, conference style, and ask, "What's the problem?"

"Like any fifth grader," Dames recalls, "he first said, ?I don't know.' So I explained my concern--that I had set up deadlines along the way to help them get their reports done. It was Week Two and he wasn't finished with Week One. I asked him, 'What do we need to do to get you ready for tomorrow?'" She waited, sometimes asking additional questions, for 20 minutes before the student came up with some ideas.

"I spent that time turning the responsibility over to him," Dames explains. "Then I signed the plan he drew up and said we'd meet every day to set goals for the next day. That first day it took an hour, the next day less than half an hour, then five minutes a day after that. He finished his project early and was one of the proudest of his finished product. I asked him, ?What did you learn by doing this?' He said, ?That when you have a deadline, there's a reason.'"

Among friends

Building a caring community also means working to foster children's friendships. Dames starts the school year with "getting to know you" activities: children interview each other, then draw pictures of each other's stories or work together on diagrams of ways they are alike and different.

"I switch their seats every day so they get to know each other. The beginning of the year is intense," says Dames. "I'm trying to get to know them as quickly as I can. Who's very social? Who are the writers? Who are the three kids everybody else wants to ignore--and what skills do they have that I can sell everybody else on, so other kids will see the value of including them?I'm madly keeping notes on who's doing what, what are their strengths and weaknesses. For every kid I try to think about what that individual needs--spelling skills? Math facts? Is he shy?

"What is it that they need me to build into their community to make them feel very safe? Because if we all feel very safe, myself included, we can take off like rocket ships."