Civil Schools Are Safe Schools: But Are They Attainable?

By Randy Sprick, Ph.D.

If once a man indulges himself in murder, very soon he comes to think little of robbing; and from robbing he comes next to drinking and Sabbath-breaking, and from that to incivility and procrastination. Once begun upon this downward path, you never know where you are to stop.

— Thomas De Quincey, 1827

Thomas De Quincey, the 19th century British essayist, may have inverted his "downward path" to make a point that has just as much relevance today as it did in pre-Victorian England — that incivility and violence are directly connected.

People today are just beginning to rediscover this connection. In discussions and inquiries throughout the country, civility is a common theme. An Internet search yields over 390,000 hits. Amazon.com lists 12,714 books containing *civility* in the title. Even if you consider that several of these may be duplicates, and others will concern past eras, still that's a lot of books. Why all this interest in something so seemingly old-fashioned?

It's obvious that we are becoming (or, perhaps have become) an increasingly violent society. On a daily basis, we read about road rage, school shootings, kidnappings and abductions, harassment, and all forms of "man's inhumanity to man." It is reflected in our songs, our films, and our art. Violence is a constant, torrential stream running through our collective mind.

As educators, our chief concern is how this pervasive violent stream will affect our children. The Center for Public Policy Priorities (CPPP), based in Austin, has drawn the conclusion that "the incidence of violence and weapons possession in Texas public schools is alarmingly high." According to their 1999 report, *Violence and Weapons in Texas Schools*, "there were more than 63,000 assaults and more than 8,000 weapons confiscated in Texas public schools" during the 1997-98 school year (the most recent year for which statistics are available).

Clearly, the violence we see all around us is having a tremendous affect on our children. Furthermore, according to a *USA Today* article, published in January 2003, it's manifesting itself in even our youngest students.

In the article, statistics are not given for Texas, but in South Carolina, during the 2001-02 school year, Greenville schools suspended 132 first-graders, 75 kindergartners, and two preschoolers. In Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, schools suspended 22 kindergartners during the first term of the 2002-03 school year. In California, between 1995 and 2001, assault rates among elementary school children nearly doubled. A 1995 article by R. Craig Sautter indicates that approximately 3,000,000 crimes occur annually in the nation's 85,000 public schools. In light of this data, the most relevant question becomes, "How do we stop this juggernaut?"

Which brings us back to De Quincey. If we accept that incivility generates violence, then it is logical to assume that its opposite would generate sociability and kindliness — qualities, we can assume, would characterize a safe and civil school.

What is a Safe and Civil School?

We have summarized the answer to this question:

• A **safe** school is one in which no one has to spend time or energy trying to protect themselves from emotional or physical harm.

• A **civil** school is one in which everyone is pleasant, polite, and respectful to everyone else — even during disagreements.

• A **productive** school is one in which people are motivated, engaged in meaningful learning tasks, and experiencing growth and success.

You can see how these concepts are interwoven. Students feel safe emotionally and physically when they are treated politely and respectfully. Students and teachers who are not concerned about their personal safety, who are not distracted by disruptive or violent behavior, will have the space and time to apply themselves to learning and teaching.

We have proven these assertions repeatedly in independent school districts and educational service centers throughout Texas. For many years, I worked with teachers across the state providing training in classroom management. Then, in 1995 I began working in partnership with Region XIII ESC to provide a systematic plan for developing schoolwide behavioral interventions. Today, this plan is still in effect, as are those in Region XVI ESC, Region II ESC, Alief ISD, and other sites. We are also embarking on a new multi-year initiative with Dallas ISD and Pasadena ISD (see Safe and Civil Schools Evaluation, page 5).

Today all schools in Texas are required to implement aspects of the Texas Behavior Support Initiative (TBSI). Recognizing the strengths and accomplishments of Safe and Civil Schools program in schools throughout Texas, *Foundations* and *CHAMPs*, two of the core components are among several programs that are recommended resources within the initiative.

Safe and Civil Schools

Safe and Civil Schools is a schoolwide, proactive, positive approach to behavior management. Rooted in a set of beliefs and guided by a set of processes, it empowers school personnel with techniques and strategies to help all students behave responsibly and respectfully.

Each school generates its own processes and beliefs, which in turn support and reinforce management procedures and techniques that guide student and staff behavior. The graphic below illustrates how all of these components fit together.
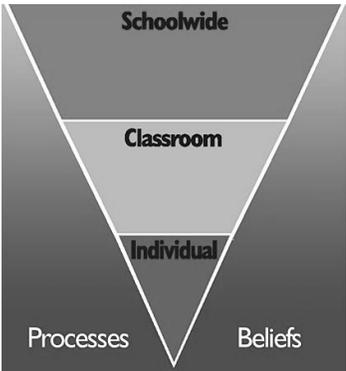
Processes include:

• Self-reflection — Everyone on staff can reflect on steps he/she can take to help students.

• Use of data — Everyone can identify areas and issues of concern in a way that can be translated into objective information, which is more reliable than hearsay.

• Structuring for success — Organize all school settings to promote successful student behavior.

• Collaboration — Everyone on staff must share the responsibility of helping students behave respectfully and responsibly.

Beliefs include:

• Treat all students with dignity and respect.

• Teach students the skills and behaviors they will need to succeed.

• Encourage responsibility and motivate students through positive interactions and by building relationships with them.

• View student misbehavior as a teaching opportunity.

Procedures fall into three categories:

• schoolwide (affecting all students in all settings)

• classroom (for teachers in their classrooms)

• individual (specifically tailored to meet the needs of a particular student)

If a large number of students are misbehaving across school settings, implementing or modifying schoolwide procedures is likely to be the most effective intervention. If a large number of students are misbehaving in their classrooms, the most effective intervention is to focus on classroom procedures. Individualized interventions can be implemented for specific students who require more support.

All of these interventions incorporate the key concepts I learned almost 30 years ago when I began my career in education that now have an ever-deepening research base, are reflected in effective practices literature, and have been tested and validated in the field.

Concepts Underlying Effective Practices

We know what to do when children misbehave and what to do to encourage responsible behavior:

• Use proactive, positive, instructional approaches to discipline.

• Use objective data to develop coherent policies and procedures that apply specifically to your school.

• Involve the entire school community.

• Implement an effective behavior management plan for each classroom.

• Civility generates safety generates learning.

Let me elaborate on these points.

Use proactive, positive, instructional approaches to discipline

Our historical approach to discipline is characterized by three traits: it is reactive, punitive and exclusionary. For instance, a student misbehaves. Typically, a teacher will *react* to the misbehavior by assigning some form of negative *punishment* — naming, marks on the board, referrals, detentions, suspension, expulsion — all acts designed to isolate or *exclude* the student from the school community.

This no longer works effectively. Students, for the most part, do not take the punishment seriously. What ten-year-old would rather stay in school and work than be sent home to watch TV? In addition, you may be only fostering the cycle. A quote in the *USA Today* article previously mentioned, from Temple University psychology professor Irwin Hyman, sums it up, "When a 5-year-old comes in violent, where does it come from? It comes from his home. And you're going to send him home?"

To be effective, we need to reverse the traditional traits. Instead of reactive, be proactive. Instead of punitive, be positive. Instead of excluding, be instructive and include the student in the process.

A *proactive* approach means you try to identify and restructure problem areas before they become problems. If, for example, students are misbehaving in the cafeteria, put new procedures in place that will stop misbehavior before it has a chance to occur.

A *positive* approach means that your staff demonstrates civility and respect in interactions among themselves and with students. Also, when staff members see students engaged in responsible actions, they reinforce that behavior with a friendly, encouraging, age-appropriate comment.

An *instructional* approach means that you include students in the school community by teaching expectations for appropriate and desired behavior. When a student does misbehave, view that misbehavior as a teaching opportunity. Instead of handing out punishment, correct and re-teach behavior expectations.

Use objective data to develop coherent policies and procedures

Subjective perceptions of the way things are do have value. But, to make effective changes in your school culture,

you need objective, quantifiable data. Instead of relying on staff opinions, survey staff, students, and parents, collect and analyze campus data regarding office referrals, suspensions, expulsions, attendance, and student performance. Use this information to identify those areas and issues that require immediate attention.

Involve the entire school community

In order to be successful, every member of the school must be involved in the process and every aspect of the school must be scrutinized. All school settings must be organized to promote successful student behavior, from the hallways to the parking lot. All school personnel must share the responsibility for encouraging positive student behavior, from administrators to bus drivers. In addition, foster parent and community participation as much as you can.

An effective schoolwide approach pulls the staff together, thereby increasing consistency within all settings and between all staff. It creates a coordinated and positive effort that pays off in an improved climate where students strive to behave responsibly.

Implement an effective behavior management plan for each classroom

It is one thing to have consistent, positive, unified schoolwide policies that govern all the common spaces on campus — the halls, cafeteria, playgrounds, restrooms, school bus loading zones, school buses, parking lots, and so on. But, since most of a student's day is spent in the classroom, that area, too, must be managed. Teachers should treat teaching behavior just like they would treat math, or science, or social studies.

Each teacher should write lessons that fit his or her instructional style and that meet the needs of his or her students. Develop lessons that teach students exactly what the teacher expects. Can students talk to each other during a particular activity, for instance, and if so how loud can they talk? Can students ask for help, and if so, how do they do that? What is the task or objective of a particular activity—the end product? Can students move around during a particular activity, and if so, what are the rules for doing that? How do students show that they are participating in a particular activity?

Civility generates safety generates learning

A civil school is one where everyone — students, parents, teachers, and staff — treats each other with respect and dignity. When children respect the needs of their fellow students, they stop pushing each other in the hallways. They stop calling each other names. They are courteous and generous when they deal with each other. They cooperate with each other.

When teachers greet each student by name and chat with them respectfully, students feel safe, secure, comfortable, even loved.

Safe and Civil Schools Evaluation

In a survey Region XIII ESC conducted in 2003, they found that 100 percent of schools participating in the program indicated that their campuses were safer. Ninety percent said they felt that they had created a more positive/inviting climate. Office referrals decreased overall — in one school by as much as 90 percent. One hundred percent of participating schools said they wanted to continue the process.

Safe and Civil Schools works for all ages, and in small rural schools as well as in large urban ones:
- A small rural middle school (200 students) had 984 referrals over the course of a year. After one year of working with Safe and Civil Schools, referrals went down to 347. After year two, they decreased to 157.
- An urban middle school (900 students) had 1350 referrals over the course of a year. After year one, referrals decreased by 75% to 345. Fights were down by 85 percent.
- A suburban middle school (837 students) had 1200 referrals, which after one year of the program decreased to 300. Tardies decreased from 400 per day to 5 per day.
- A semi-urban high school (1675 students) decreased its referrals by 1200 after one year on the program

Given this data, the participating schools in Region XIII ESC and elsewhere are committed to Safe and Civil Schools.

When children feel honored and safe, they stop misbehaving. When they stop misbehaving, teachers have more time to focus on teaching. It's a natural progression.

Safe and Civil Schools — Are They Attainable?

In a word, YES! Safe and civil schools are attainable. Effective schools literature describes best practices that are based on research and tested in the field. We know what to do. What we lack is organization and guidance.

It is not always easy, and the effort never stops. Safe and civil schools are constantly reviewing and revising their procedures to ensure success for their students. But, when we ask them, administrators and teachers tell us that freed from the time-consuming task of constantly responding to misbehavior, they are doing the job they want most to do — they are educating children.

Dr. Randy Sprick is the author of the Safe and Civil School Series, a collection of books and in-service training materials widely used in schoolwide and classroom discipline. He is one of the most sought-after trainers in the area of student motivation and discipline.

References
Center for Public Policy Priorities. (1999). "Violence and weapons in Texas schools." [online]. Austin, Texas, May 18. [accessed July 6, 2004]. Available from http://www.cppp.org/kidscount/education/schoolsnv.html.

De Quincey, T. (1827). "On murder considered as one of the fine arts." [online] Brooklyn, NY: Supervert 32C Inc., 2002 [accessed July 6, 2004]. Portable Document Format. p 23. First published in *Blackwood's Magazine* (Edinburgh: Blackwood & Sons, 1827). Available from http://www.supervert.com/elibrary/dequincey.html.

Sautter, R. C. (1995). Standing Up to School Violence: A Resource Guide for Action. *Phi Delta Kappan.* January, 76(5), K10-K11.

Sprick, R. S., Garrison, M. & Howard, L. M. (1998). *CHAMPs: A Proactive and Positive Approach to Classroom Management.* Longmont, Colorado: Sopris West Publishing.

Sprick, R. S., Garrison, M. & Howard, L. M. (2002). *Foundations: Establishing Positive Discipline Policies.* Revised edition. Longmont, Colorado: Sopris West Publishing.

Toppo, G. (2003, January 12). "School violence hits lower grades." *USA Today*.