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When Rules Get in the Way

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Too many restrictions can hamper teens' individuality and resolve, as well as destroy relationships among school staff. Here's how to pare them down.

Teenagers exist in a twilight zone of rights. Laws and regulations idiosyncratically define when it can be considered safe enough for a teen to exercise adult rights: to vote, to enlist in the military, to speak freely against authority, to wed, to drop out of school, to drive, to carry a gun, to have private conversations with medical providers, to watch certain movies. Many of these rights differ from state to state.

There is little to no scientific evidence to support the exact age that any of those rights should or will be granted, which, understandably, causes frustration for our teens. As a student once said to me, "C'mon, Mr. Benson, you know I'd be a good voter even though I am only 17, right?" When I attempted to explain the complications involved in determining which 17-year-old would be mature enough to vote, the student replied, "So I'm being punished for being above-average?" Thinking back on that conversation, I wish I had said, "Yes, you would be a good voter," and affirmed her correct view of the world.

Give Them Rights!

Affirming our students' correct views of the complicated world and encouraging them to exercise their rights is implicit in much of what we teach in secondary schools. We encourage teenagers' right to free speech during class discussions, their right to peacefully assemble at lunch and dances and sporting events, and their right to vote by sponsoring student-government elections. But I believe that secondary schools can be far more consistent in affirming our teenagers' blossoming capacity to exercise rights. Such affirmation would improve the relationships the faculty have with those students, and as an added benefit, improve the relationships the faculty have with each other.

Given that there are approximately 40 million teenagers in the United States, the granting of rights is not easily fine-tuned for each developing teenager. Instead, most secondary schools pitch their rules and restrictions—no hats, no eating in class, no leaving school grounds during the day—to the safest end of the bell-shaped curve of adolescent development, compelling teachers to say to many very capable students, "I can't break that rule for you, even though I know *you'd* be fine. I just can't." Sadly, and in opposition to abundant research on adolescent development, a typical 6th grader and a typical 11th grader have just about the same rules limiting their autonomy, voice, and decision making.

The model we use to grant a driver's license—a gradual release of adult responsibility over the course of many months, at a pace guided by each individual teenager's learning curve, with a clear and observable end goal—is not replicated in schools. There are no standardized curricula for practicing adult rights, such as getting up from your work space when you need a break or seeking counsel from an arbiter when you have a grievance. Those rights are uniformly granted by having a birthday, not by any measure of one's capacity. "What students commonly experience as their role in helping the school run smoothly is a passive one—skimming through the student handbook and then obeying a set of rules," though we know more active practices are needed to help "teenagers develop responsibility" (Poliner & Benson, 2017, p. 53).

Inevitably, most teachers feel the lack of fairness in our absolute restrictions. We say, "I'm sorry. I know the world isn't always fair." Isn't that part of our job, confirming our students' experience of reality, of self-evident truths? And inevitably, we do what many people who work in large institutions do. We idiosyncratically, secretly—perhaps even defiantly and justifiably—ignore a rule. Teenagers, after all, know how to appeal to our own sense of injustice. "Mr. Benson, didn't you feel like that when you were a teenager?" They have an uncanny way of reflecting back on us a flawed world and ask us to confirm those self-evident truths. From my observations, just about every adult in every school will say at some point to a student, "I'll let you do it this time."

And yet, this is hugely problematic for adult-to-adult relationships, as much as it is for teenage development and our relationships with students, who need us to be reliable rule keepers. What do I risk when I break ranks with my administration and peers and say, "You are right. This rule is wrong"?

When I hold the line on a rule, which can be draining in the face of a persistent and articulate teenager, I need to know that the other adults in the building are holding this line as well. In the heat of the moment, if a teenager says to me, "Mr. Jones lets us do this," I will silently scream

at Mr. Jones in my head, while figuring out if I am invested enough in this rule and this kid at this time of day to not simply let him off.

But is it really the fault of Mr. Jones? Or is it my fault, in those times I have also chosen the student over the rule? Or is it a bigger, systemic issue of schools having too many regulations, too many rules? Very few of us got into teaching to be monarchs, after all. And the more absolute rules we have in secondary schools, the more we put at risk the trust between staff and administration, between staff and staff, and between staff and students. We will all break rules. And this is not because staff are breaking rules merely to assert their individuality—it is because our individual adult sensibilities are a core feature of our humanity.

Rule-Breaking and Teacher Relationships

Our teenagers know that their teachers are different in many ways, from tolerance of off-task behavior to availability for extra support. Adolescent development is in large part defined by "profound cognitive development, the teenager's exponentially increased ability to think abstractly. No longer is the world bound by absolute rules; events happen in a context that must be taken into account" (Poliner & Benson, 2017). Unfortunately, rule-bound schooling delays much teenage development (unless the definition of being responsible is to obey rules without question). Perhaps equally egregious, rule-bound schooling ignores the adults' ability to make decisions in context and to talk to each other about those contextual decisions. We go underground when we break rules.

For brief periods of time, or under critical conditions, we can suspend our individuality to bond over a hard-line list of rules. For example, there is no discussion about how to exit the school during an emergency: We all go to the assigned stairs and doors, stand in designated areas, and await a signal to return to the building. But a 180-day school year is not a brief period of time, and rarely are conditions critical for that long. We invite interprofessional conflict by the sheer number of rules in schools that adults are expected to remember, have the time to enact, and be given the support to hold firm, while working with the range of developmental abilities in a community of teenagers.

I've seen adult relationships erode in schools thanks to dress codes that require students to tuck in their shirts. Innumerable times, I've watched as a student with his shirt hanging out walks past staff members who say nothing. Did they not notice the violation in the fast-paced chaos of changing classes? Did they have a history of conflict with that student and want to avoid having a reprimand turn into a big confrontation? Were the teachers worried about getting to their next class to set up, so that disciplining that student would simply not be good

time management? Or did they privately question the connection between tucking in a shirt and a safe learning community and not have a chance to discuss this rule with colleagues and administrators?

What if I am the next staff person in the hallway? I've seen the shirt out and the lack of enforcement from my peers, and now I'm in a bind. I have to choose between being in conflict with my peers, with this student, and with my own standards. I might talk to my peers, depending on my status in the school and the depth of my convictions. I might confront the student about the rule and then feel like I'm the authoritarian adult who is on everyone's case. Or I might excuse this teacher's behavior, and so make room in my own behavior to let the student pass as well. The opportunities are there every day to look away or make exceptions: A student arrives five seconds late for class; a student swears under her breath; a student suddenly asks for a pass to the bathroom during a restricted time; an exhausted student puts his head down on the desk.

My point here is not to suggest that we completely eliminate rules—safe communities are *in part* built on rules and boundaries. What I am advocating is that schools examine closely their lists of rules for teenagers and pare them down to what is developmentally appropriate, to what unequivocally promotes learning, and to what the staff can realistically commit to enforcing.

Treating Teens as Individuals

Rules bring safety, but an inordinate number of absolute rules restricts our relationships with the very real teenagers in front of us. And the research is abundant on how our relationships with teens impact their learning: Students who believe their teachers care about them as individuals are three times more likely to push themselves to do better academically (Quaglia & Corso, 2014).

It is possible to create richer relationships between students and staff by establishing a school culture of rights and responsibilities, as opposed to one governed by absolute rules. There are secondary schools doing this every day. These schools do not stop 100 students from exercising reasonable rights because five of their peers struggle with those rights. They encourage students to walk and stand in a nondisruptive way around the periphery of the classroom whenever they feel the need to move. Because teenagers need to eat in order to think, these schools allow them to snack throughout the day without making a mess or drawing undue attention to themselves. They encourage whispering as a social skill, so students can have a

quick word with a friend. They allow hats and hoodies as long as those head coverings always enable staff to make eye contact with students.

Of course, there are still the outliers among the students who make noise walking around the room, or can't write because their sandwich is messy, or pull their hats down low. Those students need more coaching, more preparation, and occasionally reduced privileges if they seem unable to handle the opportunities. But these schools don't restrict the teens who are ready for greater freedom, any more than they would stop teaching algebra to the class because five students would struggle to learn it. These schools aim high, celebrate the vast majority of teenagers as the standard bearers for evolving and expanding rights, and protect those few outliers from their own worst impulses.

The celebration of teenage responsibility also means that staff are not unnecessarily focused on rule breakers, or on remembering all the rules, or on their own disenchantment with the rules. They are more unified in their efforts to build a reliable learning environment and more able to be the teachers they always wanted to be. A small set of rules for running a school can then be considered practically sacred—as self-evident and unalienable as our rights. And around *those* rules we unite and celebrate our adult unity, guiding teenagers into adulthood.

Here are a few ways to build staff unity amidst the hurly-burly of teenage development, and to limit our impulses to become repressive and rule-bound:

Know the difference between a rule and a guideline. The nature of a rule is absolute—one that should be followed at all times, without exceptions. Many top-down institutions make the mistake of creating a new rule after each critical event. You can probably imagine the company where, after one employee incorrectly files a report, managers decide to make a rule that all subsequent reports must be signed by a supervisor. But you don't always or even usually need to go that far. When I was a principal and my staff debriefed after a critical event, we asked ourselves, "Do we need a rule, or can this be a guideline?" We always leaned toward guidelines built upon relationships. Rules are special; guidelines are common.

Consider your capacity to manage without the rule. If you can manage the situation with current resources, then there's probably no need to make a rule. For instance, at my school, we had strict dress code rules prohibiting clothing with displays of violence, profanity, drugs, or harassment of vulnerable populations. Most students dressed in ways that would not disrupt learning. One day, a young woman came to school wearing an unusually short skirt. We considered imposing a skirt-length rule, but chose instead to let a female staff person who had

a relationship with that girl talk to her one-to-one about self-image. We decided that our culture of relationships and dialogue was enough; we didn't want or need a rule that had us measuring skirt lengths.

Be fully prepared to back up the staff who do enforce the rules. By keeping the rules to a minimum, the school can more consistently enact clear protocols for automatic systemic responses when a rule is broken. When the response from the main office is predictable, teachers will feel supported, and they will be more likely to follow through on the rules. And administrators can be far more absolute about holding staff accountable when all systems are in place—and the absolute rules are manageably few.

Focus on staff-student relationships. A key mantra from restorative justice is to focus on repairing the harm done, not on the rule that was broken (Poliner & Benson, 2017). There are many fissures in staff unity when a student returns to class after a disciplinary action, but the support staff outside of the classroom has not communicated any insights, resolutions, or plans with the teacher. Without that communication, the teacher cannot improve her relationship with the student. Teachers should let the office know when they need to talk to a student before he returns to class. In return, the office staff can let the teacher know if the student needs a meeting: "Mr. Benson, Edgar is upset with something he thought you said to him. He'd appreciate a minute to talk, and then he'll be good to go." It's not the rule, it's the relationship! *Annually review the student handbook.* Many handbooks are sprinkled with rules that could be redefined as guidelines or with rules that are inappropriately applied to all 17- and 18-year-olds. A committee of staff, students, and parents can help with this review, as they often know which rules are actually part of the day-to-day culture and which ones are randomly enforced.

Articulate student human rights. When the opening pages of a school handbook are about the rules and the consequences, we are telling the community that discipline is what we hold most important. Instead, why not proudly list the unalienable rights that every person—staff, students, and parents—share as members of the school community? Boldly proclaim the ideals that define us at our best and seek unity around those truths that the staff will model every day. For instance:

- Every person who walks onto the grounds of our school has the right to be treated with exquisite respect.
- Students have the right to be free from being shamed in front of their peers.
- Students have the right—and our support—to talk with their teachers to make plans to do better academically and socially.

- Students have the right to be given time to think about the questions asked in class. Every student's brain will be given time to engage in the conversation.
- Students have the right to negotiate with teachers to adjust assignments so they can successfully complete the goals of the task.

School communities are stronger when they unite around the essential principles and rights that promote relationships, responsibility, and healthy adolescent development. Arbitrary rules, by contrast, mainly create divisions and misunderstandings.

Guiding Questions

- ➔ Do teenagers deserve more rights and freedoms in school, or do they do better with regulations?
- ➔ Can you think of an instance in your school where a "rule" could've been a "guideline" instead?
- ➔ Have you ever bent the rules for a student? Do you think that was OK? Did it affect your relationship with your colleagues?

References

- Poliner, R., & Benson, J. (2017). *Teaching the whole teen: Everyday practices that promote success and resilience in school and life*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
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