

AN INTRODUCTION
TO
THE LINSCOTT CHARTER
SCHOOL
COMMUNITY CURRICULUM

BASED ON THE WORK OF:

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INTRODUCTION

*“There are obviously two educations.
One should teach us how to make a living, and the other how to live.”*

-James Truslow Adams

In the past, the job of schools was to give students a foundation of knowledge, useful primarily for supporting themselves financially. We relied on our families, neighborhoods, and religious institutions to teach our children how to live in our society. This is no longer the case.

First, radical changes in the way we make our livings, the movement from an industry and manufacturing economy to one based on information and entrepreneurship forces us to reconsider the objectives of education. We need adults who can think creatively, work collectively, and make interpersonal and intellectual connections. It is not enough in a democratic society to teach our students, its future citizens, basic skills to maintain a workforce. A healthy democracy is sustained by a citizenry that is educated with skills and knowledge to solve problems with critical and creative thinking.

Secondly, as traditional cultural roles break down, we face changes in our social relationships. The social expectations that previously guided adult-child interactions have been called into question. The belief that “father knows best” or the adage “spare the rod, spoil the child” seem antiquated in this new millenium. Yet, parents and teachers seek a middle ground, somewhere between the authoritarianism of the 1950s, and the anarchy of the 1970s. We want to raise children who are intelligent, responsible *and* respectful. It is necessary, therefore, to forge new expectations aligned with our increasingly democratic society. According to Rudolph Dreikurs,

“Rapid and fundamental changes in our society accompany the transformation of an autocratic into a democratic culture...In an autocratic culture, all relationships are those of the superiority of one individual or group over another. In contrast, in a democratic atmosphere all relationships are fundamentally those of equals... We are little prepared traditionally to live in a democratic atmosphere: our insecurity becomes obvious in all our endeavors, but most painfully so in our dealings with children. Here, our deficiency in establishing the necessary relationship between equals is not only obvious, but

defeats our best educational efforts...The whole generation of children is in rebellion against adults who try to impose their will on them."

Beyond the societal imperative for democracy, there is a more personal need for change in our educational systems: **human development is based on self-determination**. In order to grow as individuals, we must exert control over our own destiny, make decisions for ourselves, and learn from those choices. We see examples of the need for self-determination in the arenas as varied as psychotherapy, the workplace, and international development. In each case, the individual's desire for independence or sovereignty propels them forward. In each case, overlooking or suppressing that desire results in hostility or frustration. Human beings are wired with this type of feedback mechanism, yet this fact is often ignored in school settings.

Purpose

The following materials provide a theoretic understanding of the philosophy behind the Linscott Community Curriculum. It is meant to guide all of us in implementing a program that will include an approach to discipline as well as character development, a program that really is inclusive enough to be called "a way of life." It does *not* provide a step-by-step recipe for "character education" or a panacea for all school problems, but aims at fostering *Self* in children: self-motivation, self-reliance, and self discipline. It also aims to foster the ability of the adults in the environment to model those qualities.

One of the fundamental assumptions of this philosophy is that change comes with self-reflection, and therefore we ask that of every member of the Linscott Charter School Community. Delving into these concepts is liable to raise questions about the program or the practice. Although these materials are not designed to answer all questions, we hope that they can start us on a journey of discovery.

ASSUMPTIONS, VISION AND BEHAVIORS

All schools want students to learn, and most include some version of this ideal in their mission statement. At Linscott, what we hope to achieve is the direct application of the vision or mission statement into behaviors that support growth, and the use of assumptions of human nature to build a vision of success.

We begin with an *image* of what a successful student looks like, as expressed in our mission statement:

Linscott Charter School is a K-8 parent participation school, collaboratively governed by parents and staff. Dedicated teachers and supportive families provide individualized, active, hands-on learning that fosters each child's academic success, encouraging excellence. Students become self-motivated, critical thinkers, demonstrating creativity and confidence. Our focus on community, in and out of the classroom, allows students to gain social and environmental awareness.

The vision is based on a set of assumptions about human nature: how we learn, what we need and what brings satisfaction. Extending in the other direction are the behaviors that create the vision. It isn't enough to say "we want our students to be responsible." The school must have policies and procedures in place that encourage the student to move toward the ideal vision.

The following diagram illustrates this flow:

Assumptions

The following assumptions provide the basis for the school's vision. Each expresses a slightly different facet of the total picture, but in reality, they are interrelated and overlapping.

Human beings inherently want to learn.

- 1a. Personal freedom in the form of creativity and choice fosters learning and

personal growth.

1b. Fear inhibits growth and learning.

Human beings are decision-makers: they grow and develop a sense of purpose, responsibility and significance when they are allowed to make decisions for themselves.

2a. All choices lead to growth. Mistakes are opportunities to learn.

2b. Adults define the limits of decisions.

2c. Human beings can make better decisions for themselves with complete information, including the knowledge that comes from self-reflection.

People thrive when they feel they belong and when they feel they are significant.

3a. People feel they belong and are significant when they:

Are listened to

Are taken seriously

Feel needed

The Linscott Charter School Vision

"A shared vision is a vision that many people are truly committed to because it reflects their own personal vision." - Peter Senge

In 2003, as a community, Linscott Charter School developed a new mission statement which contained our vision of a successful student. We will use this vision as the foundation to guide all curricular, program, and policy decisions for our school. However, what we hope to accomplish through the Linscott Community curriculum is more than that: it applies to student expectations as well as all human interactions within the school, involving parents, teachers and all other school personnel. Simply put,

Linscott Charter School aims to develop students who are responsible, respectful, responsive, and resourceful.

The following definitions demonstrate a unique and very specific interpretation of each of these words:

Responsibility: Willingness to see oneself as cause in a matter.

Respect: Honoring one's ability to make decisions.

Resourcefulness: A state of being readily able to meet and handle a situation.

Responsiveness: A sense of community, social interest, belonging and a concern for others.

Each of these points centers on the individual and the expectation that the individual is responsible for his or her own self. The emphasis on the internal state of the child rather than the external indicators of success reflects a belief that one precedes the other. In other words, once a person assumes responsibility for his/her self, that person will naturally learn to the best of his/her capabilities. Of course, the school aims to develop students' intellectual abilities, to produce students that achieve well academically, and teachers provide a rigorous and challenging education to this end. However, the linchpin to success is personal responsibility and motivation, not a new notion.

Developmentally, these expectations can be explored in depth with middle school and older elementary students. The ages between 12 and 15 are filled with self-examination and a quest for learning. The operating psychological growth principle for this age group is "autonomy." Students of this age test the waters of self-identity and self-expression by altering their clothing, language and study behaviors. Academic performance can vary radically as students "try

on" different styles. This process can be distracting and stand in the way of learning. The more an adolescent understands about himself or herself, the more freely that person can assume responsibility. Thus, self-awareness and self-reflection are key habits to encourage in middle schoolers.

At the same time, these expectations are equally attainable for even the youngest students. For preschoolers or kindergarteners, whose growth also centers around autonomy, there is a constant tug-of war between vulnerability, wanting to please, and simultaneously feeling invulnerable, wanting to make an impact on the world, demonstrated in the incessant battle cry: "look at me!" At the same time there is a burgeoning ability to walk in another's shoes that provides a golden opportunity for learning about community, and becoming part of something bigger than oneself.

For the young and middle elementary student we find vacillation between taking initiative to demonstrate newfound mastery of skills with wanting to "stay little" and be taken care of. As if that were not enough, there is the dilemma of figuring out who to please, -- the adults or the other students -- as peers take on increasing importance in their lives. The success of the "Four R's" for even the youngest students lies in their simplicity, despite the complexity and depth implicit in the definitions.

In order to support this type of growth and development, Linscott envisions itself as a learning institution that promotes democracy, by modeling democratic decision making and representation.

Responsibility

Willingness to see oneself as cause in a matter.

Personal responsibility is a central theme around which much of the assumptions, visions and behaviors outlined in this document orbit. Joan Madden describes it thus:

It sounds like 'I did it... I am it... I have it,' as opposed to 'he made me do it...she did it...society is that way.' This attitude results when people become conscious that they have real choice in a matter. In a school, the adults designate which areas of choice are appropriate for the children, give the children clear information about

consequences of the choices, support the child totally in whatever choice is made, do not blame or praise the child for any choice and do not handle anything for the child. In other words, many situations are created where the child can experience self as cause rather than effect.

Many students approach learning as a “have to:” Mom, Dad, Teacher, and Society have all conspired to force education onto these students- making them do mundane, difficult, or pointless tasks for some reason, unknown to the student. This results in extreme passivity or rebelliousness. When a student is responsible for her education, she is engaged. She may not be happy about every aspect of it, but she acknowledges her role in making it valuable. Rather than blaming others for her situation, or feeling like a victim of circumstances, she assumes self-power.

Responsibility *means* making mistakes and accepting consequences. Responsibility *does not mean* being perfect. For example, a student who generally returns his homework forgets it one day. Rather than blaming the teacher for assigning homework on an unexpected day, calling his mother to come deliver it, or getting angry at the school for making him do such stupid work, the responsible student acknowledges his error, accepts the appropriate grade on that assignment and brings the work in the next day.

Respect

Honoring one's ability to make decisions.

This somewhat surprising definition of respect also focuses on decision-making. Rather than simply “being nice” to elders or people around us, this definition encompasses the decision-making process in respecting self and respecting others. Self-respect comes from making appropriate choices for oneself and not allowing others to make these decisions. Respect for others comes from not making choices that are for others to make. In many ways, we disrespect children when we make decisions for them about matters that are best left for them to decide, such as what they should wear (within reason), when they should do their homework, or who they should choose as friends. And teachers sometimes don't respect themselves, by allowing certain students or certain parents to influence their decisions in the classroom.

Children learn respect when they are treated with respect. Therefore, the school environment must be respectful of students at all times, by allowing them to make appropriate choices, and also by listening to them and taking their concerns seriously. If we truly respect children as human beings, we pay attention to their decision making processes, listen to their needs and desires, and uphold our agreements with them. If on occasion we have to break an agreement, we respect them by communicating to them and explaining the rationale for the change.

At the same time, adults must respect themselves by creating environments in which teachers can teach and students can learn. When we allow children to take control of a classroom or school, we are not modeling self-respect or respect toward others. The “art” is balancing two dynamics: giving students appropriate choices wherever possible while, at the same time, not indulging them in their desires.

Two concepts provide language for the broadening of decision making toward respect: collegiality and subsidiarity. **Collegiality** means that decision-making is shared among those that are affected. In a school, that means that teachers who are in the position of enforcing rules help form those rules. Students get to choose who is in their listening groups. A related concept, **subsidiarity**, means that decisions are made on the lowest level possible. In a school setting, students can be responsible for making decisions about social events, and teachers can be

responsible for setting their schedules. Collegiality and subsidiarity are process tools in creating a democratic institution.

Resourcefulness

A state of being readily able to meet and handle a situation.

Resourcefulness can best be described as an “I can” attitude. It’s a willingness to look at any situation to see the possibilities of how things can work, rather than the automatic response to create reasons why it can’t work.

We have all met people who seem to be able to handle any situation. They look upon change as a challenge and appear to thrive on it. They are equipped with an arsenal of skills and strategies to handle whatever life dishes them. This attitude comes from a sense of confidence derived from successful experiences utilizing one’s personal resources, and it is a component of Linscott’s vision of a successful student. And we have all experienced the “naysayer” whose comments, like “We already tried that and it didn’t work” or “It’s not possible” shut down possibilities.

The school nurtures that sense of confidence by challenging students at levels beyond their comfort zone. Beginning with the assumption that all people inherently want to learn and grow, the teachers invite students to go beyond their pre-conceived limitations. Furthermore, resourcefulness is enhanced by a culture of determination and self-expression and school structures that foster self-reflection.

Responsiveness

A sense of community, social interest, belonging and a concern for others.

Responsiveness is the outward manifestation of the other qualities. If a person feels responsible, respected, and resourceful, that person is then able to move beyond his or her own needs and be responsive to the needs of the larger community. It means not having to tell a child to clean up after himself or to not disturb other students. The responsive student is aware of his environment and naturally considers how he impacts those around him.

Truly, the safety within the community and acceptance by the community is

what allows students to feel respected and resourceful. When a student feels safe to be himself, when he knows that he won't be laughed at because his clothing is a little different or he doesn't have "hip" hairstyles or clothing; he is more likely to take risks in learning, more likely to raise his hand, more likely to express a dissenting view. So to feel safe in the community, students need to provide that safety for others. **Behaviors**

For the vision and assumptions to really have meaning and affect students, they must be manifested in the behaviors within that school. The discipline policy, the communication structure, the parent-teacher conferences, dispute resolution, and grading all must reflect the core assumptions and vision of the school in order for them to truly take effect. This is the nitty-gritty business of following through on the professed beliefs, or "walking the walk." The *implicit* messages from daily interactions must point to the values in order for them to be manifested in the students.

Once a school begins expressing its values and assumptions, it falls under the scrutiny of students, teachers and parents searching for hypocrisy or oversights. Therefore, everything from the grading system to the expectations regarding permission slips must be in line with the stated values of the school.

Implicit Curriculum

The "heart" of schooling, metaphorically speaking, is embodied in the relationships amongst and between teachers, students, parents, and administrators. This is the learning environment, or **context**, in which the content or the "mind" of schooling is taught. If the **context** is not emphasized, then the ability of students to learn and retain **content** (the math or social studies curriculum) may be diminished. Students learn from both, whether the school chooses to recognize the implicit curriculum or not.

John Goodlad refers to this **context** as the "hidden curriculum" in his report "A Place Called School":

Schools explicitly teach mathematics and have boys and girls learn to read, write and spell and so on. But they also teach a great deal implicitly through the ways they present the explicit curriculum- for example, emphasizing acquiring facts or solving problems- through the kinds of rules they impose, and even through the social and physical setting they

provide for learning. Thus, they teach students to work alone competitively or to work cooperatively in groups, to be active or passive, to be content with facts or also seek insight, and so on. In brief, schools implicitly teach values.

Whether the implicit curriculum is intentional or not, it conveys messages to students about what the school values and the school's assumptions about human nature. For example, facing the desks in the room toward the front of the class conveys an assumption that the teacher holds all of the knowledge and students are to learn from watching the teacher. If a teacher says that she will meet a student at recess and fails to do so and doesn't apologize or acknowledge the agreement to meet, the student may interpret the action as an implicit message that he is not important and that it's okay to break agreements with students. It is therefore important that the school community become conscious of their assumptions regarding humans and development, and check to see if their behaviors express these assumptions effectively and if the behaviors manifest the expressed vision for the school.

Assumptions and Behaviors Chart

The following chart compares behaviors, which often exist in traditional schools and the accompanying assumptions about human behavior, to corresponding behaviors and assumptions at Linscott.

Traditional Schools <i>Linscott Charter School</i>			
Behavior	Assumption	Behavior	Assumption
Students who do not behave in class are sent to the office for discipline. Child is scolded or admonished.	Students are not to be trusted. Mistakes are bad and are to be avoided.	<i>Students who do not support the learning environment are given a check, to remind them that their behavior breaks an agreement and an opportunity to reflect in order to learn from the experience.</i>	<i>Mistakes are opportunities to learn.</i>
Teachers lead parent-teacher conferences and talk about child. Student is either quiet or not present.	Parents and teachers are responsible for students' education. Students are not capable of sharing their own progress.	<i>Students lead their own teacher/student/Parent conferences.</i>	<i>Each student is responsible for his/her own education and is capable for evaluating his strengths and areas to improve.</i>
Students are expected to adhere to rules made by teachers and administrator without their input.	Students are not capable or trusted to be self-disciplined.	<i>Teachers and administrators set up agreements and non-punitive consequences for breaking those agreements. Students can choose whether or not to keep the agreements.</i>	<i>All choices lead to growth. Mistakes are opportunities to learn.</i>
Parents talk to teachers when their child has a problem.	Students are not capable for voicing their own concerns.	<i>Students participate in Listening Groups and conferences in which they are given an opportunity to speak and be heard before a problem develops.</i>	<i>People feel they belong and are significant when they are listened to and taken seriously.</i>
If there is a problem on the school grounds, the administration will determine how it should be handled.	Students are not to be trusted to handle their own problems.	<i>Students determined that they would patrol the bathrooms to remedy a problem of misuse.</i>	<i>People thrive when they feel they belong and are significant.</i>

<p>If there is a problem between students, they either have to handle it themselves, or feel like there are tattling on their peers.</p>	<p>Students can't be taught to handle their own conflicts, so an adult will need to intervene.</p>	<p><i>Students call conferences with other students when a problem arises without feeling like they are tattling.</i></p>	<p><i>Mistakes are opportunities to learn.</i></p>
<p>Parents bring homework to school when their child forgets it.</p>	<p>Child isn't capable of remembering. Parents are responsible for their child's education.</p>	<p><i>Homework is not accepted if not brought to school by the child at the start of day.</i></p>	<p><i>Student is capable of being responsible for his/her educational choices.</i></p>

Assumptions and Behaviors for Adults

In order for Linscott Charter School to model democracy, the values must permeate all levels of the organization. Teachers, staff and the administration must ascribe to the values and assumptions expected of the students. The following chart demonstrates how these assumptions impact adults as well as children. When teachers feel the effects of this vision, they grow to become more responsible, respectful, resourceful, and responsive, and this, in turn, impacts the students.

Traditional Schools			
<i>Linscott Charter School</i>			
Behavior	Assumption	<i>Behavior</i>	<i>Assumption</i>
The principal makes the rules for the teachers. The teachers make rules for their classrooms.	Principals belong at the top of the hierarchy and decisions are made from the top down.	<i>The principal and teachers jointly determine agreements. Teachers rely on input from students for specific details.</i>	<i>Better decisions are made with complete information. Collegiality and subsidiarity.</i>
Principals expect to solve problems for staff.	Principals belong at the top of the hierarchy and decisions are made from the top down.	<i>Principal discusses problems with staff in order to jointly reach resolution.</i>	<i>Better decisions are made with complete information. Collegiality and subsidiarity.</i>
When disagreements arise, principal generally sides with teacher over parents or students.	Teachers need and deserve protection from parents and students.	<i>Teachers come to conferences willing to listen, learn, and see themselves as cause in the matter.</i>	<i>Mistakes are opportunities to learn. What's important is not who is right or wrong. What's important is that both sides feel heard.</i>
Teachers work in isolation.	Teachers need and deserve independence and privacy.	<i>Team members discuss student progress.</i>	<i>People thrive when they feel they belong and when they feel they are significant.</i>

Assignment: Assumptions & Behaviors

What are some of the assumptions, values and behaviors at your school? Complete the following chart:

Behaviors Values		
Assumptions		
How are students disciplined?		
How are students assessed?		
What is the process determining the dress code?		
How are parent/teacher Conferences handled?		
Who creates homework plans for struggling students?		
How are disagreements between students handled?		

UNDERSTANDING THE ASSUMPTIONS

Assumption 1: Human Beings Inherently Want to Learn

All men by nature desire to know.

- Aristotle, opening sentence to *Metaphysics*.

Freedom is more than the absence of violent oppression. It is more than "freedom from." It is "freedom to" - the freedom to become independent; the freedom to be much, rather than to have much, or to use things and people.

- Erich Fromm's Humanist Credo

Personal freedom in the form of creativity and choice promotes learning and personal growth.

It may be a cliché within the educational community to say that all children want to learn, but it is worthy of its overuse. At the very core of Linscott's approach is the firm belief that human beings are hard-wired to learn because we have a brain that constantly seeks to make connections, to make sense or make meaningful what our senses perceive. Left to his own devices, a baby will struggle to talk and walk, absorbing clues from his environment and practicing endlessly as he incorporates those new skills. Curiosity and imagination are essential aspects of who we are and these aspects are most apparent before the child attends school. As that baby grows, his urge to learn continues, fueling enthusiasm for bike-riding and reading.

While it's easy to think of examples of this impulse in young children, older children sometimes appear disinterested in school or education. The confining expectations of traditional schooling often quell children's innate sense of wonder and exploration, reshaping it into an obligation. Because the child is no longer allowed to ask questions, to tend to his curious nature, to source his own learning by finding out the answers to his questions, those innate desires are not encouraged by the demands of school standards and testing expectations. 90% of a child's imagination disappears by second grade. Some students experience homework and grades as burdensome demands rather than opportunities to practice, explore or learn.

Linscott Charter School assumes that all students want to learn. This must be supported by a stimulating and challenging **explicit** curriculum that is responsive to their innate sense of curiosity, as well as a respectful **implicit** curriculum that allows for creative expression and choice. For example, the explicit curriculum may be an interdisciplinary unit based on a question posed by the students. Within the school structure, the implicit curriculum encourages creative expression.

Creativity is a term usually reserved for artistic endeavors, but Linscott Charter School applies the term more broadly to refer to problem solving skills -- both personal and academic. When students complain about the condition of the bathrooms, for example, the staff decides to let them figure out a solution for themselves. In a structured discussion group, the students might air their grievances then develop a creative strategy for rectifying the situation. The result can be a solution to the bathroom problem and practical experience in creative problem solving skills.

Fear inhibits growth and learning.

In theory, most parents and educators agree that learning and the desire to learn is innate. In reality, many parents and educators exhaust themselves urging, pushing, cajoling, bribing, or threatening children in order to get them to learn, assuming that such actions are necessary for their child to learn. Why this discrepancy between ideals and actions? The critical element is the use of fear and intimidation.

The Fear Loop

When adults feel concerned that a child isn't going to learn, or fears the child's progress will reflect poorly on their teaching ability or parenting skills, they are liable to begin the cyclical game of urging. The more an adult urges or pushes a child to learn, the more the child will feel pressured. Nagging, pushing, and coaxing are ways that adults try to encourage children to comply, but these actions actually convey disrespect to them as human beings. Young people sense the implied message "You can't do it on your own." Also, it sends them the implicit message that they are not capable of choosing for themselves. The more pressure the child feels, the more likely that child will withdraw. The medium is the message. The parent's fears are clearly communicated and

received by the student. The child's natural instinct to learn becomes squelched by fear and intimidation. Of course, this results in more pressure from the adult, and the cycle continues.

An example of this process occurred with a boy from The River School whose father believed that it was the school's job to make the boy learn, no matter the cost. At home, he berated or punished the boy if he did not do his homework, and he applied a great deal of pressure to the school to improve his son's grades. The boy, in response, was determined not to learn. He simply said he did not care if he got poor grades. He refused to do his work, and became disruptive to class. Eventually, they reached a stalemate, where the boy wasn't learning and the father was furious.

This is not an unusual story. All too often, parents come to school with their hands thrown up in the air, expressing exasperation at their child's lack of interest. To get beyond this impasse, parents need to be educated about their role in the dynamic and *children need to be given a chance to not learn- in a non-disruptive manner- so that they can experience making their own choices and paying the consequences of those choices.*

Assumption 2: Human Beings are Decision Makers

Human beings are decision-makers: they grow and develop a sense of purpose, responsibility and significance when they are allowed to make decisions for themselves.

Growing up involves assuming responsibility for our actions. In order to do this we must feel in control of our lives and our choices. As adults, we want to protect children from getting hurt or doing damage, so we try to minimize the chances for “bad” choices. Often this results in removing opportunities for decision making from a child’s life, thereby reducing the chances to learn and grow and simultaneously conveying a lack of trust and respect. For example, parents do not want their children to get bad grades because they fear the sense of failure. Therefore, they “make” their child do homework. In doing this, they eliminate the possibility of making the mistake of getting a bad grade, absorbing and reflecting upon that mistake, learning from it, and moving on.

All choices lead to growth. Mistakes are opportunities to learn.

When a child learns to ride a bike, falling off is an integral part of the learning process.

The same is true as children assume more responsibility for their lives -- they fall, or make mistakes. In both cases, adults need to support the learning process without getting bogged down in the occasional tumbles. Think of what would happen if parents and teachers applied the typical responses to disciplining a child to the child’s effort to ride a bike. “You must stay on the bike. You know what they say about people who fall off. If you don’t stay on, you’ll be grounded. How many times do I have to tell you to stay on the bike. Why do you always fall off? You will ride this bike without falling. Do you understand?”

If a child’s parents were not to allow her to fall off, if they used intimidation and fear to teach her how to ride a bike, she probably would have a lot more difficulty learning to ride. Perhaps the intimidation would work for a while and she would eventually learn to ride the bike, but the side effects could be anger and resentment, hurt, or passive resistance.

What most parents do when helping their child learn to ride a bike is to provide a safe place for them to learn, allow them to make mistakes and through the mistakes learn how to ride a bike. So it is with the Linscott Charter School Agreement System. The adults have provided a safe place for the students to learn responsibility for their actions. Children learn by making mistakes, by “falling off”, and in so doing, learn what it takes to keep their agreements because they choose to do so, not because someone threatened them or embarrassed them. The adults don’t lecture, yell, embarrass, threaten, or inflict punishment.

So, You’ve Made a Mistake...

When a child makes a mistake, it’s important to give them the message that everyone makes mistakes and we learn from our mistakes. All decisions entail consequences, which optimally create self-reflection. In order to learn from mistakes the following five steps should occur:

Acknowledge that you did it, don’t blame or justify actions

Clean up the mess

Accept the consequences

Learn from the mistake

Forgive yourself for making a mistake

Neutrality

As adults, we often have preferences about the choices our students or children make and we don’t want to see them make mistakes. These preferences sometimes result in emotional responses, such as anger or frustration. When adults express emotions, they create reactions rather than allowing for independent decisions. In some cases, powerful emotions cause the feared “negative” reaction simply because they reflect and instigate a power struggle. When we experience intimidation or fear, we are likely to pull back in the other direction, rather than weigh out the factors and make a conscious decision. Therefore, it’s important when offering a choice to students that it is devoid of emotional weight. *Neutrality in tone, facial expression, and wording serves to reinforce the assumption that each person truly is responsible for his/her own choices.* It’s simply a matter of choice A or B.

Once the teachers and parents have set the parameters of the child’s choices,

adults must offer the options to the students with the same emotional impact as a selection of ice cream flavor. If the student does not turn in the homework, or arrives late for class, that is the student's choice and s/he will assume the consequences of those actions. Instead of preventing the child from experiencing the consequence, the consequence becomes the opportunity to learn.

Adults define the limits of decisions.

It is natural for adults to want to rein children in to a safe zone, keeping the parameters close. It is also natural for children to desire progressively wider and wider parameters as they grow. This is a delicate point of tension in homes and schools, one that frequently confounds the "democratic atmosphere" referred to by Driekers. When adults give children too much latitude in the decision-making process with parameters that are too wide, it generally results in an atmosphere of chaos and disrespect. When adults set limits for children that are too confining, there is usually an atmosphere of control, resentment, and sometimes rebellion. We convey respect by making appropriate choices for ourselves and not making choices that are for others to make.

Giving a student the choice to learn means they are responsible for their own choices in their education. The school sets the educational standards, but beyond that point, the students choose how receptive they are to learning. They always have made their choice and they should be respected to make that choice. It does not mean they can disrespect the teacher, parents, rules of the classroom, or rules of the school. *Adults must define the limits of the choices in such a way that children feel safe and everyone is allowed an opportunity to learn.* A student who chooses not to learn, for example, cannot sit in the back of the classroom and talk with friends, because it undermines the learning environment. However, that student can develop a plan that suits his or her needs and respects the learning environment and can be expected to adhere to it.

Mountain Playground

A parable of school children at recess illustrates this point. At a school on the edge of a mountain, children were observed on their playground. At first, the

playground had no fence around it. Children were allowed to explore the rocky terrain, which reached all the way to the edge of the mountainous drop-off. Observers noted that the kids clustered close to the school, in the safety zone of the nearby benches and sidewalks. When a fence was put up around the perimeter of the playground, observers noted that the schoolchildren spread out- playing games and exploring the entire area.

Limits are like fences around the playground. They provide a parameter within which children can feel safe and explore. The trick is that as children grow, they naturally want to expand and test those parameters. The more adults pre-determine the various levels of decision-making, and ensure that there are appropriate consequences in place ahead of time, the better armed they will be for children’s continual pressure to expand the parameters. The following chart shows a partial list of choices children at the middle school level can make, and the accompanying consequences of those decisions:

Choices	Logical Consequences
Student can decide whether or not to complete homework.	Not completing homework results in poor grades.
Student can decide whether or not to fulfill his/her community service obligation.	Not fulfilling the requirement results in not being allowed to attend extra-curricular or social events.
Student can forget his/her lunch or permission slip.	No lunch for that day, or does not get to go on the fieldtrip.

Students may **not** choose to harm themselves or others, break the school or classroom rules, or disrupt the learning environment. These areas are beyond the limits of the safety zone.

Human beings can make better decisions for themselves with practice over time when they are given the opportunity to reflect on their choices.

If learning to make better decisions for oneself is a process similar to riding a bike, students must be given ample opportunity to practice -- to fall, get back up, and try again -- without being made to feel wrong or bad. The discipline system at Linscott Charter School, known as the Agreement System, does just that: it provides practice. Just as a parent would not allow a child to learn to ride a bike along a freeway, the Agreement System sets safe boundaries for this process of trial and error, *boundaries that allow the student to experience the consequences of their actions without long term casualties.*

Agreement System

The Agreement System teaches students to be responsible for and conscious of their own choices and their own behavior. Unlike many discipline systems, which use fear or intimidation to shape behaviors, it is designed to raise awareness of how one's actions affect self and others.

At the foundation of the Agreement System is a set of expectations established prior to the beginning of the school year. Students commit to living up to the expectations or adhering to the consequences when they do not.

Linscott Charter School Agreements

I agree to support the learning environment and be ready to learn.

I agree to respond quickly and quietly when given a reminder or a directive to log in.

I agree to do nothing that disrespects myself, others, or the school.

I agree to do nothing to harm myself, others and school property.

More simply put, for younger students: I agree to help make my classroom a place where everyone can learn. I will

Be Safe

Be Kind

Be Respectful
Be Responsible
Believe in myself

Additionally, there are district-wide rules regarding drugs, weapons, tardiness, truancy, and violence, which are reflected in the Linscott Charter School Discipline Policy.

When a student breaks an agreement, the teacher points it out without judgment or humiliation. Some broken agreements result in three reminders before becoming a “behavior slip” and log-in, while others result in an automatic behavior slip and log-in. Often, these are for seemingly small infractions, such as not pushing in a chair or talking to a friend when the teacher is talking. The reason for this excessive diligence is that logging in provides a way to raise students’ awareness of their behavior and how it affects those around them, without nagging. Also, it provides an opportunity to practice making mistakes and learning from them.

Once the student has a mistake pointed out, he or she is then expected to **quickly and quietly** fill out a behavior slip recording the broken agreement, log it into the logbook, and return to whatever activity h/she was engaged in. The specific procedural logistics may vary between classrooms and/or grade levels, but the basic idea is uniform throughout the school. If it is the third reminder of the day, or if it is an extreme violation of the agreements, the student may be asked to remain in the office or another classroom for the rest of the period or activity when it seems he/she cannot handle being in class. If the student does not feel the behavior slip was fair, that student can contest it with the teacher privately or in a scheduled conference with another adult facilitator *at a later time*. The key point is that the behavior needs to stop, and discussion takes place later.

The tally of these reminders, maintained in the logbook is cleared at the end of a specified time period depending upon the grade level and/or individual student needs. For example, while all students begin with a one month time period, a student who is struggling to keep the agreements may have a modified time period of two weeks, to allow for more frequent conferences and adult support in bringing about change. While certain students may need a shortened time-frame for learning, whole classes might find they can expand the time frame. In any case, clearing the “record” allows students to start fresh without having to play catch-up with old behaviors. Within the time frame, however, there are consequences for reoccurring log-ins:

0-3 = No consequences- student fills out behavior slip for each behavior and logs-in.

4 = Student fills out a letter to take home that explains what he/she has done to receive four log-ins. The first time these go home in the year, the teacher or director calls the student's parents to explain the system and the philosophy behind it. The letter needs to come back signed the next day. Younger students have a modified log-in form that the parent can sign to acknowledge their awareness of the log-ins.

8 = Student fills out another letter explaining the reasons for the log-ins he/she has received and brings home letter to get signed. The student must also perform one hour of "community service" by the 15th of the month. This reinforces the realization that *the student has "taken away from the community" and now needs to give something back to it.* A student who does not fulfill this responsibility may not attend any extra-curricular field trips, after-school activities, or events until he/she has completed this obligation.

10 = The student will meet with the Director. The purpose of this meeting is an opportunity to have an adult help the student reflect on their actions and the consequences of their actions. For example, Bobby may only be receiving log-ins with one teacher and needs to meet with that teacher to make a plan. The student also meets with the director to go over the plan. The director calls the student's parent(s), informs them of the plan and also lets them know that the student is two checks away from staying home for a *Day of Reflection* or having the parents "shadow" the student for a day. After the director has met with the student, the student may return to class.

12 = Student is picked up by parents or stays in the office for the remainder of the day for a Day of Reflection. This is not a euphemism for suspension, as it is not marked on the child's permanent record. It is truly a break from the routine to spend time thinking about what's going on and figuring out what to do about it. The student cannot return to school until the student and parent(s) have met with the director to determine what might be causing the behavior of the student, and will submit a written reflection, addressing specific questions and including a specific plan for bringing about change. The student must stay home for a day of reflection and/or have a parent shadow him/her for a day at school.

The Red Chair

Imagine that there were only one rule in a classroom: no one is to touch the red chair. It seems to be a law of human nature that different children will react differently to this rule.

A handful of students will test the law. They will hover near the chair, seemingly drawn to it because it's forbidden. These children will try sitting on the chair to see what happens, or they will bump one another into the chair and blame those around them when they fall upon it. A few will test the rule by putting just one toe against the edge of the chair or touching it with a ruler, trying to do it quickly when no one is looking.

There will be another subset of children who will avoid the chair like an opposing magnet. These children will steer clear at all costs, taking the long way to the pencil sharpener just so they don't get anywhere near the red chair. They may be distracted in the classroom because they are pre-occupied by their need to avoid nearing the red chair.

There will also be children in the class who notice the chair, and go on. These children will neither hover near the chair nor avoid it, but incorporate its presence and the rule naturally into their behaviors. Occasionally these children might accidentally or playfully bump into the chair. They will accept their consequence and move on.

Similar reactions occur to the agreement system. The intention of the program is to encourage students to respond to rules like the last group -- aware and responsive, without being over-reactive or nervous.

Better decisions are made with complete information, including the knowledge that comes from self-reflection.

Being able to make good decisions requires fully understanding the options, including the short and long term consequences. The ability to anticipate the long term consequences is a skill that develops with practice, but the more information given at the outset, the better prepared the individual is to make a satisfactory decision.

At Linscott Charter School, the directors and staff try to give parents and students a picture of what is expected of them in terms of their participation in the program. Concrete expectations such as parent volunteer hours and homework demands, as well as personal expectations, such as a willingness to grow and an ability to reflect on ones own behavior are all spelled out in this documents and through school policies, the parent handbook and individual classroom guidelines. Similarly, when a teacher assigns a project to a student, that teacher provides complete information about what is expected, when it is due, and how the grade is decided. This allows the student to not only make an informed decision about his/her performance, but also to interpret the end product -- in some cases a grade, in others a written report -- as a result of a choice, rather than a judgment.

The trick is keeping all parties informed within the large and complex school environment. Elements that support this are:

A handbook of expectations distributed at the start of the school year
Continual home/school communication, such as a newsletter
Parent and/or student involvement in decision making processes
Student access to the log book in which behavioral infractions are recorded
Informational conferences with parents as problems arise and
Peer discussion groups.

Self-Reflection

*"The whole object of the game is getting someone to look at the good of the whole."
– Sister Joan Madden*

Much of the Agreement System appears similar to typical discipline policies. What sets it apart is the emphasis on self-reflection.

Within the agreement system, student conferences are held with the director on students' 10th and 12th checks for the month. When they come to see the director, they find out that:

They are not "in trouble" as they usually think when they have to see a principal or director.

Their behavior is their responsibility, so it's up to them how many times they want to go through this. It's not up to the adults to make them behave. This

is disrespectful to the student.

They don't need to be afraid of the teacher's or director's reaction, because their focus should be on themselves and their needs and goals and what they should do about them.

Parents are encouraged to let go and allow their child to handle the consequence so that they are not afraid of the consequence.

The conferences provide a chance to talk to students about how the choice to transform their lives is in their hands. By *reflecting* on what they have done and the consequences, they can begin to see themselves as *cause in the matter* and may choose to change their behavior. One student, new to the River School, paraphrased this conference succinctly: "So, what you're trying to do is give us some feedback about our behavior so we can think about it and if we want to, decide to change it. We don't like being nagged at and this way we have to stop what we're doing to think about it."

As clearly as this young student articulated this premise, it's confounding to many adults, particularly parents who desperately want to protect their children from pain, and who want to retain control. A big part of the teacher's and director's job is educating parents to their broadened parental duty: *imparting responsibility to their children by allowing them to learn from their own mistakes*. So instead of parent control, the student learns to control his/her own actions.

Some parents see the agreement system as a punishment and react with their own sense of failure when their child gets reminders or log-ins. Many want to further punish the child at home for his/her behavior at school. *It's important to reassure these parents that the school perceives these checks simply as mistakes and opportunities to learn; punishment only undermines the sense of freedom of choice and undermines the lessons latent in mistakes.*

Assumption 3: Belonging and Significance

People thrive when they feel they belong and when they feel they are significant. People feel they belong and are significant when they are listened to, taken seriously, and feel needed.

When people feel they belong and feel significant, they are self-confident and open to learning. Through the myriad contacts and relationships in a school (between parents and children, between teachers and students, between parents and teachers), students get the message that they are important, not more important than the adults are, but equally important. They then begin to voice more and more of their opinions, their concerns, because somebody in the school takes their concerns seriously. They feel that they matter and because they matter, they are more likely to engage in the life of school, more likely to participate in solving problems in the community. These are behaviors we want to encourage in our students who are citizens of our democracy and future voters. With fewer and fewer people voting in elections, it becomes even more imperative that schools encourage students' connection to each other, to their teachers, to their community.

When students do not feel a sense of connection, they often engage in disruptive behaviors in order to achieve that end. Like fear, this creates a cyclical response in which the student strives for reaction and ends up feeling alienated. Or worse, they are apathetic, don't care about what's happening around them or to their classmates, and care less and less about their learning.

The following chart explores various ways children may act out when they feel insecure about their sense of belonging within a group and offers strategies for combating that fear: It also focuses on the fact that adults should focus on the *underlying message and source of the behavior*, rather than on the specific behavior, and in some cases, the *meaning behind the words*, rather than the words. So instead of "Johnny is disrespectful and should be punished for that disrespect," adults will remark, "Hmm, I wonder why Johnny is so needy. What's going on that he feels he needs to act out?" in addition to addressing the behavior with an appropriate consequence. At the same time, once an underlying issue is identified, it is important that teachers and parents remain in their appropriate roles and make referrals, if necessary, to other qualified professionals to deal with behaviors stemming from learning disabilities, or deep emotional issues.

The Sense of Belonging Game...and How to Play It

Behavior (Sense of belonging)	Hidden Logic or Belief	Feeling of Adult toward Child	Avoid Reacting by:	Be Proactive by:
<p style="text-align: center;">Cooperation (100%)</p> <p>I'm okay- How can I support the whole group</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Good</p>			
<p style="text-align: center;">Attention Getting (75%)</p> <p>I am only significant when I am getting special attention</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Irritated</p>		<p style="text-align: center;">Avoid doing what the child expects. Ignore the behavior. Take time to stop, look and listen</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Give warm attention during peaceful and cooperative times.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Power Struggle (50%)</p> <p>I am only significant when I am fighting and winning</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Angry</p>		<p style="text-align: center;">Remove yourself from the conflict. Avoid doing what the child expects</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Act instead of talking. Be friendly. Admit your inability to control. Treat the child as equal</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Revenge (25%)</p> <p>I am only significant when I am getting even.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Hurt</p>		<p style="text-align: center;">Remove self from conflict without retaliating.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Give positive attention. Take time with child. Show child you care.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Assumed Helplessness (0%)</p> <p>I can't</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Hopeless</p>		<p style="text-align: center;">Be nonverbal. Do not talk.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Accept child as is in spite of inadequacy. Show faith in child's ability to surmount defeatism. Trust child with small responsibilities. Have patience.</p>

Listening Groups

When we talk to others, we feel we belong. When we listen and offer input, we feel we are significant, we feel that we make a difference in someone else's life. At Linscott Charter School, every student participates in a Listening Group -- a cluster of 5 students and their teacher or advisor, who meet twice a month to discuss topics ranging from what they did over the weekend to how they feel about their grades to peer conflicts. This is an opportunity for students to talk, share, and be heard.

During listening groups, students speak and teachers listen. This is both easy and difficult: easy in that it simply requires listening to what students say and taking them seriously, but difficult in that it may be challenging to not interrupt or try to "fix" the problem. The purpose of the group is not to solve student's problems, but to honor their "voice" and to have them practice at speaking about what is bothering them, listening to others, reflecting on their own and others' behaviors, and feeding back what they have heard. Allowing students to solve their own problems strengthens their sense of worthiness. If we figure things out for students, we diminish their experience and their sense of confidence. We make a huge difference in our student's lives by validating them in the moment -- their experience. Many students do not get listened to in a typical day, week or month and this is their opportunity to have that happen.

Note: It is important to let students know during listening groups that the information they share is confidential, i.e., it will not leave the circle. Example: you won't "tell" their parents what you heard in listening groups. It is very important to keep this agreement. However, you must also let students know that you have an obligation to report any issues that involve safety or abuse. If they told you that someone at school was thinking of committing suicide, you would need to deal with that. Any cases of abuse (by law) must be reported as well.

Generous Listening

We communicate all the time- when we talk, when we're silent, with our faces and our bodies. More effective and satisfying communication occurs when our words match our non-verbal forms of communication.

Feelings are an important part of who we are, and often motivate our actions.

For many, it's easy to share thoughts, ideas, and opinions, but it's harder to share feelings because it causes a sense of vulnerability.

In order to truly understand the experience of the speaker, we need to understand their feelings. We cannot do that without being in touch with our own feelings. The more you can recognize your own feelings and the needs to which they are linked, the more you will be able to listen deeply to another in order to understand that person's experience.

After listening to another person, offer back what you think that person might be feeling. Remember, you can only make guesses so offer them back as a suggestion to reflect upon, rather than as a certainty. ("Perhaps you're feeling a sad because...")

Conferences

When a disagreement or difficulty arises at school between two students, a teacher or parent and a student, or any other combination, a conference is set up to air the grievance and give the participants a chance to voice the problem in a safe setting. Generally, the two involved parties and the student's advisor, or teacher, or the director are present. The advisor/director acts as a neutral facilitator to the discussion.

The point of the conference is not about who is right and who is wrong. If that were the focus, it would be emotionally unsafe for students, teachers, and parents to participate. The point of the conference is communication -- both parties will have an experience of being heard and understood by the other. Once that is achieved, the solution to the conflict, if needed, is more likely to occur.

Like the Listening Groups, the impact comes from giving participants an opportunity to speak and be heard. The River School uses an Active Listening approach to the conferences, in which the participant is allowed to express his/her perceptions and feelings, and be heard. The keys to Active Listening are:

The conversation is direct. It does not go through the facilitator. The participants face each other and talk directly to one another to avoid objectification. It begins with the Invitation, "What do you want to say to me?"

It is the intent of each person to be heard and to hear the other person.

The facilitator does not have to direct the conversation toward an end result, such as an apology. The facilitator's role is to ensure that each person follow the formula for discussion.

The facilitator cannot be emotionally invested in the outcome.

The person who initiated the conference begins.

Active Listening

Person A begins by saying, "What do you want to say to me?"

Person B answers with an "I Message" by completing the sentence: "I feel _____ when you _____. " For example, "I felt hurt when you ignored me during lunch and sat with other people instead of me as you usually do."

Person A feeds the statement back to *Person B* in his/her own words: "So what you're saying is..." After this is checked for accuracy, *Person A* asks if there is anything else *Person B* wants to say. "So, you were hurt when I didn't tell you that I was going to sit with Frank instead of you."

When this is exhausted, the roles are switched and *Person B* asks if there is anything *Person A* wants to say.

Feeling Needed

Beyond listening to students and taking their needs seriously through conferencing, Linscott Charter School makes it clear to students that their presence is necessary for the school to work effectively. Just as we, as adults, need to feel we offer a unique service and valuable role in our families and work environment, children must experience the impact of their abilities, style, passion, and efforts on their worlds.

A variety of internal structures allow students the chance to provide service to the school in ways that match with their interests. Three ways this occurs are:

Every student has a school or classroom chore such as emptying waste baskets and refilling supplies.

Students may participate in clubs and committees which are responsible for planning extra-curricular activities and school events.

Classes and listening groups hold problem-solving discussions when the need arises.

An example of this last point occurred at The River School when a student with Aspergers Syndrome was experiencing harassment from some of the students. Rather than approaching the behavior solely from a disciplinary standpoint, the teacher explained the situation to the students and asked them to determine the best strategy. Many of the students did not fully understand the condition or the ramifications prior to the discussion, and as a result, many offered ideas to help resolve the apparent misunderstanding.

Conclusion

“You don’t teach subjects. You teach who you are.” The Linscott Community Curriculum is teaching who we are, whether we are conscious or not, so it is important that we become aware of who we are and the messages we are implicitly conveying to our students through our words and actions.

Most mission statements include some references to separate character building concepts such as respect, compassion, honor, integrity, etc. Character education programs that focus on talking about these values, that work on skill building and technique usually are not as effective if the implicit messages received by students from adult behaviors contradict the explicit messages about honor, integrity, compassion, respect. Students then become mistrustful and cynical.

The power of teaching is not from content; the power comes from relationships, from human beings relating to other human beings. To the extent that teachers model self-awareness and self-reflection as processes towards becoming more responsible, respectful, resourceful, and responsive in their dealings with students, the more successful schools will be in inculcating these values in our students, resulting in an environment where academic learning is enhanced.

The Ho’ala Educational Program as practiced at Ho’ala, at The River School and at Linscott Charter School is effective because of the following factors:

- it has a solid theory of psychology about what it means to be human;
- it has a clear understanding of how human beings learn, based on brain research and the conditions that help human beings learn best;
- its affective goals and practices are aligned to the underlying psychology;
- its balanced response to the issue of control supports teachers and students alike in giving each group guidelines for appropriate decision-making, so that students are empowered, but not indulged and teachers have power without misuse;
- recognizing that human interaction is the energy that drives successful teaching and learning, teachers and parents are called upon to embed and model reflection as a life skill which encourages continued personal and professional growth.

The intent of this overview is to stimulate reflection of what messages are being conveyed by our school. Professional development and parent education must include not just new ways of teaching content, but must also include the

metacognition to see the implicit curriculum that exists in who we are and in what our school is. “A willingness to see self as cause instead of victim” is a powerful metacognitive attitude to help us improve as educators and parents. Indeed, it’s the only path that gives us power to change and grow.

Appendix

Educational Vision of the River School

Summary of River School Implicit Curriculum Assessment Qualitative Topline Report, April 24, 2001

Underlying Assumptions

The paradigm that operates at the River School and at Ho'ala is

The River School's Educational Vision

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Essentially different from most schools. This paradigm begins with two assumptions:
1/ that human beings are decision makers

Peter Senge defines vision as a visual image which shapes the mission of an organization. The River School has as its vision the student as a **self-actualized, independent learner**. This means that we want our students to have a strong sense of self - self-motivated, self-disciplined, self-reliant - who take responsibility for their lives, instead of blaming others, making excuses, or justifying self; and who contribute to their families, communities, and planet.

We organize our school so that our students display qualities of:

- Responsibility
- Respect
- Responsiveness
- Resourcefulness

the four R's of our *implicit curriculum*. It is the responsibility of every public school to educate citizens who are conscious, responsible human beings. Thus, in addition to our *explicit curriculum* teaching the core subjects, our *implicit curriculum* focuses on developing the character habits of conscious, responsible citizens, necessary to a vibrant democracy.

History

The River School has completed eight years of growth and refinement, culminating in winning a California Distinguished School Award in May 2003. While a fairly young school, the underlying philosophy and theory for educating the self-actualized, independent learner has been in development and refinement for nearly thirty years. This educational philosophy began in a small school in Hawaii in 1972 and was initially called "Individual Education," the result of a collaboration between a Catholic nun, Sr. Joan Madden, and an Adlerian psychologist, Dr. Raymond Corsini. Linda Inlay, the director of the River School, was trained by Sr. Joan Madden and spent her formative years as a teacher and later as vice principal in this program, which is now called "Ho'ala Education." Ho'ala, which means "awakening of the self" is also the name of the independent school that Sr. Joan and Linda Inlay started in 1986. Inlay brought the Ho'ala Education program to the River School because she found that it encourages personal and social responsibility and creative problem solving skills to help actualize the River School's vision of the independent, self-actualized learner.

Underlying Assumptions

The paradigm that operates at the River School and at Ho'ala is essentially different from most schools.

This paradigm begins with two assumptions:

1/ that human beings are

decision makers whose essential nature moves toward self-determination.

Thus, the most effective way to achieve this vision of the self-actualized,

independent learner is, not by focusing on it directly and

“making” students learn and behave independently.

When parents and teachers take the responsibility for making the students learn or behave, the students feel less of the ownership of their learning, and more

dependency on the adults to do it for them. While

parents and teachers are coming from a place of concern for the students in helping, such an attitude is

disempowering and results in loss of confidence in the students of their own

abilities. This may be a reason

**Basic
Curricular
Organization**

To be effective, we must address all aspects of the school culture to forward our vision. In other words, a systems approach to organizing a school. From governance to discipline to how teachers talk with students, to how dances are organized and conferences are facilitated; every part of the school's culture must be aligned to support the realization of the school's vision

To begin organizing our school, we make the distinction between and focus on aligning two kinds of curricula: the explicit and the implicit. The explicit curriculum includes the standards, textbooks, and assessments related to reading, writing, and arithmetic. The implicit or hidden curriculum is the assumptions and values that permeate the school's culture: the organizational, disciplinary, and decision-making structures in a school, and the ways that parents, students, and faculty communicate. Every school has a hidden or implicit curriculum whether the staff pays attention to it or not. And everything within the school's culture communicates implicit messages from how a teacher disciplines a student to how parent conferences are run to what's on a bulletin board. As John Goodlad put it:

We recognized, however, that there is both an explicit and an implicit curriculum. The latter sometimes is referred to as the "hidden curriculum" but this term is, I think, misleading. It is little more hidden than is the explicit curriculum of textbooks and workbooks. Describing the implicit curriculum is tricky in that it is inferred from the handling of the explicit curriculum and from expectations, rules, and regulations that are not always recognized.

And he also said in the same article:

The gap between the rhetoric of individual flexibility, originality, and creativity in our statements of educational goals and the cultivation of these in our schools reveals a monstrous hypocrisy.

Simply put, we want everything and every person in the school's culture "to walk the talk." This is a lofty goal, which we never fully reach, but toward which we constantly strive.

We therefore involve the three major groups in a school- students, teachers, and most importantly, the parents - in communicating the implicit message that the student is capable of being responsible for his or her own learning. Teaching parents another way of parenting the middle schooler is a key piece to the success of our school. The U.S. Department of Education published a short booklet called *What Works: Research about Teaching and Learning* in which is the following quote that talks of the importance of the role of parents in the learning process:

Parents are the child's first and most influential teachers. If parents are not effective teachers, then in most cases, the school will have far greater difficulty being effective . . . What parents do to help their children learn is more important to academic success than how well-off the family is.

All educators know that the attitudes for learning start in the home. If parents communicate that:

they trust their child to be responsible for their learning,
making mistakes or "poor" choices along the way are valuable learning opportunities instead of raising anxiety in the parents to fix it for their child

it is okay for their child is encounter appropriate kinds of adversity to strengthen character and build confidence;
then their child will more likely become self-confident, self-reliant,

Theory of
Personality
and
Educational
Philosophy

Despite the challenges of starting a school from nothing as all start-up charter schools have had to face, the River School has steadily improved and been successful, growing from 48 students in its first year to 185 in its 7th year, and culminating in receiving the California Distinguished School Award in May 2003. Our success is due to this holistic, coherent approach that answers two fundamental questions that should underlie every educational program:

1/ "What is the nature of a human being?" which is answered by our theory of personality

2/ "Under what conditions do human beings learn best?" which is answered by the concomitant educational philosophy based on brain research.

1/ **Theory of Personality:** The theory of personality is based on the work of Alfred Adler, a cohort of Freud, who, unlike Freud, believed that the behavior of human beings is determined less by being the victim of the forces from within (heredity) and without (conditioning), and more by the choices they make in regards to two basic needs for affirmation: the sense of belonging and the sense of significance. A person's sense of belonging and significance is augmented by:

being listened to
being taken seriously
feeling needed

When these two basic needs are fulfilled, then students do not act out to get these needs met and instead focus on the task of learning. Thus, the River School structures the school in order to provide for these two basic needs.

Adler and Rudolf Dreikurs, a student of Adler, theorized that human beings are teleological by nature, that they are purposive decision makers and self-determining. They learn by experience, by the choices they make. Buckminster Fuller echoed this concept when he said that human beings learn primarily by making mistakes. Furthermore, Dreikurs believed that the home is the most significant element in preparing students to be effective decision-makers and the school, a distant second. The collaboration of the two is a powerful combination to support students in acquiring knowledge about their world, and, more importantly, about themselves.

Educational Philosophy:

From these assumptions of the nature of a human being, the River School evolved an educational philosophy, an amalgam of ideas that answer the question: Under what conditions do human beings learn best? The mixture includes democratic principles from Individual Education, brain-based learning, progressive education, Vatican II, and the philosophers, J. Krishnamurti and Buckminster Fuller. Here is a sampling of the ideas:

Human beings learn primarily by making mistakes. Fear of making mistakes impedes learning. Therefore, a school's learning environment should support students in becoming less afraid of making mistakes and lessen situations where fear is used to motivate student behavior. Fear reduces the brain's ability to deal with complex learning situations and results in reactive responses by the primitive brain.

Use of other extrinsic means of motivation - like rewards and punishment - impede learning because they go against the nature of a human being who desires being self-determining and, therefore, resists

manipulation. These ideas fit with Adler's view of human beings as decisionmakers.

The use of these extrinsic means implicitly assumes that human beings need such measures in order to learn. The assumption the River School

Explicit Curricular Development

The explicit curriculum: In the explicit curriculum, we follow brain-based principles by blending the state standards of the disciplines, connecting them through an overarching theme and essential question. We connect knowledge in this way because the brain learns best when the disparate state standards are connected into a meaningful whole and applying that knowledge to answer a question or solve a problem, rather than learning math separate from language arts, separate from science, and so forth. The knowledge and skills that our students learn are not to be used separate from one another, but used together in real-world jobs to solve problems.

One year the essential question to blend the standards for social studies (ancient and world history), science standards, language arts and visual arts was:

“What evidence do you have that technology (applied science) shaped culture through the ages and culture shaped technology?”

This becomes the context and the lens by which our students view all of the state standards. Rather than learning one more thing in a laundry list of standards, students are connecting the standards through their attempts to answer this question.

Another assumption we make is that human beings are creatures who seek personal meaning. This is what distinguishes us from other animals and, for middle schoolers; this is a critical key to opening up their interest and ownership for learning. Recognizing that personal meaning is the spark to ignite the students’ passion and interest, the teachers began the year with lessons on the art of questions - what makes a good question - in order to engage students in asking their own questions. They created a list of qualities of a good question:

- it has more than one answer;
- it causes one to ask more questions.

Teachers also infuse their teaching with their personal answer to the question, “So why do we have to teach these standards?” For one teacher, it was important to teach the science standards in answering the essential question because technology has had disastrous results on planetary health. For one of the social studies teachers, it was important to have her students realize that despite the diversity among cultures across time, the aspects of our humanity show up in each culture and connect us across time and across the globe. Hopefully, through this modeling, students will be able to answer their own question: “Why should I learn this stuff?”

The three teams in the school created their own cultures as a “test” of their understanding of culture. In the process, each culture was challenged by war, pestilence, natural disasters; and in the science class, the science standards were taught through the solutions to these challenges (applied science). For example, as the cultures are attacked by marauding Visigoths, in science, students will learn about simple machines to construct catapults, this process mirroring the way in which technology was developed to meet a societal need.

Understanding of the essential ideas was assessed through creative solutions to mini-projects, a simulation culminating activity, and an end of the year essay, “What evidence do you have that technology shaped culture and culture shaped technology?” In visual art, they created images and objects to share their understanding of the underlying patterns they noticed through the cultures.

For the year 2002-03, we selected three other essential focus questions from the text, *Designing and Implementing Integrated Curriculum* in order to use the connections among social science and science standards to support students in answering the questions:

6th grade “What does it mean to be human?”

7th grade “What is our relationship to the earth?”

Summary

It is this **systems approach**, this aligning of all the elements in the school's culture - explicit and implicit - to follow our theory and philosophy that is the root of the success of our school. . As Senge said:

System thinking makes understandable the subtlest aspects of the learning organization - the new way individuals perceive themselves and their world. At the heart of a learning organization is a shift of mind - from seeing ourselves as separate from the world to connected to the world, from seeing problems as caused by someone or something "out there" to seeing how our own actions create the problems we experience. A learning organization is a place where people are continually discovering how they create their reality. And how they can change it.

By paying attention to the context, we create an environment in which our students become strong individuals who flourish and learn as conscious, responsible human beings, necessary for a healthy democratic society.

Revised June 2003

Summary of River School Implicit Curriculum Assessment Qualitative Topline Report, April 24, 2001

The River School has been widely effective at instilling in the students the principles of the implicit curriculum by teaching them directly to students and parents, incorporating them into the academic curriculum and school structure, and modeling them in adult-student interactions. These values are thoroughly integrated into the school teachings and culture, and therefore impact students in countless ways. Virtually every participant in this study felt that there was some growth in students' sense of responsibility, moral development, and socio-affective skills.

Some of the most effective means of conveying these principles to the students include:

Encouraging self-expression in students by creating an environment in which students feel safe trying on different styles and characteristics.

Accepting and appreciating the whole child, not just viewing the student as an academic being.

Talking to the student with respect and listening with interest demonstrates trust and fosters self-confidence.

Making the tenets of the implicit curriculum clear to everyone through home-school communications, parenting classes, and school policies.

Utilizing teaching methods that support the implicit curriculum shows students that these are more than ideals, they are practices that the school lives by.

Holding appropriately high expectations regarding academic performance, responsibility, personal accountability and consideration for others, tells students that they are capable. This is particularly true when mutual trust between students and teachers/parents has been established.

A small number of parents and students perceive inequities in the execution of the implicit curriculum. *It is important to note that no one disagreed with the professed tenets, or the overall success of those tenets in effecting the students.* However, a minority of participants felt that some of the teaching staff's difficulty modeling the qualities of the implicit curriculum stands in opposition to the program's basic foundation and to some extent undermines the learning.

The most common references to this concern revolve around the discipline system, which is prone to misunderstandings and injustices, particularly as the teaching staff develops the skills necessary to administer it equitably and without judgement.

Secondarily, when teachers failed to model consideration, self-awareness, or responsibility they fell under scrutiny. Students, taught to cultivate these qualities in themselves and note them in others, easily ferret out transgressions.

The parental role in River School education confuses some. Parents continue to want to advocate for their children and support their education through all familiar avenues, but they are learning to allow their children to advocate for themselves and to take the lead in their own learning.

The more parents experience the implicit curriculum through non-didactic means, the more comprehensive their understanding. This helps parents resolve concerns about the discipline system, equity, and self-motivation.

