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# Julia Steiny: When rules open doors and anti-social students engage

01:00 AM EDT on Sunday, August 1, 2010



This is the first of two columns about lessons learned at “alternative schools” for troubled youth in Pennsylvania.

The Lansdale School, in Montgomery County, is a remodeled commercial space, supplemented by a couple of portable classrooms — no frills. Inside, its heads-down environment necessarily puts academics second to the emotionally draining labors of bringing disengaged and often out-of-control kids back into a community fold.

Lansdale is one of seven schools run by the Community Service Foundation (CSF), out of Bethlehem, Pa. CSF educates kids who communities and public schools can't handle — drug-involved, disruptive, uncontrollably angry, self-destructively depressed. Some are returning from youth detention (prison) or being diverted to the school as an alternative to prison. Others are sent by public schools or desperate parents.

Most schools for troubled “bad” kids impose rewards and punishments to train the kids to comply with rules. Research shows that when the external forces are gone, the compliance often goes too.

CSF's “restorative” philosophy also uses a highly structured system. But it works hardest at non-punitive ways of motivating kids to want to cooperate, and teaching them how. CSF helps youth build a community for themselves, with something clearly in it for them. Kids crave a sense of belonging. They want to trust their own powers to work with others, meet their own needs, and be in charge of themselves and their lives. Wanting the warm benefits of community develops kids' intrinsic controls, which have a good chance of staying with them when they leave.

To see this work in the flesh, I visited Lansdale with a small group that also included two social workers from Hong Kong and a chipper woman from England. Apparently, antisocial kids are a growing problem internationally.

We arrived in the midst of a crisis. We had been told that except in case of a crisis, we could wander wherever we liked, sit in classes, talk to kids, even drop into group counseling sessions, as long as the door wasn't closed. The staff would answer our questions, but often on the fly, since these kids can't be left idling without supervision for any length of time.

But a new kid was having a meltdown. The newbies are the hardest. Kids who've fended for themselves in state care, chaotic homes or hustling on the street are not interested in cooperating with your stupid community. Acting out to shock outside observers is meat for the hungry. So a cheery staff member temporarily parked us in an "easy" classroom, with "reasonably high-functioning kids, so you won't see lots of behavior problems with them."

Hmmmm. Everything's relative.

Roy (not his real name) has aggressive, nasty bayonet and rifle tattoos shooting up his neck and grazing his jaw and hairline. His head is on the desk. His social-studies teacher calmly asks if he'd like to talk to someone. No response. His classmates are getting annoyed at his behavior. I get the feeling we're all hoping he'll pull out of it.

On the walls, prominent among the wealth of educational materials, is a list of "Class Rules." Written out by hand and looking new, the longish list has an odd mix of the obvious rules — mutual respect, confidentiality — with loopy ones like "No eating stuff with fake strawberry flavor." Apparently, the classes, guided by teachers, regularly sit down together to fashion that particular group's agreements with one another.

Ah, here's a lesson: rules are agreements between people. Living in community means living with rules. Nigh-feral adolescents hate rules, because the rules always came from some random authority, and certainly never worked for them. CSF involves kids in rule-making. The CSF expectation is that adults and kids should abide by their mutual agreements. (CSF's adults are role models in excelsis, astoundingly unflappable.)

Now, among these very rules is: "No putting your head down on the desk." In fact, Roy is really bugging everyone, and getting lots of "I can't concentrate when you're such a lump." The teacher asks again who Roy might like to talk to, and mercifully, because serious tension was rising, Roy mumbles a name. The teacher makes a call and tells him where the person can be found. Roy galumphs out in a dramatic huff. The kids have a short, but strikingly articulate conversation about "bumming" and "getting totally distracted" by Roy's huff. The teacher shrugs, and explains to the visitors that Roy participates and usually is fine, but clearly has something on his mind.

Roy will have to take responsibility for his behavior in the afternoon accountability group, which is very public a feature I'll discuss next week. But his relatively minor acting out, breaking a class rule, is less important than his making the excellent choice to go talk to someone. As these kids get increasingly acclimatized to living successfully in community, they need immediate access to sympathetic ears. An upset kid can ask to talk to another kid. What matters is that he's using his words rather than throwing chairs or raging abusively.

The CSF motto is "Restoring connections between youth and community." ([www.csfbuxmont.org](http://www.csfbuxmont.org))

The teacher did not muscle Roy into leaving the room in order to keep teaching. The kids did. The kids have credibility far more than the adults. Roy was rankling their community by breaking their agreements. So these "easy" kids are those who see the benefit of cooperation. They get it.

Too often rules are a substitute for listening. They're quick. They're mechanical. If you do X, you're suspended, you're punished, you're bad.

Restorative practices have far more power to help troubled young people make lasting changes.

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