

# Parents, Children, and Connecticut's Public Schools



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In Connecticut, where I live and work, many parents and children feel unheard by teachers and staff in the public schools. One third grader recently complained to me that his school felt like “the military.” The problem looms largest in our cities.

In many urban public schools the students march in lockstep on a rigidly defined class schedule. Even in the lower grades, they are expected to stay in their seats, both feet on the floor, facing forward, without speaking unless spoken to, sometimes for hours on end. Children who cannot or will not do so may forfeit recess.

Each school's central mission, imposed by the district, seems to be formulaic, regimented instruction intended to document preparation for exams that are both burdensome and largely meaningless as measures of educational progress but that threaten the school's standing in the state and nation.

When there are behavior problems, a harried teacher or staff person eyeballs the situation and passes judgment. The issues, occasional or chronic, are usually disruption of class time, broken school rules, or a child's failure to follow a teacher's directives. Bored and made irritable by stress, many students learn that their feelings do not count.

The finger of blame is pointed first at the student, second at the parents, and third at the therapist. When the child is known to have special needs related to a mental health diagnosis, the school's behavioral objective tends to be eradication

of the symptoms (“Get well!”). Even when the problem behavior is undeniably medical in origin, schools rarely offer to focus on the fit between the child and the learning environment.

I want to suggest here that it is possible to take a different approach to the management of children from elementary grades through high school. Before I do so, however, let me be clear. The schools are staffed by many highly qualified, dedicated professionals who are committed to education and who trudge onward despite staggering bureaucratic requirements, excessive paperwork, budgetary constraints, and unrelenting oversight from the local board.

Teachers and staff members who eschew the school district’s party line, as regards policy or the handling of a challenging student, are often reprimanded and may even lose their jobs. Authority throughout the school community is very much a top-down matter. Teachers who remain in the system year after year are truly heroes.

But to whom do our public schools belong? Surely not to the teachers; they are workers under contract. To the staff? They are merely salaried employees. Shouldn’t we start from the premise that schools belong to the children and families whom they exist to serve? I wonder what would happen if students were taught that their school was their community and their responsibility.

In this scenario, the adults who run the school would communicate frequently with parents and with representatives of the student body. Community rules would be prominently posted. There would be intergenerational discussion of problems such as disciplinary issues, cafeteria food, and the maintenance of the school building and grounds. Each school would have a suggestion box, open to everyone. There would be a peer mediation process, with trained students working under adult supervision to help children in conflict learn how to resolve their problems.

Any member of the school community (adult or child) would be able to ask for help with a grievance against any other member. Children would learn to give and demand heartfelt apologies, and offenders would be expected to make amends in ways approved by the victims. Infractions would be treated both as interpersonal issues (calling for renegotiation of a relationship) and as offenses against the community (calling for repair of damage done and reaffirmation of community values).

A “town meeting” would occur at regular intervals in the auditorium to take stock of progress on goals that the community had set. The children would be invited to identify and congratulate local heroes among the students or the teachers and staff. In between such meetings, students would form a circle weekly to discuss the classroom experience in each subject—how successful the learning process

had been and how it could improve, with feedback for those who had undermined or enhanced it.

Children would be invited to suggest ways of solving their own problems. They would also be consulted about ways and means of eliminating bullying and other offenses against both individuals and the community. Dispute resolution would not proceed without input from all parties, who would share their viewpoints and would be asked to suggest solutions. Students would learn that problems look differently, depending on the observer's perspective and the context.

Children who became angry or upset would be able to excuse themselves from the classroom to access a quiet, soothing space (with a door) within the school building, where sensory materials would be available to help them decompress—a beanbag chair, cloth tunnels or a tent, soft music through headphones, a body sock, a deep squeeze machine, and so forth. Children with specific mental health disabilities would help design accommodations so that they could participate in the school community to the fullest possible extent.

When I make suggestions like these to educators, I am generally told that there is no time for them even though they would allow the school to run more smoothly and with greater cooperation from all parties. Some staff members report that resistance comes from a few old guard teachers who oppose new initiatives. Other people deplore the amount of red tape needed to implement any fresh approach to anything. The specter of the standardized examinations is ever present: "We haven't got time to do anything except prepare the children for the tests."

And yet our public schools bear primary responsibility for teaching each new generation our society's precepts and values. Unless we begin showing children how to resolve conflict and make themselves heard, how will they participate as adults in the local, national, and international community? In my experience, people become dangerous when they feel powerless and ignored. Surely the time has come for us to start listening.