

## **Discipline Policies and Practice at Shimna**

- an address by the Principal to the Annual Parents' Meeting, November 2005

The opportunity to set up a new school offers the opportunity for fresh thinking about the meaning of discipline in a school context. An 11-18 school needs to offer a positive learning environment and personal security to staff and students during the very years when students face probably the greatest hormonal and emotional upheavals of their lives.

In the early days, the touchstones of our developing discipline policies were input from all the constituencies within the college, students, staff, parents and governors, and an active negotiating approach. Schools are traditional bastions of society, and traditions of good relations, mutual respect and valuing positive learning conditions are good traditions, which we uphold. On the other hand, there are traditional elements of school discipline policies which we didn't want to inherit in an unreflective way.

One element frequently cited in discipline policies is consistency. The unreflective approach is that consistency is an absolute value. Working reflectively with people endorses Emerson's view that "a false consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds". The root of our policy is child-centredness, and consistency resides in doing the right thing for the child and for the children within the context of the incident.

Another example of this is in the matter of uniform: school uniform remains a traditional expectation of most parents and students. It is very easy to enforce rigid uniform rules, you just create a detention system to put people in who break uniform rules. Our Shimna uniform was decided upon by the founding parents, with the more recent addition of the outdoor coat. We are proud of our uniform and take our uniform seriously and expect our students to wear their uniform and to wear it well. We make strong representations to parents to support the college in ensuring that students wear the uniform. In the vast majority of cases, the system works well. Two years ago, we felt that standards were slipping in terms of uniform. We handle this through discussion with students, contact with parents, and occasionally, bringing a student home to find the missing uniform pieces. What we don't do is link uniform to punishment. School uniform is an agreed norm, not a moral absolute. The teenage years include a desire to make one's mark, and also learning to operate within a community and upholding shared values even when you don't feel like it. We need to work supportively with students while they learn to negotiate these often conflicting demands.

I am immensely proud of our discipline policy. Our approach is at the same time exhausting, challenging and demanding of students, staff and parents. A discipline policy needs to be a living, working document, and needs to be revisited in each generation. When the Department of Education produced new

guidance materials on discipline, we felt that the guidelines would provide interesting comparisons and benchmarks. I was particularly pleased that the Board of Governors was keen to meet parents and students directly as part of the review. Our review of discipline was discussed at one of the regular meetings of the Parents' Council, and a random sample of parents also took part in a focus group. Sixth form students also formed a focus group and bemoaned the immaturity of the younger generation!

Closely tied in with our review of discipline, was the development of our anti-bullying policy. Anti-bullying work is possibly the greatest challenge to a discipline policy. All our students need to be clear about their right to complain if they are bullied, and a child who bullies needs support to grow out of it. It is a particular challenge to manage the rights of both parties. The new policy went to the parents' council, to a parent focus group and to a focus group of younger students. I believe that both the revised discipline policy and the new anti-bullying policy are the stronger for parent and student input.

Discipline in practice at Shimna is about growing and developing and learning to make positive choices in terms of relationships with other and working to fulfil one's potential. The day to day business of how we live and learn with each other is discipline in practice. All our departments work directly with students at the beginning of the teaching year to negotiate appropriate classroom rules for working within that subject area. Form classes develop strong relationships with each other, nowadays supported by weekly citizenship classes. Form classes take a new form teacher each year, and thereby learn to work with a range of adults, a most important element in an integrated education.

There are of course times when a student needs much more sustained support than dealing with the incident of the day. We are ably supported by a range of agencies: our Education Welfare Officer comes into college twice a week, and is there to support students when a problem also affects relationships at home; our college counsellor, a post supported through parents' voluntary contribution to the college, works closely with all our key stage 3 students in citizenship, and is also available to older students, to staff and to parents for counselling; our outreach teacher comes into college once each week and supports approximately five students who are going through difficulties in working with others or in organising their work and belongings.

The greatest tribute I experienced recently to the organic and real success of our policy is our college formal. Our discipline policy transforms in sixth form into the negotiated sixth form contract, which is the basis on which students accept their A level places. Students join sixth form because they want to, not because the law says they have to be at school. The sixth form contract, and its parallels in contracts of employment, allow students to grow in independence and to learn to take responsibility for balancing rights and responsibilities. We have been particularly pleased with our new prefect system, which has allowed students to

contribute explicitly to the life of the college. Examples so far have included:

creating a team of vikings to row in a fundraising event to support children with autism;

turning out a team of labourers on a rainy Saturday morning to dig and plant our wild flower bed, a joint project with the Basque country;

working hard to get us back to workable conditions after our flood;

organising an excellent formal, attended by the whole cohort, no matter what path they had chosen at age 16.

Each year the formal, entirely organised by students, reminds me of how our discipline policy works. Our students are all proud to be there, the ones heading for straight As at A level, the ones already well underway in business, trade or training, the very few whose lives have taken a downturn. The fact that the majority who stay into sixth form take such trouble to track down those who have moved away, or the fact that those who have moved away take such pleasure in coming to see us is the double tribute to a system based on mutual respect.

None of our discipline policy could work without the support of parents and guardians. Sometimes parents/guardians are bemused at being contacted, or initially distrustful of schools, but my experience of eleven years at Shimna is of parents who take the risk of trusting us when it comes to supporting their child, and of parents who work closely with us.