

# School Stories

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## Proactive Policies and Practices – Example 2

### Brief background to school initiative

When the principal arrived at this school there was a hostile atmosphere. There was an oppositional culture and a general feeling of teachers versus students on the playground. There was also an expectation from parents of severe punishment for their children in any instance in which they were contacted by the school.

### School profile

- Metropolitan primary school
- 680 students
- Years: P–7
- This was generally a low socioeconomic area with a high proportion of Aboriginal students and some Maori students. This was not necessarily a factor in the strategies used, but racial taunts were something that teachers and staff wanted to address.

### Action

The school adopted a proactive stance toward behaviour management, aiming to minimise reactive strategies. The school exposed its students to practices that develop a sense of self-respect and a clear understanding of the school motto: “Care, Respect, Trust”. To facilitate ownership, the students were involved in the creation and the design of the new motto.

To promote team spirit within the school a challenge was created. Tokens in each of the four faction colours were used by teachers, assistants and administration personnel to reward positive behaviour. Each fortnight the winning faction was announced at assembly and received ten minutes extra recess time.

A raffle was also conducted during assembly, with five names being drawn at random and the winners receiving an ice-cream. At the end of each term the most successful faction had their name placed on a memorial shield. To culminate the challenge, if all factions met a pre-determined quota of tokens each term together, everyone received a small prize. The challenge, therefore, rewarded students at the whole-school, faction and individual levels.

To further recognise and reward positive behaviour, students were rewarded with a special event at the end of each school term, known as Reward Days. All students were invited to attend provided that they have not received more than two detentions during the current term. However, negotiations occurred if detentions were received early in the term and/or it was apparent the student has demonstrated considerable improvement in behaviour and attitude.

Games trolleys were used to reward individual classes for positive classroom behaviour. The school purchased numerous high quality children's board games and puzzles. The school handyman adapted some old trolleys to house a range of children's board games and puzzles. Each class is challenged to earn five reward cards from their teacher and one each from each teaching specialist for positive classroom behaviour. If the class achieved this goal they were allowed to use the games trolley for half a day.

A buddy class (Big buddies, Little buddies) program operated at the school. This program consisted of twice weekly class visits by Year 1 and Year 4 and 5 students. Half of one class would go to the other class (two sets of mix and visit) and shared activities, such as making and building things and/or playing games. This was organised between class teachers.

The school encouraged and promoted a "working with parents" ethos. This school emphasised the importance of being aware of the family and cultural attitudes of the district. They found that parents sometimes encouraged retaliation and physical fighting and that weekend conflicts were spilling into the school environment. The school encouraged parents to resolve problems through the school rather than approach other students' parents or the student themselves. The school encouraged parents to trust that bullying and behavioural management issues would be dealt with and that it was not up to individual parents to 'settle the score' with students who were bullying others, or their parents.

The school encouraged teachers and administrators to act as role models and avoid engaging in bullying behaviour themselves. The school considered it important for the school community to know that the principal and teachers did not bully others. The school's ethos statement reinforced that all students and parents have the right to talk and share each other's point of view.

A mid-year survey revealed the school and teachers scored a high rate of approval among parents, who were confident that the school, principal and teachers were "firm but fair". The survey showed that parents trusted the school and teachers much more than they previously did and understood that the school would deal with any negative behaviour. Staff attitudes also changed positively with regard to discipline. In the past, teachers had the attitude that, because it was a big school, student behaviour was going to be hard to manage. Now the problem is not seen as being the large school size, but the relationships. There is an emphasis on promoting friendly, respectful behaviour towards people from all parts of the school community including administration, teachers, general staff and students.

## What we learnt

### Difficulties encountered

Teachers, staff and parents accepted bullying as part of the school environment. Year 6 and 7 students had experienced hostility from older students when they were in lower years and had developed an attitude that it was their turn to 'dominate' the younger students in the school.

### Overcoming difficulties

The school believed in the selection of local staff, as well as ensuring that new staff members were right for the school. The school ethos was an important first step in establishing this supportive school culture.

By concentrating on the attitude of the lower primary students, the school was able to ensure that the hostile attitude of the older students did not influence the younger year groups, thus interrupting the cycle of negative behaviour. Many problems were overcome through the promotion of positive behaviour from both staff and students. When teachers set an example of a comfortable, happy working environment, this filtered through to teacher-student relationships and to student-student relationships.