

# The Difference a Classroom Teacher Makes

A schoolwide approach has the greatest potential for impact on the school's moral culture and students' values and character. Individual teachers, however, even when they act alone, can and do make a difference.

It was mid-November when Debbie Wilcox, just a year out of college, got a call asking her to take over a third-grade class of 26 children for six weeks. The regular teacher had found the class impossible to manage and had taken a mental health leave.

Debbie Wilcox began by gathering the children in a circle for a class meeting. She asked them to agree upon rules that would "help us have good talking and listening in our meeting." Then the discussion turned to rules for the whole classroom. Most students proposed rules in negative terms: "Don't push," "Don't punch," "Don't tear up somebody's homework."

"What does it show," teacher Wilcox asked, "when we do hurtful things to other people?" A girl answered, "That we don't care about them." "So what can we do to make this a better class?" Ms. Wilcox asked. "Care for each other," the girl said.

**CARE FOR EACH OTHER**, printed in large block letters, became their primary rule. In the weeks that followed, teacher Wilcox began each day with a class meeting. With time, more children participated, and people listened more attentively when someone else was speaking. During the rest of the day, teacher Wilcox observed, "small changes in behavior began to appear": Children more often made an effort to work out problems; sharing behavior began to replace the "give it to me, it's mine" exchanges. Emergency class meetings were sometimes needed for example, when several boys broke the agreed-upon rule about spitballing.

Serious behavior problems, however, became "almost non-existent" a change Debbie Wilcox attributed to their daily meeting and its provision of a forum where "every child felt he or she was worth listening to." The "bad class" of the school had become a caring moral community because teacher Wilcox provided a support structure the class meeting that called forth children's best moral selves.