

Participatory Student Government: Involving All Students in Creating an Honor Code

by Bill Parsons

Honor codes are most effective when students are committed to them. One way to strengthen students' commitment to any behavior code is to give them a meaningful role in creating it. Participatory student government is a way to give the entire student body a voice in designing an honor code that they will be motivated to follow.

When I became principal of Troup H.S. (LaGrange, GA), I met with class officers to get input on school issues. But those class officers didn't seek input from or report back to other students. Consequently, they didn't have any real power to influence the peer culture. When I learned about participatory student government, I immediately saw the limitations of what we'd been doing and redesigned our approach to give all students a voice.

Called "The Leadership Team," our new student government consisted of 9 groups of 10 students—two *elected representatives* from each second-period class. Leadership Team rep's met twice a month. The next day, they reported back to—and got further input from—their respective classes. (Initially, some teachers resisted

giving up time for the follow-up discussions.) Through this schoolwide process, our students spent the first year developing an Honor Code that covered many aspects of character—not only lying, cheating, and stealing, but also bringing drugs or weapons to school and all forms of bullying.

At a May assembly, Leadership Team rep's presented the new Honor Code (see box) to the whole student body and discussed its rationale: "Any violation of the Code jeopardizes one's self-respect and harms the entire community." Student leaders invited all students to "take a stand for yourself and our school by signing the Honor Code as you leave today."

One month into the following fall semester, Leadership Team representatives presented my new challenge to their respective classes:

This year we are seeing many more incidents of drugs being reported and wallets and purses being turned in with their contents intact. But we still have incidents of disrespect and theft. We need your input to continue to improve our school. Therefore the questions for this semester are:

What can we do to promote Honor Code behaviors? How can we recognize these behaviors in students? Do any parts of

TROUP'S HONOR CODE

1. I will be honest in all my actions.
2. I will treat others in the same way as I want to be treated.
3. I will extend kindness and respect to all.
4. I will treat our school building and other people's property with care.
5. I will strive for a spirit of pride in all our school programs.
6. I will have the courage to report bullying in any form and the possession of drugs or weapons on our school campus.
7. I will uphold this Honor Code and exhibit these same behaviors when I represent our school off campus.

the Honor Code need to be rewritten?

It's critically important that the Leadership Team feels that it got something done and is seen by their peers as having brought about positive change. So at every opportunity, I got on our closed-circuit TV and said, 'Your Leadership Team is responsible for the following school improvements' For example, they suggested we install security cameras in the parking lots after some students and faculty had their cars broken into—by off-campus offenders, we believe. We put the cameras in the very next week. ■

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