

Democratic school leadership - Topic 4: Discipline through responsibility

Key Question: *How can schools encourage students to maintain discipline through responsibility rather than force and punishment?*

Awareness handout 4:1.

Control or trust? How to ensure student discipline

“Ask yourself: do students behave differently when there is no adult around? If so, why is that?”

(Bäckman/Trafford, *Democratic governance of schools*, p. 66)

If you answer this question with “yes”, you may be facing the problem of how to maintain discipline in school. Students must observe the school rules and treat each other with respect; otherwise a school cannot function, and life in the school community may suffer seriously. But what is the adequate solution? Putting students under permanent control and supervision is hardly feasible nor desirable, as your school would teach students only to obey the rules if they are under surveillance. A certain measure of control will be necessary to make the students take school rules seriously, but permanent supervision will not solve any problems of student discipline. (See *Rethinking discipline and order from a democratic point of view*, in *Educating for democracy*, <http://www.living-democracy.com/textbooks/volume-1/part-2/unit-1/chapter-2/lesson-5/>)

If you have answered the question above with “no”, you may agree with us that in your position as a school principal, you need to rely on your students’ attitudes, as the school community, like any other, cannot function without the students’ consent and commitment. The different heterogeneous groups in this community – students, teachers, housekeepers and employees, parents – are all interested in the school’s success, just as you are, and they contribute to the school’s performance in their specific ways, just as you do. At the same time, each player has his or her personal interests and needs in mind. You cannot control the different groups in the school community, but you can influence their behavior.



One might say that the students are responsible for the success of their teachers and their school principals, and that they strongly depend on you and your staff in their personal development and academic achievement. Therefore, all members in the school community rely on each other. It is important to make the students aware of this, and to put trust in them rather than to intimidate and control them. Students need to develop an attitude of civic mindedness and responsibility – not only to play their part in a democratic school community, but also in a democratic society as a whole. Civic mindedness includes the sense of belonging to a community, as well as a sense of civic duty. Responsibility stands for reflecting on one’s actions and considering the effects of these actions on others. (See [Competences for democratic culture](#), pp. 12 f., 41 f.).

If your school succeeds in strengthening these attitudes in your students, you can be much more confident that your students will know how to behave “when there is no adult around”.