

Back to Basics

Joe Puggelli

From *SAAS Watch*, February 2004

It is time to begin a dialogue about our disciplinary system. I have come to this opinion because of recent comments from parents, faculty, and students, some of whom hold what I see as misperceptions about what we do in terms of discipline and how we do it. (For example: "Children of major donors get better treatment." "There is no consistency in the way we apply discipline." "You guys aren't strict enough. The school never throws anybody out." And, on the say day, "There is much less respect for the individual than there used to be. You're much too strict now: SAAS is getting to be like {one of our competitors}.)"

If there are misperceptions on this subject, then the fault is mine, because we, as an institution, and I, as its representative, should spend more time being clear, over and over again, about the disciplinary process. Misperceptions about such an essential part of our school and culture should not exist. Accordingly, I shall endeavor to be clearer about the principles underlying our disciplinary system and how and why we make our system work.

In this first article, I review the principles that underlie our disciplinary system. In subsequent articles, I will discuss how these principles guide what we do and what we do not do. I'll answer questions I'm frequently asked, and several I wish I had been asked. If you have questions you would like addressed, please call or e-mail me, 206-676-6821 or jpuggelli@seattleacademy.org.

Our disciplinary system is based upon several principles. First, our goal as educators is to teach, not punish. Part of our mission and responsibility as a school is to help students learn and grow from their mistakes and failures. In the vast majority of cases involving Middle and Upper School students, this is exactly what happens.

Second, we work hard to insure that the spirit that infuses the disciplinary process and the logic that determines the gravity of a

response to an infraction are consistent with the core values of the school. Our core values, listed in the school handbook, are trust, respect, integrity, and responsibility. For example, we assume that a student is telling us the truth until there is compelling evidence that he or she is not.

And, as we tell our students at the beginning of the year, one does not need to be a rocket scientist to understand what constitutes a serious violation of policy, practice, or procedure at SAAS: if your action or intent violates trust, respect, integrity, or responsibility, you are doing the wrong thing.

Third, we strive to be fair to the needs of the institution and fair to the needs of the individual. The costs of favoring the one over the other are often hidden but are always real, both pragmatically and philosophically. Tilt too far towards favoring the needs of the individual, for example, and the best students will leave because they sense that there is no order or structure to protect them. Tilt too far towards accommodating the needs of the institution, and the most creative and idiosyncratic students will leave to find an environment that does not try to force their square pegs into round holes.

Fourth, we try to balance a consistency of process with a respect for precedent—following the same procedure to investigate and judge infractions with the prescribed consequence informed by the awareness that the penalty imposed upon a student should be reasonable consistent with penalties imposed in similar situations in the past. The Deans of Students and the Division Heads spend considerable time talking to each other and to the Assistant Director and the Director about both the process by which we investigate a situation and the degree to which possible responses are consistent with responses in the past to comparable offenses.

Fifth, when it comes to the application of discipline, perception is often as important as reality. We therefore strive not only to be fair



but also to appear to be fair. We do not take action until we have heard all sides in a dispute, and we work hard to distinguish between the rumor mill and the facts. Effective communication to students and parents about issues of discipline—to the extent that such communication does not violate a student’s or a family’s right to privacy—is critical to the creation of the perception of fairness.

Sixth, we believe that actions, not words, ultimately define a person’s character. When we consider a response to an infraction, we consider the student’s past history in school. For example, in the case of a serious violation, probation rather than expulsion might be the consequence for a student who has no history of past misbehavior. Another significant consideration in determining a disciplinary response is the degree to which a student accepts responsibility for his or her actions and appears to be genuinely committed to correcting the problem.

We believe that by following these principles we do the best we can for the student and the school.

