

Back to Basics, Part III

Different Page-ed-ness

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In my last column about issues that Jean and I always consider in deciding whether a student on Very Thin Ice should get another chance, I mentioned the “Are we on the same page with parents?” factor. A parent asked if I could be more concrete about “different page-ed-ness.”

Before I make the attempt, let me note one important thing: If we conclude that the school and the family are not on the same page, we do not assume that the parents are wrong. After all, one of Uncle Rocco’s Prime Directives is “Always remember that there are more ways through the woods than one.” And neither Jean nor I want to contest Fine Points of Philosophic Truth with Rocco (“The Occasionally Irascible Hammer”) Bovino.

Our judgment in such matters is pragmatic: experience indicates that when a disconnect exists because the parents and the school are on different pages, things frequently Don’t Work Out for the kid. These kinds of disconnects are not common at SAAS, but when they do exist, their roots can be traced to one or all of three specific areas, the first of which I call the “black-white-gray” continuum.

A central premise of SAAS culture is that there is more gray in the world of adolescent development than some people think and far less black and white than our national culture – especially the popular media – seems to prefer. Our SAAS view clashes strongly with a perspective that sees most situations involving young people as “either-or” moments; for example, in a situation involving tension between two kids, a given student is necessarily either “the bully” or “the victim.”

I’ve had to evaluate hundreds of cases of adolescent conflict, and the primary lesson of this experience is that the

easy analysis of instant labels is to fair, reasonable, and productive conflict resolution what a Big Mac is to a healthy diet.

Quite often in adolescent conflict, both sides were doing Something You Shouldn’t Do and not doing Something You Should Do. Hammering the “bad kid” and letting the “good kid” slide might prove to some that the Institution is Taking a Strong Stand and Does Not Tolerate Bad Behavior, but is this kind of response really the right way to prepare either kid for Life, in which actions and motivations tend to be more complex than simple?

A second continuum is the “entitlement-accountability” spectrum, a ten-point scale of what Good Things should naturally happen to and for you, because you are a Wonderful and Lovable Bundle of Existence; and what Difficult Things you should be expected to handle for yourself, because life is not always a Bowl of Cherries. Given the school’s mission, it is not surprising that most SAAS parents believe that an appropriate spot on the scale falls somewhere around five for a freshman and tilts heavily towards eight for a senior, who in a few months is about to enter the adult world. Those parents who cluster towards the “entitlement” end believe that “My kid is entitled to whatever he wants, because, after all, he is my kid, and someone else, usually the teacher, is accountable for anything that goes wrong.” An excellent example of this attitude is the following direct quote from a parent complaining several years ago about the school’s disciplinary response to several students’ drinking on a retreat: “This situation is as much your teachers’ fault as my son’s. Let me ask you a question, and the answer is ‘yes’ or ‘no’: Did your faculty



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explicitly state that drinking was not permitted during the retreat?”

The third area of potential disconnect involves negotiating style. The “kick the door in, throw a hand grenade, and then present your demands to the survivors” school of negotiation is more common in New York than in Seattle; but even here the rhetorical hand grenade (a label that effectively polarizes a discussion and ends real dialogue – for example, “racist” or “sexist”) is not unknown. Another example of a rhetorical hand grenade is a blanket judgment dropped early into what was supposed to be a real discussion (“You never do anything about bullying at SAAS.”).

Now it is often the case that the appearance of different page-ed-ness is greater than the reality. For example, the parent who left me a voice mail saying, among other things, that “If you don’t meet my demands, I’m going to sue the school and go to the board and get you fired,” was operating more out of an extreme anxiety about whether her son could be successful at SAAS than from a genuine disagreement with our mission, values, or operating style. Once we addressed and diffused her anxiety, she was easy to work with.

Even when there is a bone-deep disconnect between the parents and school, it is still possible for Things to Work Out for the kid. But success under these circumstances requires a young person with a maturity level greater than that of many adults. When presented with the reality that The Important Adults in My Life Are on Different Pages, the normal kid (like the young moi) will immediately begin working both sides against each other.

We, and I mean all of us, don’t have Scads of Time to spend slogging through the mud of confusion that results when people who are supposed to be on the same page are clearly not. We live in a world with war; terrorism; changing social roles; the economy in the toilet; the Decline

of Family Values; the proliferation of cheap drugs, except the kind that fight disease; the need to get into the right college or Western Civilization As We Know It Will End; and increasingly litigiousness that threatens to make educators Play It Straight Down the Middle on any potentially controversial issue, a designation which these days covers Almost Everything, to the ultimate detriment of the kids they are teaching, because Straight Down the Middle is to education what a bucket of water is to a camp fire; and the list of swirling and ever-rising levels of rootless and real anxiety, stress, and pressure goes on and on and on.

In a complicated world that promises to get no simpler, the best way for us to do the right thing for the kids at SAAS is to begin from the same page and to stay on it.

