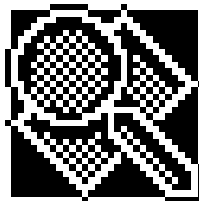


Action on Ethos

'Praise System'

This case study describes one of the strategies which Mearns Academy uses to promote excellence. We recognise the motivating factor of praise in influencing beneficially pupils' academic performance and behaviour. A quite overt Praise System, the philosophy of which is supported by the school's statement on its shared vision, values and aims, operates throughout the school.



MEARNS ACADEMY

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1 Background

Mearns Academy is a rural comprehensive school in the town of Laurencekirk in Aberdeenshire. The school roll stands at 455 pupils and is rising. The school places a huge importance on promoting a positive school environment with an emphasis on an ethos of achievement, and an ethos of caring. Expectations of pupils and staff are high. The Praise System, introduced seven years ago, has developed significantly in this time and the evidence now demonstrates clearly its successful implementation in terms of its effect on pupil performance and behaviour

2 Development of the Praise System

The Praise System is designed to focus on the acknowledgement of pupil achievement in all aspects of pupils' development. If pupils are praised overtly for their achievements, be it in class work, behaviour, extra-curricular activities, they will feel good about themselves and consequently be better motivated to learn.

However, our Praise System cannot and does not work in isolation. It operates within the context of the fostering of good relationships and high expectations at every level within the school and with parents and the wider community. Our aim is to value and support each individual.

Our expectations of pupils and staff are high. Pupil expectations are displayed in every classroom to encourage consistency of application throughout the school. Pupil expectations are referred to regularly at weekly morning assemblies. Pupils are supported in realising these expectations through well developed First Level Guidance and Promoted Guidance provision. Staff know what the school's expectations of them are and these expectations are set out in our whole school Policy on Behaviour. Staff are consulted regularly on all aspects of school life and the Senior Management Team are seen to take action in light of consultation.

A 'pink slip' system used by staff for referring on a daily basis to the Senior Management Team and the Guidance staff areas of praise and concern has evolved into a separate Praise Slip and separate Concern Slip. Since this development almost three years ago Praise Slips every week outnumber significantly concern slips.

Similarly, as a class and Principal teacher, my perceptions of the effects of praise were that it was a strong influence in supporting good behaviour and encouraging pupils to achieve their potential. In conjunction with teachers setting high expectations praise for achievements was seen as a key motivating factor.

As a department however, we wished to discover if our perceptions were in fact matched by the views of the pupils themselves. Consequently one focus area for the 1996 Departmental Self Evaluation programme was on Praise and Reward. Sources of evidence for this exercise included: questionnaires to all pupils, senior management discussion with pupils and observation of classes by both teachers and senior management. The exercise went well, relationships were enhanced and evidence produced that was largely in agreement with existing perceptions. Findings included the following:

84% of pupils had received Praise Slips in History
62% had received more than three Praise Slips
All aspects of praise were welcomed by the pupils, not just Praise Slips
Praise Slips were valued greatly but had to be deserved
Parental knowledge of praise at school was very popular
91% of pupils suggested praise encouraged achievement

As well as providing evidence, the exercise also illustrated a range of issues relevant to the use of a praise system in the department:

- Praise and older students - ensuring students of all ages are praised for achievements
- When to issue Praise Slips - ensuring validity, consistency and fairness by communicating criteria
- How to create a 'climate of praise' - must be more than mere paper
- Relaying views of achievement to parents - ensuring sustainability

These issues have been addressed through the development planning process and this indicates our continuing commitment to a praise system that genuinely motivates pupils and supports the drive for ever higher standards.

2. PUPIL VIEWS

Recently an evaluation of the Praise System was carried out on a quarter of our pupils from S1-S5/6. Pupils completed a questionnaire and submitted it anonymously. Virtually every comment was positive. Pupils were asked how they felt when given a Praise Slip and why they thought teachers used Praise Slips. Here are a selection of their comments which reflect the general response:

"When I am given a Praise Slip I feel I have achieved something that is worthy of praise e.g. good quality work or good grades in a test. I also feel that teachers have recognised I have put extra effort into work and this pleases me."

"I feel very happy because it means I've achieved something or done something really well. My class tutor is very happy with me and my guidance teacher as well."

"Teachers use them as a way of telling you that you've done well and it also gives you more confidence."

"Teachers use Praise Slips to show they think you have tried extra hard at something. They also give them to encourage pupils to continue to work and try hard."

3. PARENTS' VIEWS - AN ETHOS QUESTIONNAIRE

In December 1996 an ethos questionnaire was issued to all of our parents. This sought parental views on five areas: communication with parents; parents' evenings; school uniform; achievement and praise; school aims and policies. The response from parents represented 84% of our pupils. The diagram below right illustrates a very high degree of satisfaction from parents in all aspects and action has already been taken to effect even more satisfaction.

4. IMPROVEMENTS IN MEARN'S ACADEMY

In the last few years there have been significant improvements in the school, improvements in which the acknowledgement of pupils' achievements, by overtly praising them, has played a part.

- our examination results have improved
- our pupil attendance has improved
- there are fewer instances of major disciplinary incidents and a significant decrease in low level classroom disturbance (Praise Slips always outnumber Concern Slips every week)
- visitors to the school invariably comment on the welcoming, positive, happy and encouraging atmosphere
- the Inspectorate recognised the good work being done in the field of praise by asking the school to organise a National Conference in October 1996 on the theme of 'How Good is your School?', the underlying theme being the promotion of excellence in pupil performance and achievement through praise and high expectations.

5 Conclusion

We were gladdened by the comment in the report by HM Inspectors of Schools - STANDARDS AND QUALITY in SCOTTISH SCHOOLS 1992-95. "We were encouraged to find that the motivating effect of praise in improving pupils' work was becoming a feature of more and more schools' learning and teaching policies."

Mearns Academy does not promote our Praise System as a perfect system. We do know, however, from our evaluation that the Praise System is being implemented successfully. It has improved our pupils' quality of learning but we recognise that we have to work continuously to effect further improvements and strive for excellence. We acknowledge that praise should be given not only to our pupils but to our staff and our parents. We endorse Robert Fisher's view in his book 'Teaching Children to Learn' that "We all like praise when it is honestly given and deserved". A final comment "hot off the press" taken from an S5 student's Higher English discursive essay on Corporal Punishment. "In my own school there have been many steps taken to help raise standards of discipline. Praise slips have most effectively helped children in the school because they have given pupils a target of personal achievement to aim towards and in the process have helped improve the pupils' attitude and commitment in school."

reference:

Robert Fisher 1995 "Teaching Children to Learn" published by Stanley Thomas, Cheltenham.

DIAGRAM

In terms of achievement and praise 98.2% of the parental responses testified to the value of praise in motivating their children to achieve.

ACHIEVEMENT AND PRAISE	strongly agree	agree	=	total
The school encourages pupils to achieve all they can through a range of curricular and extra-curricular activities	30.0	67.7	=	97.30
Expectations of pupils in the school are high	27.3	67.7	=	95.00
I am satisfied with the achievements of my child/children within the school	23.6	66.6	=	90.20
I know when my child receives praise	23.7	67.0	=	90.07
My child/children receives regular praise at school	18.8	61.5	=	80.30
I am aware how the school Praise Slip and Parental Contact system works	20.08	71.7	=	92.50
I think that receiving praise helps motivate my child/children to achieve	42.9	55.3	=	98.20

(Extract from the results of the section "Achievement and Praise" contained in the Ethos Questionnaire issued to all parents in December, 1997)

