

WHY ALL THOSE RULES?



"Why do you have all those rules?" the father asked plaintively as he registered his teenage daughter at the Adventist boarding academy. "Don't you know that drives the kids out of the church?" I did my best to explain the need for a coherent set of rules to govern not only classroom procedures, but also the around-the-clock care for 140 restless teenagers.

BY LYNDON G. FURST

Without being argumentative, I tried to reassure him that the school's policies had been developed with the best interests of his daughter and her classmates in mind.

Yet, his question has stayed with me over the years. It deserves to be revisited on a regular basis, since many Adventist adults as well as their children challenge the rules and regulations at the denomination's schools. There is a general impression among many members that rigid rules and their harsh application drive young people from the church.

Adventist schools, and particularly boarding institutions, have a long history of rather strict rules imposed on their students. Following World War II, many of our schools were led by administrators who had experienced the discipline of military service and attempted to impose this atmosphere on their institutions. Naturally restless youth had a tendency to rebel, so the schools (especially the boarding academies) reacted by imposing rather harsh discipline. Stories abound among Adventists and ex-Adventists who attended an academy during that era about their alleged maltreatment at our schools.

A pendulum that swings too far in one direction will react by swinging too far in the opposite direction. And so it was that the restrictive school climate was replaced by a more permissive environment, emphasizing what has become known as a "grace orientation." The attention of church leaders was firmly focused on this concept by the results of the Valuegenesis study. In his analysis of data from that research, Roger Dudley¹ suggested that the "Adventist emphasis on behavioral standards" was one cause of youth's disillusionment with the church and its doctrines. He suggested in response, that we "bend over backwards . . . to get across a grace orientation."² This has been interpreted in many quarters of the church as a call to eliminate as many rules as possible as well as the discipline necessary to enforce the remaining regulations.

A basic premise of this article is that discipline is an integral part of the ministry of the school to the young people under its care. Thus, there is no

place for harshness on the part of the faculty or administration in a Christian school. Those in charge of Adventist schools should keep this in mind throughout the process, from development of rules and regulations through the way they treat the youth who are accused of an infraction, to the implementation of punishment. Even when it becomes necessary to expel a student from the school, faculty and administrators should find ways to continue to minister to the young person.

In order to achieve its mission, the Adventist school must find a balance between supporting a "grace orientation" and implementing a common-

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sense approach that is neither excessively legalistic nor overly permissive. Rules are necessary to enable Adventist schools to achieve institutional mission and to maintain order and safety.³ The recommendations in this article are informed by my decades of experience as a teacher and administrator and on my discussions with teachers, parents, students, pastors, and school and church administrators.

Different Kinds of Rules

I have observed that schools, including Adventist institutions, have several different types of rules. These rules have different purposes and varying effects on both the students and the school. In an Adventist school, the most important rules are those with a religious or moral basis. "Thou shalt not steal" has a serious application in the school setting. This fairly straightforward rule is easily applied.

However, other religiously based rules are more problematic. Such rules are less likely to be accepted by students, parents, and constituents if there is considerable diversity within the church and society regarding their legitimacy or appropriate interpretation. One example is Sabbath observance. Many Adventists still support fairly strict limitations on behavior during the hours of the Sabbath. Yet, for many others, a list of restrictions smacks of legalism.

Generally, church members expect a conservative approach by the school, especially the boarding school, yet many students come from homes where a rigid conformity to Adventist tradition is not part of the family custom. When the school imposes rules that don't match the student's experience, this creates tension and resistance.

Another area of tension arises in the crafting of morally based rules to govern the relationship between boys and girls. This is especially problematic at a boarding school, where the sexes are continually in close contact. Because of the normal hormones flooding young bodies and the permissive values promoted by the media, the Christian school needs to establish fairly restrictive regulations for contact, especially physical contact, between the sexes. While moral purity is not a part of the postmodern lifestyle, it will always be an essential value for Christians. Rules are necessary to further this goal even if they make Adventist schools appear puritanical and out of step with societal mores.

The legal realities of modern society also require a rather broad array of

rules in the school setting. Teachers and schools face serious liability issues if they fail to provide proper care and supervision to the children and youth under their care. These rules and regulations are necessary for teachers and principals to properly carry out their legal duty. For elementary schools, this is generally well accepted, but secondary students often express a good deal of skepticism as to the need for such rules. For example, students like to ride in their friends' cars on school-sponsored events. However, the school is liable for any accident that happens during such a ride, and a wise school board will include in the student handbook a prohibition of students riding with youthful drivers on school-sponsored events such as field trips and band or choir trips.

All schools must have structural rules to ensure that the educational enterprise functions effectively and efficiently. These include the daily schedule, attendance and graduation requirements, and classroom behavior. In the boarding school, evening study time, noise levels during that time, and requirements for room cleanliness are examples of necessary structural rules. One can always argue about the need for any particular regulation, but without such rules, the school would soon descend into chaos.

Some rules are culturally based. In addition to teaching academic subjects, the school is expected to introduce students to the mores of the dominant culture. The school dress code is best included under this category of rules. Young people need to learn how people of culture dress and behave for various types of activities. Proper church attire is quite different than what is appropriate for a beach party. Our educators often don't think about introducing young people to the world of cultured society. However, I view this as an important aspect of Adventist education.

Some rules fit into multiple categories, such as campus security and safety (legal and structural). In boarding schools, this is especially true of

Case Study: The Chronic Truant

Wilhelm missed classes on a regular basis, especially the first two periods of the morning. He claimed to have trouble waking up on time, although his roommate set the alarm in time for him to get to class. We tried successively more severe punishments, but nothing seemed to work. Finally, in exasperation, the discipline committee voted to suspend him from school and send him home for a week.

Wilhelm's mother was not happy to hear of his punishment. "Wilhelm has always had a hard time getting up in the morning," she said. "He is not trying to defy the school rules; he just can't seem to wake up on time." Later, the head elder of the church where Wilhelm and his mother attended called and asked me to reconsider our decision. "I realize that you have to enforce the school rules, but this punishment doesn't make sense to me," he said. "Punishing him for missing classes by having him miss a whole week of classes seems a rather odd thing to do."

In thinking about the elder's statement, I reluctantly agreed that he was right and convinced the discipline committee that we should search for an alternative punishment that would not cause Wilhelm to miss any more classes.

Recently, a number of articles have appeared in the popular press regarding sleep habits of American adolescents. It is generally felt that teenagers do not get enough sleep and also that for many teens, their sleep rhythms may not match school schedules. Many students are staying up late playing video games and interacting on social networks, making it difficult for them to function the next morning.

For these reasons, schools must remember that the inability to get up in the morning and get to class on time may have some physical or psychological causes unrelated to the moral dimension of obeying the rules.

rules relating to off-campus activities and home leave. To fulfill their supervisory function, the faculty must have control of where students are at all times. Sometimes, the rules have to be a bit rigid to accomplish this goal. Yet, this is essential from a liability standpoint.

Some rules have both a moral component and another reason for implementation. The dress code is one example. In a Christian institution, culturally appropriate dress relates to both appropriateness and modesty.

Case Study: “You Faculty Are Really Stupid”

The discipline committee faced the difficult decision of determining how to punish several freshman girls who had broken a major school rule. They were not bad girls, but being mischievous, had taken a dare and gotten caught. The faculty did not want to overreact or be excessively punitive, and word soon spread around campus of the faculty’s sympathy for the girls. Just before the committee met, one of the senior boys asked if he could address the group. I have always been hesitant to let individual students talk to faculty committees, but I relented this time, though with some apprehension, since this student had been a vocal critic of the school and its administration.

The committee assembled, and after prayer I told them the student wished to make a statement about the business at hand. His statement was totally unexpected by me as well as the rest of the teachers in attendance. “You faculty are really stupid,” he said rather bluntly. “All the kids know these girls broke the rules, and now you are going to let them off with a slap on the hand. The whole campus is laughing at how easy you faculty are. You really need to suspend them from school, and send them home for a few days. That is the only way for kids to know you are really serious about the rules.”

I thanked the boy for coming to talk to us and dismissed him from the room. It was a sober group of faculty who sat in deliberation that night. They eventually voted to send the girls home for a few days. When I discussed the punishment with the girls individually, each one admitted that her punishment was fair. None of them got into any more trouble during that school year.

Thus, rules relating to appropriate dress often contain both moral and cultural components.

Some school rules are arbitrary, based only on the power of the school administration to regulate student behavior. Sometimes such rules are ac-

cepted by the school community, but more often they are viewed as an abuse of power. I have observed that when arbitrary rules are strictly enforced, this leads to a general disdain for all rules, even those that are necessary and well considered by students and parents, as well as the broader community and constituency.

In my experience, school rules are more readily accepted by both students

and parents when the school is open about the basis for making those rules. I have also found it best not to conflate the reasons for rules based on faculty preferences with those that have a moral justification. There is no moral issue involved with whether to wear blue jeans to Friday night vespers. That is more of a cultural issue. Let’s not seek to assert a religious basis for every restriction our schools place on student behavior.

Enforcing the Rules

Making rules is one thing; enforcing them is quite another. Rules and regulations are only as effective as their implementation. It can be quite demoralizing to the school morale if the rules are unevenly or capriciously applied.

An elementary teacher once asked me for help with classroom discipline. She was having trouble keeping order because the students were so unruly. When I visited her classroom, I noticed a list of rules and disciplinary procedures posted on the chalkboard at the front of the room. After school, I remarked to the teacher that if she enforced the posted procedures, she should have no problem with classroom discipline. “Oh, well,” she said with a sigh. “I can’t stick with the rules all the time.”

Merely creating and publishing rules will not produce the desired behavior if there are no consequences for failure to comply, or the rules are inconsistently enforced. Minor rules should have minor consequences, promptly enforced. For major rules, there should be major consequences but applied with common sense and love. I have found four basic principles to be useful in guiding school disciplinary decisions.

Principles for Making Disciplinary Decisions

First, decisions about a major infraction of the rules are best made by a group of adults rather than one person. A committee-based process is slower and less efficient than having one person make all the decisions but usually

produces fairer and more effective disciplinary procedures. Since the primary goal is to minister to the student who is in trouble, it is important to make the best decision possible. This is more likely to occur when involving people who have known the student in a variety of venues (pastor, teacher, counselor, work supervisor, etc.).

Second, I believe that discipline should, as much as possible, be corrective rather than punitive. When I first became a boarding school principal, I found that the rule on class attendance was enforced by a monetary penalty. Three unexcused absences resulted in a \$10 fine. In my view, that was merely punitive and did nothing to correct the undesirable behavior. In fact, it could even encourage students with ample funds to intentionally plan to skip class! It seemed to me that a logical corrective response to students missing class should be to make them go to class. So, we replaced the fine with required attendance at a detention hall

held in the library during evening recreation. Most students found the new penalty more distasteful than paying a fine, and the number of unexcused absences dropped sharply. Not all students took advantage of the detention time to catch up on their academic work, but many did.

A third principle I used in the disciplinary process was to individualize the consequences for breaking a major rule. In other words, the punishment should not necessarily fit the crime but rather be fitted to the criminal. Every student and every circumstance is different. What is corrective for one student might cause rebellion and bitterness in another.

To fully implement this principle takes a lot of thought and time, but if one views discipline as an opportunity to minister to the student, it is time well spent. When students committed a major infraction, I spent as much time as possible discussing the situation with them, trying to discover

what was going on in their lives. I also talked at some length to the parents to get their perspective on how to handle the situation. Frequently, I sought counsel from the pastor of the student's home church. I found this especially helpful in situations where the student might be suspended or expelled from school, as the pastor needed to be aware of the need for ministry to the student and family.

Making punishment fit the individual student sometimes seems inconsistent, which alarms people who believe that justice requires that the same offense always receive an identical penalty. Yet most students want to be treated as individuals, rather than faceless cogs in an institutional system. I have seen some schools where the student handbook's list of rules included a specific punishment for breaking each rule. Such a system does produce a high level of consistency in the school's operation but ignores the special needs of each individual student.

An example of individualized punishment occurred early in my boarding school principalship. Three senior girls committed an infraction that normally resulted in a one-week suspension from school. When I called the mother of one of the girls (I will call her Olga) and explained what her daughter had done, she begged me not to send her home. "I am a single parent," she said. "I work all day, so if you send Olga home she will just run the streets and get into more trouble. Can't she stay there at the school and work, rather than come home?"

The local pastor gave me the same counsel. "Please don't send Olga home," he said. "There are too many bad influences here, and she will just get in more trouble."

When I called the manager of the furniture factory that employed many of our students, he also pleaded with me not to suspend Olga from school. "I am already short of workers on the afternoon shift," he said. "Olga is one of my best employees. Instead of sending her home, why don't you have her work a double shift for me?"

Case Study: Blaming Ellen White

On becoming the new principal at a school, one of the first things I did was to review the school bulletin. It helped me understand the culture of expectations for student behavior in that community. In one school, I noted that on almost every page there was a sidebar with a quote from Ellen White that applied to the imposition of rules in the lives of children. It appeared that Mrs. White was being blamed for the strict rules of the school. I have always felt we should have rules because they make good sense for the education of children at the school, not because of some quote taken out of context from the prophetic writings. So when I revised the bulletin, I removed all the Ellen White quotes that related to school rules and where appropriate, replaced them with Bible texts. I tried to use texts that emphasized the saving grace of Jesus rather than those which might have a negative connotation in the minds of young people.

Because I was getting the same counsel from several sources, I suggested to the discipline committee that we suspend all three of the girls for a week, and send the other two home, but allow Olga to remain on campus. She would work both morning and afternoon at the factory and be room bound the rest of the time. Though some members of the committee felt uncomfortable about the inconsistency of this disciplinary action, everyone agreed that the plan made good sense.

The three misbehaving girls all expected to be sent home for a week and accepted the penalty with an air of resignation. However, Olga was quite upset that she was being kept on campus. "That's not fair," she protested. "I am just as bad as the other girls, and I should be sent home, too." I could tell that she was looking forward to a week at home without supervision and was disappointed that her plans for a good time were thwarted. She complained bitterly all week about the unfair treatment she was receiving, but all three girls finished the year without any further disciplinary problems.

After they graduated, I did not see any of the three girls until an alumni reunion 20 years later. I hardly recognized them as they were now mature women. We reminisced a bit, and Olga asked if I remembered the trouble they had been in their senior year. "I don't remember the details," I said. "But I don't think you did anything really bad. I suspended you because I just wanted to get your attention."

"Well, you did," she responded with a grin. "You certainly did!"

The fourth principle, being consistent in enforcing the rules and discipline, may seem to be at odds with the previous rule. Yet, nothing undermines school spirit more than an uneven application of the rules. If a school rule is enforced intermittently or in a haphazard manner, the students are baffled as to what behavior is expected of them, which causes a rapid deterioration in school climate. Further, if rules are more severely applied to some students

than others, a breakdown in morale will soon result. Preferential treatment—or more severe penalties—must not be given to one racial or cultural group, more (or less) popular or attractive students, or the children of church leaders, major donors, or other important persons. In general, teachers and administrators should seek a high level of consistency in both the application of school rules and the disciplinary consequences for breaking them, while individualizing penalties when this seems wise.

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Conclusion

Every school must have rules, and Adventist schools need make no apology for them. However, it is best if students understand the basis for the rules, and school boards eliminate strictly arbitrary ones as far as possible. Further, it is usually best to limit the number of rules for which educators claim a moral or religious basis. It is not God's fault that there is a strict dress code. Such matters are best explained as cultural in nature.

It has been claimed that harsh rules alienate young people from the church. That may be true in some cases, but I've observed that youth who are alienated from the church often view all rules as being harsh. While most youth will accept the necessity of rules, even if

grudgingly, there are always a few who resist all restrictions on their personal freedom. Their view should not be allowed to set the standard for our schools. Ellen White gave excellent counsel on this when she wrote: "Rules should be few and well considered; and when once made, they should be enforced. Whatever it is found impossible to change, the mind learns to recognize and adapt itself to; but the possibility of indulgence induces desire, hope, and uncertainty, and the results are restlessness, irritability, and insubordination."⁴

In enforcing school rules, we should always remember that the primary work of the school is to minister to students. In applying disciplinary action, the Christian educator has an opportunity to show the love of Jesus as well as the certainty of punishment for sin. I believe utilizing the principles of discipline in this article will help to accomplish that ministry. ✍



Lyndon G. Furst, Ed.D. (*educational administration*) is Professor Emeritus of Leadership and Educational Administration at Andrews University in

Berrien Springs, Michigan. He recently retired from the deanship of the School of Graduate Studies at the university. Previously, he served as Professor of Educational Administration, and worked in the Adventist school system for 21 years as an elementary teacher and principal, academy principal, and conference educational superintendent.

ENDNOTES

1. Roger Dudley *Valuegenesis: Faith in the Balance* (Riverside, Calif.: La Sierra University Press, 1992).

2. *Ibid.*, p. 272.

3. Gordon Bietz, "Institutional Grace—An Oxymoron?" *The Journal of Adventist Education* 65:3 (February/March 2003), pp. 4-8.

4. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1903), p. 290.