



A PUBLICATION
OF THE MINNEAPOLIS
JEWISH DAY SCHOOL

keshet CONNECTION

קשר

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Office Visits

Dr. Ray Levi, Head of School

The kindergartener was sobbing as he sat on the bench waiting for me. The note from his teacher indicated that, like many young children, this boy's actions had gotten ahead of his thinking. His offense hadn't been catastrophic, but he had repeatedly failed to heed reminders and had repeated behaviors that had hurt the feelings of classmates. I took his hand as we walked down the hall to my office. Initially I offered him a seat at the table in my office, but suddenly, that chair seemed oversized and distant, so I motioned him to come stand by me. He climbed into my lap and buried his head in my shoulder. This provided an opportunity for me simply to let this upset youngster know that we all make mistakes, that it would be easier to speak when he calmed down, and that everything would be OK. Within a minute, we were able to talk about the mistakes he had made: name-calling in class and not stopping when his teacher asked him. I pointed out that, when we make mistakes, what is important is whether we are able to make changes based on those mistakes. We also agreed that I would be checking in on him because I wanted to hear about the good things he was doing in class.

The boy returned to class, and a dilemma arose for me. This was not an incident that merited a call home. In fact, I think it's important that parents NOT be called every time a child is sent to see Helen Siegel, Rabbi Julie, or me. Certain problems are serious enough for a call home, but wherever possible, we do want to give students the space to trip and fall and pick themselves up, to make mistakes and learn from them. In this case, the emotional upset that the boy demonstrated suggested that, despite my best efforts, he might report to his parents that he'd been sent to the office and he might again burst into tears. So I did call home, simply to alert his family that he might be upset. My call opened the door for ways in which his parents might reinforce what I had said. As it turned out, the boy did report the incident with a good deal of accuracy, noting, "Even Dr. Levi makes mistakes." However, I did not call home when a fifth-grader made his first office visit for a problem this fall. As this was his first visit, he was also quite upset. Again, my first task was to help him regain his composure. We talked about the fact that fifth- and sixth-graders try on new behaviors as they check on boundaries, and that this might not

be the last time he would be sent to see me. However, I was able to place his behavior in the context of what I had observed over more than five years. And in this case, I felt it would help him if I told him I wouldn't call home. Not surprisingly, his mother reported that he had spoken about the incident — again reporting the substance of our conversation, not simply that he'd been "in trouble."

Whatever the reason for being sent to the office, we work hard to put the incident into context and to use it to begin planning for alternatives. While I'm sometimes called upon to put on my "mean face," more often than not we talk about doing *t'shuvah* — apologizing and making restitution to the students or teachers affected — and we consider how a problematic situation might be avoided in the future. Sometimes the process isn't simple, as we help students recognize when anger is building (Can you feel how your body changes as anger is building? What can you do before you explode?). Often, we offer alternatives to help students deal with challenging situations or release tension. When we do call parents, there may indeed be consequences of actions that we must discuss, but our primary goal is to establish a plan that will help a child grow past problematic behaviors.

Of course, not all office visits are occasioned by problems. A student who had heard rumors about the Geography Bee e-mailed me to request a meeting and presented a petition that she had circulated over an extended period of time. I must confess that I love it when students approach me to question a school policy in a respectful and appropriate way. It is a true reflection of our success as a school when students feel empowered to act on their beliefs about what is fair. In this case, and I hope in each case like it, I thank the student for coming forward and I speak about how hard it must be for a student to approach the Head of School and question a policy. Even if I can't fully satisfy the request, I hope that the student leaves with two understandings — an appreciation for the thinking that led to the establishment of a policy and my admiration for the courage that the student demonstrated.



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Just before vacation, I received a beautifully written letter from a sixth-grader, questioning our decision to hold classes on Martin Luther King Day. Using knowledge gained when doing research in fifth grade and citing our core values, he presented a remarkably articulate case for closing school. It was in fact the very argument I had presented when our Calendar Committee had met last spring. I realized that we hadn't shared our reasons for changing the calendar this year. We had agreed that we would try the model that TCJMS employs. Believing that most students would not participate in activities to commemorate the life of Martin Luther King Jr. outside of school, TCJMS opens school and finds ways for students to participate in community observance. MJDS teachers thought this might be an approach for us to try this year, and so a faculty team has been working on a variety of activities involving community speakers and lessons about Martin Luther King Jr. and justice that will encourage our students to develop an appreciation for the principles that guided this significant shaper of American democracy. I invited the student who wrote to me to participate in the planning – and promised that we would evaluate the effectiveness of this approach after we'd tried it.

Whatever the reason for an office visit, I hope that students leave with better understandings of their behaviors, with a sense of how their wishes and behaviors relate to school policies and values, and with a bit of guidance about how they might approach comparable situations in the future. In short, we hope that our offices, like our classrooms, are environments where important lessons can be learned.

