

DELIBERATE HONOR

Implementing
Student-Run
Honor Councils in
Secondary Schools

Daniel R. Venables

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22 21 20 19 18

1 2 3 4 5

Names: Venables, Daniel, author. Title: Deliberate Honor
Description: West Palm Beach, FL : Learning Sciences, 2019.
Identifiers: ISBN 978-1-943920-75-4 (paperback)
Subjects: LCSH: Education. | Literacy. | Content area reading. | Language arts--Correlation with content subjects. | Effective teaching. | BISAC: EDUCATION / Professional Development. | EDUCATION / Teaching Methods & Materials | EDUCATION / Aims & Objectives.

for Benjamin and Henry Venables

for Frank Vincent Serpico

**“Ten percent of the [people] are absolutely honest.
Ten percent of the [people] are absolutely dishonest.
The remaining 80% wish they were absolutely honest.”**

—*Frank Serpico, the NYC police officer who, in 1971, nearly single-handedly
took down the Blue Wall of Silence in a then very corrupt
NYC Police Department*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have wanted to write this book for many years. My passion for the subject has never waned since my earliest days serving as a Faculty Sponsor. I wanted other schools to learn and know what I had come to know about the impact that the presence of a viable, respected Honor Council could make on their campuses. Except for a page here and there on websites of colleges and universities that had long-standing histories of Honor Codes and Councils, there was virtually nothing out there about how to actually implement them. I had all this experience and information in my head about this topic, so, I thought, *Why wasn't I sharing it?*

One of my big obstacles was that I had written and published three previous books in education, and although all three were successful, their content related to my other passion in education—implementing and leading authentic professional learning communities (PLCs). So, when I approached my usual publisher with the idea of a book on student Honor Councils, they respectfully declined on the basis that this book would be “off brand” for me since I had come to be known as a PLC alternative to some of the more popularized PLC models.

All this is to say how deeply grateful I am to Mark Combes of Learning Sciences International (LSI) for taking a chance and publishing this book. He has encouraged me, picked my brain here and there, and given me a voice in nearly all aspects of this project, including cover design, title, and layout, and offered practical suggestions that really helped to make this work better. I am truly beholden for the guidance and support of Mark and the rest of the team at LSI, especially director of products MaryAnn Hartel and copy editor Caroline Define. It bears mention that none of this would have happened

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

were it not for a mutual colleague, Ross Romano, who once worked for LSI and introduced me to Mark.

As with the three works before this one, I owe a big *thank you* to my wife, Brady Venables, who was not only there picking up the slack with our 5-year-old son, Benjamin, when I was secluded in my office writing (and later, editing) for hours on end but also for being there to bounce ideas off as I worked on this project. (I should note that Brady is a graduate of Davidson College and knows well what a high-functioning Honor System looks like.) Our second son, Henry Venables, not quite born yet at the time of this writing, is worthy of the Dedication, but I am reluctant to offer him public thanks as I have witnessed firsthand how hard he made it for mom (for more than just the first trimester and for more than just the morning) as she worked double-time on family matters to support me writing this book. Oh, Henry.

And finally, on a more serious note, I am so very indebted to the dozens and dozens of young people who have served on my Honor Councils. They taught me so much about honor and about the incredible integrity, courage, grit, compassion, and maturity young people have within them when we, the adults in the room, care enough to draw it out of them. Thank you for your gift of working alongside me for so many hours as we labored for this important cause.

*Daniel R. Venables
Lexington, SC
May 26, 2019*

INTRODUCTION

Honor’s Inspiration

As a high school Honor Council Faculty Sponsor, I have watched with amazement as dozens of 16-year-olds (although some students were younger and some older) have become outstanding young men and women, in significant part from their experiences serving on my Honor Council. This, for me, has been nothing short of exhilarating; it can be pretty exhausting at times to be sure, but worth it 10 times over.

Decades before serving as a Faculty Sponsor, when I myself was 16 years old, I walked into a movie theater to watch a new 1973 docudrama, *Serpico*, starring Oscar-winning actor Al Pacino. Since that day, I have reflected on that movie so many times in my life that I suppose it is fair to say I left that movie theater changed by what I had just watched, although I didn’t know it then.

My Personal Journey Working with a Student Honor Council

In 1986, after teaching for six years in a public high school in Connecticut, I took a job heading up the math department in a highly respected independent school in South Carolina. Independent school education was a new thing for me, and I quickly learned that every faculty member was expected to be involved with the students in one or more extracurricular activities. Some were assistant coaches; others headed up the student yearbook or Student Council; others organized all of the school’s ceremonies such as awards night, commencement, and so forth. Because I was not a good candidate to coach a sport or willing to be the Faculty Sponsor for the math team (something I

did in my previous job teaching in Connecticut and generally disliked), I was a shoo-in for taking over the school’s Honor Council when the sponsor who had done it for years decided to retire.

When I took over the Council in 1988, I really didn’t know anything about the subject, but I came to know quickly that the school’s Honor System was in shambles. The school had decided on an Honor Code, and students wrote the accompanying Honor *Pledge* on all assignments and assessments; but other than this, there was no evidence of the Honor Council actually doing anything. “What Honor Council?” I wanted to ask. The Council never heard any cases, although cheating occurred now and again, as with any high school, despite the pledge all students were signing on their work. The honor culture of the school was really a train wreck. If I were going to take this over, there were going to have to be significant changes in how the honor culture, and the supporting Honor Council, of the school operated.

I knew intuitively that for the Honor Council to exist in any meaningful way, it had to exist in service of the Honor Code and the honor culture of the school. I knew that to make this anything meaningful, we had to first work with the honor culture of the school. And so that’s what we did. Within two working years, we had established on campus not only a relevant Honor Code but also a thriving Honor Council set in service of that code.

I believe this can happen anywhere, in any secondary school in the nation. It takes time and commitment by all those involved, but it can change the culture of the school in the most amazing ways. My school experience is living proof of that.

The Time Is Now

There is something of a movement afoot springing up in many of America’s large cities—New York City, Washington, DC, Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, to mention a few—and also in many of her little towns that has young people speaking out in numbers too large to ignore about issues important to them. As I write this, hordes of young people aged 18 to 21 are registering to vote so that they may have an impactful voice in the impending local, state, and even the 2020 presidential election. As a child from the 60s and 70s, I am delighted to see such involvement—it matters not which political side they’re on.

Introduction

What we are seeing—we, the grown-ups watching from the sidelines—is an impressive display of maturity, leadership, and solidarity by these young citizens as they organize (mostly on social media), stand up for, and articulate their message. I have been moved by this display, the likes of which I cannot recall in my 24 years in the high school classroom teaching similarly aged kids—with one exception.

That exception was when I served as a Faculty Sponsor to the student Honor Council at the high school where I taught. There, I witnessed many of the same characteristics I see in the kids who I watch now on the evening news:

- ◆ Extraordinary levels of maturity
- ◆ Young people taking seriously matters of justice and fairness and demonstrating an unwavering commitment to and passion for doing what they believe is right
- ◆ Service to the community as a whole, putting their egos second to these matters they view as bigger than themselves
- ◆ Never once wanting or expecting any personal reward in exchange for their service (though they surely deserve it)
- ◆ Steady-handed determination, even when faced with obstacles and adversity
- ◆ Impressive natural leadership qualities, often emanating from the least likely students
- ◆ A selfless willingness to work, often in stressful and frustrating circumstances, for the greater good and doing so at significant personal sacrifice (my Honor Council kids, for example, frequently missed classes to meet during a case and continually had to play “catch-up” in their classes, often in demanding honors or advanced placement courses)
- ◆ Facing a segment of their peers who disagree with their decisions or judge their service, and not backing down despite the dissonance they experience

It has been a few years since my experience building and sponsoring the Honor Council at that school, but the experience was powerful enough to leave a mark on me about the tremendous results that can happen when we entrust young people with the work of adults and how, without exception, they rise to our expectations. They never once let me down.

This book is about how to build an Honor Council *from the ground up* in your secondary school. Check it out, test the advice contained in the following pages, and stand back in awe as you witness what I have been so fortunate to witness when ordinary young people accomplish extraordinary things.

PURPOSEFUL HONOR

Timely Student Voice

Not since the Sixties have I witnessed significant numbers of young people organizing—mostly on social media—marches, protests, media spots, and even television commercials, making a statement about some aspect of the social ills and inequities that continue to exist in American society. They often have a crystal clear message and stand in numbers conveying and supporting it. Adults, too, have been more active in this way than in the past few decades; movements such as #blacklivesmatter and #metoo have had significant impact in raising awareness, changing attitudes and employee handbooks, and even changing laws. Football players take a knee protesting police brutality and sentencing inequities; celebrities are standing up for their beliefs, in words and in dollars. In many ways, the 2020s are becoming a digital rebirth of the Sixties. Regardless of where one falls on the issues, there is no disputing that student and adult voices are being sounded and, in many cases, being heard, getting attention, and having an impact.

Coinciding with this social stirring, school curricula, educational publications, and blogs are increasingly addressing civility both in schools and outside of schools. How can schools better teach students to be civil and live with integrity? Schools have always taught students what it means to be a good citizen, particularly in elementary schools, but the push at present runs deeper than that, and much of it is targeted at older kids.

Honor in Schools

Just as a personal curiosity, after consulting and visiting with hundreds of schools, I started taking cell phone shots of school mission statements, which

are usually prominently displayed in close proximity to the main office where I would routinely sign in for my visitor's pass. As I made note of these mission statements, I paid particular attention to the language therein and looked for commonalities across a wide range of schools nationwide. Whether the schools were low-performing urban schools or affluent suburban schools, the language in the schools' mission statements was surprisingly similar. An accurate composite of all such mission statements would sound pretty much like this:

The Mission of _____ School is to provide each student an education in a safe, supportive environment that equips students with the intellectual, social, and emotional skills to be lifelong learners and productive citizens in the 21st century, instilling in them critical thinking skills, core values of honesty, loyalty, perseverance, and compassion.

Some mission statements were simpler. Some were even more verbose. But all of them included a clause about citizenry and about developing values of good citizenship, such as honesty and service to the community.

After reading these proudly displayed statements (I even saw one that was etched in the glass in the window leading to the main office), I always wanted to ask: *So, how are you actually instilling these values?* On the few occasions when I was brave enough to actually ask this question, the answers were very disappointing, ranging from "Well, we don't really do that—it's a mission statement" to "We try to teach them to be responsible citizens; you know, voting in Student Council elections and stuff." *Oh boy. We have a lot of work to do*, I thought.

As a 24-year veteran of classroom teaching, I am ultra-aware that teachers' plates are so full that to ask them to teach *one more thing* may well cause their collective heads to implode. So the question then becomes: *If we agree that teaching honor and global citizenship is a good thing and warranted—perhaps even more so than other items presently included in crammed curricula—and that teachers are spread too thin to take this on, however desirable and noble the cause, then how else can we do it?*

Enter student-run Honor Councils.

Student-Run Honor Councils

In every single secondary school (6–12) I researched for this book and in a surprising number of elementary schools (K–5), schools had Student Councils firmly in place. Around for many decades in a number of these schools, these

Chapter 1: *Purposeful Honor*

councils were composed of student-elected delegates to hold the offices of president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer, whose job it was to design and lead student activities (from *Water Day* to the *Junior-Senior Prom*). They acted as a liaison between students and faculty on a host of issues (from cafeteria food to student dress codes) and served as a welcoming committee for incoming freshmen. Many Student Council members volunteered to work at the school bookstore, and others were in charge of assembling the yearbook or hosted College Night for parents. In short, they were involved in almost every aspect of student life, except one—establishing and maintaining student honor on campus. *How could something publicly stated as valuable in a mission statement be so overlooked in what Student Councils were asked and expected to do in the role of representing school values?*

For this reason, schools that are serious about instilling honor values in their graduates have turned to implementing a body external to the school's Student Council to spearhead such values, a *student-run Honor Council*.

Student-run Honor Councils, unlike their popular Student Council counterparts, deal with the less popular—even at times *unpopular*—infractions of the school's *Honor Code*. In a nutshell, they are charged with hearing cases of academic cheating, lying related to that cheating, and (less frequently) student stealing (e.g., stealing from other students, teachers, the school cafeteria, or the school media center or bookstore). At the conclusion of its thorough and important investigations, the Honor Council makes recommendations to the school administration regarding guilt or innocence and recommends an appropriate punishment, in the case of guilt.

Honor Councils also serve as models of honor and how members present themselves to their classmates and peers. The Honor Council also prepares and presents an Honor Assembly at the start of the school year, which serves to provide information concerning the Honor Code and the Honor Council and raise student awareness about the school's culture of honor, all neatly packaged with the perfect balance of seriousness and fun.

The responsibility of an Honor Council is great; the degree to which the Honor Council and its decisions are embraced by the school community (students *and* faculty) is a direct consequence of the Council's reputation for being fair and not biased by either the popularity of the accused or Honor Council members' relationships to the accused. This premise is paramount to an effective, impartial Honor Council, and all who serve are keenly aware of this condition before agreeing to serve.

Honor Councils that practice fair and unbiased investigations and rulings are almost always respected by the student body at large, and the “word on the street,” so to speak, is that everyone gets a fair hearing. It goes without saying that if the accused has something to hide or has done something wrong, the Council will find it out. In schools where this opinion is pervasive, students not only *respect* the Honor Council but very often desire to *serve* on it.

Why Student-Run?

It is not inconceivable that an Honor Council be composed of a half dozen or so *faculty members* who hear cases of academic dishonesty and make rulings as to guilt or innocence and recommend punishment. In this paradigm, students accused of cheating by a faculty member would be exonerated (or not) by other faculty members. What would be the downsides of such a paradigm? Well, there are several.

- ◆ How likely is it that a cadre of faculty will vote against a fellow faculty member and overrule the cheating accusation? In my experience, it is not very likely.
- ◆ When, in teachers’ busy schedules, will there be time to hear cases?
- ◆ A ruling by a cadre of faculty reinforces the notion that teacher rules govern student behavior rather than the notion of a culture of acceptable student behavior, embraced by the students themselves.
- ◆ Will the student body at large view any such faculty-driven ruling as fair, or is it instead more likely to contribute to an “us against them” attitude among students?

For these and other reasons, a *student-run* Honor Council—messy and slow as it can sometimes be—is the way to go. When students investigate cases, deliberate those cases, and make a ruling on them, there is not only a greater likelihood that the ruling *is* fair, but also a greater chance that the ruling will be *judged* as fair by the student body at large. This is so very important. Kids serving on the Council don’t want to see their fellow students as guilty in cases of cheating; when Council jurists arrive at such a conclusion after considerable investigation, it is generally because there is undeniable evidence that supports guilt on the part of the accused. The rest of the student body realizes this and most often stands by the Council in its decisions and in its recommendations for punishment. This does not create an “us against them” mentality—quite the opposite. It creates a culture among students that clearly delineates what

is acceptable behavior (in students) and what is not. This becomes a powerful, peer-driven force in shaping the culture of acceptable student behavior. No top-down faculty dictum could ever be as powerful or as effective.

This structure only works if the kids who serve on the Honor Council truly represent the student body at large. *This is essential.* Students in the school have to know that their Council represents them, that every type of student (from jock, to egghead, to loner, to party girl) has a voice on the Council. We'll discuss more about selecting the Council in subsequent chapters; for now, realize that the student body at large will honor and respect the decisions of the Council *if* they perceive that the Council is a microcosm of the student body.

Who Owns the School Culture?

There is no simple answer to this question, so I will refrain from attempting to offer one. Arguably, every constituent involved in the school, from student and teachers to administrators and parents, has some ownership and influence in the culture of a school. To be sure, "cultural ownership" is not evenly distributed across these constituents, so the question becomes: Who owns the school culture, really? I would argue quite emphatically that the students are the primary owners of the school's culture. True, administrations and teachers play a huge role in influencing this culture, but student attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors do more to shape the school's culture than do administrative and faculty rules and expectations bestowed upon the students. School leaders can regulate how many tardies constitute an absence, but they can't regulate honor, trust, and integrity.

Imagine a middle school or high school that does not have a single padlock on any hallway lockers; or one in which dozens of student bookbags are piled up, unattended, just outside the auditorium as kids go in for a weekly morning meeting; or one where a lost cell phone or wallet is returned to its owner mere hours after being lost. I have seen all of these schools, and I can attest that in such places, the culture of honor is pervasive and of the students' creation and not created from teacher or administrative dicta.

Digital Citizenship

Before you decide to etch your school's mission statement in glass, you might want to consider this: In the hundreds of mission statements I have read, I can count on one hand the few that have actually mentioned anything about *digital citizenship*. Yet, the digital world (and our computers that take

us there) is the go-to source for our news; our social contacts and events; our outlets to buy and sell stuff; our banking; our political ties and networks; our medical advice; our place to read and post blogs, photos, and videos; our neighborhood news; our fact-checking; our academic research; and even our lesson ideas and activities. *Why in the world would teaching students digital citizenship not be front and center to their learning to be good citizens?* It is the world in which they (and we) reside and will remain so, by all indicators, from here on out.

The ability to engage successfully with these new skills has collectively become the new “learning to balance a checkbook.” Arguably, in this present climate of online banking, no one bothers to balance their checkbooks anymore. Balancing checkbooks has gone by way of learning to use the slide rule. Yet, in too many conversations to which I am privy, there remain the “slide rulers” and the “checkbook balancers” who cling to these antiquated skills themselves and insist that teaching them is good for their students. If Robert Marzano and a host of other eminent educational researchers are right in their assertion that contemporary K–12 curricula would require a K–22 education to cover it all with even a modest degree of mastery, why in the world would those among us in education insist on clinging to such antiquated content (Marzano, 2007)? To the slide rulers and checkbook balancers, I say a resounding “No.” No school should entertain—much less be captive to—such antiquated thinking that may have served students well 50 years ago but does no service to and, in fact, holds back students in schools today.

With these new 21st-century skills come new responsibilities and also new places and ways to be digitally dishonest. From not citing Internet sources (for example, using a copyrighted photo without mention of the owner) to hacking into and manipulating the school’s grading software—and everything in between—with new technology comes new opportunities for student dishonesty. Replacing the teaching of antiquated skills with an awareness of digital dishonesty and the ethics of digital citizenship can go far in circumventing problems before they arise.

The Honor Code

Let’s back up a minute. The Honor Council deals with infractions of the school’s *Honor Code*. That presupposes the *existence* of an Honor Code. Enforcing an Honor Code and hearing cases of honor prerequisite that there *is* an Honor Code to begin with.

Chapter 1: *Purposeful Honor*

Most school Honor Codes are remarkably simple and sound something like this:

I pledge my honor that I will not lie, cheat, or steal.

Most infractions heard by the Honor Council are squarely in violation of the second category of cheating, with any preponderance of lies mostly occurring to abet whatever cheating may have occurred. It is for this reason that most Honor Councils are involved almost exclusively with situations of academic dishonesty, and the lying that may have occurred thereof, rather than with situations of stealing or lying more generally. There are exceptions, but more than 90 percent of the cases heard by school Honor Councils involve cheating and any lying associated with the cheating.

In Chapter Two, I will discuss this notion of a student Honor Code and look at several examples of schools and universities that have effectively adopted one.