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Do strict behaviour policies at academies really make for happy schools?

Some children now face daily uniform checks and the threat of five types of detention, or else 'isolation'. How strict is too strict?

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It's around noon at Skinners' academy in Hackney, London, and through the glass walls of the classrooms children can be seen with their heads down over their work. Open a door and they will all jump to attention and stand silently, shirts buttoned to the top, ties neatly pulled up under pinstripe blazers.

Tight discipline is something of a feature in the sponsored academies of north London and, according to its principal, Tim Clark, Skinners' is not the strictest.

Yet he's proud to report that when he arrived at the beginning of this term, three years into the new school's life,
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The new policy, with its strict dress code, daily uniform checks and long lists of rules about the school's five different types of detention, has won praise from some parents, according to Clark, but others believe it has gone too far.

Sian Martin withdrew her 13-year-old son, Noah, from the school this term after a series of incidents in which he was punished for what she felt were minor infringements. He is now being educated at home via an online school because, she says, there is no place available in a local school with a less strict discipline policy.

"They are all academies around here or are run on similar lines," she says. "There's only one school that isn't, and it's hugely oversubscribed. We're being given no choice about how our children are educated. Why is it only in poor areas that children are being made to do this?"

Infringements

Noah fell foul of his school's uniform policy on the first day of term because his shoes were made of canvas rather than leather. The rules say shoes "must be sturdy and plain black, no trainers, heels, patent leather, open toes or slipper type shoes ... Kickers must be plain black with no tassel".

He was sent home. His mother says that when she sent Noah back wearing Kickers with the branded label cut off, he was searched while queuing for assembly and given detention because she had failed to spot a tassel on the inside of his shoe. The school says it has no record of this incident, though Martin says she discussed it with her son's head of year.

Martin says Noah was also held in detention on several occasions for minor infringements such as talking while working with a friend in an art lesson. She says she became concerned he might face a formal exclusion as a result of poor attendance because of an ongoing health problem, and she feared he would then not be welcome in another school.

The school's new "merit" system also worried her. The system used to award children merit points leading to rewards for good behaviour, but this was reversed so pupils lost points for bad behaviour instead. Only those with no deductions at all, even for a minor reprimand, are allowed to go on an end-of-term trip.

The school says that it still has a separate system of rewards for good behaviour that runs alongside this, but Martin believes the new rules are fundamentally wrong because they are demotivating. For her this was the last straw. "It's the lifer's dilemma," she says. "If you're in prison for life, what's to stop you from killing someone else? And the head thought that was reasonable. I'd had enough."

Skinners' opened three years ago in a smart new glass building, replacing an old and successful girls' school. It had a good Ofsted report last year, but its new principal says discipline needed to be tighter.

"I was faced with completely changing the ethos of the school," he said. "We introduced the new behaviour policy with the support of governors and all the staff. No child has the right to disrupt a lesson, and no child has the right to be rude or offensive to anyone else. Everything we have done is based on those two principles."

He says Noah was given two detentions for persistent talking in art and for disrupting a history lesson. But there is no doubt more pupils have been subject to sanctions this year - Clark refuses to say how many have been excluded from school this term, but concedes there were between 20 and 30 in the first three weeks - an increase on last year.

Under a new set of rules introduced this term, pupils who arrive at school without the right uniform or at lessons without the correct books or equipment are given detention on the same day without notice. A repeat offence will lead to a more serious "principal's detention" at the end of the week.

Escalating sanctions

The rules say repeated minor offences will lead to an escalating series of sanctions that automatically lead to exclusion, though he says only a few exclusions were imposed for this reason. Two other parents complained about the new behaviour policy, he says, and one of them withdrew a child as a result.

Its uniform policy states: "All pupils will look immaculate in their uniform ...failure to look smart at all times will result in **automatic** detention, isolation or being sent home - **there will be no warnings**, you know what is expected" [the school's emphasis].

Skinners' is unusual in that most sponsored academies have replaced failing schools, while its predecessor was well established and successful. In other sponsored academies, a strict new discipline policy has often been imposed as a means of marking a change of direction.

At the nearby Mossbourne academy, for instance, the behaviour policy says students are not allowed to go to the toilet between lessons or visit a local shop on the way home. The City of London academy in Islington has a five-stage "behaviour improvement path" that begins with 20-minute detentions for minor matters such as not filling in a year planner properly, or bringing the wrong equipment, and escalates to exclusion for persistent rule-breaking or more serious offences.

Not all academies have taken this route, though. Brendan Loughran, principal of the Darwen Aldridge Community academy in Lancashire, says he visited a number of other similar schools before his school opened in 2008. What he saw in one particularly strict academy disturbed him.

Sombre

"It was overbearing, with sombre-faced children walking in line, heads bowed," he says. "It felt unnatural to me. At Darwen we were clear we had high expectations. But critically, we gave students involvement and ownership in developing our behaviour policies."

Instead of imposing a set of rules, his school asked pupils to help draw up a policy for "managing and motivating" students, he says. "We invested considerably more than most schools in behaviour management and in our approach to exclusion and we set up clusters of local schools so any excluded child could be placed temporarily elsewhere and then returned. In the first year we had 80 placements; last year we had 30." His school is now fully subscribed for the first time, and GCSE results have soared.

At the Corby Business academy in Northamptonshire, discipline is not so much imposed as assumed, according to its principal, John Henrys. The school simply expects its pupils to behave as they would in a business environment, so while they are asked to pay attention when a teacher enters a room, they are not required to stand. "I liken it to how people behave when the boss walks into a meeting," he says. "We're a business academy so we provide a business environment. Behaviour doesn't drive what we do on a day-to-day basis; we just deal with poor behaviour when it arises."

But Bill Watkin, operational director of SSAT, the network that represents academies and free schools, says discipline is often a key focus for sponsored academies, most of which replace failing schools. "Sponsored academies have a duty to effect a radical transformation in standards because they have been underperforming for a long time. One of the ways to address underperformance is to address students' behaviour. It's essential that there's good behaviour in classrooms and corridors in order for children to be able to do their learning.

"There are sponsored academies that have had to introduce more rigorous behaviour policies and practices in order to make sure they have a working environment where children can learn and build relationships with each other."

Back at Skinners', Clark is delighted with the result of his push for discipline. "I've been bowled over by the support of parents, pupils and staff with the new situation," he said. "I make no apology for saying that pupils must show respect. They have to realise rules apply to everyone."

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