



Making Management Meaningful

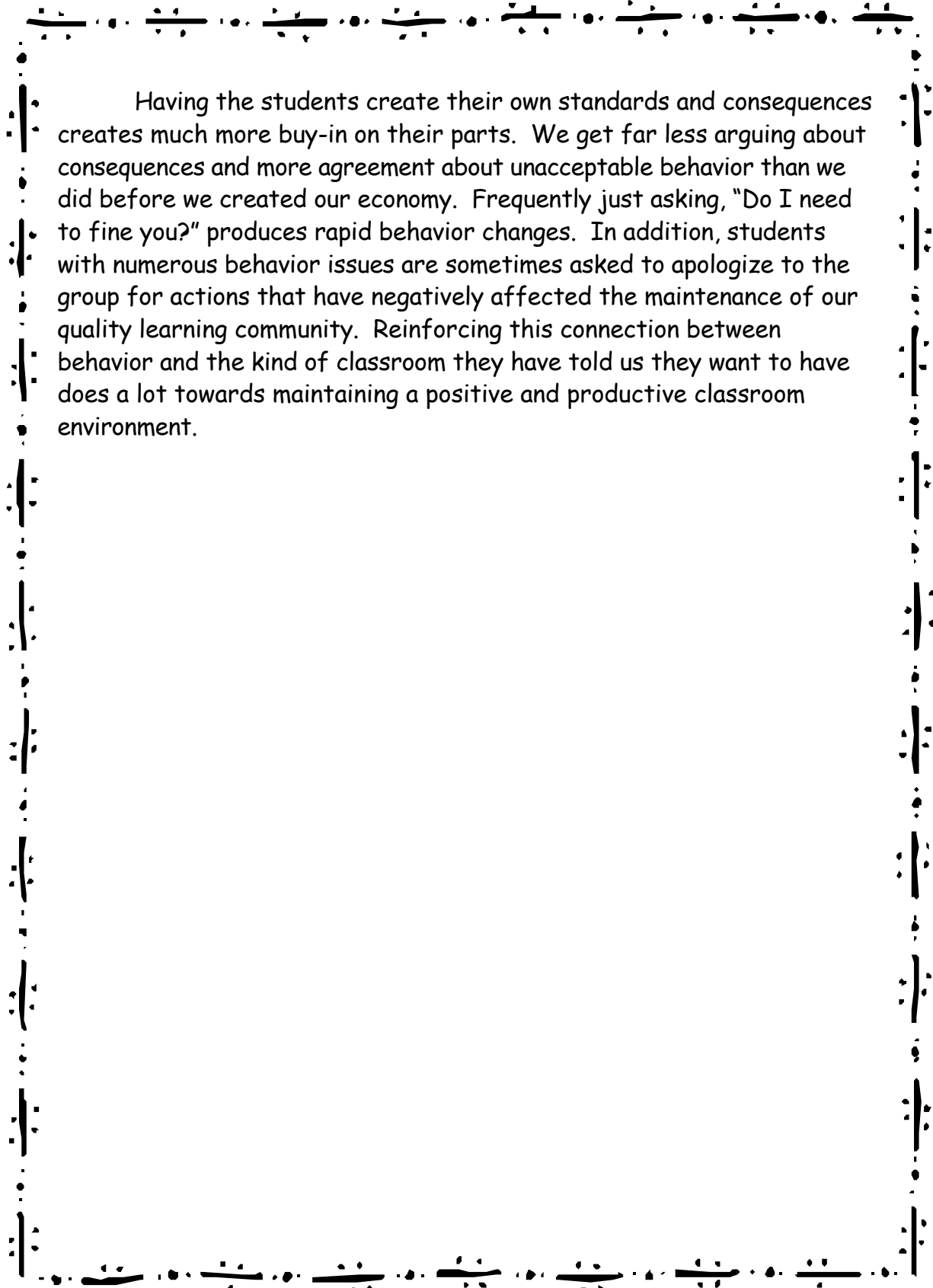
Denise Benjamin
Dolores Patton

Open Magnet Charter
Yellow Cluster
Grades 3-4

Our classroom management is based on the idea that everyone in the classroom is a part of creating a quality learning community. We use a classroom economy to maintain and enforce the student-created standards. The framework of the economy is defined by our year-long curricular project in which we build a model of a city of the future. The names we give our groups and the way we define aspects of the economy are based on the city model. Someone choosing to create an economy without the city might choose to use different names for groupings, or have different things that were rewarded or paid for, while still making use of the idea of a classroom economy.

At the beginning of the school year we set up our learning community. For homework the first week of school, the children write about a quality learning community, what it looks like, what it sounds like and what it feels like. They then draw a picture of themselves in a quality learning community. We compile their input, have them create illustrations, and this becomes our Quality Learning Community chart for classroom display. We have included quality learning community charts from two different school years.

The next step is to use our chart as a guide for the development of classroom policies. We discuss what kinds of policies we want in order to maintain the quality of our learning community. Since our classroom management system is based on that of a city, we develop a list of fines for infractions, much like those imposed for traffic violations. The children establish the relative severity of the infraction and we assign a monetary value based on their ratings. Thus, if lying is deemed a bigger problem than talking during teaching time, its fine will be more. We sneak math practice in by making sure that we choose values for fines that generate regrouping or work with bigger numbers. We have included fine charts from two years, so you can see how different groups of students have generated their fines and placed values on the infractions. These are directly behind the Quality Learning Community Charts which inspired them. It is always interesting to see how each new group of children discusses and evaluates various behaviors. We learn a lot about the class this way.



Having the students create their own standards and consequences creates much more buy-in on their parts. We get far less arguing about consequences and more agreement about unacceptable behavior than we did before we created our economy. Frequently just asking, "Do I need to fine you?" produces rapid behavior changes. In addition, students with numerous behavior issues are sometimes asked to apologize to the group for actions that have negatively affected the maintenance of our quality learning community. Reinforcing this connection between behavior and the kind of classroom they have told us they want to have does a lot towards maintaining a positive and productive classroom environment.

This part of the handout begins with the description of our classroom organization. Each child is a member of a neighborhood team, and a commission. At the beginning of the year, children are placed into neighborhood teams. We create heterogeneous groups, mixing abilities, sexes, racial groups, etc., and creating effective pairings while separating mutually unsupportive ones. These teams function as our classroom grouping system for most activities. In addition, each team is responsible for planning and building one fourth of our model city of the future. Next the children apply for commission positions. Each commission has two sets of responsibilities, those in the classroom and those in the city. These job descriptions are included in this section. Using the Yellow Cluster Want Ads as a guide(also included) the children apply for 3 different commissions, explaining their interest in each, ranking their preferences, and gathering convincing references. We have also included a sample job application. Someone interested in having jobs and an economy, but not in building a city, could create individual jobs, or categories of jobs, similar to classroom monitors, and devise a list of responsibilities to match classroom needs. Calling groups neighborhoods or commissions comes out of our classroom theme and activities, but other names or organizational groupings would work just as effectively, as long as they all tied together in a way that was clear to the students.

Once the jobs and commission roles are established, the children begin doing their jobs. We allow weekly job time on Fridays, but most jobs also have daily responsibilities which the children are expected to complete independently, hopefully without being reminded. . . **right**. Every month students complete a job evaluation in which they discuss their job performance and how it might be improved. They must also find two fellow commissioners to comment on their evaluation, explaining why they agree or disagree with what has been written. The teachers review the evaluation, assess it for accuracy, and establish the amount of pay for that pay period. We have set the maximum amount that can be earned in a month at \$200, but it could be any portion of that amount. Children are given a check from Denise Cole and Dolores Patton which they deposit into their bank account. There are additional ways to earn money with various bonuses, rewards for completing work and going without fines, and extra jobs that can be done as well.

Along with opportunities to earn money come responsibilities for payment. In our class, students are responsible for paying rent on their individual pieces of land that form our model city. In other environments, they might pay rent on their desk or chair, or a fee for using other classroom supplies on a monthly basis. The idea is to create something that is theirs, that they are responsible for maintaining and paying for. On monthly paydays, the students write a rent check to the Yellow Cluster Land Company. Monthly rental rates are established by the size of the parcel which they are renting. All deposits, withdrawals, and checks are recorded in each student's bankbook and we have other students who serve as bankers and check this work. In addition to the checks, we also have one, five, and ten dollar bills which are used as cash to purchase extra classroom supplies and pay small fines. We encourage the students to only keep \$20 cash in their wallet at any given time so that less is lost in case of theft or misplaced money. Copies of the bills, checks, and checkbook are included in this section.

This system has been developed over the course of a few years. As we worked with various jobs and ways of handling money, we have made changes and adjustments to solve problems that arose or to make things work more efficiently. Sometimes students have found extra jobs that needed to be done, or opportunities arose in a given school year that fit within the economy, so we included them. Both students and parents love the economy and feel that it teaches many life skills besides how to behave in a classroom setting.

Parent communication plays an integral part in our management system. Every day we put a flow chart on the white board in the front of the room showing what the activities for the day are. The children then put the schedule into their plan book. A blank copy of the students' weekly plan follows this page. At the end of the week, children evaluate and comment on their week by completing the questions on the back of the plan for that week. They rotate through several versions of the questions. We have set this up so different students have different evaluations each week as we have found this gives us a more well-rounded picture of the week. When we began this evaluation, we used the same questions each week and found that the students were getting bored and we were not learning about as many aspects of the program as we wished to, so we created a few different sets of questions. These follow the blank weekly plan in the handout.

We use these plans to communicate with parents as well. When a student is fined, it is written on their plan. Good work, or areas of difficulty, are also noted on the plan, as time permits, or the needs of students dictate. Homework that was not completed, or long term projects that need to be worked on, are also noted on the plan. On Fridays, we read the student evaluations and write comments back to them. We attach a letter to the parents that includes information about what is happening in the classroom / school, what next week's homework will be, and an optional weekly math problem. The letter and plan go home to be read. The letter stays at home and the plan is signed on the front and back and returned on Monday. Students are paid a Yellow Cluster dollar if they bring the plan back on Monday and are charged a Yellow Cluster dollar if they forget it.

While this plan, comments, and weekly parent note do take up some time each week, the time spent is more than worth the benefits that we receive. Parents are always informed of what is happening in the classroom, and with their child, and can use this information to support us and extend their child's learning. In addition, when we are asking parents to make sure homework is completed, or projects done, they can't claim they weren't notified of classroom progress and assignments. When they do try, and believe us, they do, we are completely secure in telling them where the information was and showing them their child's signed plan.