



## Positive School Culture: How one school transformed from violence to haven

*by Jennifer L.W. Fink*

Christian Fenger High School had a bad reputation. Located on the south side of Chicago in a neighborhood known for crime, poverty and violence, Fenger had long been a less-than-ideal educational environment. But when 16-year-old honors student Derrion Albert was beaten and murdered in 2009 while walking home from school, Fenger catapulted into the national news. The school was in crisis, and everyone—from politicians down to neighborhood activists—agreed something had to change.

Robert Spicer came to Fenger in late 2009 as the Chief Dean. On paper, his job was to create a safe environment for staff and students, but in practice, he found himself “pushing kids out” because the school’s zero tolerance policies called for suspensions and expulsions for even minor offenses. But keeping kids out of school didn’t help. If anything, Spicer says, “it made it worse, because they would come back even more angry.”

The administration knew it was time for a new approach. But how do caring educators who have already tried so many tactics create that change—a real lasting change—in a school’s culture? There are few challenges greater than school transformation. But when a school finds a way to make it happen, there are lessons to be shared. For the staff at Fenger, the answer was the Boys Town Education Model, a school-based intervention program that focuses on managing behavior, building relationships and teaching social skills. After learning the basics, staff members were intrigued, and invited Boys Town representatives to visit them in Chicago.

“When they met us, their team shared some of the struggles they had gone through at their alternative school in Nebraska, and how they were able to develop a plan to bring stability, character building and a sense of belonging and purpose back into the lives of young people,” Spicer says. “From that moment on, I was hooked. I believed the process could help our school and students.”

## Changing the Culture

Like many schools in crisis, Fenger had lost its way. “When I came, the school had lost its vision,” Spicer says. The culture had become overwhelmingly negative and punitive. The school wasn’t a place anyone really wanted to be.

Creating a new culture, though, required some radical change. School administrators and educators had to discard the old ways of doing things and embrace a new approach. The first step was to start focusing on what students were doing right instead of what they were doing wrong, while working concurrently to give students the skills they needed to be successful both in school and in life.

“You can’t hold kids accountable for something you’ve never told them,” says Erin Green, Director of National Training at Boys Town. “Behavior should be treated like academics, and students should be taught the skills they need to execute desired behaviors.”

Something “simple,” such as following directions, is not simple for someone who’s never learned how to do it. So the staff learned how to break essential social skills into small, manageable parts. Teachers and administrators taught these skills in class, and learned how to change their own way of responding to student behavior—both appropriate and inappropriate.

Following instructions, for example, is a three-step process. “You look at the person. You say, ‘okay.’ Then you do what you’ve been asked right away,” says Trish Stallard, Director of Student Services at Phoenix’s Pendergast Elementary School District, a district that also uses the Boys Town Education Model.

“You set the expectations, and then sit back and try to catch kids being good. You tell them when they’re doing what’s right. And if they need correction, you teach them a replacement behavior. We believe in a four-to-one praise-to-correction ratio,” Green says. “In a classroom environment, you should be praising kids four times as often as you are correcting them.”

Kids who misbehave or mishandle a situation aren’t automatically punished or sent out of the classroom. Instead, teachers are taught to show empathy, connect with students and reinforce social skills.

“A teacher might say, ‘I understand why you want to get out of your seat right now. I’m feeling a little bit wiggly myself. But the instruction was to stay in your seat, and when you stay in your seat, you’re more likely to get your work done. So let’s practice staying in your seat right now. Okay. Good job,’” Stallard says.

Teachers also learned how to deal with cycles of behavior as they get bigger, Stallard says. “Things like, it’s OK for a teacher to tell a kid, ‘I need to walk away for two minutes, but I’m going to come

right back and then we're going to talk about this,' instead of flying off the handle and saying, 'You know what? You need to get out of my classroom!'"

## Putting the Pieces Together

A positive school culture requires a positive approach, and Fenger administrators decided to go all in. Spicer's title was changed from Chief Dean to Culture and Climate Coordinator. "The decision was made to shift my role and move me from working in the very negative world of zero tolerance to building relationships instead," Spicer says.

But shifting to a new approach can be tough. Sometimes adults simply assume that kids who are behaving disrespectfully or aren't doing what they're told are "bad kids."

"I had to shift my thinking," Spicer says. "Because that's how I thought."

Fenger's staff learned how to positively interact with students, how to explain their expectations and how to praise them when they were meeting those expectations. Teachers also learned how to correct students when they were not meeting expectations, which ultimately teaches students life skills that will help them, not only in school, but outside of school as well.

Because all Fenger staff members underwent training, consistency skyrocketed. All teachers and administrators had the same expectations, and they all used the same techniques, methods and language to teach and talk to their students. Over time, that consistency decreased the number of behavioral issues.

It's also changed how students felt about school. Students who have learned new social skills are proud of their achievements. They feel empowered. "When we brought this system in, we had to put into our young people a whole new vocabulary," Spicer says. "Now there's power, because they have words for how they feel. They can actually name and claim what's going on. They can say, 'I feel this way and this is what I need to help me deal with this situation.'"

Ernest Fruge, Child Search Coordinator at Positive Connections, an academic and mental health treatment center in Calcasieu Parish, Louisiana, saw similar effects when his center underwent a culture change. "We took a lot of the negative talk out of our school. Kids hear more positive talk," Fruge says. "That's what our students need, especially because many of them had been labeled 'problem children.'"

As students and teachers developed skills—and confidence in their newfound skills—school culture evolved. Classrooms became more peaceful and disciplinary referrals decreased drastically. And students began using their skills in the hallway, on the playground and at home as well.

“We’ve definitely seen our youth take the skills out of the classroom and into the general area,” Spicer says. In fact, at his school in Louisiana, Ernest Fruge has seen kids as young as 5 and 6 use their newfound skills to show empathy and encourage positive behavior.

School culture has changed drastically at Fenger since 2009. “It’s night and day,” Spicer says. “We went from a school of fear to a school of faith in each other and faith in what we believe as educators. We’ve become one of the safest schools in the city of Chicago, and it’s not because we’ve added more police, more cameras or more security officers. It’s because we created structures and processes that help teachers and staff build relationships with these young people. We’ve built a sense of belonging and a sense of family.”

## 6 Steps to Success

1. **Set clear expectations.** Uneven or unclear expectations set the stage for conflict whereas crystal clear expectations remove the potential for conflict because both the desired behavior and the management of unacceptable behavior are clearly understood. Agree on a basic set of behavioral expectations for your entire school, and communicate those expectations to all students and staff.
2. **Teach processes.** The Boys Town Education Model includes 182 social skills, each broken down into simple, easy-to-understand steps. Borrow their approach: when you want students to do something, teach them the steps it will take to get there, and repeat that instruction, over and over, until students have internalized the process.
3. **Praise students for good choices.** “When kids are taught with a proactive, praise-heavy approach, they tend to do better,” says Erin Green of Boys Town. But be specific. Generic, overly-generalized comments such as “good job!” can confuse kids. Complimenting a specific behavior, on the other hand, reinforces that particular behavior.
4. **Build relationships.** “Kids don’t care what you know until they know that you care,” says Ernest Fruge, Child Search Coordinator at Positive Connections, an academic and mental health treatment center in Calcasieu Parish, Louisiana. “Building relationships with kids is one of the best ways to get them to come to your side.”
5. **Keep things small.** “Kids are going to make mistakes. They’re going to say stuff. They’re going to do stuff,” says Robert Spicer, Culture and Climate Coordinator at Christian Fenger High School in Chicago. Avoid escalating small mistakes into big confrontations. Take a few minutes away from the situation, if necessary, so you can respond calmly, instead of in the heat of the moment.
6. **Be patient.** It takes time for students (and teachers!) to master new skills. “Think about it in terms of sports,” Green says. “Some people have natural ability. Others learn how to hit the ball, but their form isn’t perfect. You’re not going to get mad at a kid because the first time you pitch to him, he strikes out. You’re going to pitch to him over and over and over again, and work with him on his form.”

