I wrote the following article for my website (www.drrobertbrooks.com), September, 2004. Other articles are posted on the website.

The New School Year: Orienting Staff and Students for Success

In the past few weeks millions of children and adolescents have started or will soon start a new school year. As they do, I am reminded of many patients I have seen who have struggled with the demands of school and learning. While most were apprehensive as the first day of school approached, there were a number who also felt a sense of excitement, hoping that this year would be filled with success and achievement rather than frustration and failure. Unfortunately, for many, their hopes soon faded, overshadowed by feelings of inadequacy, loneliness, and despair.

Professionals who have attended my workshops are aware that I have long advocated instituting an "orientation" period at the beginning of the school year. During this period the main curriculum would not involve books or course material but rather activities that specifically build a foundation for a school climate that nurtures motivation, self-discipline, cooperation, hope, and resilience in students. I am not suggesting that formal academic work be avoided during the orientation period. However, the primary goal would be to strengthen a positive attitude towards teaching and a positive relationship with students; academic work would be included if it furthers this goal. If the initial days of the school year were used to foster a positive relationship with students, it would serve to enhance the learning process that occurs throughout the year. While I believe the best time to engage in this orientation period is at the start of the school year, the activities I describe below can occur at any point.

I envision two phases to the orientation period, the first directed at the staff and faculty a day or two before the students arrive and the second occurring during the first couple of days of school when students are in attendance.

The First Phase

The purpose of the first phase is to reinforce a positive mindset in teachers. While most educators already possess this mindset, it is well worth nurturing and refining. My colleague Sam Goldstein and I use the concept of "mindset" in many of our writings. Mindsets are assumptions we possess about ourselves and other people. Sometimes we are not even aware of these assumptions, but they dictate our behaviors and the way we respond to others. For instance, if a teacher assumes a student's difficulties in school are a result of "laziness" and a "lack of motivation," that teacher will typically respond in a more accusatory, punitive way to the student's struggles than a teacher who views the same student's behavior not as a matter of laziness or a lack of will but rather as an indication that the student is burdened by learning difficulties.

In addition to the mindsets that teachers hold about students, the mindsets they have about themselves also impact on the classroom environment. If teachers enter a classroom and believe that they are not very competent in managing a group of students or that their influence on a student's life is inconsequential, they are less likely to be passionate, purposeful, and competent in their roles as educators. Students know which teachers believe in themselves and their students.

In the first phase of the orientation, school administrators can involve teachers in several activities to reinforce a positive mindset. They can encourage staff to reflect

upon and share with their colleagues why they became teachers (or other professionals in the school) as a way of emphasizing one's purpose at work. A clear sense of purpose or commitment serves to lessen feelings of disillusionment and burnout. Staff can also consider what factors they believe are most critical in creating a positive school climate and what steps can be taken to achieve this climate. They can be asked to describe teachers they liked and disliked when they were students and then make a list of the words they hoped their students would use to describe them during the upcoming year. As these words are listed, staff can be engaged in reflecting upon their behaviors with students and designing activities to maximize the likelihood that students will describe them with positive words.

Another exercise that I have recommended is for staff to share their most positive and negative memories of school from their childhood and to recognize that just as they hold on to these memories for a lifetime, so too will their students have indelible memories of them. I often ask teachers, "What memories do you hope your students take from your classroom and what are you doing to increase the likelihood that these are the memories they will have?"

These and similar activities introduced during the first phase can evoke a more positive mindset in school personnel accompanied with specific, constructive strategies for engaging students.

The Second Phase

The second phase of the orientation period can be implemented during the initial day or two of school, but its activities can be modified and reinforced throughout the school year. As noted earlier, during this second phase I recommend that teachers not feel compelled to introduce academic content. Some educators have questioned if this would be a waste of precious classroom teaching time. However, it has been my experience that devoting the first few days of school to address the social-emotional needs of students is invaluable. Teachers can use the time to develop and enrich their relationship with students so that students will be more motivated to learn, more involved in their own education, more capable of managing frustration and mistakes, and more self-disciplined. As I once heard from an educator, "Students don't care how much you know, until they first know you care."

Edward Deci, a psychologist at the University of Rochester and one of the foremost experts on the topic of motivation, has noted that students will be increasingly motivated to confront and persevere at tasks when the staff has developed an environment in which certain basic needs are satisfied, namely, the need to belong or feel connected, the need for self-determination or autonomy, which heightens a sense of ownership, and the need to feel competent. These needs can be actively addressed during the first few days of school.

To Belong and Feel Connected: A sense of belonging is reinforced when students feel welcome in school. When I asked students of all ages what they thought educators could do to help them feel welcome, the two most frequent responses were "greet me by name" and "smile at me." Educators who quickly learn the names of their students and express a warm, genuine smile vividly communicate the importance they place on the teacher-student relationship. I met a kindergarten teacher when one of my patients was assigned to her class. A few days before school began, she sent a postcard to each student that contained the following message (obviously the parents read the words to

their child): "Welcome to kindergarten. When you come to class the first day if you have a drawing you've done or your photo, bring it in so we can hang it up." I had an appointment with my patient on the afternoon of the second day of school. He had been very anxious about starting kindergarten, but he excitedly told me, "My teacher put up my drawing and my photo. She likes me."

A middle school adopted as a primary goal the strengthening of "connections with students." When the students arrived for the new school year, they discovered hundreds of paper stars hanging in the halls; each star had the name of a student written on it. Some might wonder if young adolescents would find this practice contrived or trivial. This was not the case. The students responded very positively. During an interview one of the students noted that the teachers must have spent many hours cutting out the stars and writing the names of students on each star. He commented, "That shows they really care about you."

A high school teacher I met informed each of his classes during the first day of school, "Sometimes I don't have a chance to get to know you as much as I would like, so during the year I plan to call each of you at least twice at home in the evening to find out how you're doing." He said this practice didn't take time from his own family since the calls were not lengthy and, very importantly, his reaching out in this way provided him with more time for his family since he had fewer discipline problems, the students were more likely to meet their classroom responsibilities, and their achievement scores improved. This is another example of highlighting the power of connections during the first couple of days of school.

To Experience Self-Determination and Autonomy: Students will be more motivated to learn and more willing to accept responsibility for their behaviors if they feel their voices are being heard and they have some choice about what is transpiring in school. As I recommended in my December, 2003 website article, teachers can reinforce a sense of ownership at the beginning of the school year by explaining to students the purpose of classroom practices that are typically seen as "givens." The rationale for these "givens," which include such activities as tests, reports, and homework, is rarely, if ever, discussed in classrooms. Some may counter that a teacher should not consume valuable class time to explain to students the purpose of these basic features of education. However, I believe doing so will enhance one's teaching. Also, such explanation does not suggest abdicating responsibility for one's classroom or allowing students to make up all of the rules or deciding which classroom requirements are acceptable. Rather, it means educating students about the rationale for various class activities with the goal of increasing their feeling of ownership and motivation.

A middle school teacher reported that a student surprised her by asking about the purpose of homework. This teacher, rather than becoming defensive, wisely used the question as an opportunity to discuss her thoughts about the function of homework. She also encouraged her students to ask other questions they had about her class expectations. She told me, "I was so impressed with their questions that I decided that in the future I would not wait for students to ask me any questions they had about classroom requirements. I realized they might not do so since I had not structured time for such questions. Instead, I decided I would take part of the first day of class at the beginning of each new school year to review my expectations and what I saw as the purpose of homework or tests or reports. It was a good exercise for me since I was forced to think

about why I gave homework or why I gave tests in certain formats."

This teacher continued, "I would have never thought of having this kind of discussion if the student had not asked me about the purpose of homework. Yet now I would not think of not having this kind of discussion."

Another example of promoting self-determination involves enlisting students to help create class rules and consequences, especially once a teacher has reviewed two or three nonnegotiable rules. Not only are students more apt to adhere to rules that they helped to design, but in the process teachers can reinforce problem-solving and decision-making skills and, very importantly, nurture self-discipline or self-control. As an example, a middle school teacher engaged students in developing class rules the first day of school; he recorded these rules as a "class constitution" with each student signing his or her name on the document. He told me that this practice greatly diminished discipline problems.

To Feel Competent: Teachers can use the first couple of days to identify each student's "islands of competence" or areas of strength and plan strategies for reinforcing these strengths throughout the school year. I have recommended that elementary school teachers set aside a few minutes alone with each student to ask the student to identify his or her strengths (if a student says, "I don't know," a teacher can simply respond, "That's okay, many kids aren't sure what they're good at, but it's something we can figure out"). Similarly, teachers can ask students about their interests and then consider how these interests might be incorporated into academic assignments. Interviewing students about their strengths and interests conveys the message that teachers appreciate that all students possess special interests and competencies that can be used in the educational process.

Since it is more difficult for a secondary school teacher to meet individually with each student given the number of students one has, I was impressed with the practice of a high school teacher I met. Prior to the new school year, he sent a four-page questionnaire to each of his incoming students. One of the questions asked students to list three things that they "were good at," while another question asked them to list three of their "academic strengths." Other questions asked them the areas in which they would like to improve and what they perceived to be the characteristics of effective and ineffective teachers. An accompanying letter informed students that completing the questionnaire would help him to be a better teacher. An administrator informed me that students in this teacher's classes were noted for the responsible academic and social behavior they exhibited.

If students are to feel competent, teachers must lessen the fear of making mistakes and looking foolish, a fear that can play a major role in any classroom and often serves as one of the most potent obstacles to learning. I have met students who are so desperate to avoid appearing "stupid" or "dumb" that they would rather act like bullies or class clowns than risk failing to learn. One of my patients with learning problems said, "I would rather hit another kid and be sent to the principal's office than have to be in the classroom where I feel like a dummy."

I believe that teachers can minimize this fear of humiliation and create a more supportive, less stressful classroom environment by openly addressing this fear during the orientation period. Prior to the introduction of any academic work, teachers can ask their class, "Who in this class thinks they will make a mistake and not understand something this year?" Before any student can respond, teachers can raise their own hand and share

memories of their own anxieties when they were students. Teachers can then involve the class in a discussion about the best ways to insure that no student will be worried about being called upon, not understanding the material, asking questions, or being teased by other students because of an incorrect answer. This discussion will serve to minimize the potency of the fear of mistakes and fortify a more resilient mindset in students.

Concluding Comment

The implementation of the two phases of the orientation period described in this article represents a proactive approach to creating a positive school climate. The specific strategies used may vary from one educator and one school to the next, but the goals will be similar. Instead of waiting for the possible appearance of staff burnout, tense teacher-student relationships, poor motivation, and disruptive student behavior, it makes eminently more sense to plan and initiate practices that minimize these problems from emerging. The time spent in these orientation activities will more than offset the time and frustration involved in dealing with school environments that are filled with dissatisfaction and negativity; when negativity permeates the corridors and classrooms of a school, teaching and learning are compromised and all who inhabit that school suffer. It is essential that we engage in practices that will allow a positive mindset to become the dominant force in a school.