

**Encouraging Democracy:  
An Administrative Method for  
After-School Programs**

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A democratic [leadership] can enable and encourage citizens to do more for themselves, while for that reason doing what it must do more effectively.

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-Alexis de Tocqueville; *Democracy in America*

Not perfection as a final goal, but the ever-enduring process of perfecting, maturing, refining is the aim in living. The foundation of democracy is faith in the capacities of human nature; faith in human intelligence; and in the power of pooled and cooperative experience.

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-John Dewey; "Democracy and Educational Administration"

## Introduction

This short study is intended as a practical pamphlet on administrating after-school programs, although the conclusion will propose a theoretical "philosophy" intended more for edification than for any functional purpose.


There are 3 main areas of this study:

- I. Environment
- II. Leadership
- III. Participation in a Community

Each area will explain one or two important concepts and end with follow up questions designed to aide comprehension.

This pamphlet is not a comprehensive study of either democracy or after-school administration. Rather, given the high turnover rate in after-school program administration, this pamphlet is a short guide to successful after-school programming designed for novice, in-the-field practitioners in after-school settings. Hopefully this short work will be of use.

## I. Environment

Perhaps the greatest, but most subtle factor in the success of any learning or caring organization is the composition and arrangement of the external environment, especially in terms of after-school programs, the classroom environment. The external environment as an ever-present "atmosphere" has a direct impact on the overall wellness of every participant because it sets the conditions to which every participant acclimatizes; the implicit structure and method of a program can be deduced from a simple look around. 

If the environment speaks disorder, messiness, clutter, chaos then one can infer a weak and unorganized structure based on limited awareness and laziness, most likely accompanied by a reactionary discipline standard.

If the environment speaks order, cleanliness, deliberate placement, then one can infer a strong and organized structure based on greater awareness, planning, and pro-active attention, which will be most likely accompanied by a rational and consistent disciplinary structure.

Let us examine three environments from contrasting after-school programs and infer an administrative method from each.

### A. The Mess

Step in the door of what seems to be a standard classroom environment and take a look around. The floor is littered with bits of food, dust, broken and scattered toys, papers, pencils and an assortment of odds and ends with no discernable description or use. The walls have pictures of various school "type" posters and bric-a-brac, but posters are ripped in places,

bulletin board boarders hang freely, children's graffiti is found in various blank spaces on posters, bulletin boards and even on the walls, and there is a noticeable hole in the wall from what seems to have been a blow of some sort. A bookshelf stands under a window with a few, splattered piles of books spilling onto the floor where most of the books are cluttered in a pile. The tables and chairs art at odds and ends spread over the entire surface of the floor leaving very little "open" space. A piano sits dusty in a corner with ripped music books scattered across the top, broken keys, a scratched and battered wood-finish, and a broken pedal door laying on the floor amidst toys, markers, and some sort of paper object crammed into the exposed pedal door opening. Underneath another window are several "cubby" type shelves where there are various odds and ends, games pieces, toys, art supplies, and most notably broken and exposed electronic equipment, like computer monitors, keyboards, printers, a type-writer, and a computer mouse. Near the back of the room there is what unmistakably must be the "teacher's" closet hanging open with all sorts of art and paper supplies, chemicals, clothes, old tattered blankets and odds and ends bulging out. And to top it all off, the room seems to be a storage area for the school so there is an assortment of stacked chairs, several music stands, boxes, and a table laying against the wall.

**Questions:**

*What administrative principles can you infer from this environment?*

*What implicit or explicit dangers can you discern?*

*How do you think the children treat their environment? Why?*

*What kind of discipline would you expect given this environment?*

*Can an after-school program be successful in such an environment? Why?*

*How would you alter this environment and to what effect?*

## B. The Prison Camp

You walk into a site and see spotless walls with a few centered posters. One poster reads in bold, black print: "NO running, NO shouting, NO horseplay, NO messes" and another announces "Program RULES" and lists several prohibitory commandments. Looking around the room you notice a blank chalkboard and several tables symmetrically aligned in perfect rows. There are neatly stacked cubbyholes with each child's name. The room is exceptionally clean, however most of the room seems devoid of anything other than desks and chairs. Each table has several nametags taped on its surface denoting specific placements for the children. Near the back of the room a sign reads "Teacher's Area." Behind a barrier of low cabinets, a table, and behind the teacher's desk is a locked cupboard next to large shelves filled with games, toys and books, with a visible "check-out" sheet handing close by.

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### C. The Play-Zone

You walk into a large classroom area and notice several distinct "areas" in the room, each labeled with a brightly colored sign. Near the front door where the children enter there are many cubbyholes designated with each child's name and a coat rack. On the wall next to the door there is a display board with all of the children's photographs, their names, and the pertinent program information and certification forms.

Upon entering the room you notice a "Teacher's Area" blocked off behind a desk and cabinets with many supplies arranged in a workable order. Walking into the room you notice a bright sign that reads: "Respect, Responsibility, and Safety" and then goes on to explain each principle in a short, easy-to-read sentence. Next to this poster is another, which reads "When Inside We Need To" and lists off several positive behaviors.

On your right a small, carpeted area with a table, chair, couch, and a full bookshelf labeled "Quiet Corner." The center of the room is predominantly filled with a neat, but uncluttered arrangement of tables and chairs into two long rows and plenty of space in between. On the left you see a large table filled with baskets of paper (one basket has colored construction paper, one has white paper, and one is filled with various coloring pages photocopied from a color-book), a basket of scissors, a basket of glue, a large container of crayons, a box of colored and regular led pencils, two large buckets of colored markers, and several color books stacked neatly to one end. This area is labeled "Art Table."

Beyond the "Art Table" there is a computer and a chair. Near the back of the room on the right a large sign reads "Games and Toys" next to a large shelf and a table filled with games, toys, blocks, and logos. At the back of the room by the back door there is a large box labeled "Out-Side Play Equipment"

filled with balls, cones, and jump ropes. Next to this box is a sign, which reads "When Out-Side We Need To" and then lists off several positive behaviors.

On the back wall is a large chalkboard divided unequally: the smaller half filled with writing and lines reads "Teacher's Side" and the larger side of the chalkboard reads "Kid's Side." The Teacher's side lists a schedule and daily announcements and the kid's side is covered in brightly colored chalk drawings and scribbles. Looking back and taking in the full scope of the room you cannot help but notice that the walls are filled to overflowing with children's and staff's artwork all labeled with names and dates.

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## II. Leadership

There are many competing ideas about leadership, especially within the field of education and child-care. The three environmental examples above can also serve to introduce three different styles of after-school leadership.

The first, **Passive Supervision**, is a naïve, hands-off style reminiscent of "baby-sitting." Far too many child-care practitioners follow this lazy and unstructured style of leadership, and it produces shoddy after-school programs that have a high frequency of disciplinary issues.

The second style is a more dictatorial form of leadership representative of the **Excessive Authoritarianism** of 19<sup>th</sup> century pedagogy (Mr. Gradgrind in Charles Dickens Hard Times (1854) is a perfect example). This form of leadership is prohibitive in nature (No this and No that), obsessed with controlling children, and not only produces a lot of conflict between teacher and child, but is damaging to the overall wellness and creativity of children.

The third example represents a **Pro-Active Leadership** and we will explore this option at some length.

### A. Pro-Active Leadership

Pro-Active Leadership is not concerned with dictating every move a child makes nor is it overly obsessed with order. The pro-active leader knows that children are creative, finicky, inherently messy, very energetic, and that they have short attention spans. The purpose of pro-active leadership is not to work against the physiological and psychological nature of the child, but to work with it and to make the most of it for the child's advantage.

The core principle of pro-active leadership is the “catalyst effect.” In the chemistry lab, the “catalyst” is the agent of chemical change, which, when added to a stable solution, immediately causes a chemical reaction. In the after-school setting, the “catalyst” is the leader who as an active agent of change will cause a positive, creative reaction in a child – *directing* children into activities that will take advantage of their creativity and energy and *focusing* that energy into *positive expressions* of play, games, art or imaginative silliness.

The pro-active leader should not necessarily dictate, command, or control (although these tactics are often warranted) but should primarily *direct, channel, transition, and guide* children from one activity to the next and in activity settings.

“Pro-active leadership” means one must be highly organized and fully conscious of not only the environment, but also how children will react to that environment, to each other, and to the activity at hand. The pro-active leader needs to *predict* the likely consequences of environments, activities, *play groups*, and individuals at play so as to insure a healthy, safe, and fun atmosphere – one that will *prevent* discipline issues before they start or *manage* them before they become a problem. In this way the pro-active leader will announce transition or activity periods ahead of time, will allow for stragglers and short attention spans, and will demonstrate the appropriate actions through short, direct reminders and positive reinforcement.

A structured and ordered environment is also essential because it accentuates a *predictable schedule* and an *expected level of conduct*. Thus, the pro-active leader needs only positively reinforce the program “norms” and then look for anomalies in order to locate and deflate possible sources of conflict before they become serious discipline issues.

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**Questions:**

*Can you identify times where you were "pro-active"? Explain. Can you explain how "pro-active" leadership is related to organization skills? What has been your experience? Relate an experience where a transition or activity- time when badly. What could you have done different?*

B. Discipline & Guidance

Discipline and guidance are also an important part of any education or child-care setting. One should not approach this subject from a vantage point of "punishing" misdeeds, but of encouraging and reinforcing "positive" behavior. One should start from the position that kids need to be kids and they need a program that will allow them to blossom and grow in creative ways. But of course the natural growth and creativity of a child must be combined with consistent instruction about positive social interaction, community ethics, and personal responsibility. Perhaps the best way to model this instruction is with a simplified discussion of "actions" and "consequences" so as to broaden the child's ethical awareness, teaching the child that every action effects a community in either positive or negative ways.

For starters, it is important to set up an agreed upon "contract" for behavior before a child begins a program. The "contract" forms the constituted basis of all positive behavioral norms, whereby any disciplinary actions can be explained to the child as the necessary consequences of negative behavior. Thus, in dealing with children on a contractual/constitutional basis it is important to remind them that they are members of the program because they agreed to follow the rules of the program and are, therefore, bound by their word.

Here is a sample behavior contract:

### Behavior Contract

The STARS after-school program at \_\_\_\_\_ Elementary School is a privilege that I must earn through my good behavior and my willingness to listen to the staff. I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to follow the basic rules outlined in this contract. I understand that should I not follow any of the rules on this contract I could lose privileges at Stars (like free-time, computer time, activity time, playing with my friends, free-time Fridays, Party Days) or I could be put in "time-out," or if I continue to not follow the rules I could loose the privilege of coming to Stars.

I agree to follow these Rules:

- 1) I will LISTEN to the Stars leaders at all times and respect the staff by doing what they ask. I WILL FOLLOW DIRECTIONS.
- 2) I will RESPECT both staff and kids. I will keep my hands and feet to myself, and keep others and myself SAFE.
- 3) I will ALWAYS be in site of a leader and/or remain in the Stars room, unless I ask for permission to leave.
- 4) I will RESPECT my ENVIORNMENT by cleaning up after myself and I will not damage any Stars or school equipment.
- 5) I will ALWAYS DO MY HOMEWORK when a Stars leader asks me.
- 6) I will let a leader know when I am frustrated and talk about my problems, and I will ALWAYS ask for help when I have a problem with another child.

Director \_\_\_\_\_ Parent \_\_\_\_\_

Child \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

The contract should always end with the signature of the program director, the parent and the child. And keep in mind, the contract should always be framed in positive language so as to reinforce what a child *should* do. If one has the time and ability, it would also be a good idea to follow up the contract with a "Bill of Rights," which would basically outline what the child expects from the program and serves as an incentive for good behavior. This "Bill of Rights" does not have to be written. It can take the form of an oral discussion about privileges and rewards within a particular program.

Usually children will not break the rules that they have agreed upon, especially if there is an incentive to follow the rules. A simple reminder that the child could lose the incentive coupled with a positive "asking" (i.e. "will you please stop..."), should be enough to stop negative behavior, although it might take several requests. Be patient and you'll find that most kids will comply. ✱

When a child does misbehave and breaks the "rules" outlined in the contract and does not respond to several, reasonable requests then you need to follow through with a penalty. Usually the most effective penalty is the "time-out." You can simply explain to the child that there are consequences for negative actions and that a quiet-time reflecting on the negative behavior is one of those penalties. Make sure to have a consistent "time-out" gradient that "fits the crime" (i.e. for a minor or first time offense 2-3 min, for a repeated minor offense 5 min, for a third-repeated or more serious offense 10 min, and so on).

In keeping with a sense of democratic community, a group penalty can also be enforced, and this will be discussed in a later section of this pamphlet. A "group time-out" reinforces both a collective and an individual responsibility so as to prevent the all too often occurrence of chaotic outbreaks.

Inevitably there will be children who transgress past the 10-15 min "time-out" because of serious offenses: physical violence or intimidation, running away from the program, disrespecting a leader, destruction of property, and so on. Usually when a child escalates to this type of behavior it is a sign of more serious problems and one should talk to the parent in private about their child to find out if there are special needs that should be addressed. Hopefully parents/guardians will alert you to special needs *before* they become a problem, however, this is not always the case.

When a special need must be met or if the child has a chronic behavior problem, then the issue of discipline becomes highly subjective and a parent conference is usually the best way to negotiate consequences for the negative behavior and also to decide upon a new behavior contract. Also, if in fact the child has some special needs or is troubled in some way, be prepared to make concessions with the child wherever possible to insure their participation and overall wellness. Sometimes, in extreme cases and if possible, this means an alternative schedule.

**Discipline is about finesse, discretion, and consistency.**

Leaders naturally want to befriend the children in their program, as they should, but one must first establish one's self as an authority figure to be respected. A leader must, especially at the beginning of every program or after a long break, assert his/her authority and make sure the rules of the program are clear and followed consistently. Often it is an effective policy to be sterner at these "beginning" times and then slowly become more flexible, especially when you are running a larger program.

There are no easy answers when it comes to discipline, but children inevitably test authority figures early in a relationship. If you are consistent and a stable role model in the child's life then discipline will become easier over the long-term.

**Questions:**

*What kind of behavior contract do you use? Has it been effective?*

*Do you discuss or draft a "bill of rights" in your program?*

*What kind of incentives do you use? How effective are they?*

*What kind of "serious" discipline issues have you had to face?*

*What actions did you have to take? Did they work?*

*Describe a situation with a "special needs" child and what you needed to do to make the situation work.*

### III. Participation in a Community

The most important and perhaps most neglected part of an after-school program or academic classroom is creating a sense of community where it is the responsibility of every child to be an active and positive participant in the program's community. Classrooms and after-school programs, to invoke the notion of environment in section I, are living organisms that can function as either a cohesive unity or as a loose collection of antagonistic factions. Usually, the nature of large groups when left to their own devices is exclusionary and antagonistic. The most destructive form of this process is evident in high school "cliques," but the seeds of this behavior are present in grade-school. It is the leader's responsibility to navigate this sometimes-rough terrain. If the community ethos is left unattended, participation can be negatively effected, individual self-worth can deteriorate, and inter-group and personal conflict can escalate. \*

It is not the easiest task to encourage community and small and large groups come with their own difficulties. Small groups tend to be more cohesive because of the simple fact that there are usually not many social alternatives for children and there is often more direct contact with leaders.

For a large program there are several ways to help encourage community, some of which are applicable to smaller sites.

- 1) Group Sharing
- 2) Individual Responsibilities (Jobs)
- 3) Group Rewards and Penalties
- 4) Mentor or "Jr. Leader" System
- 5) Democratic Initiatives

### Group Sharing

A great way to encourage community is to make a time where all the kids and leaders can sit down together. It helps to focus this time on a specific activity like "announcements," "sharing" or a combination of both. One must reiterate the rules about respect and listening so as to allow for a calm and open atmosphere. It also helps to have specific boundaries for group-time like sitting in a circle or within specified bounds. Kids love attention and the ability to engage a group, especially when there is something very special to announce. Group sharing can be a great time to reinforce not only community, but individual identity as well.

### Individual Responsibilities (Jobs)

Another way to encourage community is to have kids take an active part in making the program work. Most kids enjoy taking responsibility because it makes them feel older. Assigning jobs can be attached to group sharing time or it can have a time all its own. Jobs should be treated as a "reward" type activity for only the responsible members of the group who follow the rules and set good examples. It is also a good idea to tie successful completion of a job to an external reward-system of points, or some such method where so many successful completions of jobs equals a prize like candy or computer time. Jobs can range from taking attendance, making sure lines are quite and straight, to helping serve snack, monitoring bathroom times, washing tables, and cleaning up the classroom. It can also be helpful to attach homework or reading to the list of jobs that can be completed, which gives a concrete incentive to finishing homework. In some cases a group-job can also be implemented like picking up trash around the school or helping the janitor, and this might entail a special group incentive.

### Group Rewards and Penalties

A very effective way to not only monitor individual behavior, but to encourage a sense of community is to offer group rewards and penalties.

A simple example of a group reward is noticing that the day went exceptionally smooth and reward the kids with 15 min of extra free-time. Another example is "free-time Fridays." If children behave themselves and follow the rules Monday through Thursday then the group is rewarded by a full day of free-time on Friday, which can include special activities like extended computer time, or bringing toys or electronic devices from home. Another example is an "end of the month Party." If the children are good for an entire month they are rewarded with a Party accompanied by special treats, special activities, and perhaps a movie. The Party can also be a time to reward the individuals who have done jobs over the course of the month.

Perhaps the most effective group penalty is the "group time-out," which can lead to the loss of group rewards like free-time Fridays or end of the month Parties. The group time out can be invoked when a large majority of kids are not following the rules, especially those times where there is excessive talking, horse-play, or loud voice levels. When a group time-out is mentioned, usually the more responsible kids will begin to take a leadership role and tell the other kids to be quiet and listen. When a program is running smoothly this will happen and the leader will simply have to direct the attention of those kids who still continue to break the rules. Sometimes, however, this will not always work and the entire group has to sit down, hands and feet to themselves, and be quiet for a specified period of time. It is usually a good idea to set a limit before a group privilege is lost, for example 3 group time-outs means the negation of free-time Friday.

### Mentor Programs, "Jr. Leader" Systems

In a grade-school setting, the older kids (ages 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> grade) can often be your greatest source of trouble. Part of the reason is a growing sense of self and independence. Thus, a good pro-active way of harnessing this natural development is to offer these children more responsibility, which is tied to greater freedoms at the program or a special system of rewards.

One example of a successful mentor program is the "Jr. Leader" system. 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> graders have to meet with the director who tells them about the responsibilities involved. Then kids must sign-up for the program (an additional contract could be optional). These Jr. Leaders must satisfy two requirements: 1) they must complete a set number of "special jobs" or "good deeds" and 2) they must set a good example for the younger kids to follow.

The reward for this behavior could be a special "Jr. Leaders" time away from the group to talk, play or do a special activity. Another incentive could be an additional reward at the end of the month Party, like a special treat or a special party-time with special activities and/or special treats just for the Jr. Leaders.

But if these children do not do the required number of "special jobs" or if they do not set a good example then they miss out on this extra incentive. Reminding kids of this fact can be a good method to positively reinforce good behavior and control negative behavior.

### Democratic Initiatives

The best way to get kids involved in the program is to give them a say in how its run, i.e. let them have some input on what type of activities and projects are offered. The more kids feel that they have an active say in a program, the more likely they will take responsibility, will participate, and will behave themselves. A greater measure of power can also give kids a sense of ownership, whereby, they will be more inclined to follow the rules and respect the program environment.

There are several ways to implement democratic initiative into your program. Here are just a few:

One can announce a group meeting to go over the contract that all the kids signed and discuss the rules. At this time you can ask kids to explain the rules, ask them if they agree with the rules, and ask them if there are any additional rules they would like to add.

One can announce a time for art activity ideas, whereby kids can come up with a project (perhaps with a leader's help) and then the kids can help the leader do that project with a group on a specified day.

One can take suggestions from the kids for organized-activity times (and perhaps the leader can make a suggestion too) and then the group can vote on the top 2-3 choices. The group plays whichever activities get the most votes.

One can take a vote on free-time days and ask if the kids want to do free-time or an organized activity. If enough kids want to do an organized activity the program could split into two groups. Or one could take a vote about the specific area the children want to spend their free-time: the classroom, the gym, outside, or perhaps a certain playground or part of a playground.

One could also take a vote on the special activities to be done at an end of the month Party, which movie the kids wanted to watch, or what type of special treat the kids would enjoy.

The mechanism of voting gives the children a sense of power and also responsibility. The leader facilitates the children's wants and needs by reminding the children about what is appropriate and not appropriate for the program, but the leader does not necessarily have to dictate all the moves a child makes. Children must learn to behave responsibly and to make sensible choices on their own and the best way to facilitate that development is to give children as much practice as possible. Thus an after-school program can be a workshop for democracy.

### Questions

*What community-oriented activities are implemented at your program?*

*Do you have a sharing time? How do you do it? Is it successful?*

*Do you assign the children jobs at your school? What are they? What are the rewards?*

*Do you have group rewards or group punishments? Are they effective incentives?*

*Do you use your older children as mentors or Jr. Leaders? What types of arrangements have you worked out?*

*What types of democratic initiatives do you use in your program? What could you do to enhance this issue?*

Notice - leader's  
"wants" are not the  
issue → leaders  
are "servants"

### Conclusion

This pamphlet began with two quotes. The first was by the 19<sup>th</sup> century French political theorist Alexis de Tocqueville from his monumental study of American democracy. The quote explains that there are two "objectives" and thus two "motivations" behind government and he implicitly suggests that they can often be conflicting. One goal is "what citizens want" and the other is "what is good for the country." We can translate this into "what do kids want" and "what is good for the after-school program." As Tocqueville explains, the effective leader will try to harness these two objectives into one by giving "citizens" a greater measure of power over their own lives by promoting their civic role, which can, thereby, ease the leader's burdens of governing these selfsame citizens because the citizens have taken it upon themselves to govern their own lives and communities. Likewise, a democratic initiative in an after-school program can put part of the burden of responsibility and leadership on the children in the program. This will enable the kids to have a sense of power, place, and ownership in the program and will, thereby, allow them to practice responsible, democratic decision-making.

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The second quote is from America's preeminent philosopher of democracy, John Dewey. Dewey basically says that the ends of democracy should be its means: developing the "capacities of human nature," cultivating "human intelligence" and encouraging "cooperative experience." Where one actively engages and practices these natural, human processes then one is living the democratic ideal. The human condition and promise is one of maturation and refinement. Thus we must teach children not to be complacent in their humanity, but to learn to grow and develop in order to meet their own needs and the needs of their community.

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These are the fundamental principles of a functioning democracy.