

The Power of COMMON LANGUAGE

How a shift from rule following to habit development created a culture of high expectations in one school.

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For most episodes over the past 29 seasons, *The Simpsons* has opened with young Bart completing a variation of the same punishment: writing a pledge over and over on Mrs. Krabappel's chalkboard. The pledges have included, "I will not fake rabies," "I will not skateboard in the halls," "I will not conduct my own fire drills," and "I will not do anything bad ever again." After hundreds of episodes—each requiring a new repeated oath from Bart—one wonders if Mrs. Krabappel is taking the right

approach. If only Springfield Elementary had integrated schoolwide language for classroom management, Bart might have had a chance to develop better habits before he reached 4th grade.

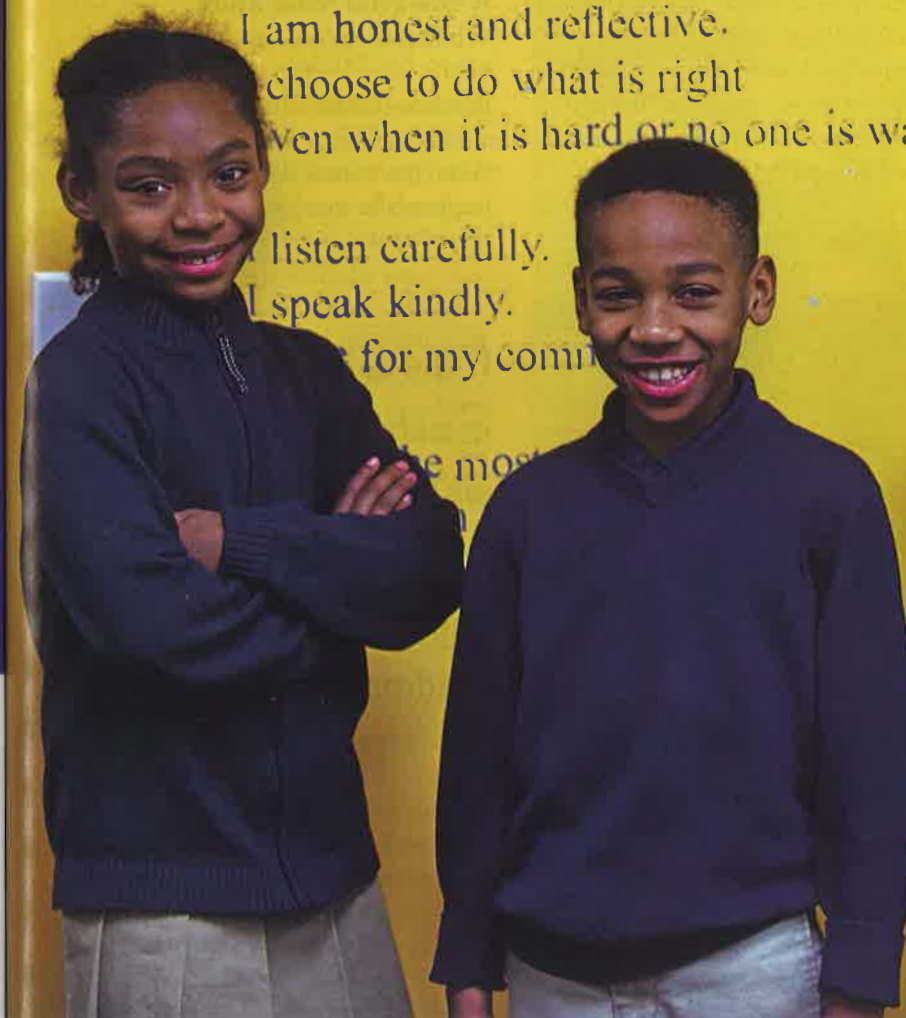
When Harlem Academy, an independent school that serves children from underserved communities in New York City, entered its sixth year of existence in 2010, we recognized something was missing in our approach to classroom management. Here is how we described what we saw in a letter to parents:

SCHOOL CREED

I am bold and creative.
I take opportunities to lead.
I seek help when I need it.

I am honest and reflective.
I choose to do what is right
even when it is hard or no one is watching.

I listen carefully.
I speak kindly.
I am responsible for my community.



The school creed is visible in every room at Harlem Academy, including the library, where these two 4th graders proudly stand. This visual cue reinforces shared language and serves as a reminder of the creed's importance in the school community.

to rules and consequences wastes precious time needed to drive learning goals. It also forces students to adjust to different approaches throughout the day and diminishes opportunities to repeat important behaviors year after year.

Built from High Expectations

High expectations are critical to student performance, particularly for elementary and low-income students (Sorhagen, 2013; Hinnant, O'Brien, & Ghazarian, 2009). Though this is widely understood, it is less clear how to institutionalize such expectations. How can we weave them into the culture not only in every classroom, but also in the halls, in the lunchroom, and on the playground?

Once Harlem Academy recognized the need to support improvements in student behavior by cultivating shared expectations and aspirations, we set out to create a statement that would anchor what it means to be a member of the school community. Our goal was to define the outcomes that we sought for our students, and then work backward to implement an approach that would support those goals.

What emerged, after much exploration and some trial and error, was the Harlem Academy school creed. Starting with "I am bold and creative" and ending with "I don't give up," the creed provides shared language around our aspirational expectations for students. It is an affirmation of each person's dedication and

Currently, each grade level has its own language for behavior expectations and character development. As such, growth that is achieved at one level is not always strongly sustained at the next. We see some students learning from their Harlem Academy experiences while others slide back into patterns of unproductive behavior and decision making.

Every school hopes for its students to behave well in class and emerge

as positive contributors within the school and broader community. However, many schools muddle through, skipping the intentional steps needed to develop the habits that underlie these goals. Often, teachers are left to develop their own classroom management systems and behavior expectations.

This is a lost opportunity. Each teacher devising a separate approach

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commitment to upholding the four pillars of our community: initiative, integrity, compassion, and determination.

Our daily schedule now includes blocks of time to explore these concepts explicitly, but much of the growth happens less formally, as teachers use the lines of the creed as common touchpoints in explorations of history, literature, science, and math. Unit plans include a section for “creed connections” to ensure these

line, “I care for my community.” Ultimately, the cumulative attention on these aspirational ideals shapes a school culture centered on high expectations.

Researchers Wood and Neal (2007) highlight the strong interaction between goals and habits, arguing that most habits originate through the deliberate pursuit of goals. In the early stages of habit development, attention to goals, rules, and rewards is intentional and directed by the

power of connecting expectations for classroom behavior with the larger goals described in our school creed in developing lasting habits.

A Powerful Mind Shift

While Harlem Academy’s baseline habits (see “Harlem Academy Baseline Habits” on p. 58) may be similar to other schools’ classroom rules, the critical difference is in our implementation. First, we connect these habits less to obedience or

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consequences and more to the ideals outlined in the creed and developed through advisory (in which all students in grades 1–8 participate). Second, our habits are shared schoolwide, setting the stage for repetition.

Reframing desired classroom behaviors as habits toward the realization of aspirational goals—not rules to be followed—is a powerful mind shift. If the school creed is a shared vision of what each student can become, our baseline habits provide a roadmap to get us there. We want students to know that embracing habits is a necessary prerequisite for becoming the person they envision in the creed.

When we developed our baseline habits, we aimed to make them specific, concrete and observable, universally achievable, and relevant to students’ success toward realizing the creed. These criteria align with prevalent goal-setting frameworks, such as SMART goals.

When behavior issues do arise, the restorative conversations that follow a student’s misguided choice are rooted in the common language of the creed. For example, after a peer-to-peer dispute, our work with the students will often connect to: integrity (reflecting on personal responsibility in the situation); compassion (considering the feelings and perspectives of the other student); and determination (learning from mistakes and never giving up in the face of challenge). In such instances, we are able to build on an aspirational context that has already been established and embraced by students, families, and teachers.

We Are What We Repeatedly Do

At the foundation of habit development is repetition (Lally, et al., 2010). If we believe these classroom habits and behaviors are essential to students’ overarching development, then providing opportunities for students to repeat them is a logical next step—and having a common language for them is a powerful tool to support this.

■ *Repetition through consistency:* Common language provides a pathway for consistent expectations throughout the school, allowing students to practice the same positive behaviors in every class, every day, at every grade level. Common language provides all members of the community with shared touchpoints to reinforce messages and



Harlem Academy families engage with the creed at home, supporting growth toward its aspirational expectations in conversations outside of school. In this photo, 2nd and 5th grade siblings point to the school creed posted on their refrigerator alongside their mother, who uses the creed as a guide during teachable moments.

deepen students’ understanding of goals and expectations.

■ *Repetition through precise feedback:* Common language around expectations allows for clear, specific feedback. A teacher can easily correct a student who is not prepared for class or praise students for “following directions all the way, right away.” These concrete, observable habits are easy to track, such that we can measure growth and report to students with specificity the areas in which they are thriving or struggling. Feedback is important to the development of habits, even at the neuron level. MIT researchers Graybiel and Grafton (2015) found that the brain is wired to weigh costs and benefits as it develops habits.

■ *Repetition through reflection and goal setting:* To support students in

developing strong habits, we ask them to reflect on the feedback they receive and set goals for ongoing improvement. Reflection allows students to determine “implementation intentions” or plans toward achieving their goals (Gollwitzer, 1999). Common language guides this work by providing a set of baseline habits and goals that every student can strive to achieve. In lower school, students engage in a brief daily reflection that often connects to classroom habits. For instance, a student who is having trouble coming prepared to class will have a chance to think about obstacles and connect action plans with lines in the creed about initiative and determination. In middle school, goal setting takes place weekly, and the focus is often more aspirational—transitioning the

skills are intentionally integrated into daily lessons. A 2nd grade teacher, for example, might challenge students to explore the pillar of determination in *Mercy Watson to the Rescue* (Candlewick, 2009) or to connect Sonia Sotomayor’s biography to the

prefrontal cortex. Then, Wood and Neal explain, through repetition and learning, these behaviors become habits (cue-driven, rather than goal-driven) and are controlled primarily by the basal ganglia, a different brain system. This underscores the

baseline expectations to the school creed and individual ambitions.

■ *Repetition through family partnership:* School is an important starting point for supporting the development of strong habits, but students have many opportunities to internalize these messages during out-of-school time with their families, such as chatting after a movie, discussing the news, or working through arguments with siblings. The shared language we provide is a valuable tool for families, as Harlem Academy parent Chris Middleton affirms:

What our family likes most about the creed is that each line is usable. We post it on the refrigerator at home. During teachable moments with our kids, my wife and I ask, 'Which pillar do you think this situation relates to—integrity, determination, compassion, or initiative?' I think that's something that all families can do. It ties home life into school life.

A Lasting Impact

If you visit Harlem Academy today, you will see our creed prominently displayed, serving as a valuable beacon in our daily character and behavior work. You will also see a joyful school filled with engaged, attentive students. As a demonstration of their strong habit-building, during the spring trimester 8th graders are allowed to leave our campus daily for an extended lunch and recess block. The creed's impression on our students, however, lasts well beyond their final year.

Mariah Bell, who graduated in 2013 and is now at New York University, reflects:

When I first got to Harlem Academy, I did not understand why it was so important to have a school creed. I was like, 'Oh this is nonsense. What are we doing?' But once you start to practice it, you find yourself accidentally using

Harlem Academy Baseline Habits

- Remain "SET" during class. (Sit up, Engage in the lesson, Track the speaker.)
- Come prepared for the start of class with all materials.
- Complete assigned homework to the stated expectations of the teacher.
- Follow teacher directions all the way, right away.
- Refrain from side conversations, calling out, or otherwise distracting from the lesson.
- Use quiet voices, respectful tone, and appropriate language in and out of class.
- Keep organized notebooks, homework folders, cubbies or lockers, and desks at all times.
- Remain in dress code throughout the entire day.

it in important situations. You're struggling with work, and you find yourself saying, 'I don't give up, I have to do better, because I know the people in my community are expecting me to.'

Jada Cooper, a graduate from the 8th grade class of 2014 who went on to a boarding high school, adds, "Harlem Academy encouraged us to seek opportunities to lead. In my room at Putney, I have a copy of HA's school creed to remind me of these values."

At Harlem Academy, we often recall the maxim, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, therefore, is not an act but a habit." We've

found common language to be a powerful tool for ensuring students are repeating excellent behavior. By empowering students, parents, and teachers with the same goals and expectations—and the language to connect to them—we create the opportunities students need to practice and internalize character habits that are critical to their academic and personal success. ■

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