

Brimming with Hope Column
St. Louis Review
June 22-28 Issue

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Prayer, Virtue, and Dignity Don't Take a Summer Break

Imagine you're a parent giving a ride to your elementary school daughter and some of her friends. In the backseat, you hear some of them start gossiping about someone not in the car. Another child pipes up with, "you know, this kind of talk is not very virtuous." What would you expect to happen next? Perhaps you might brace yourself for the others in the car to call the child who spoke up a 'goody two-shoes' or some similar words of disapproval. But the mother who relayed this real-life story said that, without a word from her, the other girls responded with, "You're right," and changed their conversation to another topic.

Does this sound too good to be true? Not if your child's school has adopted the Virtue-Based Restorative Discipline (VBRD) program. We are fortunate that VBRD was developed right here in St. Louis by Mrs. Lynne Lang, Director of School Climate for the Catholic Education Center. While the program provides a "Catholic response to bullying," this program is so much more. Many Catholic schools and homes in the Archdiocese have experienced powerful transformations with this program and it is recognized nationally as a leading initiative to promote a positive school climate centered on Jesus Christ.

While the bishops of the United States were meeting downtown last week, another group of about 250 Catholic leaders gathered at the Cardinal Rigali Center in Shrewsbury. Most were Catholic school principals and teachers here to learn how to promote restorative practices in Catholic schools for the Third Annual Restorative Discipline Summer Institute. The program's success has been spreading and this year Catholic educators from 11 different states and the nation of Belize attended the four-day Summer Institute.

The program improves the quality of relationships between children and adults. The key to this success is simple; a culture of prayer, consciously cultivating what virtues are ("holy habits that lead us closer to God") and what they look like/sound like, and a commitment to working through problems constructively to preserve human dignity. Through regular classroom circles and a common vocabulary, students discuss and practice virtues at home and school.

This provides a constructive framework for acknowledging and repairing harm when it occurs. In VBRD schools and homes, when there is harm, the injustice is acknowledged and solutions are focused on formative rather than punitive outcomes. One of the consequences for students who make poor choices is to restore the relationships broken by their actions. This approach puts into action the lesson my principal taught me during my first year teaching in a Catholic school, "A child needs love the most when he deserves it least."

Strengthening relationships is also central to the Building Intercultural Competence for Ministers program, created by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). As part of the Restorative Discipline Summer Institute, we were also pleased to welcome school, parish, and diocesan leaders from throughout Missouri to a one-day introductory workshop on this program that increases the ability of our leaders and ministers to communicate, relate, and work across cultural boundaries.

Our society clearly needs more virtue, restorative practices, and intercultural understanding. The VBRD and Intercultural Competence programs are helping our students, teachers, administrators, and parents do that more effectively in our Catholic schools. Teachers and principals even gave up some of their summer vacation last week to learn how to better help students and parents; now that's virtuous!

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