

## **The PEN program - New Authority in schools**

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Just like today's parents, teachers and schools are also very much conscious of the loss of authority in the educational system. The traditional authority of the teacher has been severely eroded, yet in today's social climate it is neither desirable nor possible to recapture the authority of the past. In traditional society children did what teachers told them since by definition, teachers had unquestionable authority. The authoritative, distant often punitive teacher of yesteryear was replaced by a kinder, understanding and supportive teacher. Today we are at a crossroads; the more liberal approach to education has proven unsatisfactory and only a partial answer to children's needs, while the authoritarian approach is no longer valid in a world characterized by greater transparency and a more critical relationship to authority.

It is in response to this conflict and the vacuum left in its wake that we found ourselves struggling with the question, how do we fill this void, where the traditional authority has been eroded, in a way that provides meaningful experiences of boundaries? How do we still influence our youth but in a way that is valid in today's culture and society. It is from this crossroad that we have developed the New Authority alternative for schools – The PEN program.

The object of this paper is to describe the principles of the working model in schools as they are implemented in Israel. It is important to stress that unlike parental counseling, which is measured in weeks, the counseling for schools is measured in spans of many months. A change in attitude regarding authority in a multi-participant educational staff is more complex than changing the conceptions of a couple of parents regarding their authority at home. Therefore, the work of the New Authority Center's team is more complicated and more difficult in schools.

## **The PEN program for schools – Fundamental Principles**

The acronym of the schools program – pen, reflects three significant dimensions in the new authority concept- **P**resence, **E**mpowerment and **N**et-support:

**Presence** - Presence is the central motif in the construction of the new authority. In this regard the program emphasizes the importance of the presence of teachers in the student's life - in the classroom, in the hallways and courtyards of the school, and at times in the home while reaching for support from parents.

**Empowerment** - A central message in our program is the empowerment of the authority of educational figures in the school. This stance is of great importance and teachers sense it right from the start of the program's implementation. Counselors often arrive at the schools with a basic attitude that says - we are here to help you perform better and improve the students' condition. Our basic position is - we are here to help you improve your situation and deal with the difficulties you face due to a variety of student behaviors. It is important to realize that this position is not a mere slogan. The rationale behind it is that our "client" is the teacher/principle and not the students. The basic belief that guides us is that empowering parents and teachers will lead to an improvement in the condition of the children and students. I shall note here that in my personal opinion, in many cases today the distress of parents and teachers is greater than that of the children and youngsters...

**Net-support** - The best metaphor that describes the character of the new authority is that of authority as a net rather than authority as a pyramid. The power of the new authority figure is measured in her ability to create as many connections as possible which enable the weaving of a network that supports her actions. In this regard we assist education personnel in acting so that that they may receive backing from colleagues, from parents and from the community in which the school is located alike. A final and significant point in the PEN program is the recognition that intensity and complexity with which the school staff deals in the course of the school day sometimes requires immediate response to acute problems. Therefore, the structure of the proposed program for schools provides an answer to this need - the implementation of the program is carried out by a team consisting of a 'supervisor' and a 'coacher' (similar to the work of the psychologist and the telephone support for parents). The 'supervisor' outlines the ideas of the new authority to the educational staff and presents ideas for their implementation. The 'coacher' maintains a more intensive contact with the staff by phone, email and Internet forums as may be required. It should be stressed that the program not only constitutes a basic change in the concept of teacher authority and the ways to build it, but also offers a series of practical means to implement it in practice.

## **Tools for Teachers during the lesson**

The first meeting of the New Authority counseling team with the teachers is constructed as a workshop which takes place in one of the classrooms. The title of the workshop is: Dealing with disciplinary problems by students during class. This workshop structure, which takes place in a standard school classroom, turns the teachers into students and the program supervisor into a teacher.

One should know that teachers definitely know how to behave like students... behaviors such as chatter, noise, tardiness, engaging in activity unrelated to the lesson are definitely prevalent once we allowed the teachers to become students. This "lesson" is the most difficult step for our counselors but also the most significant - the team will demonstrate the teachers how to deal with escalating processes during class in live. It is important to clarify that the object of the supervisor is not to mirror the teachers' behavior; her role is not to preach, but rather prove the teachers that she can indeed deal with the disciplinary problems which they create - just as students do. The supervisor constructs her authority not by presenting a fascinating theory but by her very presence with the teachers in the classroom.

Of course she must also deal appropriately with the problem of chatter, for example, and one of the simple means to do that is by movement during the lesson while explaining. In this way the supervisor (=teacher) builds her presence throughout the classroom and can respond to the teachers (=students) who some of them will probably chat during her explanations.

There are quite a few means that have been developed to illustrate to teachers how to deal with escalation processes during class. One of the favorites among our staff is "the bookmark". During the class the counselors creates a provocation in which the coacher interrupts the supervisor during the lesson and an escalating process develops between them. This staged process illustrates to the teachers how reciprocal escalation (arguments, shouting, threats and so on), which often occur during class may be stopped, using the bookmark. The bookmark is a sentence which the teacher addresses to the student during the argument or confrontation:

**"We are both angry right now, we will stop that now and we'll talk about that at the end of the lesson. I ask you to sit down and continue working."**

We call this a "bookmark" because a bookmark has two main roles: One is to close the book at this point - in this regard, the teacher "closes" the argument with the student. The anticipated objection by the teachers, who first hear about it - that the student will continue to argue, is answered by the explanation that even if the student continues to argue, as long as the teacher does not respond there is no argument. This is the first step towards unilateral action according to NVR principles. But a bookmark has another use - to re-open the book at the exact same point but later. The phrase **we'll talk about that at the end of the lesson** is designed for that purpose - at the end of the lesson the teacher calls the student over. The reaction of the teacher at the end of class is solely up to her discretion, but the important point is that the teacher did not respond in the heat of the moment - she delayed her response. The

reader who is versed in our approach has probably recognized that this is a simple and effective application of Professor Omer's famous principle "Strike the iron while it's cold".

This initial meeting with the teaching staff is not an easy one for our counselors. However, holding this meeting in a classroom - the teacher's primary "theater of operations", while positioning the program supervisor as a "teacher" and the educational staff as "students" allows the teachers to feel that the suggested means of coping are not based only in theory but are applicable and work on the ground, as it were. The working alliance between the counselors of the New Authority Center and the teaching staff begins to build. The teacher's motivation to work according to NVR methods and to construct a new authority for themselves grows significantly at the end of this "lesson".

### **The Steering Committee**

The steering committee includes 2-3 members from the school (including the school principle) with whom our team is in regular and continuous contact. In practice, the meetings with the steering committee take place before the onset of the yearly program, and enable us to properly define the 'character' of the school and the emphases required in our program. The school's character depends on many parameters, including the student population, the staff room dynamics, the level of parental involvement in the school and also the managerial style of the principle. Accurate assessment of school characteristics enables us to avoid pitfalls and correctly avail ourselves of the school's strengths & resources.

The steering committee enables us to define and adapt various procedures within the program, such as the "present suspension", the Patrolling procedure, the school Sit-In etc. These procedures must be well planned and fit the school's character. There are schools where the focus of the program is the parent-teacher alliance, in others it is the empowerment and cohesiveness of the teachers and then there are schools which require more focused plans, such as one school in which we were asked to formulate a unique plan to reduce school refusal and drop-out issues.

### **Mutual Support - Thinking and Acting as "We" Instead of "I"**

The isolation of teachers stems not only from the structure of their jobs - the teacher standing alone in a classroom - but is also a state of mind. As a result of their ongoing isolation teachers often tend to hide their difficulties. Hiding which is understandable, due to their long experience with criticism and with requests that are not met with support. A central condition to escaping this isolation is to begin to think, react and operate as a team - "We" instead of "I".

One of the most significant means in changing the teachers' stance and creating a position of "We" instead of "I" is the formation of response teams. But acting as a

team does not occur easily. Teachers must acquire personal experience in joint responses in order to internalize the stance of "we". Here, as well, experiential learning workshops, in which teachers taste the creation of solutions based on teamwork, aid in understanding. Teachers who have experienced creating support network bring their experience to the team and receive feedback. For instance, when two teachers or a teacher and a counselor have carried out a school sit-in together, they shall describe the action and in this manner other teachers are encouraged to use this technique. Another means we use is a variation on the bookmark - under certain conditions, in response to escalating behavior by a student, the teacher may respond with a short sentence: **"We do not accept this sort of behavior at our school"**. The teacher closes the argument but does not invite the student for discussion at the end of class. Instead he informs another teacher about the incident - this teacher will call the student's parents and invite them for a joint discussion. At the joint discussion of the two teachers with the parents, the teacher who was not involved in the incident will describe what took place and will end with the exact same words - "we invited you to this meeting because **we do not accept this sort of behavior at our school"**. We call this a team bookmark - one teacher places the bookmark and another re-opens at the same point. The message "We" trickles down to students and parents but mostly this message and experience grow in strength among the teaching staff at the school. The change from "I" to "We" is a significant milestone in the change of perception from the old authority to the new authority. The means and techniques that we offer are meant to mobilize the teachers as a team but this action leads to most important thing - a change in the attitude and the personal experience of the teacher.

### **The Parent-Teacher Alliance**

The culture of isolation among teachers is also expressed in their regard for parents. Teachers tend not to see parents as partners in dealing with violence and discipline problems and often are afraid to involve them. As part of the instruction workshops for teachers we guide them, using role-plays, how to better communicate with parents in order to further the connection between parents and teachers. In fact, most teachers have never been trained in how to address parents in a manner that will enlist them to joint action. Furthermore, most teachers lack tools for joint action with parents.

At the workshops the teachers are presented with tools that enable joint action with parents - the school sit-in, the struggle notebook (which is a variation on a parent-teacher contact notebook), reparation acts and so on. Those tools enable teachers to build a new authority while enlisting parents to joint action. These means often turn the teachers into "light therapists" - the teachers guide the parents in constructing NVR steps. In this manner the teachers are empowered twice - both vis-à-vis the student, by initiating response actions, and vis-à-vis the parents - who feel that the teacher can help them deal at home as well.

The strengthening of the parent-teacher alliance while carrying out joint actions helps teachers build a network of support which includes not only their colleagues but also

the parents. The wider the network and the more participants it includes, the teachers' new authority is strengthened.

### **In Conclusion**

The central focus of the PEN program is to empower the authority of the educational staff at the school. Our central message to teachers is - we are here to empower you. If you are not stronger and have more presence, we haven't done our job! We definitely believe that as long as we don't empower the teachers, as long as the school staff does not feel sure and confidence in its ways, actions and stance, it will be difficult to improve the student's state. Our goal is to build a new authority for teachers and for parents, and as Prof. Omer states:

“The new authority is about empowerment. Influential figures, like parents or teachers, need not be defined by their ability to control children but rather by their ability to initiate, whether it's initiating care, initiating resistance or initiating support.”

The PEN program defines tools and procedures for teachers & parents to act that way, feel that way and at the end make the best for our children. After all they are the real reason why we are doing all that...