

# The 'Stained-Glass Window' Theory

By David Hill

**A**s a beginning teacher years ago, I was surprised to hear a principal offer some amazingly simple advice for maintaining order in the classroom. The suggestion would not guarantee classroom tranquility, she said, but it would help. "Make a real big deal about chewing gum," this principal advised. "Gum just creates problems, gets stuck everywhere. When students know that you're serious about gum, they'll be less likely to *really* misbehave."

These words seemed strange at the time, but they now make a lot of sense. Productive learning environments can be created in part by choosing to "sweat the small stuff."

Many teachers try to proactively address small problems in order to fend off more-serious student misbehavior. They are determined to quickly fix all kinds of metaphorical "broken windows" because, as the broken-window theory goes, ignoring small problems often leads to larger ones.

Writing in 1982 on crime, policing, and neighborhood safety, James Q. Wilson and

George L. Kelling explained in a widely cited *Atlantic Monthly* article that, if one broken window in a building is not repaired, "all the rest of the windows will soon be broken. ... [O]ne unrepaired broken window is a signal that no one cares."

Schools too often struggle with violence, flagrant disrespect, and generally disruptive student behavior. Consequently, we educators will often nod approvingly at the student who simply "stays out of trouble." But it is one thing to keep from behaving poorly and quite another to decidedly behave well. To keep from failing (behaviorally as well as academically) is different from excelling. Repairing symbols of brokenness may help prevent larger problems, but we should aim higher than this. We should encourage excellence.

If we extend the logic of the broken-window theory, then the following kinds of questions arise: What if we were not content with merely repairing broken windows? What if we instead put up "stained-glass windows"—that is, symbols of excellence—in their place? While the quick repair of broken windows communicates that disorder is not accepted, the creation of stained-glass windows would signal an

expectation of excellence.

By carefully crafting these metaphorical stained-glass windows in our schools, we can create environments that inspire students to give their very best. This is

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How a school moves from repairing the symbols of 'brokenness' to building an expectation of excellence.

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altogether more desirable than simply keeping the worst in young people at bay.

I am the founding principal of an inner-city Memphis middle school. Its faculty and staff members certainly have not found all the answers, and the school is by no means a utopia. But it is a place where students are surrounded with stained-glass windows. So enveloped, they are freed to more easily excel—in their behavior as well as their coursework.

Here are a few examples of "windows"

that are commonly broken in schools, how they are normally repaired, and how we make them stained glass:

**Use of time.** Student learning suffers in many schools because class time is spent unwisely. Teachers may regularly allow students to have extended periods of nonacademic chitchat, for example. If such idle conversation were to last 15 minutes for every one-hour class period, then 25 percent of class time would have mindlessly slipped away. Over the course of a 10-month school year, this would mean 2½ months of lost instructional time.

This "broken" situation can be repaired by ensuring that all available class time is used for academic instruction. Our school takes it a step further. The "window" becomes stained glass, for example, when we require students who eat breakfast at school to begin the day with independent reading.

**Students' attention to instruction.** Almost all teachers attempt to wake up sleeping students. In our school, teachers are not satisfied with maintaining student consciousness. Instead, we expect students to always remain on task, sit in their seats "properly," and maintain eye contact with

the teacher or speaker when appropriate.

**Student speech.** Most educators agree that profanity is undesirable in schools, and they usually repair this broken window with disciplinary action. To create a stained-glass window here, we expect students to speak "professionally." We ask that they express themselves by speaking clearly, in complete sentences, with correct grammar, and without the use of slang.

**Student dress.** Schools are increasingly requiring students to wear uniforms as a way of eliminating the problems that often come with inappropriate apparel—from gang attire to various types of attention-seeking clothing. We ask more of students. We require that they wear their school uniforms properly (with pants at the waist and shirttails in) whenever they are on campus—even before and after school.

These small but substantive examples of erecting stained-glass windows to replace the broken glass of other circumstances teach our students valuable lessons. Those who read during school breakfasts learn new ways to use their time efficiently, and can better appreciate its value. Concentrating on alert posture in classrooms communicates the importance of approaching learning activities with a sense of urgency. By speaking "professionally," students are able to constantly practice the rules of grammar, and they learn how to tailor speech for different settings. The expansion of dress requirements beyond regular school hours extends the day's sense of order.

It is a pleasure to see students embrace these lessons. With a confident self-awareness, they tuck in shirttails before crossing the campus edge, and pause to order their thoughts before speaking. They feel part of a place that strives for excellence in seemingly small things, and they respond accordingly in the big things.

After one recent field trip, a bus driver said that in 15 years of shuttling young people to and fro, he had never seen as well-mannered a group of students as ours. More important, the students' academic efforts have yielded exciting results. They still have good days and bad, of course, but they are propelled to more frequent excellence. At their best, they are, indeed, brilliant.

When these students eventually make their contributions to the larger society as adults, they will do well to remember the stained-glass-window theory. While repairing broken windows will be crucial in their lives, I hope they will not stop there. By creating stained-glass windows of various shapes and colors, they will build environments that bring out the best in their employees, bosses, colleagues, and neighbors. And they surely will know that this is possible, having seen in school the subtle power of stained glass as a window to the world. ■

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