

11 September 2006

Rights and Responsibilities

At last Monday's assembly, we talked about the Charter of Rights and Responsibilities that underlies how students and staff treat each other at St. Paul's College. This Charter is outlined in the Student Handbook at the beginning of the section called The School Rules. The words of the Charter start with:

“The aims of our school rules are to make each person aware of the importance of self-control and to develop a sense of responsibility for their own conduct and for the well-being of others”.

So what do we mean by rights and responsibilities? Of course, we have all heard of the term “Human Rights” but maybe the term ‘Human Responsibilities’ is not so familiar. A quick run of the term Human Rights on a well-known internet search engine resulted in 384 million hits. The term Human Responsibilities, however, returned only 52 million hits and the combined Human Rights and Responsibilities resulted in a smaller 39 million hits. This suggests to me that while we place a high level of importance on Human Rights (as we must) it may well be the case that we do not think about Human Responsibilities to the same degree (as we should).

The **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** was a declaration adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 10, 1948 in Paris, outlining the UN's view on the human rights guaranteed to all people. The Declaration is not legally binding on government and as a result there are no signatories. However, it is an important tool for applying pressure on governments who are in violation of any of its 30 articles.

Yes, the Declaration of Human Rights has thirty articles outlining people's human rights. You may have heard of the most important of those rights:

- The right to life, liberty and security.
- The right to an education.
- Freedom from torture.
- Freedom of thought, conscience and religion.
- Freedom of expression and opinion.

Almost 50 years later, the United Nations issued (in 1997) the **Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities**. The Declaration of Human Responsibilities does not lay down rules. What it does is propose priorities and prompts choices. So what are some of the points made in this Declaration?

- Every person in every country has a responsibility to treat all people in a humane way.
- No person should support any form of inhumane behavior, but all people have a responsibility to strive for the dignity and self-esteem of all others.
- Everyone has a responsibility to promote good and to avoid evil in all.
- Every person has a responsibility to respect life.
- Disputes between states, groups or individuals should be resolved without violence. Every citizen has a responsibility to act in a peaceful, non-violent way.
- Every person is precious and must be protected unconditionally.
- Every person has a responsibility to behave with integrity, honesty and fairness.
- All people, given the necessary tools, have a responsibility to make serious efforts to overcome poverty, malnutrition, ignorance, and inequality.
- All people have a responsibility to develop their talents through hard work.
- Every person has a responsibility to speak and act truthfully.

I am sure that we would all agree that the Declaration of Human Rights and the Declaration of Human Responsibilities are important and ought to be followed by governments across the world. However, what relevance do they have in our daily lives here at St. Paul's College?

On occasions there have been reports in the local Chinese and English newspapers, and questions asked in the Legco, about bullying in Hong Kong schools. These cases of bullying, in primary and secondary schools across the SAR, often involve hitting, teasing, name-calling, exclusion and isolation from one's classmates. The reasons a boy is bullied can be numerous but often relate to his appearance, family background or mannerisms. Of course, such cases are to be found not only in Hong Kong but in schools in all countries. Furthermore, I would be very naïve if I thought that there was absolutely no bullying in our school.

Bullying of any kind is one of the worst things that can happen in any school community. The bullying can be carried out by one boy or by a number of boys. For the student who is being bullied, however, it can lead to great sadness or serious depression. We should also remember that boys in any year, from Form 1 to Form 7 can be subjected to bullying.

We say in our Charter of Rights and Responsibilities that 'everyone has the right to feel safe at school'. So, the two main questions that we must ask are:

- What are we going to do about making sure that bullying does not happen at our school?
- What will we do if we find out that bullying is taking place?

Each of us has a responsibility to look-after and protect one another.

If you know of cases of bullying happening at school today or if you find out tomorrow, next week or next month about classmates who are being bullied, you must not remain silent but tell somebody. I would suggest that you tell your Form Teacher, or the Discipline Master, or the Guidance Master, or the Chaplain, or the Vice-Principals, or myself. However, you might feel more comfortable telling one of your class teachers, or a Prefect, or another classmate, or your parents. The important point is that you must not keep the information to yourself.

If you are the person who is being bullied, again, please tell somebody as soon as possible.

The fundamental point is:

What you do not wish to be done to yourself, do not do to others.

My final message this morning is directly related to your own safety. There have been a number of tragic road accidents in the Mid-Levels over the past two weeks. Indeed, only last week a young father and his baby daughter were killed by a truck on a road very close to our school. The Mid-Levels is very dangerous with too many pedestrians and too many vehicles in such a small area of land.

I am concerned about the boys who catch the buses (23, 40M, 40, 3B, 103) and the mini-buses from the city in the mornings and alight at the bus stop outside the University of Hong Kong East Gate on the other side of Bonham Road. Many of these boys decide to cross the road immediately rather than walking to the traffic lights and using the crossing. This is an extremely dangerous practice and it is only a matter of time before somebody is seriously injured or killed.

Some of the boys concerned might say that it is their 'right' to cross the road wherever they wish. I would say to those boys that you have a 'responsibility' to look after your own safety and a 'responsibility' to your family that you will return home at the end of the school day. Surely, your life is worth the 25 metre walk to the safety of the traffic lights? I urge you to think always about your responsibilities.

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