The Principal's Role in Successful Schools:

Creating a Positive School Culture

Shelly Habegger

Positive school culture is the heart of improvement and growth in any building.

The job description of a school principal cannot be adequately described in a 1,000-word essay, let alone in a short paragraph; today's principal is constantly multitasking and shifting roles at a moment's notice. So, how does a principal get past the "daily survival mode" in order to create a successful learning environment?

My quest to answer this question led me to study the principals at three high-performing schools of low socioeconomic status. Most urban and rural school districts share the traditional limitations and barriers to student learning: poverty, fewer resources (both material and human), students whose primary language in not English, parents who have less than a high school education, and a disproportionately high number of under-qualified teachers. However, there are schools where students of lower socioeconomic backgrounds and diverse cultures are achieving great academic success despite society's obstacles. What are these schools doing differently?

Impact of School Culture

I explored the different roles of principals at the three schools, which included: assuring instruction aligned to state academic content standards, maintaining continuous improvement in the building, designing instruction for student success, develop-

ing partnerships with parents and the community, and nurturing a culture where each individual feels valued. In doing so, I found out what these principals, and their schools, are doing differently. The answer lies within the school culture—principals need to create a positive school culture that promotes learning and engagement for students and adults.

Yes, all the other roles and responsibilities of a school principal are important. But a positive school culture is imperative. It is the deliberate decision by the principals I studied to focus their time on creating a positive school culture that enables the other areas (e.g., designing instruction for student success) to also achieve noteworthy outcomes. These principals know school culture is the heart of improvement and growth.

The principals in these high-achieving schools created a culture that empowered and instilled confidence in teachers as they prepared for achievement testing, solicited professional dialogue and research,

valued their students and teachers, and sought the help of parents and community members to enhance the school's effectiveness.

A positive school culture is the underlying reason why the other components of successful schools were able to flourish. For example, one principal seeking ways to increase reading comprehension asked for and valued teacher suggestions. As a result, suggestions were developed into action plans that were then implemented. Because the principal valued the expertise of the teachers and allowed the latitude to try new approaches, an unbroken cycle of continuous improvement was observed in the building. The culture was one where the teachers felt their opinions mattered and felt comfortable enough to take risks and try new methods. Therefore, the positive culture the

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principal created enabled continuous improvement to occur.

The principals focused on creating a positive school culture by engaging in activities (e.g., making a point to visit each teacher before class started, greeting students as they entered the building, and providing common planning time for teachers) that developed both the students' and adults' capacity for learning and success. I also found

two significant types of activities on which the principals concentrated and in which they engaged to help create positive culture: creating a sense of belonging and providing a clear direction for all involved—students, teachers, parents, and community.

Create a Sense of Belonging

For Students. When the principals were asked, "What were your major goals for the building?" the answer was not to generate high test scores, but to develop positive relationships. One principal articulated a desire for students to develop a relationship with caring adults in the building. The principal hoped these relationships would encourage children who did not want to come to school to be motivated to do so because of the support and nurturing they received.

Developing these relationships is crucial. Payne (2003) declared that for students from backgrounds of poverty, their primary motivation for success would be in their relationships. Karns (2005) stated that learning can only take place when teachers have positive relationships with students and with one another, helping them to make connections and to make materials tangible to their backgrounds and prior knowledge, thus making instruction more responsive to the students. All three principals made it a high priority to provide opportunities for building positive relationships. They were constantly looking for ways to establish a natural connection and enable this vital resource to take root and grow.

For Teachers. This sense of belonging was also achieved for teachers by the encouragement, professionalism, and success that being part of the educational process gave them. Teachers expressed the empowerment they felt in being part of a team working together.

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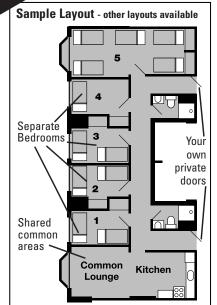
Each principal provided a common planning time for teachers. During this time, the teachers and principals viewed achievement test data, sought assistance for particular students, and discussed curriculum alignment, instructional strategies, how to enhance student achievement, and other job-embedded issues. The teachers felt the common planning time was vital to their professional and their students' academic growth.

DuFour and Eaker (2006) characterized such intentional communities as

environments with a shared mission, vision, and values; collective inquiry; collaborative teams; action orientation/experimentation; commitment to continuous improvement; and results orientation as a professional learning community. Creating strong professional learning communities holds several potential advantages for schools and districts, such as: increased efficacy, both collectively and individually; collective responsibility for student learning; reduction in teacher isolation; substantial learning about good teaching; increased content knowledge; higher morale; greater job satisfaction; greater retention rates; and more enthusiasm.

For Parents and Community. Each principal referred to the parent's role (and community's role) as complementary to the school. Each principal strove to learn parental needs and welcomed and solicited parents' questions and concerns. Informally, information was gathered through conversations the

principals had with parents as they dropped off and picked up their children from school and attended various school events, and in phone calls home. More formally, the principals conducted a needs assessment survey of their school's parents to keep in tune with what and how to best communicate with them concerning their children's social and academic growth.

Each school displayed substantial efforts to invite, include, and demonstrate need for parents and various community members. In fact, one school funded two positions to aid in developing relationships with parents and community members: a parent volunteer coordinator and a public relations promoter. Remember, these schools are of low socioeconomic status; therefore, money is very limited. However, these schools viewed these relationships and connections to the community as a high priority and benefit to their students, and one school placed what little money it had toward these efforts.

Provide Clear Direction

For Students. The importance of setting goals was emphasized to the students through practical action. The students participated in setting goals, charting progress, and developing action plans on a daily basis. For example, at one school each classroom developed a goal for the year and displayed it in the hallway. Progression toward classroom goals was monitored and then posted for all to see, creating awareness and ownership for the students. Each of the schools presented goal attainment concepts every day to its students. State standards were posted in each classroom. In most classrooms, the standards were rewritten into "I can" statements (child-friendly phrases) that were easier for the students to become familiar with and comprehend. These statements were continuously interwoven into daily lessons.

For Teachers. A cohesive schoolwide focus is the byproduct of a shared vision, mission, and beliefs among school stakeholders. Kotter (1990)

explained that once a shared focus has been realized, needs assessment data are analyzed to provide a solid basis for informed decision-making about instructional issues. A holistic, strategic, clearly outlined approach to improving the school is most effective.
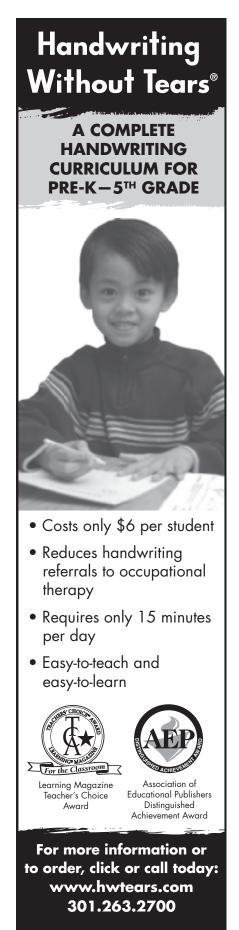
In the schools explored, the principals and teachers were all familiar with the building mission statement. Each principal acknowledged the mission statement as the guiding force when making decisions. At one of the schools, the teachers developed the mission statement for their particular building and the principal recited it on the public announcement system each morning.

In addition to setting yearly goals based on school data, curriculum mapping was another way the principals and teachers provided instructional coherence and direction. And each principal also stated that his or her building atmosphere encouraged daily collaboration and dialogue about best practices. Whether it was participating in book studies, exchanging journal articles, or conversing in the lunchroom or hallway, the teachers and principals constantly provided guidance and assistance to one another in achieving their professional goals and enhancing their practice.

For Parents and Community. Each principal made a point of keeping parents well informed of what and how children were doing in school. Each school had developed a daily communication log with parents (e.g., data folders and homework folders). For example, data folders contained goals the students were working on and each individual student's progress record. Parents viewed the data folder and responded within it every day. The principals and teachers also used methods such as phone calls, conferences, and complimentary notes to stay in constant contact with parents.

Path to Success

Why are these principals and their schools successful? The principals fully understand the importance

of positive school culture and how it can help student achievement and professional growth in the school building. Principals and teachers alike are confident in their working relationships with one another and feel that, together, they can tackle any challenge set before them.

I encourage you to take a close look at your school culture and either take action to encourage the current situation, if it is a positive one, or improve it if it is not. It is a vital resource! ▣

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WEB RESOURCES

The Fall 2007 issue of *Leadership Compass* examined the impact of school climate. The articles provide suggestions for improving school climate and relieving stress, and discuss workplace aggression.
www.naesp.org

The *Principal* archive includes "Managing School Culture," an article that offers eight guidelines for principals planning to transform the culture of their schools.
www.naesp.org/principal

This Education World article, "Is Your School's Culture Toxic or Positive?" helps readers determine whether their school's culture is toxic and explains what administrators can do to nurture a school culture's positive aspects.
www.educationworld.com/a_admin/admin/admin275.shtml