



Building a Positive Culture

- It's People First, Then Programs
- Building the Foundation
- The Ripple Effect
- Creating the Climate

The foundation upon which to build a successful school has to be one of a positive school culture. Nothing can transform a poor school into an exemplary school without this foundation. Think for a moment of building your dream house. You have selected special windows to best control the interior climate. You have chosen attractive colors for the exterior as well as the interior. The appliances are all state of the art. You have even purchased all new furniture for this beautiful new home. The only problem: care was not taken with construction of the house, and it begins to crumble. The most important part of building a house, its basic structural integrity, was neglected in favor of the more visible enhancements.

The overriding emphasis in school improvement efforts, throughout the country, appears to be on programs rather than people. However, we are in a people business. We need to think of people first (teachers, students, parents) and then programs and evaluation, and accountability. State testing programs were to be the answer, along with the Common Core Curriculum, and professional development activities focusing on new initiatives. What is lacking is talk of making schools places where teachers can be respected and appreciated

so that they can be at their best for students. Where are the conversations around creating schools where teachers can use their creativity and students can find joy in learning? The success my faculty and I had in turning around a failing school was indeed based on people first, then programs and initiatives, and professional development.

Culture Is the Common Core

So what is culture really about? You can find thousands of books written on the subject, not only for schools but for the business world as well. Corporate and organizational talk often centers on building culture. A web search on culture provides a limitless listing of resources, including articles, blog posts, books, and YouTube videos. At Palm Springs Middle School, in the Miami-Dade County Public Schools district, we felt that a culture built around respect, trust, and caring could provide the all-important foundation for our vision of an exemplary school. It was Jack Welch, the former CEO of General Electric and management guru, who said during a March 28, 2012, interview on CNBC, "Culture drives great results."

Culture building needs to come from leadership, from setting the example, and from being a positive role model. As an assistant principal, I worked at a school where the principal often resorted to shouting at teachers, even in the office area, where anyone could hear. He was not the role model one needs to create a solid foundation for success. I was an assistant principal at another school where all the early-arriving faculty members met in the cafeteria for coffee and conversation. The principal was always there enjoying the camaraderie. What a difference in role models! Be the model and set the example for what your vision of an exemplary school is. Albert Schweitzer, philosopher, theologian, and physician, said, "Example is not the main thing in influencing others. It is the only thing."

On September 13, 2012, the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and the National Association of Secondary School Principals jointly released a report titled *Rethinking Principal Evaluation*. Building a positive culture was one of the six domains being considered. Indicators of performance in this domain include a principal's abilities to develop collaborative processes that affirm the school's mission, to ensure positive working conditions for teachers, to create time for instructional and teacher reflection, and to engage teachers in high-quality professional development. There should be no doubt that school culture must be a top priority for all principals.

The journal *School Administrator* published in August 2012 a “turnaround” article titled “Leading the Wagon Train” (Gimenez, 2012). This was the story of Suzanne Gimenez, who had been a successful principal for many years and was asked to produce the same successful results at a school that had been failing for several years. Among her many strategies was to introduce a family/team approach and create an environment of trust and honesty. Said Principal Gimenez, “We would work collaboratively to make it happen.” To highlight her theme of togetherness, the school’s theme song became “We Are Family” by Sister Sledge.

My very first faculty meeting was an especially important one because I was new to the school. I had been appointed approximately six weeks before the start of the school year, so I had an opportunity to meet some of the faculty members, and I also had an opportunity to hire a few new teachers to fill vacancies that had come about over the summer. For the most part, I was an unknown quantity, and although I had been an assistant principal for many years at several different schools, this was my first principalship. It was important for me to allow the faculty to see who I was, where I had been, what I had done, and what my vision for the school might be.

Do You Know My Name?

After my introduction, I explained to the faculty that we were going to view a short film that I hoped would clarify how we would look at students. The film was *Cipher in the Snow* (Whitaker & Atkinson, 1974), produced by Brigham Young University and now widely viewed on YouTube. It is the story of a young boy who dies unexpectedly, and his math teacher, who is asked to write the boy’s obituary. Even though this teacher was the boy’s favorite, the teacher hardly knew him. The boy was a cipher, an unknown number in the teacher’s grade book. My question to the faculty: “Did we have students here who were overlooked as well?”

There were few dry eyes in the room by the end of the film, but it did send the message that we would truly be about caring for all students. We were going to begin to change our culture by looking at all students with a positive vision for their futures. There could be no more wholesale student failures and no more “writing off” students who appeared to be disinterested. Students would be valued and accepted in an environment where they could interact with caring people whom they could trust.

At a conference I attended many years ago, one of the presenters brought up the fact that many students go through their days without ever hearing their names called. If they are not part of a social circle and do not have many friends, they may never hear their names uttered by classmates. If teachers are not focused on names, or have forgotten how important one's name is to a person, a student has an even darker day. Many teachers issue orders such as "Pick up your paper" or "Move your seat," or they might say, "What is your question?" without using a student's name. What a difference it makes to a student when phrases such as the above are preceded by the student's name. We all know how good we feel when our names are remembered by others who are addressing us.

A practice we initiated, having teachers stand at their classroom doors to greet incoming students, greatly enhanced the personal relationships between teachers and students. Teachers could now acknowledge students with a nod or a smile at the very least and could even make personal comments. I had been at schools where students might enter a classroom to find the teacher seated at the desk, almost oblivious to the entering group. Although we hoped students would never be absent, it was comforting to a student who had been absent the day before to have a teacher say something like "We missed you yesterday."

I Care

Relationships between teachers and students set the stage for student learning. Without a positive relationship, there cannot be much growth. There is a statement I often think of when looking at teaching and learning: "I don't care what you know, until I know that you care." Students, just like teachers, want to know that they are cared about. The learning process is a very personal one, and young people need to feel good about what is happening in a classroom in order to produce maximum results. All of us who have been in education for any amount of time know that the best teachers are usually the ones who build caring relationships. We can all think back to our school days and recall a teacher or two who had a profound effect on us because they cared about us in a personal way. It was Dale Carnegie who said, "You can make more friends in two months by becoming interested in other people, than you can in two years by trying to get people interested in you."

Parade magazine, which is usually included in the Sunday editions of local newspapers, ran a wonderful and uplifting story titled "World's

Greatest Teacher” (Meltzer, 2012). It was the true account of a man returning to his junior high school in Miami, Florida, to visit a former teacher who was retiring. The man recounts how, as a ninth grader, he had just moved to Florida from New York and how most of his new teachers seemed to look past him. He felt that he was just one more student among hundreds. However, there was one teacher who took an interest in him and told him that he was good at something. That something she praised him on was his writing ability. She believed in him, and he believed what she said. Today, he is the successful author Brad Meltzer, writer of both fiction and nonfiction. Teachers do have powerful and long-lasting effects on all students.

Set the Tone

It is important for a school’s leaders to teach by example. Teachers need to see their school administrators treating students with respect. If administrators go about their day shouting at students, the vibe will become contagious. Are the administrators friendly toward students, or do they ignore them when passing in the hallway? I believe that my practice of interacting with students in front of the school as they arrived each morning set an example of a positive adult-student relationship. Parents certainly appreciated seeing the principal mingling with their children on a daily basis, and this practice further emphasized to teachers what we were all about.

As will be discussed in Chapter 2, on visibility, the administrators and counselors spent time in the school cafeteria daily. Yes, we were monitoring behavior, but we were also building positive relationships with our students. One of our assistant principals, who enjoyed the game of chess, brought chessboards with him to the cafeteria and set up games for interested students. Most important, teachers knew of our cafeteria practice and observed the relationships for themselves when they came to lunch. This was a true turnaround from the leadership practice that had existed previously. Setting positive examples is really the key.

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We have all heard of the “ripple effect,” probably as children when we threw a pebble in a pool of water and marveled at the ripples it made. Setting examples, and observing the ensuing results, can be compared with ripples in water. When teachers observed administrators actively engaging students in the hallways, they did

the same. When teachers observed other adults greeting one another in a pleasant manner, they did the same. Students picked up on this as well. I recall vividly a student in the cafeteria saying to me, "You know why students like you? It's because you respect us." That was an important thing for me to hear, and it must have made an impression, because I still remember the incident so many years later.

Setting the tone for how things should be is extremely crucial. It cannot be done via memo, however. Setting the proper positive tone has to be an observable action. It is rather like the expression "to walk the talk." When parents, or any visitors for that matter, enter a school building, they should be greeted by individuals who are pleased to see them. Teachers need to see their administrators as positive, upbeat people. There is no room in an exemplary school for unhappy, complaining, moody individuals. Students also need to observe the adults in their schools as respectful and caring and positive people. As Robert J. Weintraub (2012), professor at Teachers College at Columbia University, said in a *Phi Delta Kappan* article, "forge strong partnerships with staff, parents and the broader community, lead by walking around, be happy, and create a family within the school."

How's the Climate?

It is interesting to note that more and more today, businesses are using surveys to determine if they are doing a good job in pleasing their customers. JetBlue Airways frequently sends out an online survey as a follow-up to a flight, and one of the questions is "Did the pilot come out of the cockpit to greet passengers before the flight?" Many doctors' offices are doing the same. Restaurants will even reward you if you go online and complete their surveys after your dining experience. Software designers are providing services to companies to assist in analyzing survey results.

Many, if not most, school districts do their own surveys as part of school improvement processes. Again, the purpose is to ascertain the "tone" of what a particular school is like. Does the school have a positive culture, for example? The Miami-Dade County Public Schools did an annual climate survey that surveyed parents, students, and faculty members at each one of the over 300 schools in the district. Questions centered on the "personal feelings" of the survey participants. Examples include "The school is a safe place," "The principal treats me with respect," "The administration is supportive of teachers," "My teachers always help me," and "My ideas are listened to." The rating scale ranged from "agree" to "disagree," with points in between.

Upon completion of each year's survey, the results were published in an annual compilation of all schools in the district as well as posted on the district's website.

The mission of the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program is to improve the competitiveness and performance of U.S. organizations. This prestigious program offers its own Education Criteria for Performance Excellence, which are used by many K–12 school districts around the country. The survey centers not only on what Baldrige calls "workforce satisfaction and engagement" but also on "customer satisfaction and engagement." Again, it is all about creating and focusing on a positive school climate.

Morale is most certainly a big factor in building a positive school culture. We often hear the word used with regard to organizations of any kind. If an organization's morale is high, people in the organization are happy with their situations. High morale indicates a positive culture. TheFreeDictionary.com defines "morale" as "the state of the spirits of a person or group as exhibited by confidence, cheerfulness, discipline, and willingness to perform assigned tasks," citing as a synonym "esprit de corps." We, as school leaders, want a school where morale is high and where everyone performs at high levels. We want our teachers to be as effective as they can possibly be so that our students can achieve at their very best. The most crucial function of a school leader is to create conditions where morale is always high, no matter what extenuating circumstances may exist.

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Be Happy

A major part of esprit de corps as mentioned in the above paragraph is cheerfulness. The *Collins English Dictionary* defines cheerfulness as "having a happy disposition; in good spirits." *Roget's Thesaurus* says that "happiness" and "cheerfulness" are synonyms. Positive culture building must include a focus on ensuring that our faculty members are happy people. Again, we are in a people business, and everything we hope to accomplish depends on the output of people. Happy teachers need to be a part of every classroom in our schools. Happiness is contagious, and happy teachers can lead to happy students with increased achievement levels.

Delivering Happiness, by Tony Hsieh (2010), reached number one on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Hsieh is the CEO of Zappos, the top

online seller of shoes, which was acquired by Amazon for almost \$1 billion. He talks about focusing on company culture as the number one priority and applying research from the science of happiness to running a business. The book's website (deliveringhappiness.com) states, "Tony shows how a very different kind of corporate culture is a powerful model for achieving success . . . by concentrating on the happiness of those around you, you can dramatically increase your own." This is a man who has proved what his philosophy can do. Let's do it too.

Dale Carnegie said, "Common sense is not common practice." It is common sense for administrators to greet teachers with a smile and a "good morning" whenever possible. It is common sense to look for positive comments to make to teachers and students. These and other little things make for happy teachers and happy students. Our faculty meetings always included coffee, tea, and cookies. Teachers were always provided with "goody bags" of desk supplies at the start of each school year. We did our best to see that all classrooms were in good repair and that new furnishings were provided whenever possible. Even small things can make people happy. Teachers were thrilled when they returned from summer break and found their classrooms filled with new student desks. We made sure that teachers had a comfortable place to eat their lunch or to have coffee in the mornings. One of the special things we did was to provide what we called a "faculty study," which was a room set aside for teachers to work on lesson plans or read professional journals or access computers during their planning periods.

Teachers knew that the administration truly cared about their well-being and their happiness. Schools, and the school environment, are often not the most accommodating entities. Limited budgets often prevent administrators from doing some of the more exceptional things they may want to do for teachers and students. However, a beautiful house does not make a successful home. The way we treat people says much more about who we are and what we are about.

Tal Ben-Shahar, PhD, was a successful Harvard professor who taught one of the most popular classes at that esteemed university. His classes on positive psychology, which combines scientific research with common sense, attract some 1,400 students per semester. The book he wrote, based on his Harvard lectures, is titled simply *Happier* (Ben-Shahar, 2007) and was a *New York Times* bestseller. Martin Seligman, the father of positive psychology, called the book "the backbone of the most popular course at Harvard." In Chapter 7, "Happiness in the Workplace," Ben-Shahar talked about creating conditions conducive to happiness.

It is the responsibility of a school leader to ensure, whenever possible, that teachers are happy in their work so that they can do their

best for students. A book by Neila Connors (2000) with a most clever title, *If You Don't Feed the Teachers They Eat the Students!* is a wonderful reminder to all administrators of the importance of putting teachers' needs at the center of everything we do. In Chapter 2, "The Need to Feed," Neila wrote, "Administrators who make it a priority to treat teachers with respect, recognize invaluable contributions, and realize teachers are their best allies, see great things happen." In Chapter 3, "Creating the Ambiance," Neila used a quotation from Charles E. Bryan: "The quality of employees will be directly proportional to the quality of life you maintain for them."

Principal magazine, the journal of the NAESP, published an article in its March/April 2008 issue on school culture by Steve Gruenert (2008), professor of educational administration, who wrote, "It seems that a happy teacher is considered a better teacher, and this attitude influences the quality of instruction." Gruenert went on, "If happy people truly perform better, then leaders must create conditions in which happiness thrives." We hear the term "effective teachers" used frequently when talking about what is needed in every classroom. It appears that the key to effective teaching may be found in the happiness level of the faculty members.

A wellness coach at About.com, Elizabeth Scott, said in a January 7, 2011, *Inc.* article, "The CEO's demeanor can directly affect the staff. . . . So, smile more often, talk about fun things . . . or crack a joke" (Hames, 2011). I do believe that a principal needs to set the tone and walk the talk. There is no way for faculty members, or students for that matter, to be happy participants in daily school life if the principal is frequently seen as an unhappy person. We have all come across school leaders who may be unhappy in their personal lives and tend to bring their issues with them to school. We have all seen principals who are so concerned with administrative challenges that they are too preoccupied to show any form of positive emotion to their faculty. There can be no successful schools, regardless of the superb curricula they may have, or the state-of-the-art technology at their disposal, if there is unhappy leadership leading to unhappy teachers and unhappy students. As Craig Jelinek, the CEO of Costco, said, "Culture is not the most important thing, it is the only thing."

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Afterthoughts and Reflections

What do I do to focus on teachers?

What do I do to show I care about my students?

How am I showing my interest in our parents?

How do I/we recognize and celebrate our teachers, students, and parents?

In what areas am I a role model for faculty and students?

In what ways are we receiving feedback from parents, students, and faculty?

How are we making our school a happy place?

How do we set the tone and walk the talk?

Check out climate surveys at

<http://drs.dadeschools.net/SchoolClimateSurvey/SCS.asp>

http://www.nist.gov/baldrige/publications/education_criteria.cfm