



Building Culture and the Principal

By Greg M. Romanek and Jack K. Barshinger

One of the most important charges of a building principal is to develop, maintain, and enhance a positive school culture. In an age when the challenges faced by educators seemingly increase on a daily basis it is easy to be drawn into a negative mindset. Such negativism or defeatism on the part of teachers can have a deleterious affect upon the performance of the school. The principal must engender a sense of optimism and purpose into the climate of the school. Schools in which the principal takes a thoughtful, proactive approach to school climate issues are more likely to be nurturing and achievement oriented.

While it is easy to say that a principal must focus attention upon the establishment of a positive school culture it is sometimes difficult to accomplish this task. In some instances veteran teachers will distrust any effort aimed

at this direction because of past failed change initiatives, administrative style, or resistance to new ideas. In other instances principals may approach school

climate issues in a superficial or insincere manner. Whatever the circumstance, no principal is likely to achieve a positive outcome in this arena unless they have a well-grounded value structure that includes valuing both people and achievement. Artificial efforts aimed at short-term change or gimmicks are doomed to either immediate failure or a limited life span.

What can a principal do to achieve the type of climate necessary for a school to prosper? While there is a wealth of research on public and private sector approaches to this issue some commonalities of principle do exist. Some of these building block premises follow in a presentation designed with an eye toward practical implementation.

Professional educators have varying degrees of skill and time to devote to their work. These, and a host of other developmental and performance factors,

can affect how involved a given teacher will be in the broader school climate. A principal must be able to assess their staff and come to understand the talents and expertise that each teacher has. Regardless of the innate talent of individuals it is important for the principal to have high expectations for all adults and children. We need to expect the best from people. Just as teachers should have high expectations for their students, a principal needs to expect results from the staff. While it is true that results, styles, and attitudes vary across people it is necessary for everyone on the staff to be committed to children and learning. A key factor for the principal to focus upon is every teacher is capable of giving their best effort and providing for the needs of children. By expecting the best and modeling a concerned attitude the probability for the creation of mutually supportive school culture raises.

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EXPECT RESULTS

Professional educators have varying degrees of skill and time to devote to their work. These, and a host of other developmental and performance factors,

BE OPEN TO OTHER'S NEEDS

Principals should see themselves as

the facilitators for educational growth. Rather than grasping power, control, or dominance it is important for a principal to assess what resources the citizens of their school community require. In a very real sense principals function as human resource conduits who decipher past, present, and future human needs and address them. A leader who arbitrarily sets rules or determines policies without stakeholders input is quite possibly inept and most definitely tyrannical. In such circumstances, teachers and other staff will react with a variety of interpersonal defense mechanisms including avoidance, isolation, defiance, or discord. Whatever the staff reaction the failure on the part of the school principal to take into consideration the needs of others during decision making will result in a weakening or erosion of the school climate. To avoid this trap a principal must be adept at reflective listening and observational skills. The operational task is to determine what needs exist, how high a priority they are, and what resources can be brought to bear on the problem. Any positive results will be the result of the principal's formal and informal environmental assessments.

ENCOURAGE RISK TAKING

Education is an inherently conservative field. In a very real sense the schools that we currently operate are not radically different in their structure from those operated in the latter 19th century. The school calendar, structure of classrooms, and schedules used in modern schools are fundamentally similar to those of previous generations. However, it is possible to take risks that produce bountiful results. Unfortunately, the taking of risks in schools can result in "failure" with concomitant consequences. Teachers often resist risk taking because they may fear administrative repercussions if results are not what were anticipated. Therefore, it is vitally important for a principal to model an attitude that encourages cre-

ativity and risk taking without a fear of failure. Teachers should be coached to realize that trying something that does not pan out is generally not a critical error. Instead, it is sometimes possible to learn more from defeats than from successes. Through trial and error a talented teacher may come to discovery a procedure or teaching strategy that affords students a great opportunity to learn. By creating an environment where there is a positive orientation to reasonable risk taking behavior a principal can generate both enthusiasm and creativity. Further, by being supportive and helping others to take mishaps in stride the principal becomes a positive coach rather than a judgmental drone.

STRESS PROFESSIONALISM

Teachers and other educators have come under heavy criticism over the past decade. Issues such as accountability, assessment, and teacher certification all are linked in some way with public criticism of the national educational network. In such a political atmosphere it can be difficult to be as motivated a professional as once was possible. Yet, for a school to be an environment where students can maximize achievement a commitment to the concept of professionalism is vital. Effective schools, built upon a positive climate focused upon learning, can be exciting places to be. To augment this environment it is important for the principal to emphasize professional con-

duct. Children and parents must be considered as our customers and treated in a requisite fashion. Staff must be respected and supported. If the princi-

pal is primarily concerned with when teachers arrive for work, how much Xeroxing is occurring, or where every paper clip is, then professionalism will wither on the vine. Principals need to stress qualities such as collegiality, cooperation, shared decision making, competence, and humanity. Without these factors how could a school be a professional and decent place to be? If there are problems in the environment in a school then it is the principal's responsibility to rectify the situation. A principal who does not treat others with respect will not receive respect. In such a culture it is also not improbable to believe that children and parents will also be treated in ways that are not only ineffective but also destructive.

EMPHASIZE AND REINFORCE ACHIEVEMENT

Teaching can be a very isolated endeavor. Once the bell rings and the teacher begins to work with his or her pupils it is probably that their efforts will be witnessed only by that student cadre. Performance feedback for teachers may only come during their periodic and required evaluation cycles. Others may overlook lessons or activities that they present that are wonderfully effective. An effective principal uncovers those pickets of brilliance and publicizes them. Find ways to applaud the efforts of teachers who do things well. Connect other

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teachers to these educational artists and allow them to be mentored. Create systematic and spontaneous ways to provide positive feedback to deserv-

ing colleagues. All too often the only feedback people receive is negative. While providing critical feedback and making tough personnel choices is part and parcel of a principal's job so to is the provision of supportive feedback. Just as effective teachers catch students when they are good in order to augment performance so too should the principal. A principal who develops a climate within which performance is recognized and rewarded will go a long way toward the creation of a broadly effective school.

BE COLLEGIAL

Research in both the public and private sector stresses the need to build cooperative, compassionate, and inter-

toward building a program wherein children and adults can prosper.

ENCOURAGE INDIVIDUALITY

No two people are exactly the same. There is no single best way to teach. We are part of a broader human community that is strikingly diverse. An immutable law of life is that everything changes and evolves. Therefore, it is important for the principal to acknowledge and embrace diversity. Teachers will adopt differing approaches to the same subject matter. An effective principal bent upon enhancing the school climate must realize that there are many ways to be an effective teacher. By accepting this need for diversity in style

ever, despite the pressures that exist as part of the role of principal it is necessary for he or she to model positive motivation. The principal who drags into school and demonstrates limited attention will fail. People do not expect their leaders to be complaining or lax in their demeanor. Likewise, principals who cringe at the first sign of conflict will lose the respect of their staff. A principal needs to have a personal and professional sense of mission. Their schema must be shared with and by the staff as part of a joint venture. He or she must be committed to student and staff development. This commitment needs to be demonstrated on a consistent and ongoing basis. An effective motivator is also a person who will be available to listen and help people who have needs. Without crossing over the boundary of professional limits it is possible to be a humane and compassionate leader. Take the time to get to know the teachers and staff in your school so that they will see you as concerned about them as individuals. By model in a mission and supporting people as unique individuals with intrinsic value the principal can be a positive motivational factor.

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active teams aimed at accomplishing goals. Effective teachers create opportunities for students to work together collaboratively in pursuit of learning. These premises hold true for teachers as well as students. Through the creation of a school-wide atmosphere of mutual support and collaboration a principal can generate far more energy toward achievement than exists in an isolationist environment. In an atmosphere where the principal truly valued his or her colleagues it is much more probable that staff will feel connected to one another. It is all too easy to become lonely and isolated as a teacher. Through a sincerely collegial approach the principal can help develop an esprit de corps that acts as a catalyst for creativity and sharing. When a positive school or group identity is developed most people find themselves accomplishing more than when left alone. The creation of the school as a “generalized other” that staff feels allegiance to is a major step

and delivery the principal also acts to democratize the work environment. While his or her role as instructional leader makes the principal the apex of decision making in a school it is important to realize that the individual strengths and talents of the staff contribute to every decision. Teachers who know their divergent modes of instruction that produce positive student achievement will be supported will contribute to a supportive school climate. By supporting effective yet diverse approaches the principal creates an environment for learners that better prepares them for the real world into which they will grow up.

BE A MOTIVATIONAL LEADER

Being a principal is a very demanding job. There are a veritable host of issues that clog up your day. Not everyone who comes across the principal's path is beaming with happiness. How-

SHARPEN THE AX

Abraham Lincoln is credited with saying that if he had eight hours to chop down a tree, he would spend six hours sharpening the ax. That advice applies here. Sharpen your skills. Hone your professional edge. Pay attention to your own learning. The time to charge the batteries is before you need to call IPA for a “jump start” Just like a car, the principal needs regular tune-ups and oil changes. Effective principals keep themselves sharp so they can better deal with expanding job responsibilities. This means regular renewing and strengthening of your physical, mental, emotional and spiritual dimensions. The physical dimension includes exercise, eating healthy, getting enough sleep and finding time to relax. Take time for your mind. Keep up to date

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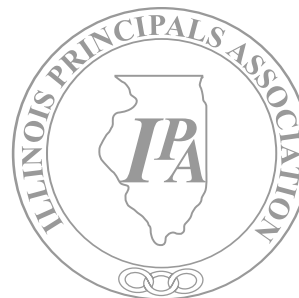
with educational journals, expand our own professional skills, and write for a variety of audiences. Build your emotional coefficient. Devote time to building relationships with your family, friends and professionals. Expand your professional network. Give service to the community and others and most off all, laugh. Finally, develop a spiritual dimension. Keep a journal and set aside time to reflect each day. Devoting time to sharpening the ax will prepare the principal to achieve the type of climate necessary for a school to prosper.

CONCLUSION

The creation and maintenance of a growth oriented and positive school culture is a complex mission. As in so many other instances it is the principal

who stands on the point in this complicated task. A principal who does not value or take heed of climate related issues will miss out on a great opportunity. Further, a de-emphasis of this issue can result in gradual or swift erosion of the school climate. Schools can be very negative in their emotional tone. There are schools across this nation in which adults and children are treated in a disrespectful and inhumane manner. The long term effects of such a school climate on individual learners is potentially tragic. The costs of such a school culture can include defeatism, alienation, lost achievement, drop out, and violence. These are all qualities that harm our broader society as well as the individuals involved. In a very real sense the ultimate cost of a principal's failure to inculcate a posi-

tive school culture is a lessening of human potential. Educators, and in particular educational leaders, cannot tolerate such outcomes. Principals must take the lead in the development of supportive school climates aimed at student achievement or they fail. Conversely, principals who are successful in the nurturance of a positive culture help children and adults to reap the harvest attendant to such a social bounty.



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