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# A 7-Step Student-Centered Approach to a Positive School Climate

*By keeping the focus on the students, using data to your advantage, and prioritizing collaboration, leaders new to the principalship can build a positive school climate.*

9/23/2023 | Jennifer Camilleri

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A new school year brings new opportunities to establish a positive school culture. But for those who are new to the principal position or starting fresh at a new school, this can take some additional planning. As principals navigate a new position, they can use these seven strategies to build relationships, prioritize student-centered learning, and determine how best to use data, and more—all leading to a positive climate in their schools.

### **1. Gather Perspectives**

Starting early in the school year, make it a point to learn as many names—of staff members, parents, students, board members, district office staff, and community members—as you can. As a new principal, actively listening to the stories of the school from their perspectives will prove insightful, giving you information about what works well and what needs to be changed at the school.

Remember, there's no hurry to make all the changes at once; assure all stakeholders that you'll tackle the issues one at a time.

### **2. Build It Back Up**

Before you begin the tedious work of making the changes necessary for your new school to be a success, you must ensure that you have built strong relationships with the stakeholders. Here are some ways to show stakeholders this is a top priority of yours as a school leader.

- Share your vision for the school over the next five years and get these groups excited about embarking on this journey with you.
- Let stakeholders know that you believe in your team and you are there to support them.
- Set the bar high and remind everyone of your high expectations. Your job as a principal is to serve your school community and ensure all kids at your school are learning.
- Always be visible—in the hallways, classrooms, lunchroom, and during arrival and dismissal. This helps build relationships and show all stakeholders that you are truly invested in the school. This is a time that I use as well to monitor and see if the expectations that I have set are being followed. As a school leader, you need to be consistent and be able to back up what you are saying. This helps build trust.
- Consider rebranding your school. Develop a new logo—and use it on everything! Need a new school mascot? Make it a schoolwide contest.
- Build up your library. Engage staff, families, and community partners to solicit book donations so students have a large selection of quality books to read.

### **3. Focus on the Students**

Your students are your customers, and to meet their needs, it's important that schoolwide and classroom expectations are consistent across the board. Make sure every class has the same positive and “needs work” skills. This was a great way to keep track of the data from

the classroom and then use it so that students and families alike can learn from it and be engaged in learning.

Focus on creating strong social skills with the staff to ensure that every adult in the building maintains a high rate of positive interactions with the students. This process begins with you as the leader: Model your expectations as you serve as a role model for staff and students.

Teach students the specific skills you want to see throughout the school and in the classrooms. We can't expect the students to just know them unless they are taught to them. To ensure that your plan is a success, build in frequent rewards to make sure the students see progress. And include students in conversations about what skills they think they should focus on and why they might be helpful.

#### **4. Charge Up Your Service**

Start every school day with a morning meeting or check-in and school announcements. Predictability works in our favor, as it sets a precedent that sets students up for success.

Collaborate with that stakeholder group you worked so hard to build relationships with to create a Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) committee they can serve on. Give everyone the opportunity to be included in monthly meetings, and share the notes with the staff.

Have the committee present on schoolwide discipline data monthly at the staff meeting and set quarterly schoolwide behavior goals based upon the review of the data. Set a goal early on to become a model school for PBIS (Positive Behavior Interventions & Supports).

Train front office staff on how to answer the phones and provide great customer service. The front office is the first stop when families enter the building, which means it serves as the first impression for every new family to your school. The person behind the front desk serves as the ambassador for your building and the welcome committee.

Everything starts with communication. Remember that it's impossible to over-communicate. Find effective ways to communicate with all stakeholders, like daily announcements for students, a weekly newsletter for staff, and weekly updates for school families.

#### **5. Step Up Your Efforts**

As you make your way around the school throughout the day, find every opportunity to praise students for following the schoolwide and classroom expectations. Celebrate all successes, no matter how small. Make sure that you set firm guidelines for rewards and consequences. Remember that behavior needs to be taught like academics.

Hold community meetings with every grade level every quarter to clarify classroom and school rules, including the expectations and rewards. And be innovative with your rewards. During my second year as a school principal, I had the students actually duct-tape me to the

wall, and everyone still talks about it. Don't be afraid to try something new; the kids will love it.

## 6. Fix Your School's "Leaks"

As you work through your procedures and routines for your school, limit all areas of congestion. Tighten up on all arrival and dismissal procedures, for example, and insist on high structure in all areas of the school.

Remember that before delegating responsibilities to specific staff members (instructional coaches, assistant principals, department heads), you might need to complete the tasks yourself to ensure they get done. And make sure you "walk the walk." Sub in classrooms, teach a physical education class, and join your staff for lunch and recess duty.

This will help to build trust and let everyone know you are a team. It will also help you learn first-hand where some of the "leaks" might be, and give you the opportunity to fix them.

## 7. Slice and Dice Data

As you build your building schedule, build in a common time that staff can meet for professional learning community (PLC) meetings. These meetings are very important in getting everyone connected and collectively focused student achievement data.

Schedule PLC meetings weekly with grade levels or departments to ensure that everyone is on the same page. As you review your behavior data with your team, brainstorm ways to decrease areas of high referrals. Build in big celebrations with the school when you reach schoolwide goals based on referral data in creative ways.

It can be difficult to make necessary changes in a school community when you're new to the principalship or have changed schools. But it's not impossible. By keeping the focus on the students, using data to your advantage, and prioritizing teamwork and collaboration among stakeholders, you'll improve your school's climate and make the school community a better place for everyone.

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