

Beginnings and Endings

A Reflection of School Culture

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The beginning of the school year is an ideal time to shape and reinforce the culture of your school. For most people, the start of another year is exciting. It holds the promise of a new beginning and a measure of nervous anticipation.

The principal is responsible for helping everyone feel safe and secure as they anticipate the new year and for setting a tone that reflects your vision for the future of your school. In one Michigan school, for example, every new year begins with teachers, staff and students lining the hallways and welcoming the new students. Another school posted the name and picture of every new student in the lobby of the school.

Such activities reflect the underlying culture of a school. Culture is quite distinct from school climate. While the school's climate reflects the "feeling or tone" of the school, culture reflects the more complex underlying set of values, beliefs and traditions that are present in a school. Culture reveals itself in "the unwritten rules and assumptions, the combination of rituals and traditions, the array of symbols and artifacts, the special language and phrasing that staff and students use, the expectations for change and learning" (Peterson & Deal, 2002).

Culture reflects the often unspoken and unwritten norms about a school. Influential staff members whom others recognize as the informal leaders and opinion makers often transmit it from generation to generation.

Ways Leaders Impact Their School's Culture

- What leaders pay attention to, measure and control becomes important;
- The leader's reactions to critical incidents and events;
- Role modeling, teaching and coaching by leaders;
- The criteria for allocation of rewards and status in the school;
- Criteria used for recruiting, selecting and promoting staff.

[Adapted from Schein (1985)]

Successful principals recognize the power of culture to shape their school. They are skilled at linking everyday practices in ways that reinforce the core values and mission of their school.

Organizational Symbols that Reflect Culture

1. **Rituals and Ceremonies** – provide structure to our daily life and to the routine of a school. Rituals occur rather routinely while ceremonies are grander, less frequent events (graduation). Both rituals and ceremonies reflect values in their structure, their priority, and carry meaning about what is valued and what is important.
2. **Heroes and Heroines** – those people who are looked up to as reflecting the organization's values; people who are examples of living the values.
3. **Stories and Tales** – those recollections of events that are told and retold and play a powerful role in sharing examples of organizational values. Stories often contain a moral and are inevitably engaging.
4. **Rewards and Reinforcements** – They reflect those things that are valued and therefore rewarded. Is it creativity in the classroom or compliance with established patterns? Is it waiving a rule so that a student may be successful or adhering to established policy?

Principals can impact their school's culture by using these symbols to promote institutional values and the school's mission. Most importantly, principals need to understand the power of these symbols to telegraph messages about what is important (Williamson & Blackburn, 2009).

Setting the Tone at the Beginning of the Year

Among the most important rituals in a school are the ways in which the year begins. We've found that the beginning of the year provides a unique time to reinforce your school's values and core mission.

Activities Prior to the Opening of School

- Send a welcome letter to staff with information about assignment, room, student rosters (if possible).
- Permit teachers to get into their rooms and prepare for the opening of school.
- Distribute supplies to each teacher room.
- Plan for opening day activities.
- Provide a time for parents and students, particularly new families to visit the school.
- For parents who speak a language other than English, prepare school registration and information materials in their native language.

The routines of the opening day also reflect the culture of your school. Some principals work with their leadership teams to identify a theme for the school year and use that theme throughout their opening day activities. The school improvement team in one Illinois school chose *Classroom Instruction that Works* (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001) as their theme. Every teacher received a copy of this book and every month one chapter was discussed at a staff meeting to affirm their collective commitment to effective instructional practices.

Opening Day Activities for Staff

- Recognize that teachers want to work in their rooms and prepare for the arrival of students.
- Ensure that opening day is upbeat and positive.
- Provide food.
- Model good instructional practices in any meetings.
- Rather than scheduling additional meetings, use an alternative means of communicating (email, newsletters).
- Use upbeat and positive stories to set the tone for the year. A principal in Tempe, Arizona, used “Turn Around” stories to provide examples of students who had made significant changes in their academic performance. The school had a history of low achievement, and staff were concerned that it was difficult to make achievement gains with students.

Don't forget to plan opening day activities for parents and students. Having lots of helpful adults present to assist students and families in locating classrooms sends a positive, helpful message about your school. Have plenty of directional signs, clearly posted in the languages of your student population.

Work to assure that every student is scheduled and assigned to a teacher's classroom. One of the worst nightmares for a student and parent is to spend the first day of school sitting in the office, knowing they don't quite yet belong.

Finally encourage everyone to smile. For everyone walking in the door, it makes a difference to feel welcome.

Endings Leave a Mark

Just as the beginning of the year provides an opportunity to reinforce your school's culture, the end of the year is also a good time to celebrate success and lay the groundwork for the next school year. A South Carolina principal told us, “No matter how tired we are, we take time to celebrate the year and look forward to the next year.”

People remember how the school year ends, so use it as a time to affirm your school's values. Remember to identify and celebrate academic and social successes. Share them with staff and parents. This builds confidence that the work of teachers and parents makes a difference. A principal we met in Tacoma, Washington, took photos of classroom and

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student activities throughout the year and then had a high school Photography Club turn them into a collection of posters that were placed around the school to celebrate the year. He remarked, “Students like these photos. They spend lots of time looking at them and recalling the year. It ends the year on a much more positive tone.”

Prior to the end of the year, review data (achievement data, school climate data, satisfaction data) about the current year with your school improvement team. Use the data to identify goals and strategies for the next year. Based on your plan, develop a theme for the coming year.

Be sure to schedule time with families to share the success of the year and discuss the goals for the following year. This helps to build continued support and ownership. Also be sure to arrange an end-of-the-year activity with staff to celebrate successes. One school in Ohio always holds a faculty potluck at lunchtime on the last day, after students are released. It provides a time to socialize, build camaraderie, and most importantly, celebrate.

A Final Thought

Your school’s culture is a reflection of the beliefs of those who work there and send their children to your classrooms. The rituals and ceremonies, stories and tales, and routines of the day are visible manifestations of that culture. They say more about your school than anything else. Investing in planning rituals and ceremonies, thinking about the stories you tell, and considering your rewards system is a worthwhile investment in your school’s future.

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Williamson and Blackburn are co-authors of “The Principalship from A to Z” and the soon to be released “Rigorous Schools and Classrooms: Leading the Way,” both published by Eye on Education (www.eyoneducation.com). Material for this article is adapted from these books.

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