



# Transforming a School into a Community

Imagine being greeted daily with a smile and a few kind words. If this happened to you as you started your workday, would you not feel a greater commitment to your place of work? Now visualize a school where staff, students, and parents greet one another in this way, smiling and engaging in good-hearted conversation. Can you picture a better environment in which to work? It can be a reality at your school, but in order to accomplish it community-building must be your No. 1 priority.

As an elementary school principal, you have the power and duty to shape the culture of your school. This is a tremendous responsibility and one not to be ignored. The purpose of this article is not to preach to you about instructional strategies and curriculum. There are people out there who are much more knowledgeable than I am in these areas. This article addresses the principal's role in developing a caring and committed learning community at one's school.

Our job is one that is very demanding. We are all being pulled in different directions, with many people asking for our time. Whether it is the parent in the parking lot, the teacher in the hallway, the student at recess, the superintendent, or a school board member, the principal is someone who always is in high demand. Our time is precious, and with so many asking so much of us it is easy to forget how important it is to focus on the building of community.

As a teacher, building community in my classroom was always my highest priority. I realized that without a well-functioning, supportive learning community my students would not maximize their potential. As a principal, schoolwide community-building has remained my

top priority because without a well-functioning community a school can never go from good to great. I have outlined below some of the steps that I have taken to build community at my school.

## Step 1: Be Present

As a site administrator, people are constantly watching to see how you respond to situations as they arise. They are watching when a critical decision must be made. But most important, they are watching to see if you are there. The stakeholders at your site, be they students, teachers, classified staff, or parents, want to see your personal commitment. Being present and accessible is an easy and necessary way to achieve this. Prioritize your time so that you are present to greet students when they arrive at school, check in with your staff throughout the day, and chat with visiting parents. For example, I make it a priority to greet students as they arrive in the morning and go home in the afternoon. I open car doors and encourage students to hustle to class if they are running late. In addition, when I see parents entering the school office I make every effort to take a moment to step out of my office and greet them. Prioritize these types of activities

because by simply being present you demonstrate how much you care about the people at your school.

## Step 2: Build Relationships

Learning each person's name and something about that person allows people to bond more closely with you. They feel a greater sense of connectedness and respect when you acknowledge them by name. Take time to listen to people who want to be heard—your staff, parents, and most important, your students. They will give you an honest appraisal of your job performance, and they will let you know what is happening around the school. Their insight as to what is and is not working at the school is valuable feedback.

Relationship-building is an ongoing process. I make it my goal to sit down in the staff room at least twice a week to listen and chat informally. I do the same with my students. On any given day, you will find me sitting with a group of students at lunchtime, discussing anything and everything under the sun. While it is important to listen, it is equally as important to let people into your world. Letting people know that you have a life outside of school demonstrates that you, too, are human and you, too, go through life's ups and downs. As long as you don't air your personal dirty laundry, allowing people into your life is a good way of solidifying relationships.

## Step 3: Recognize People

Finding ways to recognize people for their contributions to the school is the third step in the community-building process. Individualize and personalize this recognition. Make it meaningful. Generic or blanket statements such as, "You are all doing a great job," don't mean as much as those specifically honoring an individual's or group's achievement. Recognition can be made either informally during a conversation or formally during a school assembly.

At my school, we use our daily morning gathering to celebrate the accomplishments, both big and small, of the children and adults on campus. We hold monthly student recognition

assemblies to honor the achievements of our students. And I use the Golden Bear awards when recognizing staff at staff meetings. I hand out gold teddy bears (our school mascot is a bear) to staff members who go above and beyond the call of duty. It is important to recognize the efforts of all members of the school community because recognition pays dividends in the long term. People remember when someone pats them on the back and lets them know of a job well done. This type of recognition is motivating and brings out the best in everyone at the school.


One simple way to recognize individuals is to remember their birthdays. While some people may be averse to sharing this information with you, most appreciate a simple card in their mailbox on their special day. I keep a stash of cards in my desk drawer that I use to honor people's birthdays, anniversaries, and other life accomplishments. A great way to keep up with birthdays during

the school year is to write cards over the summer, keep them in your desk, and drop them in people's mailboxes when the date arrives. Once again, you are recognizing people as individuals, and they appreciate it when you make this type of effort. This small deed demonstrates how much you care about your colleagues and their well-being.

#### Step 4: Lend a Hand

One thing that has solidified my relationships with my staff is my willingness to occasionally do their job, and to do it with a smile on my face. From answering the phones in the front office to sweeping the gymnasium floor, these actions demonstrate to staff members that you value what they do. So, take a moment to relieve a teacher and teach a lesson. Take a class out for PE. Give a teacher an extended recess. Help serve lunch in the cafeteria or shelve a few books in the library. These small gestures are some of the most

valuable things that you can provide to your staff.

Ask most parents of elementary-age children what they want from their school and they will tell you that they want their child to feel loved and supported. They want their child to be excited about going to school in the morning and coming home happy in the afternoon. They want to trust that when their child goes to school they are being cared for. As the principal, you are responsible for meeting these needs and desires. Make community-building a top priority and the rest will follow. To borrow a line from the movie *Field of Dreams*, "If you build it, they will come." 

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