

# Foundations of a Strong School Culture

**M**any school principals cannot help being preoccupied with test scores. I am no exception and have often been nagged by questions about the most effective preparation. Could we have taught different strategies or embedded more practice into daily instruction in math and literacy? How do we compare to other schools in the district? Will my leadership be questioned? Is there a way to build more urgency among the faculty? The never-ending questions can be endlessly preoccupying. Unfortunately, the questions often prevent us from nurturing the components of a strong school culture from which improved test scores can grow.

This article is not an answer to the questions testing poses for a principal—questions that I in no way want to minimize. Rather, I suggest beginning from a different perspective. My hope is to provide a reminder of the basic values that foster improvement. Shift away from focusing on testing alone to highlighting the essential components underlying a strong school culture—an environment where teachers are continually encouraged to say “Help me; thank you; and WOW!” What follows is an elaboration of each of those phrases and why they are important.

The inspiration for this shift away from testing to a preliminary focus on culture comes from an unlikely source: the nonfiction writer Anne Lamott. In an interview titled, “Falling Off the Tightrope,” on [beliefnetwork.com](http://beliefnetwork.com), Lamott spoke of three essential prayers that articulate the most basic human needs: “Help me, help me,” “Thank you,” and “WOW!” I found clear parallels to the culture a principal must work to create.

## Ask for Help

One building block of a strong school is setting a help-seeking culture. Faculties need our permission to acknowledge that teaching is incredibly complex and demanding, and they are not expected to do it alone. This means repeatedly hearing from the school principal that asking for help is not an indication of incompetence, but of a reflective practitioner who recognizes his or her blind spots and wants to get

better. Teaching calls on all parts of us—our creativity, perspective, content knowledge, common sense, and sense of humor.

It is essential that teachers rely on each other and their collective wisdom and skills when they analyze student work, plan timely interventions, and implement engaging and purposeful curriculum. Test scores only improve in isolated instances, unless there is a school culture where asking for help, collaborating, and learning from each other in order to improve instruction becomes the norm. “Help me, help me” must be heard from every corner of our buildings. The ability to look critically at test scores will follow.

## Show Appreciation

Teachers crave recognition and acknowledgement for their commitment to educating today’s children. Rarely is the thanks forthcoming or in 1:1 ratio to the amount they give. Unhealthy resentment and a sense of isolation can develop unless appreciation becomes part of the school culture.

What does that mean? Again, it is up to the principal to set the example. Write a note of thanks when a teacher goes above and beyond—offers to do an extra recess duty for a colleague, calls a parent in advance of a difficult conference, or speaks up in a tense faculty meeting.

Use every opportunity to thank faculty members publicly—for persistence and patience with an especially chal-

lenging student, for taking the lead on technology innovations, for offering a workshop before school, or for co-leading the next faculty meeting.

Highlighting “thank you” is another way to remind teachers that there is much to be grateful for if we only look around us. Thank the colleague next door for dismissing one’s class, for bringing up a cup of coffee, for offering reassuring words after a lesson that bombed. Giving thanks to each other is an important way to connect and remember that we are bound together for the greater good of the children we teach. It builds a foundation of trust and respect that will make talking about test scores more productive.

## Make a Difference

Although we often spend time enumerating the difficulties and thanklessness of our profession, we often forget how lucky we are to work in school communities. Why are we so fortunate? When we least expect it, miracles happen. The parent, who was inordinately angry and defensive in a conference, may return a few months later with words of thanks for a teacher’s forthrightness. A child who struggled finally experiences success. A classroom discussion after the latest recess conflict can turn into a talk about competition, friendships, and bravery that makes one’s heart sing.

Where else are we able to slowly, and often when we least expect it, make a difference in a child’s life? That’s the WOW! We are the lucky professionals who are surrounded by the possibilities of making simple, but profound, differences in the way children see themselves, experience success, and find a meaningful place in the world.

The need to respond to test scores will not go away. Questions about the most effective instruction and preparation will continue. I believe that a more thoughtful response will be possible when the principal grounds faculty in “Help me; thanks; and WOW!” as foundations of a strong school culture. ■

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