

Promoting a Positive Learning Atmosphere During Testing Time

Traditional ideas of spring conjure images of lengthening days, buds on trees, and that certain energy in the crisp air that signals the change in seasons. For schools, however, spring also signals the time of year when all members of a school community, including educators, students, and their families, are focused on achieving adequate yearly progress (AYP) on standardized tests. No Child Left Behind places tremendous weight on standardized tests to gauge student and school success. Principals know, however, that schools must focus not only on testing, but teaching, learning, and developing the whole child as well. Thus, spring can be a challenging time, as principals both lead their students to reaching AYP and maintain a positive school climate that values each child's unique gifts.

Here are some suggestions for ensuring that your school community radiates an encouraging and optimistic message to students, contributing to a positive test-taking experience so that they can reach their highest potential.

Learning First

Principals have the unique responsibility of influencing the climate of a school from the top down. Principals can impact the way standardized tests are viewed by teachers, support staff, children, and family members. It's important to recognize that students and their parents take cues from school personnel, and that when students are more comfortable they perform better. A school's positive stance on assessment must not apply only to standardized tests but, according to principal Leslie Clark-Yvon, "has to be all year on all types of tests."

It's also important to convey to students that they are not just test-takers, but that their most important role is that of a learner. Clark-Yvon, who leads Franklin Avenue School

in Massachusetts, thinks that it is helpful to explain to students how testing information is used throughout the year to inform teaching. For example, Clark-Yvon suggests telling students something such as, "This test showed that we, as a school, are weak in understanding nonfiction reading, so we bought these new books to practice more with nonfiction articles."

Raul Sanchez discourages emphasis on the word "testing" in favor of "demonstration" because while the former term motivates some students, it stresses others. Sanchez, who is principal of Ruth N. Bond Elementary School in New Mexico, prefers that throughout the school year, educators underscore assessment as "just another day of learning" when students can "demonstrate what they know." As a result, during standardized testing time, students suffer less from sleepless nights, headaches, anxiety, and fear because the school culture recognizes the assessment as a part of the teaching and learning continuum.

Teacher Buy-In

There's plenty that teachers and test proctors can do to foster an encouraging environment during testing time. For example, John Wherry, president of the Parent Institute and the Teacher Institute, suggests that teachers can "let their confidence about each student show, avoid stressful and disruptive incidents, and speak calmly and confidently, saying something positive to each student." Teachers have the unique position to encourage a student daily to do his or her best, and principals must motivate teachers to nurture these encouraging relationships with their students, and with families and communities as well.

Building relationships with students and their communities takes time, however, and often it is the

tipping point between a good and a great school experience. "When teachers have the full support of their principal, they will go above and beyond to make sure that their students feel encouraged and valued throughout the school year and beyond the school day," says fifth-grade teacher Leslie Perkins. "Really knowing students and their families and going to their sports activities, for example, makes a big difference in how students perform during testing time. Teachers are more apt to take the time to get involved in their student's communities and get creative with motivating activities when their principals value their time and recognize their talents."

Schoolwide Support

When principals garner the full support of school staff and families, they can cultivate a schoolwide atmosphere during testing time that is both encouraging and leads to higher achievement. Some schools regard testing time as an opportunity to launch yearlong motivating campaigns. This year, Michelle Aube-Barton, who is the principal of Chester E. Jordan Elementary School in Texas, kicked off the "Turn up the Heat" campaign to motivate students. Aube-Barton uses the motivational book *212 Degrees, The Extra Degree* by S.L. Parker and Mac Anderson to guide her school in putting forth one degree of extra effort. The schoolwide initiative includes goal-setting, motivational songs, and a pep rally before testing.

Testing time at your school can be tense. But by keeping the focus on student learning, using the strengths of your teachers and support staff, and creating a sense of schoolwide collaboration, you can ensure that students at your school view spring testing time positively. ■