The "It Factor"

Creating an inclusive and equitable early childhood and elementary school culture

BY BWEIKIA STEEN AND GLADYS WILLIAMS

We recently visited an early childhood school that just had a certain unnameable "something." We could tell immediately that it was a place where students could thrive. As we followed the tiny painted footprints leading toward the front doors, the teachers, staff, and administrators stood along the sidewalk, greeting every student and family member. Returning families were greeted by name and asked about their summers. Kids were smiling and excited to enter.

As we walked through the doors, there was a bulletin board displaying the pictures of each faculty and staff member. Above the pictures was inscribed: "When you enter into this location, consider yourself a special member of our extended family." This school had what we call the "it factor."

Such a positive climate begins with an effective school leader—one who is aware of the community, the cultures represented in the school, and the importance of an inclusive, equitable educational experience for all students and their families. This "social justice" model includes galvanizing the school community around a common mission: to create a setting in which every child is presumed to be ready to learn and capable of learning; where each child is provided multiple and varied opportunities to acquire the skills leading to positive social, emotional, and academic achievement; and where families are empowered to partner with the school.

The equity position statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children says that school leaders need to involve children, families, and community members in order to build upon the knowledge they bring as members of their cultures and communities. Let's look at a few high-quality elementary school settings to outline the ABCs of the "it factor."

"A" Is for Attending to a Shared Vision

Effective school leaders manage school operations collaboratively by implementing a unified vision that promotes safe, effective, and efficient learning environments for all students and their families. In developing a shared vision and goals for the school year, school leaders, staff, families, and community members must come together to identify the needs of the school openly and honestly. This helps build a school community that's based on trust.

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During the initial vision meeting, focus on the following five basic questions:

1. **What kind of school do we want to have?**
2. **What should our school look like?**
3. **What kind of school do I want to work in?**
4. **What kind of school do I want my child to attend?**
5. **What should the communication plan for keeping families involved look like?**

Once the initial meeting has taken place, administrators should analyze the input for themes, concerns, and suggestions and use them to form goals and strategies for the academic school year. Ideally, there should be three meetings during the year: the initial meeting, a second meeting that discusses the results of the initial meeting and asks for feedback on the goals developed, and a third that discusses the progress made toward those goals.

School leaders should also collaborate with other leaders in the district who have similar visions. As Sonia Nieto writes in *Language, Culture, and Teaching,* when school administrators and teachers work with other educators and the community to learn to view students' differences in a positive way, they encourage policies and practices that are more equitable for all.

In Northern Virginia, four administrators from the same school district budgeted funds to start an African American family association to improve families' involvement. The organization met once a month, and administrators dedicated resources to offer guest speakers, workshops, and events relevant to the topics the families deemed important.

"B" Is for Building Relationships

Effective leaders see all families as contributors to the school's climate and success. They move beyond negative assumptions about certain families, and instead they seek to find ways to build relationships.

These three strategies can inform effective partnerships with parents:

1. **The greeting.** The school leader asks every staff member—administrator, custodian, specialist, and teacher—to greet every person walking through the school doors with a friendly hello, wave, handshake, or high-five. Acknowledging each person ensures that they feel welcomed and valued. Make it a priority to get to know the community and its families, and ask them what they want from the school and its teachers.

   In an early childhood school in Washington, D.C., the school's security guard noticed that young children were interested in watching their parents sign in each morning and seemed to want to do something similar. The security guard took it upon himself to design a separate sign-in form the children could use, promoting the inclusiveness that was a part of the school's shared vision.

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2. Tap tech. School leaders can use technology to inform and include families. Make websites innovative, interactive, and engaging, and update them regularly. Useful sites include relevant information about available resources, upcoming events, and pictures and videos of students and families.

Remember to be sensitive to equity in the selection of the students and videos displayed. Designate a staff member or a family member to check that the school's website and teacher websites are current and provide professional development and support to the staff. (See the "Tech Resources" list on page 52.)

3. Provide a shared space. Make an inviting place in the school building for families and community members to gather. An ideal space will include coffee, comfortable seating, a range of pertinent information and resources in the languages spoken in the school community, and opportunities for families to share questions or concerns.

One elementary school in Atlanta features a large, colorful welcome sign that reads: "Welcome All Families." In the office, there is a family area decorated with a flower-print rug and comfortable chairs. The resource room offers information about the school, community services, and events, as well as computers for families' use.

"C" Is for Cultivate and Celebrate

At a school in New York City, the school leader and staff developed customer service cards to help families offer feedback to administrators about what was and wasn't working, concerns, questions, and suggestions. Cards were displayed at the office adminis-

trator's desk, next to a volunteer sign-up form. A customer feedback form was also included on the school's webpage.

Every school leader has an obligation to model the values, expectations, and behaviors that are expected of students, staff, and teachers. High expectations should be evident in the school's vision and demonstrated in the school climate, curriculum choices, instructional strategies, and time allotted for teachers and staff to participate in professional learning communities.

Celebrating school successes is a fundamental part of forging a positive culture. Acknowledge the exemplary work of teachers and students on the school's webpage and in its newsletters. Such celebrations can lead to new learning opportunities, too: An elementary school in Virginia took the "Zero the Hero" idea from GoNoodle and incorporated it into a schoolwide celebration. One of the school leaders dresses up as a Zero superhero every 10th day, "flying" into every classroom to lead the students in counting by tens.

Whether you have a student population of 100 or 1,000, a positive learning environment will yield benefits. Programs will look different in different settings, but the "it factor" starts with a school leader who takes the steps necessary to include all members of the school community. ●

Bweikia Steen *is associate professor of early childhood education at George Mason University.*

Gladys Williams *is director of educational administration at Trinity Washington University.*

Tech Resources

Here are a few of the tech tools that can be used to inform and engage families in education:

Seesaw
Bloomz
Flipgrid
Aurasma
Soundtrap
Wheelofnames.com

ClassTools.net
Adobe Spark
GooseChase
GoNoodle Plus
Weebly.com
Wix.com