



# **Teaching, Learning & Leadership**

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Creating a positive school culture, while challenging and supporting all community members is the most important task for me as a school leader. I believe that a positive school culture is the magic that separates good schools from great schools. A positive school culture can help facilitate the shift that is so desperately needed for turning 20<sup>th</sup> century dinosaurs into innovative and creative 21<sup>st</sup> century institutions of teaching and learning. Building a positive school climate requires an understanding that the institution of the school is a living, breathing being. It is comprised of a diverse group of people that are called to be the best version of themselves on a daily basis. This kind of work attracts adults that are emotional, caring people and it requires that they commit to a continual journey of being learners. It can be the most exciting and rewarding kind of work and it can be challenging and scary as well.

In *Engaging the Disengaged*, Lois Easton asserts the foundation for building a positive school culture begins by being intentional in creating a “system of use” (p.69). “So, we must intentionally introduce the principles that serve as the basis for culture; we must maintain the focus of that culture; and we must use the principles for real-life decision making” (Easton, L., 2008, p.69). It is important to make time to discuss the culture of the school on a regular basis with students, faculty, parents, and board members. In doing so, the nuances of change are brought to the forefront. As a community, we can decide if we like what we see and if not, we can create a plan to address it. This kind of purposeful, community reflection is important on many levels. It allows me as a leader to get a sense of change by listening to all stakeholders in the community. It also allows faculty, students, parents, and board members to have input and a shared sense of responsibility in what happens in our school community. Lastly, teachers need to understand that a student’s social and emotional development is just as important as their

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academic content. Understanding this “require(s) that teachers be exposed to ideas that focus on empathy, motivation, ‘charismatic adults,’ and resilience,” and this “...can serve as the catalyst for a more positive school climate, a climate filled with a sense of security, excitement, and fun” (Brooks, R. 1999, p.72). Student learning is the most important goal of our work as educators and “school culture is an important part of the work that educators need to do if students are going to achieve at high levels” (Fisher, D., Frey, N., & Pumpian, I., 2012, p.8).

The framework I will utilize in order to build a “system of use” will include the work done by the National School Climate Center (NCSS.) NSCC’s research highlights the following strategies to improve school climate:

1. Engage all stakeholders as active participants and agents of change.
2. Focus on long-term programming, impacts, infrastructure and support.
3. Create school networks to share best practices and discuss challenges.
4. Engage students at all stages of the process to build capacity and sustain reform efforts.
5. Create and share tools and information with teachers, administrators, staff and parents.
6. Establish a school climate policy agenda to support quality practices built on research.

(National School Climate, 2013, p.13)

NCSS also asserts that shared leadership can support and nurture faculty in partaking in school improvement efforts by challenging teachers to become learners and empowering them to become leaders.

As a new leader, it will be important that I create leadership opportunities for teachers, such as mentoring new faculty, leading faculty professional development experiences, and leading parent discussions in which teachers feel confident to share their vast well of expertise. Encouraging and providing opportunities and resources for self-directed learning among faculty will also inspire a culture of learning. Furthermore, creating time and space for things such as professional learning communities and/or Critical Friends Groups will engage faculty in

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supported professional development and reflective practice at the same time. I will strive to provide professional development (PD) experiences that are between 30 and 100 hours and spread out over 6 to 12 months. In doing so, teachers will be able to transform their teaching instead of adding a quick-fix strategy to their already full toolboxes (NCSS, 2013, p.54). NCSS cites Darling-Hammond & Richardson, “Teaching practices and student learning are most likely to be transformed by PD that is sustained, coherent and intensive, rather than episodic, fragmented and a one-shot experience” (NCSS, 2013, p.54).

In *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, Carol Dweck discusses the importance of having a *growth mindset*:

The passion for stretching yourself and sticking to it, even (or especially) when it’s not going well, is the hallmark of the growth mindset. This is the mindset that allows people to thrive during some of the most challenging times in their lives.

(Dweck, 2006, *Kindle* p.184/4691)

As a leader, one habit of mind necessary to foster a *growth mindset* is resiliency. Henderson and Milstein assert that resiliency is necessary in creating an environment of hope and possibility. “Schools that do not make time for relationship building will not be effective resiliency builders” (Henderson, N., & Milstein, M., 2003, p19). One particular strength I have as a leader is building strong relationships. In order for people to trust the school, they need to feel connected. Increasing bonding by providing meaningful ways for parents to be involved, communicating positive messages about their children, providing student activities before, during and after school in which students are engaged and connected to the school community in a different way, and arming teachers with various instructional strategies that address students’ various learning styles are just some of the ways I will build trust and relationships. Providing meaningful

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opportunities for faculty and students to participate in the life in the school is crucial in improving school climate. Students and faculty need to be viewed as important and precious resources who are unique gifts to the school.

Building resiliency in *students* is also part of building a positive school climate and it is also the work of all community members. Allowing student involvement in setting up “clear and consistent boundaries” that utilize a strength-based approach fosters trust that is needed in order for students to take risks, bounce back, and try again. Teaching “life skills” such as collaboration, how to express one’s opinion in a respectful way, how to set goals and how to make the best decisions are all necessary in order to foster resilience in schools. Henderson states, providing “care and support is the most crucial element of resiliency-building attitudes but should be expressed by behaviors. These include knowing all students, knowing their names, drawing out the ones who may not readily participate, and investigating and intervening when students are dealing with difficult circumstances” (Henderson, N., & Milstein, M., 2003, p.28).

I will challenge and support the learning of faculty through utilizing reflective practice. One way in which I will model being a reflective practitioner is through blogging. By publically sharing my journey as a learner, I hope to inspire and motivate faculty to do the same. In *Engaging the Disengaged*, Easton states that we must constantly ask ourselves, “Who are we? ...Why are we doing this? ...Why are we doing this, this way?” (as cited in Easton, L., p.85). I will invite faculty to join in an ongoing dialogue that asks these very questions. Utilizing protocols can help facilitate transparency. This will provide time and space for teachers to reflect, challenge more vocal teachers to listen, and allow quieter voices to be heard. “In their transparency, protocols teach us habits that we wish we already had: to take the time to listen and

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notice, to take the time to think about what we want to say, to work without rushing, to speak less (or speak up more), to give and receive graciously both forthright praise and forthright critique” (McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2013, *Kindle p.494/3296*). Furthermore, I believe it is the leader’s responsibility to address issues of diversity and inequity. Although these conversations may be awkward, they can be more easily addressed and supported through use of protocols. Through deep conversations, faculty can grow in their empathy, appreciation, and understanding of one another. This builds trust and thus, improves school climate. Teachers can then continue their learning by taking these practices into their own classrooms.

Finally, it is important for me as a leader to model the effective use of technology for students, faculty, parents and board members. Doing so allows me the opportunity to model being a learner who tries new things, takes risks, makes mistakes and is resilient.

School leaders should take every opportunity they can to show publicly that they value technology. Principals should incorporate technology into such everyday tasks as completing observations or giving presentations. Classroom modeling—delivering demonstration lessons in which students effectively learn through using technology—is an even more direct approach. (Blankenship, 2013)

It is important that I model: effective communication practices utilizing social media, digital and global citizenship skills, and share my reflective practice publically (Sheninger, 2014). In *Learning by Heart*, Barth states, “You can’t lead where you won’t go” (p.27). Engaging in shared leadership, creating opportunities for teacher leadership, utilizing reflective practice and protocols to facilitate dialogue, and modeling digital leadership, will help create a positive school culture that supports, challenges, and inspires all community members.

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An effective leader is also highly competent in coaching and evaluating faculty. In utilizing an appreciative inquiry and strength-based approach, I will support faculty by building upon their strengths and by fostering a sense of self-directedness into their development as a professional learners. One of the most powerful tools for professional development that is often forgotten about is teacher-driven, peer to peer observations. In “Rethinking Classroom Observation,” Grimm, Kaufman and Doty state that, “Teaching occurs in particulars—particular students interacting with particular teachers over particular ideas in particular circumstances” (as cited in Grimm, Kaufman, Doty, 2014, p.6). The authors add, “We can only get at these particulars effectively by embedding professional development in the classroom and by activating the voice too often absent in professional development efforts—the teacher’s” (Grimm, Kaufman, & Doty, 2014, p.6). Observation protocols are effective tools that generate dialogue, support reflection and deepen the learning of both the teacher being observed and the observer.

Clinical supervision is an effective way to evaluate teachers when paired with peer to peer observation, teacher mentorship and professional learning communities. Marzano states, “The purpose of supervision should be the enhancement of teachers’ pedagogical skills, with the ultimate goal of enhancing student achievement” (p.2). My approach to clinical supervision would be closest to that of Allan Glatthorn’s: “Different circumstances require different approaches” (Daresh, 2007, p.334). Glatthorn’s specific model, *artistic supervision*, takes on a more holistic view of teaching, “(*Artistic supervision*)...relies on sensitivity, perceptivity, and knowledge of the supervisor as a way of appreciating...subtleties occurring in the classroom...” (as cited by Daresh, 2007, p.336). I do not believe there is a *one size fits all*

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approach to coaching and evaluating faculty. Just as I provided differentiated instruction for students, I will also provide differentiated supervision for teachers. I believe in honoring the unique gifts of each individual and appreciate we are on our own unique teaching and learning path.

In honoring each individual teacher as a unique learner, I will model my expectation for teachers to do the same with their students. When students are honored as individual learners, they are excited to come to school because they are engaged in the learning process. Teachers first need to determine that the curriculum is engaging. There are:

- ...four criteria for determining when material is worthy not just of covering but of understanding. The material should be:
- Enduring.
- At the heart of the discipline.
- Needing uncoverage.
- Potentially engaging.

(Wiggins, G. & McTighe, J. (1998). *Understanding by Design*. p.23)

In addition, classrooms should be lively where students are actively engaged in hands-on experiences not only in science, but in math as well. Specifically, students engaged in high-level math learning will have a “growth mindset.” They will also understand that speed doesn’t make them good or bad at math, realize that making mistakes actually makes their brains grow, think flexibly about numbers, see patterns and relationships with numbers, and be “outside of the box” thinkers when it comes to problem solving (Boaler, [How to Learn Math for Students Online Class](#)). Students engaged in high level math learning will be engaged in tasks that are real world problems and cognitively demanding. Students should be utilizing manipulatives, drawing illustrations, and talking about math. Students will be collaborating to solve problems and using



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mathematical language in discussing their ideas with other students and teachers. In addition, students will have regular opportunities to reflect through discussion and writing. In *Making Sense, Teaching and Learning Mathematics with Understanding*, James Hiebert states, “Reflection occurs when you consciously think about your experiences...stopping to think carefully about things, to reflect, is almost sure to result in establishing new relationships and checking old ones. It is almost sure to increase understanding” (p.7). The social culture of the classroom should exhibit four key features. The first is that ideas by all students should be treated with respect and should be accepted as having the potential to contribute to everyone’s learning. Another feature is that students accept that each person in the class needs to understand their own method of solving a problem *and* that there are a variety of ways to solve problems. The third feature of positive social culture in math classrooms is that mistakes are seen as learning opportunities. Hiebert states the fourth feature is that the “persuasiveness of an explanation or the correctness of a solution depends on the mathematical sense it makes, not the popularity of the presenter” (p.10).

Evidence of high level science/technology learning will in many ways mimic evidence of high levels of math learning. The NSTA Reader’s Guide to *A Framework for K-12 Science Education* notes that the “principal goals of science education, ‘to engage in scientific inquiry’ and ‘reason in scientific context’” (p.11). In addition, NSTA states students should be:

- Asking Questions and Defining Problems
- Developing and Using Models
- Planning and Carrying Out Investigations
- Analyzing and Interpreting Data
- Using Mathematics, Information, and Computer Technology and Computational Thinking
- Constructing Explanations and Designing Solutions
- Engaging in Argument From Evidence
- Obtaining, Evaluating, and Communicating Information

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(NSTA Reader's Guide to *A Framework for K-12 Science Education*, Expanded Edition, pp.11-12)

Inquiry-based science investigation involves critical thinking and hands-on science activities. Students should be engaged in dialogue with each other and their teacher using scientific language. They should also be making sense of ideas through argumentation while citing evidence for their thinking (Osborne, J., 2007, p.180). In addition, utilizing technology to further students understanding is extremely important in order to prepare them for all future careers.

Finally, evidence of high levels of engagement in science/technology and math will be the use of project-based learning. "PBL asks students to investigate issues and topics addressing real-world problems while integrating subjects across the curriculum" (Edutopia, 2007).

Research supports the use of PBL as a highly effective method for students to learn science and math.

Boaler (2002) compared student mathematics achievement in two similar British secondary schools, one using traditional instruction and the other using project-based instruction. After three years, students in the project-based-learning school significantly outperformed the traditional-school students in mathematics skills as well as conceptual and applied knowledge. In fact, in the project-based-learning school, three times as many students passed the national exam.

(David, J., 2008, p.81)

Project-based learning allows teachers to integrate teaching the fundamental skills of reading, writing and math, *and* 21<sup>st</sup> century skills needed in order for students to be prepared to solve the complex issues of today's world. These 21<sup>st</sup> century skills include:

- personal and social responsibility
- planning, critical thinking, reasoning, and creativity
- strong communication skills, both for interpersonal and presentation
- cross-cultural understanding

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- visualizing and decision making
- knowing how and when to use technology and choosing the most appropriate tool for the task

(Edutopia, 2007)

Making sure teachers are engaging students in high levels of math and science/technology learning, facilitating and providing support for teachers to grow professionally, developing teacher leaders, and providing clinical supervision are many of the moving parts needed in order to help develop a positive school climate. Leaving the classroom to become a leader does not mean I will stop teaching and learning. Teaching and learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a humbling and exciting experience for many of us. Never before have we been able to have information so quickly at the click of a button. Never before have we been able to create content, collaborate and connect globally. Leading in this century requires digital knowledge, but more so, the ability to realize being a leader is being a *learner*.

“Teaching and leading are distinguishable occupations, but every great leader is clearly teaching—and every great teacher is leading.” ~John W. Gardner

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