

Healthy Schools

There is enough room at the top for everyone! Every school can be a healthy school! And, all children *deserve* to be in a healthy school where they can receive an excellent education. About 10% of our schools are at the top, offering an excellent education for all their students; about 10% are at the bottom offering dimly little to their students, and need to be totally restructured. The remaining 80% of the schools are pretty good; with help, they can develop into excellent, healthy schools.

We have visited many healthy schools; some of which went from being extremely ineffective to healthy schools in surprisingly short time. It typically takes only about five minutes from walking through the front door to know whether or not we are in a healthy school. It is the affect. We feel a sense of warmth, caring, and wonder in the atmosphere. It is a feeling of safety; a feeling of “*this is where I want to be.*” It transcends all other things. Anyone who has visited a healthy school knows the feeling.

All healthy schools have several things in common:

- ★ ***Strong Leadership***
- ★ ***Staff Buy-In***
- ★ ***Student Voice***
- ★ ***A sense of Who They Are and Who They Want to Be***
- ★ ***Staff Collaboration and Development***
- ★ ***Optimum Student Achievement***
- ★ ***Minimum Student Discipline Problems***
- ★ ***Positive School Environment***

There are many programs available that claim to help schools become healthy environments with optimum student achievement. None of the content specific programs (math, reading, etc.) have evidence-based success toward reaching this goal. Only comprehensive processes focusing on the development of the whole school and child can meet the needs for today’s schools.

The first step in creating the foundation for a healthy school is to determine the core values of the school. These core values must then be integrated into every aspect of the school. Regular assessments are made to determine the level of integration of these core values. School and district administrators support this process which results in continuous improvement in the school culture and climate.

Strong Leadership

Healthy schools have strong leadership! This leadership usually comes from the principal. It is strong, consistent leadership. The leader has a dream, or vision, of what a healthy school is and how to make it happen. There are a few key elements that seem to define successful school leadership. The leader is consistent over time, focused on both the results and on effective processes for obtaining those results, and has open communication with staff, students, and community. Effective leaders have the trust and respect of the faculty. Leaders who focus on effective processes for developing a caring school climate, which supports collaborative practices for both students and teachers, are much more successful than those leaders who focus on strategies to increase test scores.

The greatest danger to a healthy school environment is change in leadership. The new leader must buy into the healthy school culture for it to continue. All too often a new leader brings in a new agenda that extinguishes many of the features that made the school healthy. This has been avoided in many schools through the following procedures:

★ *Having a district-wide focus with appropriate professional development*

A healthy district required all staff, including all teachers and administrators, to attend training during the summer before employment to learn about the culture and expectations of the district. All continuing staff attended a shortened renewal training every three years.

★ *Developing leaders internally*

The principal of a healthy school was planning for retirement. She selected a lead teacher to work with her during her last two years at the school. Upon retirement of the principal, the trained lead teacher moved into the principal position which continued the healthy school processes.

★ Focus *hiring interviews on maintaining healthy school culture*

During recruitment of the new principal, each candidate answered staff questions pertaining to the school environment and how s/he would work to maintain and improve the environment. In addition, each candidate was required to teach a “regular” class of students that was videotaped and open for review by all staff.

Staff Buy-In

The research is very clear! Schools that are caring communities, where collaborative practices are the norm and character development is integrated into the curriculum, have optimum test scores and good student behavior. It is equally clear that schools without these conditions have sub-optimum test scores and problems with student behavior.

School leadership must obtain “staff buy-in” to become a healthy school. There must be a collaborative culture for both the staff and students; a focus on intrinsic motivation and movement away from extrinsic rewards. To succeed, expectations must be school-wide. We are well past the day when teachers can operate little kingdoms in isolation; healthy schools have healthy teachers working together to maximize student learning.

In a healthy school there is just one goal: ***All staff members are working together to maximize the total learning experience for every child; academic and non-academic.*** Staff members celebrate each other’s successes. Every staff member helps every other staff member become the best they can be.

There are many places in society for hard fought competition. We love our baseball and football teams. We relish playing golf and other sports. The competition in sales can be ferocious. Many enjoy haggling for the best price on a car. But, there is no room for competition in the teaching-learning process in a healthy school. Maximum learning for every child is the goal. Students cooperatively work on a science project; students work together to develop geometry skills; students discuss and resolve interpersonal issues. Rather than a Science Fair, where only the top science students compete for prizes, the school can support a science night where parents and the community are invited to share in student-led learning experiences.

A healthy school has a culture of excellence; yet, no one is allowed to fail. It is a culture of success. Everyone – every administrator, every teacher, every parent, every student, everyone – expects to succeed.

She was the first new teacher in this healthy school in three years. Her background included several years of teaching in a very different setting. When asked if it was difficult making the transition to her new school, she responded, *“It has been easy. No one here will let me fail; neither the staff nor the students will allow me to fail.”*

Every staff member and every student in every school should be able to make this statement.

A healthy school does not just happen. It takes the concerted effort of all staff – leaders, teaching-staff and non-teaching staff – to make it happen. And, it does not happen overnight. It is always a work in progress. There must be continuous assessment and discussion of the following: *Where are we and where do we want to be?* Either the school is improving or it is regressing, nothing ever stays the same. Thus, the label Healthy School is not a state of fact. Rather, it is a state of progress.

Student Voice

Students have voice in a healthy school culture. They are involved in establishing the core values for the school and in determining classroom and school norms. Using class meetings, students have input into learning processes, help identify and plan service learning activities, discuss and resolve interpersonal issues such as bully. School becomes a partnership between students and staff. In healthy schools, staff members help students develop their own intrinsic motivation for learning and pro-social behavior; *doing the right thing because it is the right thing to do*. Staff eliminates dependence on external rewards designed to control student behavior and promote increased test results.

Students develop a sense of belonging, the most powerful predictor of academic success. In a healthy school environment, all students feel a sense of community and believe that they can accomplish what is asked of them by teachers and other staff. It is a true learning community.

A Sense of Who They Are and Who They Want to Be

The staff and students in a healthy school have a common focus. They have partnered with parents and other community members to determine the core values for the school culture. These core values, often referred to as character traits, are the norms for the school. They are made visible in the school and community; posted in every classroom and integrated into all aspects of the school including the academic curriculum. The core values are incorporated into staff meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and other activities. They form the foundation for discipline policies. They also guide teaching-learning processes.

In healthy schools these values reflect a caring school environment with high achievement and good pro-social behaviors. Values like mutual respect, personal trust, integrity and perseverance, and individual self-reliance are common. Core values should be revisited each year with staff, students, parents and other community members. While core values seldom change, the meanings assigned to these values become clearer over time.

A planning group reviews, at least annually, where the school is going, how well they have done and where they want to be. Data are collected from parents, staff and students on their perceptions of the school environment (culture and climate) and the degree to which healthy school processes are being implemented. As the planning group reviews the data, they identify changes that they want to make in the school culture and strategies for making the changes happening.

An effective guided planning process allows maximum effect with a minimum of teacher time out of the classroom. Teachers focus their time facilitating student learning. School leaders lead and support changes that are identified during planning.

Staff Collaboration and Development

Staff members work together to create an optimum caring learning environment for both themselves and for their students. Teachers feel that they have voice¹ within the school environment. They have a sense of belonging to a caring community and feelings of competence. As one teacher said; *“No one here will let me fail; neither the staff nor the students will allow me to fail.”*

The collaboration is felt in many ways. Teachers may facilitate learning across grade levels with older students working directly with younger students. They may develop shared activities between school and home, where students can directly involve parents in learning situations that are brought back into the classroom and shared with others. They may work on special school-wide activities such as a science night or art weekend, where parents and community members are invited to share learning opportunities with students. High school teachers can set up learning experiences across the curriculum, such as American History teachers working cooperatively with American Literature teachers, to understand historical development directly from literature. Technology and art teachers might get involved in the presentation of historical events as illustrated in literature. Music and theater teachers can introduce the historical development of American music and theater related to events being studied. All of these teachers can work collaboratively to integrate the school’s core values into this learning mosaic. Teachers work together to optimize the learning experiences for all students.

School staff can move forward in creating the healthy school process only through their own development. This may take the form of individual study associated directly with teachers’ desires to improve specific learning opportunities, such as creating the environment for new experiential or service-learning endeavors. New learning also can be acquired through specialized development opportunities such as offered by the National Writing Project or technology summer camps for teachers, graduate education, or sponsored in-service opportunities.

For a school to move forward on a specific school-wide effort, such as becoming a healthy school, focused staff development activities are required. These start with formal training of a leadership group who works directly with the staff or with direct training of the staff. It is usually most cost effective for the leadership group to work directly with the staff. This initial training lays the foundation for success by providing both the rational and the specific skill for long-term implementation.

The next level of training refines the processes that have already been implemented. These processes are analyzed at a greater depth, which maximizes the school environment and assures that all staff and all students can achieve their potential. This is a continuing process with annual data review and reflection, in order to establish direction for the following school year.

¹ Referred to as autonomy and influence

Optimum Student Achievement

Schools are responsible for the education of every child who comes through the door. This education includes student content learning deemed important by society such as reading, math, science and social studies/history. The research is clear. Healthy schools with their caring environment optimize student achievement. For schools with less than half of their students achieving at acceptable levels, math and reading performance can be increased at least 50% over a three year period when healthy school processes are adopted. In schools where these processes become integrated into all aspects of the school culture, even higher levels of improvement might be accomplished.

Minimum Student Discipline Problems

Student behavior is a major issue for all schools. In schools where students are self-reliant, engaged in the schooling process and excited about learning, good things happen. To the contrary, when students are in need of continual supervision, disengaged, focusing on non-learning issues, or find schooling to be drudgery, sub-optimal learning is the rule.

Learning can and should be exciting for every student every day. This is the norm in healthy schools. In the caring environment of healthy schools, students have voice² in their schooling process, feel like they belong and have a sense of competence. They feel safe. Students set classroom norms through collaborative procedures facilitated by their teachers. They develop social convention and practical reasoning skills that enable them to work successfully in diverse social cultures and difficult moral situations. Behaviors like bullying, fighting, disrupting classes, stealing, sexism, racism and disrespecting others disappear. Students do the right thing because it is the right thing to do. In healthy environments teachers can successfully facilitate learning and students can successfully optimize their learning.

This is a culture of relationships; positive relationships among staff, among students and between staff and students. Through the norming process, both staff and students understand and support behavioral expectations. In the few instances of discipline problems, discipline becomes a learning process rather than a punitive one. The core values are “above-the-line” expectations, and violations of these values become “below-the-line” behaviors. When a “below-the-line” behavior occurs, the individual is expected to “fix it” in a concrete way that benefits those harmed by the behavior and serves the individual as a learning experience (an apology is not a “fix-it”). In healthy schools learning is the standard; not punishment or threat of punishment.

² Referred to as autonomy and influence

Positive School Environment

The previous discussion has focused on the characteristics of a positive school environment. Further discussion is provided because it is the foundation for a healthy school, where student pro-social behavior and academic learning are optimized. Every school can and should have a positive environment; a place where both staff and students enjoy being, where everyone feels safe, where learning is the expectation, and everyone is able to succeed. This is a school without failure.

A healthy school culture includes:

- ★ Staff working collaboratively to optimize the healthy school environment
- ★ Integration of core values into all aspects of the school
- ★ Strong school leadership
- ★ Staff and student voice in the schooling process
- ★ Use of collaborative practices such as
 - Cooperative Learning Circles
 - Class meetings
 - School-home activities
 - School-wide activities
 - Cross-grade³ grouping
- ★ Continuous learning for staff
 - New staff – learning the school culture
 - Continuing staff – new ideas, skills and refinement of healthy school processes
- ★ Both staff and students are positive role-models
- ★ Experiential learning opportunities, including service-learning, for all students
- ★ Periodic assessment of staff, students' and parents' perceptions of the school environment providing the information needed for effective planning
- ★ Continuing focus on improvement; unwillingness to accept the status-quo

³ At secondary level grouping is often across content areas