

EDUCATION WEEK

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COMMENTARY

What Reflects a Great School? Not Test Scores

By Regie Routman

As an educator who has been working for more than four decades to improve literacy in our nation's schools, it's been sobering to observe that it's not very hard to raise test scores in the short run. These gains often turn out to be an achievement mirage, however, especially in schools with a history of underperformance. Enduring achievement gains require not only applying content and concepts worth knowing, but also ensuring that learning is occurring in a healthy, thriving culture as well. School leaders—including principals, teachers, and district superintendents—are the key players in creating such an environment. In fact, the quality of a school's culture is a prime indicator in determining whether all learners will experience success.

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Three interconnected factors are as essential for whole-school achievement as knowing how to teach well: trust, collaboration, and authenticity.

To get an accurate read on school culture, it's important to ask yourself several questions: Does the work on the walls reflect high expectations, deep thinking, and awareness of an audience beyond the school building? Are the teachers working together successfully within and across grade levels and disciplines? Is the principal visible in classrooms and noticing and commenting on teachers' and students' strengths? Are students engaged in worthwhile and challenging learning? And—not to be minimized—are teachers and students enjoying instruction and learning? Joy in learning is essential to a healthy and productive school culture; fear and joy cannot coexist.



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Here are a few proven ways in which effective principals and school leaders can ensure, sustain, and support a culture of achievement:

Trust is paramount. In fact, the quality of relationships in a school is a crucial factor in whether students and teachers have sufficient opportunity to learn and contribute their ideas without fear of retribution. Without trust within and across the school community—which includes the principal, teachers, students, and families—learning will be stalled. People who are anxious with worry, concerned for their safety, or treated disrespectfully do not take risks or work well with others, nor do they perform their best work.

Successful principals and other education leaders deliberately model and take trust-building steps with and for their school communities every day. This can make all things possible.

Successful school leaders ensure that schedules, routines, and interventions put the needs of students before standards and specialists. They listen without judgment, are open to divergent viewpoints, communicate clearly and respectfully, and are humble in their actions and demeanor. They look for and comment on all that is good in each member of the school community. They celebrate teachers' strengths before evaluating them. They give feedback that is useful and actionable. They let parents know through social media, a phone call, or an email when a child has done something well, noting even small achievements, such as listening to a speaker without interruption. They also do everything possible to make the school safe, clean, orderly, and beautiful. A caring, well-organized, and well-managed environment helps promote a sense of well-being and optimism.

Collaboration between teachers, the principal, and students is a successful school's *modus operandi*. Research has clearly shown that teachers become more effective, efficient, and joyful when they have time to plan, observe, problem-solve, coach, and learn together. Universally, teachers in the highest-achieving countries are given significant time to work together and develop an intellectual culture of inquiry, high expectations, and best practices.

The most important action effective principals and school leaders can take is one in which they ensure that professional learning is ongoing and embedded. That is, the principal and teachers work closely together and assume collective responsibility for improving and accelerating literacy learning for all students. Collaboration also includes creating an environment for optimal learning. For example, having students' desks clustered so they have continuing opportunities for small-group work and providing teachers with common planning times and scheduled release time so they can work with and observe colleagues are critical. Successful principals foster a collaborative atmosphere by creating time for classroom teachers and specialists to observe, coach, and co-teach with each other by hiring roving substitute teachers when budgets allow.

"Without trust within and across school community members ... learning will be stalled."

Authenticity in instruction, assessment, and learning is the norm in successful schools. In schools where students spend most of their time engaged in reading and writing high-quality real-world texts, students are far better readers and writers, which translates into greater achievement gains. Reading and writing lessons, assignments, and assessments across the curriculum are practical and relevant. For example, students write with purpose for a specific audience, engage in scientific and historical inquiry, read critically for pleasure and information, and respond to and raise higher-order questions.

The key to maintaining authenticity is prioritizing: keeping the focus on what's most essential for students to become proficient, self-directed readers and writers. Successful principals and education leaders encourage colleagues to establish rich and extensive classroom libraries with all kinds of texts, including student-authored texts. They give students choice and easy access to books they can and want to read with understanding. They encourage more time for independent reading and conferring with students. The most effective principals and education leaders also take their own professional learning seriously and become highly knowledgeable so they can ably guide and coach teachers.

Because writing is one way we work out our thinking, effective principals also ensure teachers make sustained, daily writing time as important as reading time. Also, they partner with teachers to ensure that all resources and texts used in the classroom are well written

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and are crafted by notable authors who can serve as exemplary models and accurate sources of information for students and teachers. When using technology, such as iPads, savvy principals make sure the technology use yields an academic benefit.

Finally, for a culture of high trust, collaboration, and authenticity to take hold and be sustained, the direct and unwavering support of the superintendent is

required. Engaged superintendents ensure that effective principals stay in a school for a minimum of three years, in order to make sure the school's culture remains stable and achieving, even as some staff members leave. These superintendents also work closely and amicably with the teachers' union to ensure sufficient time is allotted for regularly scheduled professional development. They also make it high priority to schedule time regularly with the principals in their schools. Such visibility not only shows the principal and staff that the superintendent supports the school's leader, but also that the superintendent is a partner in the teaching and learning process.

It doesn't take much for a stable school culture to deteriorate and for test scores and achievement to decline. It is a paradox of our assessment-obsessed culture that when principals and teachers are expected to have a laser-like focus on test prep and raising achievement, they actually teach worse, not better. Having standardized assessments, credible standards, curriculum documents, and learning outcomes in place is necessary, of course, but they are insufficient for school improvement.

It is primarily the quality of relationships within the school and across the community that ultimately determines whether achievement occurs and is sustained schoolwide. Those relationships, built on trust, are the foundational glue that, in a collaborative and authentic teaching and learning environment, makes it possible for all students to become competent and confident readers, writers, and thinkers.

Regie Routman works with teachers and administrators in underperforming schools to sustain reading achievement for students. She is the author of many books and resources for educators, most recently *Read, Write, Lead: Breakthrough Strategies for Schoolwide Literacy Success* (ASCD, 2014). Her website is www.regieroutman.org.

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