



These six steps to creating a positive school climate may help your job satisfaction soar!

# Climate Change

**W**hen I walk onto a school campus, the feeling I get speaks volumes to me. Is there a sense of positive energy in the air? Does it feel safe? Is it clean? I suspect that within minutes, many of us can determine a school's culture or climate.

As an assistant principal of a middle school, cultivating and promoting a positive school culture is what I believe to be one of my most important roles. Creating a positive culture is like taking care of a delicate flower. It takes constant care and maintenance to keep it looking healthy. We can't just throw water at a garden and expect it to produce amazing fruit. In the same light, we can't use terms like trust, loyalty and sacrifice lightly.

Some would say that AP at the middle level is a tough job; however, I want to tell you why working on the following six steps to a positive climate at my site has made it the best job in education. Whether you're a principal or superintendent, keeping these in mind just might provide you with the same positive feelings about your role as I have.

## 1. Public relations

We are our schools' chief public relations officers and should constantly point out successes, celebrate them and remind all stakeholders what wonderful places our schools are for students and staff to learn and work. This creates a desired sense of loyalty by those stakeholders. All of us want to be proud of where our kids go to school or where we work. Anyone actually in the public relations field will tell you that these desired positive perceptions, like anything worth its salt, takes work.

Standing proud on a false hill isn't what I'm getting at here. For example, I'm very proud of the fact that last year my school had the lowest suspension rate out of the four secondary schools in my district. I'm proud because this hasn't always been the case at my school, but knowing our school's strengths and weaknesses and having a transparent plan for all to see has been the case.

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*By Anthony C. Frascone*

When speaking of our weaknesses, we focus on the solutions and strategic plans. When speaking to our strengths, we talk about what we are most proud of and how we are tackling our problems.

Knowing your school's story and where it has been is important as well. Was it the little engine that could, or the academic powerhouse that needed more community? Either way, giving people something tangible to hold on to and be proud of is crucial.

## 2. Building trust

At my school, our teachers have common preps, which are used for cross-curricular meetings. I often drop in on these meetings to provide insight about different student situations, concerns, or sometimes simply give a listening ear. Doing this isn't just good practice as an administrator, it also builds trust with my staff, which leads to higher morale. If I only show up when I'm on an agenda item, or randomly appear in the corner of the room but don't engage in discussions, I may be perceived differently and more importantly, not trusted.

## 3. The "open door"

A cliché that resonated with me after becoming an administrator was this notion of having an "open door" policy. I knew this meant that my door should physically remain open; however, I have worked for bosses in the past who had an open door but I was never comfortable going through it. So what does it mean? I believe that truly having an "open door" goes back to those notions of trust, loyalty and family, which need to constantly be fed and nourished.

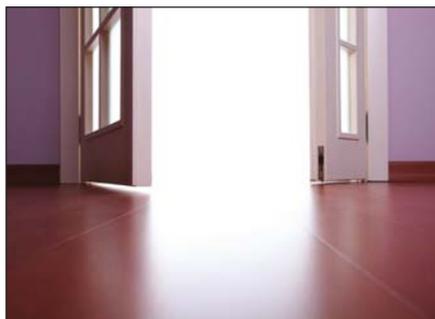
Throughout my career, I've had many staff members and students thank me for having an "open door." Looking back, I believe that I do two things which add to this perception: I listen more than anything else, and when someone comes in with a problem or concern about a mistake they made, I empathize and focus on solutions. Inevitable outcomes or consequences may arise, but sensitivity is the key when someone is in a vulnerable state.

We can all go through a rough patch, sometimes through our own doing and other times through no fault of our own.

Understanding the human element in what we do is crucial because it is who we are and the essence of those we serve.

## 4. Genuine concern

My campus is a close-knit group and we often call ourselves a "family." Nothing bothers me more than when a student or staff member shares with me that they feel



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like they are not a part of this family. Building loyalty and trust means building a genuine concern for both those we educate and those we work with. We can't have one without the other. Sharing our personal lives, cheering each other on, and pulling together when someone needs help is a critical piece to a positive climate.

## 5. Continuous recognition

We all know that teachers have not had pay raises in years, are often scrutinized by the media, and have suffered under serious budget decreases. Showing appreciation for what anyone does in order to make a school function is not an end-of-the-year thank you speech to the staff, but a daily practice. The principal of my school and I are constantly

brainstorming different ways to recognize our staff, including classified staff.

Because of these efforts, one of our teachers won the Silicon Valley Chamber of Commerce secondary teacher of the year award in 2009-10. This past year, we nominated one of our custodians for the district classified employee of the year and he won! This not only shines a light on these individuals and their amazing work, but also brings positive attention to our school.

The positive energy created by nominating staff speaks volumes, and that alone can shift the climate in a positive direction, whether or not they actually win the recognition. If the students come first but the staff comes last at your site, there is a problem worth fixing.

## 6. Sense of belonging

Being a part of professional networks is important as well. In fact, if you are reading this article, you most likely have taken the initiative to join ACSA. As the instructional leaders of our schools, we should sign our schools up for appropriate associations and take advantage of the professional development that comes with membership. My school also belongs to the National Middle School Association and the California League of Middle Schools.

Through organizations such as these, my staff has networked with educators throughout the state and has been able to focus on best practices. We have also been able to showcase programs at our school, leading to earning a California and National "Schools to Watch" designation.

We can easily isolate in education and withdraw, whether we are in the classroom or in the front office, which makes it imperative that we continue to learn and share practices and try new strategies. By doing so, it reminds all stakeholders that we are a part of something greater than ourselves – the future that we in education have a hand in developing. ■

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