

Create a Culture That Engages Every Family



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Principle I: The collective beliefs, attitudes, norms, values, actions, and assumptions of the school organization explicitly embrace and are committed to ensuring the notion of families as a foundational core component to improvement and greater student learning and performance. The culture is reflected in artifacts and organizational practices.

1.1 The school has created and sustained a culture that is conducive to family engagement through explicit beliefs, actions, norms, values, and assumptions made about the value of families being engaged with their children's school experiences.

1.2 A culture of family engagement exists within the school such that policies, programs, practices, and procedures specifically connect families with student learning to support increased achievement and enhance student learning and performance.

1.3 A culture of family engagement exists within the school and community that directly and positively impacts the social and emotional growth of all students.

For more information, materials, and tools to support your work with Principle I, see Chapter 6 in *Engage Every Family* (Constantino, 2021).

CASE STUDY 1.1 BACK-TO-SCHOOL NIGHT

Principal Scully checked himself in the mirror as he tightened his tie and slipped on his jacket. He was wild with excitement as he left his office for the hallway, looking forward to greeting families at back-to-school night. In his third year as principal at Blakely High School, Scully felt confident in his ability to lead change in a school that years ago had shifted from a majority white population of students to a heterogeneous community of immigrant families. The community was largely agricultural and industrial, and over the last decade, the school community had become home to a vibrant Haitian-Creole population of migrant families. Scully's family had emigrated from Ireland, and he had grown up with stories of hardship and the desire for belonging and acceptance. He valued these families as assets within the community and was eager to embrace a school-community partnership.

The faculty was ill prepared to meet the needs of non-English-speaking students and their families while other members of the community showed intolerance toward a changing demographic. Scully worked hard to develop trust with the faculty, and through a focus on teaching and learning, he was confident that things would turn around in the classrooms. While there had been achievement gains since Scully took the helm, the needle was slow to move. Significant gaps in achievement were evident among students with disabilities and the low socioeconomic population as compared to their peers.

Scully worked in earnest to shepherd the faculty toward new and better strategies to meet the needs of their students, many of whom were English language learners, but only a handful of early adopters, mostly novice teachers, were fully on board, and the resisters included a strong group of veteran teachers who shared war stories about “the way things used to be.” Teachers continued to complain that phone calls to parents were unproductive, conferences went unattended, and families were labeled apathetic.

Scully was convinced that getting the families of the struggling students into the school more often would help to build better relationships and change strongly held stereotypes. He enlisted a few of the faculty allies in the redesign of the historically poorly attended back-to-school night. Instead of trudging from class to class, families would visit the school for food and fellowship followed by a curriculum fair. He was excited to greet the families as they entered, especially those that would be new to the event.

As Scully walked about, he heard the whispers of the faculty: “This is another waste of resources—no one will show up.” His smile faded as he found the halls empty of all but those families who were always present. He wondered if the naysayers had been right, and he had been wrong. Making his way to the car, he noticed the circling lights of law enforcement vehicles stationed at checkpoints at each end of the street that ran in front of the school. They had been waiting for these families, too.

Stop and Reflect

- How would you describe the culture of Blakely High School?

PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION

1. What problems are presented in the case related to communication? Bias? Relationships? Community culture?

ADVANCED THINKING

1. In what ways does the culture of the school community impact school efforts to engage families in the academic lives of their children?
2. What steps did the school miss in the effort to build relationships with the families of students, and how might the school correct them?
3. How might a collaborative effort between the school and community leaders, such as collective impact, result in a more positive outcome?
4. How might the school and community leaders work collaboratively to build relationships with all families?

POINTS TO PONDER

- While Scully had begun to prepare the faculty and staff to consider parents and families as partners in the academic lives of their children, he had not considered that the greater community didn't hold the same beliefs and values. It is important to keep in mind that not everyone on a school staff or in a school community will suddenly think that engaging families is a good idea.
- Schools are part of a larger community ecosystem. Personal belief systems play a powerful role regarding the desired family engagement outcomes. Families apply the very same thinking. Understanding that perception is reality for most people underscores the need to carefully examine the belief systems of people, organizations, and the school community.
- Redesigning current events and activities to be more engaging for families is only one piece of the puzzle. Many times, school efforts to increase engagement fail because of differing styles and types of communication between schools and families.
- It is a poor assumption to think that because someone is disengaged, the reason is always apathy. Often, those who disengage with schools do so because they do not see the value in their participation, the meaningful nature of what engagement looks like, or how the engagement is relevant to them.

Application of Ideas

Your Turn

Consider the case study you just read and think of a similar situation that you and/or your colleagues may have experienced in your school, district, or community.

Briefly describe the experience/situation:

How did the situation resolve itself? What did you do?

Reference and review the appropriate principle information. For more detailed information, see the corresponding chapter in *Engage Every Family* (Constantino, 2021). Once completed, reflect on your original actions and steps. What changes will you make should an issue like this arise again?

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CASE STUDY 1.2 THE CLIQUE

Sylvia Cohen, the new principal at Brookmeade Middle School, was eager to meet as many parents as possible in her first few weeks on the job. An invite appeared in her inbox for the monthly meeting of the parent-teacher organization. Scanning the date and time, she was sure there had been an error—the invitation was for noon at the community country club. Sylvia was surprised when her secretary confirmed that this was the standard meeting time and place, but she was new to the community so perhaps this *was* the best time and place. After all, there would be more room for a large group there than in the available space at the school.

Stop and Reflect

- Do you think having a meeting at noon is an inclusive practice?
- Before reading on, what do you think the result will be?

When Sylvia arrived for the meeting, she was directed to a small table near the back of the club. She was greeted warmly by five women already seated. As they began to chat, Sylvia took note that all the women were like her—white—and were very familiar with each other, referencing shared vacations, visits to each other's homes, and more.

"You seem to know each other and work well together," Sylvia noted.

They told Sylvia that they lived in the same community, Barrington Heights, an exclusive neighborhood, and were members of Edgewood Country Club. Sylvia quickly realized that the organization's board was not representative of the school population. Brookmeade Middle School equally served communities of privilege to the east and older communities of Black families to the west. Most families whose children attended the school did not live in Barrington Heights, and the students' parents were not likely to be members of this exclusive country club.

"How many members does our organization have?" asked Sylvia.

"Well," said Dorothy, the treasurer, "we only have fifty families who have paid their ten-dollar membership fee, but we have no active participants who attend meetings. It's pretty much the five of us who do it all. When the annual election of officers comes around, it's easy to find a slate of candidates; we just nominate each other! I was president last year." The ladies chuckled at the comment. Sylvia forced a smile, but inside she was forming more questions.

Stop and Reflect

- Why do you think parents stopped attending these meetings?

"How do you plan to provide effective support to the school with only five active members in the organization?" asked Sylvia.

Dorothy was quick to answer: “We have an art auction each year at the country club, and that raises a significant amount of money. We also do a black-tie ball for Valentine’s Day. Between those two events and the personal donations we and some of our friends make, we have enough money to support the school and its activities. And of course, we support the teachers with lunches, gifts, and treats during teacher appreciation week.”

“How does the parent–teacher organization support learning and student experiences at school?” Sylvia asked. The group sat silently and glanced at each other and then back at Sylvia. They shared that as a group, they believed that it was the responsibility of the school to provide funds for classroom materials and events. They viewed their role as a complement to the existing budget for nonacademic events.

Art auctions? Black-tie balls? Personal donations? Sylvia was beginning to see why the parent–teacher organization membership was small. Sylvia knew that if the organization was going to represent all the families at Brookmeade and make an impact on student experiences in school, then a change had to come. Just what that change was going to be and how to go about it was the question.

Stop and Reflect

- ◆ How could this organization better be connected to student learning?

PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION

1. What problems are presented in the case related to school culture? Communication? Relationship development?

ADVANCED THINKING

1. Describe the current culture of the school. What beliefs, values, and assumptions may contribute to this?
2. The power dynamic in the parent–teacher organization is firmly entrenched. Develop a theory of action for Sylvia to engage every family and parent beyond the already engaged group.

POINTS TO PONDER

- In this scenario, the involved parents have seemingly worked in isolation, creating their own priorities and norms for supporting the school. As a new principal, Sylvia will need to reset the organization's focus by reframing involvement to include engagement in school experiences and promote more inclusive representation from the school community.
- Sylvia will have to build relationships with parents and families across the school community and find ways to unite them in a common purpose to support all students.
- School culture affects behavior and achievement of students. If not changed for the better, a school culture can become an obstacle to success and be oppressive for various groups.

Application of Ideas

Your Turn

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Briefly describe the experience/situation:

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How did the situation resolve itself? What did you do?

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CASE STUDY 1.3 WE CAN DO THIS!

“The graduation rate at this high school is abysmal,” said the superintendent. “We are putting you in there in hopes there is something you can do. By the way, you will be the third principal in three years.” Brad wondered what he had gotten himself into. Union High School enrolled 2,700 students, had a free and reduced lunch rate that topped near 90 percent, and had a graduation index of 60 percent. Brad knew the odds were stacked against him, but he had waited patiently to become a principal, and now was his chance.

Stop and Reflect

- Given the data presented, especially the graduation rate, what course of action might Brad take?

Most of what he heard about the school and its community was not overly positive. Teachers complained of lazy students, and students complained of disinterested teachers. Significant issues with discipline and chronic absenteeism seemed to keep the school from its ability to focus on teaching and learning. But the worst set of data was related to dropout and graduation rates. Almost 40 percent of Union's students either dropped out or did not complete high school in four years. Few students came back for the summer session. Once they were gone, they were gone.

As the school year started, Brad visited classrooms, focusing on teaching and learning, but he could see that there was little student engagement in the classrooms. Students wandered the halls and skipped school. No wonder students weren't graduating on time! By the end of the first month of school, Brad was exhausted . . . but not defeated. He decided that the best way to solve a problem was to go directly to it—and he wanted to know which students were at risk of missing an on-time graduation.

One by one, Brad read the grade reports of the nearly 700 students expected to graduate at the end of the year, identifying the class or classes standing in their way. Among them, Brad identified almost 200 students whose graduation was in jeopardy. As he made the determination, he wrote a personal note to each one.

Dear _____,

I see that you are having a tough time with _____. I know that you might be worried about graduation or even thinking about giving up. Please come to the auditorium next Monday at 8 a.m. so that we can create a plan for your success. I will shake your hand and give you your diploma this June! We can do this!

Brad stuffed each letter in an envelope and mailed it to the student's home, hand-addressed to the student "and family."

Stop and Reflect

- Why do you think this strategy is important to Brad?
- What assumptions did Brad make as he launched his plan?
- Why did Brad hand-address the letters?

Several days later, Brad assembled school counselors and teachers in the auditorium to greet those students who arrived to take him up on his offer. Brad made remarks to a packed room: "I am glad you are all here this morning. I meant what I said in my note to you; I *will* shake your hand at graduation this June. For that to happen, I will need your help. Are you interested?"

The students all shouted, "Yes!"

"Great," continued Brad. "Your counselors and your teachers will create a plan for you to be successful. Your job will be to work that plan. We will create as many opportunities for your success as is possible. But you need to put some skin in the game, too! We can do this!"

The counselors and teachers went to work with their students on creating plans of action for those in attendance. As the last few students filed out and returned to class, Brad asked for the names of the missing students. He would be making calls that evening, and if that failed, then he would make a home visit.

Throughout the remainder of the year, Brad kept tabs on all 200 of the seniors at risk of not graduating, making frequent calls home, sometimes making home visits, and checking weekly grades and attendance. At graduation, almost all the students at risk for not graduating walked across the stage and received their diploma on time. The celebration was grand! But Brad did not give up on the other students who still had work to do, and he made sure that his leadership team reached out to each family to develop a plan for a summer session. For the first time ever, Union High School had a summer graduation and celebrated its first graduating class. As he greeted the families, he noticed they were admiring a cake that one of the parents had made. The icing on the cake read, "We did this!"

Stop and Reflect

- Why do you think Brad made such an effort to contact the students missing from the auditorium meeting?

PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION

1. What problems are presented in the case related to culture? Communication? Developing relationships?

ADVANCED THINKING

1. What about Brad's approach may have been different from that of other principals? Why do you think his approach was so successful?
2. Brad's action has sent a message to the school community about his beliefs, values, and expectations for student outcomes. In what ways can Brad parlay this into a shared vision and mission for the school?
3. What should the school do to elevate student voices in shaping the school culture?
4. What should Brad do next to build relationships and communicate with the faculty and staff? The families and community?

POINTS TO PONDER

- While Brad's strategy had a positive outcome and presents a quick win, it will take a more strategic approach to reset the culture of the school and unite the school community around a shared moral purpose.
- The student response to opportunities for success dispels the myth that they are unmotivated or apathetic, confirming that a culture, particularly one of low expectations, affects the behavior and achievement of students.
- Challenges to effective and meaningful family engagement exist for schools and families. In this case, the school seemed to fall into a spiral of failure and negative thinking. While some barriers to success exist due to limited resources, most originate from beliefs and perceptions of families, students, and school staff.

Application of Ideas

Your Turn

Consider the case study you just read and think of a similar situation that you and/or your colleagues may have experienced in your school, district, or community.

Briefly describe the experience/situation:

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How did the situation resolve itself? What did you do?

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CASE STUDY 1.4 THE TROUBLE WITH HENRY

No one can recall exactly when things changed for Henry McMaster. Most recently, Henry had steadily become more of a discipline problem in school with each passing day. At first, the infractions were minor—talking out of turn, showing up to class unprepared, acting somewhat insubordinate toward his teachers. When Henry found himself in trouble, he was sent to the school's main office.

At some point each day, Henry appeared in the main office and sat in a chair closest to the secretary, Camille Larson. Camille was a veteran staff member and had seen countless students sit in the chair and wait for an administrator to call them in. Camille couldn't put her finger on it, but something was different about Henry.

“Oh, Henry, not again!” said Camille. “What happened?”

“I didn’t do anything!” Henry shot back.

Camille looked over the top of her glasses. “Henry, students are not sent to the office for doing nothing. Something has happened. Tell me what it was.”

Each day it was the same: Henry in the chair and Camille talking with him about that day’s infractions. The school administrators tried to help Henry, to no avail. When Henry needed to be picked up from school, either an aunt, another relative, or a neighbor would come to school to take Henry home. For as many times as Henry got himself into trouble, no one had ever seen or talked to either of his parents. But if documents needed to be signed, they were eventually returned signed by Henry’s father.

Stop and Reflect

- What reasons or conditions might be in place keeping Henry’s father from interacting with school personnel?

Henry was a regular topic of discussion among the student support team. Interventions, placements, changes in schedule—all these strategies were tried, but they all failed. It appeared that the more school staff tried to help Henry, the worse Henry’s behavior got.

It was clear to many that Camille had a special bond with Henry. He was always polite with Camille and didn’t argue or become angry if she was critical of his behaviors or actions. Henry talked to Camille in a respectful tone and listened and responded when Camille asked him to.

Eventually, Henry found himself in some real trouble. Henry got into a fight in the cafeteria, and this offense, along with his poor discipline record, could lead to Henry’s expulsion from school. Henry sat in his usual chair, with tears welling up in his eyes.

“I guess I really did it this time,” Henry said. “If I get kicked out, Camille, at least I won’t be bothering you anymore.”

“Henry, you do not bother me. I wish I could do or say something that would help you have a better experience in school. I worry about you, Henry, I really do.” Camille was now almost in tears, too.

The invitation to the hearing was sent home by registered mail, and it was clear that a surrogate or substitute would not suffice. Henry’s father was going to have to appear at this meeting if Henry had any chance of remaining in school.

Stop and Reflect

- What do you think of the way Henry’s father was informed of the hearing?
- What might be going through Mr. McMaster’s mind about this meeting?

Henry's father walked into the main office with Henry. He was dressed in a very expensive business suit and was talking on his cell phone as he entered the office. He looked up, saw Camille, and froze. The expression on his face was one of shock, as if he had seen a ghost. He asked Henry to go ahead into the conference room.

"You are Camille, aren't you?" He stared at Camille as if there were a problem.

"Yes, sir. I am Camille."

"And is this the chair where Henry sits every day after he gets into trouble?" He pointed to the chair in front of Camille's desk.

"Camille," Henry's father began, "I don't know how to say this but to just come right out with it. You could be the twin sister of my late wife. We lost her two years ago. I am beginning to piece this story together, and I may know why Henry finds a way to come and visit you each day."

Tears ran down Camille's cheeks. If she had only known. If anyone had only known.

PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION

1. What problems are presented in the case related to culture? Communication? Relationship development?

ADVANCED THINKING

1. Why do you think it took so long to piece together a reason for Henry's behavior?
2. What does this case tell us about the importance of building relationships with students and their families?
3. What could the school have done differently to engage Henry's father before Henry's behavior escalated? What can they do now to build a strong relationship with him?

POINTS TO PONDER

- School cultures that promote the academic socialization of families will be successful in meeting the academic and social-emotional needs of students. In this case, Henry's father might have been invited to partner with the school staff to find a catalyst for his behavior and draft a plan for success.
- Henry's unique relationship with Camille shows how the adage is true that one caring adult makes a difference. School leadership must set high expectations for the engagement of every family and, along with staff, enact the beliefs and values of the benefits of engaging every family.
- While not clear in this case, the school's policies and practices might be revised to strengthen the communication between home and school, particularly related to student well-being.

Application of Ideas

Your Turn

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PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Culture is defined in a variety of ways and most often recognized as the beliefs, values, traditions, and rituals of an organization. A school's culture is evident in why and how things are done as the organization approaches its problems. Culture plays a dominant role in the exemplary performance of an organization (Deal & Peterson, 1999). The major indicators of improved school culture are collaboration, collegiality, and efficacy (Wagner, 2006). The degree to which educators and families work together toward a shared vision of student success is measured by how well they share information and develop connections to the school, and the degree to which all the members of the school community feel a sense of belonging in the organization.

Culture can be experienced through the senses: what people hear, what people see, what is being talked about, what is not being talked about, and how people feel. It is evident in the policies and practices of the school. As you explore your own culture, consider this: There is an important reason that culture is the first principle. Strategies to build communication, efficacy, and community will be influenced by the current culture and the readiness of your school community to embrace authentic family engagement. To sustain the other principles, the school culture must demonstrate consistent, tangible, credible, and measurable evidence that the culture of the school believes in and values the engagement of every family in support of student learning (Constantino, 2021).

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