Rigourous Schools and Classrooms: Leading the Way

Barbara R. Blackburn Consulting Group
bcgroup@gmail.com
www.barbarablackburnonline.com
Twitter: @barbblackburn
Facebook: Barbara R. Blackburn
LinkedIn: Barbara R. Blackburn

Why does rigour matter?

Rigour: creating an **environment** in which each student is **expected to learn** at high levels; each student is **supported so he or she can learn** at high levels, and each student **demonstrates** learning at high levels (Blackburn, 2008).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Environment</th>
<th>Expectations</th>
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<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>Demonstration of Learning</td>
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Layering Meaning: Sources for Leveled Text

**Right now, unless noted, these are free, but they may add premium items or add a fee at a later time.**

Newsela ([https://newsela.com](https://newsela.com)): provides several different levels of the same news article; students can read for free; a small fee allows teachers to monitor progress. They also provide some texts in Spanish.

News in Levels ([http://www.newsinlevels.com](http://www.newsinlevels.com)) and FortheTeachers ([http://www.fortheteachers.org/reading_skills/](http://www.fortheteachers.org/reading_skills/)) also provide varying levels of an article or text. For the teachers has science, health, and other topics, but information is language arts oriented.

Books That Grow ([http://www.booksthagrow.com](http://www.booksthagrow.com)) has a library of texts that have each been edited to be made accessible to different reading levels. There is a fee.

TweenTribune ([http://tweentribune.com](http://tweentribune.com)) is produced by the Smithsonian. It also provides an article at different levels, but adds a quiz (moderately high-level questions) and allows teachers to create virtual classrooms to monitor progress and moderate comments.

Readworks ([http://www.readworks.org](http://www.readworks.org)) is a little different—they do texts, including paired texts, but they do not provide differing levels of the same text.

Text Compactor ([http://www.textcompactor.com](http://www.textcompactor.com)) lets you paste text into it and then automatically summarizes it (with a customized setting you control).

Rewordify ([http://rewordify.com](http://rewordify.com)) allows a teacher or student to paste text into the screen, and it will identify challenging words and replace them with simpler ones or with explanations.

*Thanks to Larry Ferlazzo for these sources.*
**Graphic Organizer for Math Word Problems**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clue Words</th>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>What I Know</th>
<th>K</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>?</th>
<th>Steps to Solve</th>
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**Anything Missing?**

**Write a sentence explaining the solution.**

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Leadership Strategies

Creating a Culture of Rigour

- **Rituals and ceremonies** provide structure to our daily life and to the routine of a school. Rituals occur routinely, whereas ceremonies are grander, less frequent events (graduation). Both rituals and ceremonies reflect values in their structure and priority, and they carry meaning about what is valued and what is important.

- **Heroes and heroines** are those people whom we look up to as reflecting the organization’s values—people who are examples of living those values.

- **Stories and tales** are recollections of events that are told and retold and play a powerful role in sharing examples of organizational values. Stories often contain a moral and are inevitably engaging.

- **Rewards and reinforcements** reflect those things that are valued and therefore rewarded. Is it creativity in the classroom or compliance with established patterns? Is it waiving a rule so that a student may be successful or adhering to a strict interpretation of policy?
## Leadership Self-Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Guiding Questions</th>
<th>Examples from Your School</th>
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</table>
| **Rituals and Ceremonies** | • What are the routines and rituals in your school? What values do they represent?  
• Are there special ceremonies or events at your school? What do they celebrate?  
• What messages do you communicate in your daily actions, classroom visits, and other interactions with members of your school community? |                           |
| **Heroes and Heroines** | • Who are the heroes or heroines on your staff? Why are they recognized?  
• What ways do you identify and celebrate people who contribute to the success of every student? Who have high expectations for student success? |                           |
| **Stories and Tales** | • How do you communicate verbally and through your actions with your faculty and staff? What underlying messages are represented?  
• What are the stories you tell about your school, its students and staff? What stories do you encourage others to tell? |                           |
| **Rewards and Reinforcements** | • How do you recognize and reward teachers? What values are recognized and rewarded? Are these strategies successful?  
• Do you routinely reward teachers, staff and students who make exceptional efforts to improve student learning? |                           |

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Building a Shared Vision

Activity: Hot Air Balloon

Activity: Write a Vision Letter

Write a letter to a friend or colleague. Project yourself into the future; date it one year from today. As you look back, recognize that it was your best year ever. Now, explain what happened in your classroom over the last year as you increased rigor. What did you do? How did your students respond over time? What was your biggest success? Even though you are writing what you hope will happen, write it in past tense, as though it has already occurred.
Cultivating a Positive School Culture
Ron Williamson and Barbara R. Blackburn

When we’re working with teachers and principals they often talk about the culture of their school. Sometimes, it’s a positive discussion and other times not so positive. But almost always they’re commenting on the feeling or tone of their school, a description of school climate. Climate often reflects the relationships among teachers, with families and with administrators. Climate is as much a description of the morale of the school as anything.

Culture is a far more amorphous concept that reflects deeply held values, traditions and patterns of behavior present in any school. Often those beliefs are so ingrained into the fabric of the school that people don’t even think about them when going about their daily routines.

The street-level description of culture is “the way we do things around here.” It includes the unwritten rules and assumptions about schools and their purpose, the traditions and rituals.

transmitted from generation to generation among students, families and staff, and the language and expectations that staff and students use in their interactions (Peterson & Deal, 2002).

Every school has a culture, and that culture is learned and accepted by teachers, students and families. In fact, culture is so pervasive that most people don’t even recognize that they are acting based on these unspoken norms.

Ways Culture Manifests Itself

The good news is that there is a model for understanding school culture and the way it manifests itself in a school (Bolman & Deal, 2013). More importantly, leaders can positively shape their school culture by using the tools in this model to change the culture, and the unwritten assumptions present in their school.

- **Rituals and ceremonies** provide structure to our daily life and to the routine of a school.
  
  Rituals occur routinely, whereas ceremonies are grander, less frequent events (graduation).
  
  Both rituals and ceremonies reflect values in their structure and priority, and they carry meaning about what is valued and what is important.

- **Heroes and heroines** are those people whom we look up to as reflecting the organization’s values—people who are examples of living those values.

- **Stories and tales** are recollections of events that are told and retold and play a powerful role in sharing examples of organizational values. Stories often contain a moral and are inevitably engaging.
- **Rewards and reinforcements** reflect those things that are valued and therefore rewarded. Is it creativity in the classroom or compliance with established patterns? Is it waiving a rule so that a student may be successful or adhering to a strict interpretation of policy?

**What Principals Can Do**

It can be helpful to assess your current culture. Here are some questions you can use to guide the assessment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural Factors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rituals and ceremonies</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Does your school have a set of rituals and routines that communicate your values about student learning?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Are there special events that demonstrate to your school’s mission and vision?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heroes and heroines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- How do you recognize and celebrate people who contribute to the success of every student?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- What ways do you use to recognize students and teachers who exemplify commitment to your school’s mission?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stories and tales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- What stories do you tell about your school, about students and staff?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- What do you say to share your commitment to your school’s mission?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rewards and reinforcements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Do you routinely reward students and teachers who do things that support your school’s mission?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• How do you recognize and reward people for their work?

Once you’ve finished the assessment, you can zero in on things you can do to influence the culture in your school. Principals shape culture by the things they pay attention to. In most schools it’s readily apparent what a principal pays attention to and values. Culture won’t change because a principal mandates that it change. It changes a little bit every day as you re-enforce the values and beliefs that are important to you.

Think about the patterns of regular activity in your school. What are the values that those activities reinforce? How do they visibly emphasize the things that are important? What messages do those routines send to teachers, students and families? What do they say about who can be successful? Who is provided an opportunity for leadership? How do they suggest the behaviors and activities that are valued?

Here are some ways that a principal can shape their school’s culture. Each is a way to convey those values that you want to use to shape the culture of your school.

• Develop a set of stories about student and teacher success. Use every opportunity to share those stories with teachers, families and community.

• Think about how you spend time during each day. Maximize the time you spend in classrooms and find time to talk with teachers about their instruction.

• Value being part of professional development by attending with your teachers. Join book study groups, attend team meetings, and look at student work.
• Review the use of your school’s budget. Assure that the budget supports the school vision and does not simply follow past practice.

• Consider how teachers, staff and students are recognized and their work acknowledged.

Make sure recognitions are authentic and support your school’s mission and vision.

Final Thoughts

Rituals, ceremonies, stories, and rewards and recognition are the most visible indicators of what is important and valued. Because of the powerful way culture shapes the activity of those who work in a school, and those who visit, it’s worth investing the effort to assure it sends a positive message.

References

Developing Stakeholder Ownership

Ronald Williamson and Barbara Blackburn

Efforts to improve your school will only be successful with widespread support and ownership. When a principal or central office mandates an initiative it almost guarantees resistance and
inadequate implementation. Involving all stakeholders, families, and community, as well as teachers and other staff, is essential. Participation and involvement are central to building collective commitment to improving your school. There are three keys to developing ownership from stakeholders.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Keys to Developing Ownership</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Find authentic opportunities for participation and shared decision-making.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Determine who to involve in different activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Build effective communication.</td>
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</table>

**Find Authentic Opportunities for Participation and Shared Decision-Making**

There is no perfect way to involve stakeholders in the discussion about school improvement. What’s most critical is that their participation must be authentic. Involvement can’t be trivialized or used to mask the decisions of administrators. The tasks must be real and their involvement valued. There are things that support involvement as well as the things that may be an obstacle.

**Deciding Who to Involve**

Before determining who to involve in aspects of decision-making, it’s important to think about the facilitators and barriers to involvement. At a basic level, a willingness to participate is a great facilitator or motivator. Similarly, not wanting to be involved will serve as a barrier. For some of your stakeholders, the barrier may be circumstance-dependent. For example, a faculty member with a new child may not have
the time or energy to take a leadership role at the current time. However, the same teacher may be more than willing to train new faculty the following year. We worked with one school where one teacher wanted to chair the planning committee. He was the ideal choice, but because he was also developing a new curriculum and pacing guide for the district, he asked to serve on the committee without chairing it.

From a broader perspective, there are a variety of facilitators and barriers to involvement for you to consider prior to asking individuals to participate.

Facilitators and Barriers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facilitators</th>
<th>Barriers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>◆ Adequate time to meet, talk about rigor, plan, implement, and assess current efforts. Lots of time may be required initially to get started.</td>
<td>◆ Little or no professional development provided about collaborative work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>◆ Clear understanding of the areas/topics that the group can address.</td>
<td>◆ Limits of decision-making authority are unclear or undefined.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>◆ Appropriate, ongoing professional development for all stakeholders, including conflict management and decision-making skills.</td>
<td>◆ Principal directs and tells rather than guides.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>◆ Accountability and responsibility of participants.</td>
<td>◆ Only the principal or superintendent held accountable for decisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>◆ Availability of technical assistance.</td>
<td>◆ Group does not have power to make “real” decisions and gets mired in unimportant details.</td>
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Comfort and support of the principal

Determine Who to Involve

Deciding whom to involve in a project is critical. If people have a stake in the outcome of the decision, they should be represented. Be sure to involve those who have needed expertise. If a person or group is indifferent or has no expertise, their involvement might be very limited.

However, it is important to engage everyone in the conversation. Seek to include every voice, particularly the missing voices of those who are often reluctant to speak out on issues. Here are some questions to help you assess appropriate levels of involvement in your planning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions to Consider</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Involve</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Don’t Involve</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Limited Involvement</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Adapted From: Hoy and Tarter (2008)

Using these questions allows opportunities for all stakeholders to share ownership in decisions, but at varying levels of involvement and commitment.

Build Effective Communication

Communication is central to building ownership since it allows teachers and other stakeholders to feel their voices are being heard. We’ve found there are two critical principles that should guide your communication.

2 Principles of Effective Communication

Build two-way communication
Focus and refocus on key points that match agenda

Build Two-Way Communication

Good communication is two-way. That is, you both gather (listen) and share information. That may sound simple, but too often, we inadvertently create a culture that does not encourage input, especially authentic input. For example, we worked with a school in which the principal said that all teachers participated in deciding on professional development priorities. However, when we spoke with teachers, they explained that the principal’s version of shared decision-making was to fill out a survey to prioritize four choices, choices the principal had already selected. They felt the principal had already decided what to do and was only using the survey to later say that teachers were involved.
On the other hand, we worked with a school where teachers were truly involved in decision-making about professional development. The principal met with a professional development advisory group made up of teachers. Her role was advisory, especially to provide information and guidelines related to legally required training, focus areas from the district, and financial restrictions. However, the teachers made decisions, based on input from teachers in their PLCs. In this school, the teachers felt ownership in professional development because their voices had been heard.

Focus and Refocus on Key Points that Match Agenda

Another communication principle that can assist in building ownership is to focus and, when needed, refocus the conversation on the agenda. Too often, one or two group members can dominate the conversation, and oftentimes they will drive the conversation to other topics to advance their personal agenda. Throughout all communication, keep a focus on the topic at hand, and insist that participants stick to the matter at hand.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ways to Focus and Refocus Conversations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Create a set of norms for discussions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use a parking lot for issues to revisit at a later point.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Nicely) insist that all participants have an opportunity to talk.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss questions with partners first, then ask for whole group sharing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide agenda in advance with clear rationale for discussing the topic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open meetings with a reminder of the subject.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thank participants in advance for honoring others’ voices.</td>
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</tbody>
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Conclusion

Education is a collaborative enterprise and it is essential to engage teachers, staff and families as partners in creating an environment where every child can succeed. That occurs more often when those groups feel involved, their opinions valued, and their voices heard. Building ownership of a school’s mission, and its vision, emerges when constituents are authentically involved in making decisions about their school.
Creating a Vision for the School Year

Ronald Williamson and Barbara Blackburn

The most successful principals have a clear sense of vision, or purpose, for their school. Not only must a principal have a personal vision, but they must be committed to working collaboratively with teachers, staff, teachers, students, and community to articulate a clear and compelling shared vision for their school.

Creating a Personal Vision Statement

There is an old saying, “You have to take care of yourself before you can take care of others.” The same is true of vision. Before you can help others build a shared vision, you must have a vision of your own. Writing a statement of personal vision provides three benefits:

1. Helps to clarify values and beliefs
2. Identifies priorities in your life
3. Clarifies what is most important and how you want to spend your time

The purpose of a vision statement is to inspire, energize, and motivate. It should be emotional and reflect your feelings. We suggest this four-step process to create your own statement of personal vision. Be sure to include sensory details to provide power to your statement. Also, the more time you invest in reflection at the beginning of the process, the clearer your finished product will be.

Process for Developing a Personal Vision Statement

Step 1: Think about your personal and professional life. Describe what you would like to achieve and
the contributions you would like to make. Think of it as something you’ve already accomplished. Describe what it looks like and feels like. For example, imagine hovering in a hot air balloon over your life. Imagine your life as successful as it might be—what would you see, what would you feel, what would you hear?

Step 2: Consider the following things based on what you have written --- self-image, relationships, personal interests, and community. Examine each item in your draft to ensure that it still fits.

Step 3: Develop a list of values that you hold. Identify the most important values in your life. Once this is done, review the list and rank them from most to least important. Remove the least important. Re-rank if appropriate. Check for relevance with your earlier statement. Eliminate any item that is not relevant.

Step 4: Use the items from the first three steps to develop a statement about who you are. Review and edit the statement as often as needed until you believe that it accurately reflects who you are.

Creating a School Wide Vision

A mission or vision statement is the shared vision of people in a school about their ultimate purpose. In other words, it is a collective commitment of the school community.

Effective mission statements are short and easily remembered; they are used for setting goals and priorities for the school, teachers, and students; and they are helpful in selecting the specific programs, resources, activities, and personnel used to achieve the goals. As you consider the development of a mission statement (or the revision of a current mission statement that may not be effective), incorporate the characteristics of effective statements.
Components of a Vision Statement

- A statement of purpose: Overall purpose for the school
- An indication of uniqueness: What distinguishes the school from others
- An explicit statement of commitment: Above all else, what is most important
- A clear value position: Reflection of the school’s core and fundamental values, values that will guide individual behavior and school practice

One way to create a shared vision is to invite everyone to privately write their responses for each of the four components. Then, ask teachers to work in groups of four. Encourage them to share their ideas, and come to consensus on key ideas for the four components. Then, combine the smaller groups into groups of 12 and repeat the process. Finally, ask groups to share their final ideas, and write those on chart paper. Encourage participants to take a “gallery walk” looking for commonalities across the drafts. From that, you can guide a discussion for a draft vision statement.

Vision as a Motivational Tool

Vision is one of the most effective tools for personal and group motivation. Having a vision, then revisiting that vision regularly, helps you and your faculty focus on what is most important and balance the competing demands you face.

In *Rigour is Not a Four Letter Word* (2012), Barbara recommended that teachers write vision letters. The task is to imagine that it is the last day of school. Write a letter or e-mail message to another teacher describing the past year: all that students accomplished, how they have changed, and what they have learned. It is a simple activity designed to keep teachers motivated, but it can serve as a building block for your vision process.

Ask your teachers to write the letter to you imagining it is the last day of school, and this past year was the best year of their teaching careers. Encourage them to describe what happened in their classroom? What happened in the school? How did their students change? How did they grow personally and professionally? Then, use the letters as a part of a discussion with each teacher about their vision and how it relates to yours and the vision for the school. It’s a meaningful way to start the conversation about vision in your school.

### A Final Note

The job of a principal begins with vision. If you don’t have a vision, then you won’t have a clear direction when the pressures mount. The most successful principals are clear about their own vision and recognize the importance of having a shared vision to shape and guide school operations.