

# CLIMATE CONTROL

## Ten Ways to Make Your Schools Great Places to Work and Learn

Kathleen Vail



### 1 Support New Teachers

The price of teacher turnover is high in terms of productivity and morale, not to mention money. The average cost of recruiting, hiring, preparing, and then losing a teacher is \$50,000, according to the National Education Association. Induction, training, and a structured mentoring program are vital, as well as ongoing, tangible support on what's going well and what needs to be done better.

"If a teacher is struggling without support, it undermines quality," says Tom Carroll, president of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future. "That teacher is gone, and students are taught by a passing parade of short-term folks. It definitely has an effect on teaching quality."

### 2 Address a Toxic Climate

What happens at faculty meetings? What traditions and ceremonies do teachers and staff have to celebrate successes? These are elements of school climate, the underlying attitudes and expectations of your employees.

Climate affects morale enormously, but it's not always easy to read. In fact, your schools may have a toxic culture that you are not aware of, says Kent Peterson, an education professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and coauthor of *Shaping School Culture*.

Peterson suggests this checklist for diagnosing a school's climate:

- What is the energy level of people coming into the school? Do they look positive and energized?
- What underlying message is being sent about what's important in the school?
- At faculty meetings, what do people talk about? Do they only discuss their problems, or do they believe they can solve those problems?
- Is there a sense of collaboration?

In a toxic culture, hostility and conflict among teachers are a constant; rumormongers pass on negative information, and they only talk about things that don't work. Peterson suggests that principals in such schools reach out to a core of

staff members who believe in the school and build from there, confronting negativity and hostility and slowly turning the culture around. He also recommends involving the staff in making sure that fun and celebration are part of each school year.

"It's really hard to be a teacher," says Joe Ruzicka, principal of Capital High School in Boise, Idaho. "We have to work hard and play hard."

He split his staff into four groups and challenged them to come up with celebrations and fun activities, and now they have annual staff picnics at the beginning and end of the school year with families invited, among several other "down-time" staff activities.

### 3 Empower Teachers and Staff

People are happiest when they have some control over their work environment. Autocratic, top-down leadership tends to quash teacher and employee morale.

Giving teachers a role in school decisions doesn't necessarily mean site-based management. It means

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that teachers and other staff members have a voice in decisions that affect them. Taking teachers' views and opinions into account, particularly regarding instruction, shows them that they are respected and valued.

## **4** Recognize and Reward Teachers and Staff

Letting teachers know they're doing a good job and recognizing their achievements publicly goes a long way toward making them feel appreciated.

This includes everything from following up on positive things observed during classroom visits to leaving encouraging notes and candy in teachers' mailboxes.

## **5** Don't Ignore Administrator Morale

Principals are your employees, and unhappy ones hurt morale. And administrator turnover — another concern for school boards and superintendents — forces teachers to get used to new sets of rules and expectations.

Workload is a major element of principal morale. Expectations that principals attend every school event and deal with every small detail of building management should be scaled back.

Another thing to watch is the relationship between the school board and the superintendent. If that relationship is dysfunctional, it can spill into the district.

## **6** Deal with Student Discipline

Disruptive student behavior damages teacher morale and leads some teachers to leave. New teachers in particular have trouble with classroom management, and teachers

who leave say they don't feel adequately backed up by principals when it comes to disciplining individual students.

Firm, consistent rules, clear direction to teachers, and supportive redirection when necessary are all important to staff climate and teacher morale.

Principals must maintain balance in student discipline. If a principal doesn't agree with the teacher's decision, he or she should let the teacher know in a way that doesn't make the teacher seem like the bad guy. It's an opportunity to show the teacher a better way to handle discipline.

## **7** Treat Teachers Like Professionals

Teachers need professional development and time to collaborate with colleagues. If they know they are expected to be continuous learners, like their students, they see themselves as professionals.

An important aspect of professional development is the opportunity to collaborate with peers. Teachers find working with their colleagues intellectually stimulating, and the ability and time to collaborate on lesson plans and projects is another reason they stay at their jobs.

## **8** Ask Employees What's Going On

If you want to know about teacher and staff morale, you can take a simple, but powerful, action: *Ask.*

Gathering employee input, whether through informal chat sessions or by a written school survey, gives the staff a chance to be heard on important issues. It also can alert administrators and others to potential problems.

## **9** Keep Facilities Tidy

Not everyone can work in a new building, of course, but it makes sense that the state of school facilities affects morale. Teachers who work every day in crumbling buildings with leaky roofs and broken plumbing are bound to feel that their work isn't especially valued. Morale is especially poor when schools are in disrepair because voters won't pass bond issues, sending a message about the community's lack of commitment to education.

## **10** Develop Emotional IQ

"Everyone needs to feel emotional support from the person they work for," says Daniel Goleman, the journalist who coined the term emotional intelligence. "Being empathetic, recognizing and appreciating good work, validating efforts, appreciating a well-done job, helping people develop new strengths. All of these things are what good leaders do to help teachers work at their best."

A leader with strong emotional intelligence is a godsend to any building — or district, for that matter — that struggles with staff morale. Such a person finds ways to motivate staff members to work to their highest abilities.

Teachers who feel good about themselves and their work will look for ways to reach all their children, even those who have struggled in the past. They create an atmosphere where everyone wants to be — students included. ■

*Vail is managing editor of the American School Board Journal. This article originally appeared in American School Board Journal. Reprinted with permission.*