

# **A SMALL BOOKLET FOR GREAT SUCCESS**

**Rebecca Wheat, Ed.D**

**People may forget what you said. People may forget what you did. But people never forget how you made them feel. – Maya Angelou**

*Equity – More than a word. More than a concept. Equity is really a way of viewing the world. Think of the big equity umbrella over everything. There is a saying, “The last one to know it is in the water is the fish.” Ask many other voices and viewpoints if policies, procedures, and curricula are equitable. Listen intently and reflect, making the best, informed decisions. This is an ongoing process.*

<<<>>>

This is a short primer on *Leadership*. If you are like me, you would love to read more than you have the time or resources to actually commit to reading. I have been in education over 40 years as a teacher, administrator, and coach. What have I learned? My experience has taught me the irrefutable value of Relationships. Maya Angelou captures the importance of relationships in her truthful statement that “*People may forget what you said. People may forget what you did. But people never forget how you have made them feel.*”

From so many possible topics, I have chosen what I feel is essential in addressing the elements of Leadership. I hope you find these topics very helpful.

### **Starting Out**



Before the school year begins, you can and should create a wonderful tone. Meet with each staff member – teachers, assistants, custodians, secretaries, and cooks. Capture their interests and determine what their hopes and dreams are for the school. What do they want you to know? Listen deeply. You will learn so much and will also be able to set the tone for what matters most – *relationships, relationships, relationships*.

## Trust



Imagine your retirement party. What a gala affair. It is at your favorite hotel. The food is delicious, and the conversation lively. This is your night! Now it is time for recollections. You hope they will be from the heart. What will people say about you? What do people really think about you? You have butterflies in your stomach. You're anticipating kind things, but what do people really think? What qualities have you left behind? The answer to this question lies in where you begin--and the starting point is trust.

Why do I begin with trust? Because without trust, you might as well forget about trying to inspire people and creating educational changes. Without trust, people will always be wondering – “What is she really thinking? What is he going to do next?”

Trust is not engendered from a single exchange. Trust is built over a period of time, and it is created by consistently acting in a trustworthy manner, and by consistently showing integrity. Sometimes showing trust will be difficult, but it is always worth the effort.

### **Trust with Staff**

Staff will come to you with very personal issues, and often those issues will have nothing to do with work. Marriages, divorces, their own children, and finances may come into play. It is critical that these issues be dealt with totally confidentially. People will talk to you if they can trust you. One slip-up, one betrayal of a confidence, and people will not open up to you. A staff member might think, “If she gossiped about Mary, she may gossip about me.”

I simply cannot emphasize enough the issue of trust. Think of people you trust who may, or may not, be in education. I bet that you can speak to them about anything. You admire them. If you are feeling great about something, you can share it. If you are feeling extremely down or upset, you can also share it. You know that your confidences will not be broken and will not be told to anyone else. Well, that is exactly the way you want people to feel about you.

### **Trust with Families**

Relationships with families can make or break a principal. Families talk, and how families perceive you is critical to the type of school you will create, and the feelings of community you will inspire within the school.

When I discuss trust with families, I use the term “family” because so many children do not live with their parents anymore. Many live with grandparents, aunts, uncles, and in the foster care system. The word “family” acknowledges immediately that many types of homes exist and should be validated.

Establishing trust with families is imperative, and a continuous process. As you act in trustworthy ways, your community feels this trust, and trust increases and continues to increase.

It is not a cliché. Honesty is really always the very best policy. It is much better to call parents too much than not enough. A simple call now, by you or your secretary, can save you countless hours of grief later. When children are hurt, call. Be brief, and be honest.

Some concrete call examples: Always call about head injuries, even if the injuries seem minor to you. The call might take this form: “Sally has bumped her head and it is bleeding. Everything is under control and she has stopped crying. I don’t feel you need to come, but please come if you wish.” Or, “Neil fell and cut his forehead. We have

cleaned the cut. I don't think it needs stitches, but I would like you to make the final determination with your doctor. Please come if you can, or send a friend or relative."

By being calm and honest, and by using the best judgment you possibly have, parents will feel they are able to trust you. You have tried your best, and that is all anyone can ask.

### **Listening**



The power of deep listening is immense. Our lives are busy and many are almost addicted to their social media screens. When do we really listen? When are we listened to? How do we feel when someone listens to us with his or her ears, eyes, and body? As a principal, become a supreme listener. Listening shows respect, empathy, and care. We listen with our hearts and bodies.

### **Listening to Staff**

Staff and families have many different personalities. Every person deserves to be heard and respected. Taking the time to listen is critically important. Many times people will bring up personal issues. Life is just plain hard at this point. A troubled marriage, a misbehaving teenager, an aging parent. Many times people just want to talk, and the principal becomes mother or father figure. Just listening and empathizing can do a world of good. We have talked something out and gotten it off our chests.

Occasionally people will come to us with concerns, complaints, or anger about another person at the school. “I’m supposed to be meeting with Bill, but he is hoarding all of the literature books.”

Or,

“My mentor teacher is Jill. I know she’s getting money to be a mentor. Well, she seems too busy to even visit my room.”

As a listener, I have a rule and process that I always follow, and have found that it really works well. I advise these individuals:

- Meet with Mary, Bill, i.e., whoever is causing the problem.
- State the issue calmly and pleasantly, using “I messages,” e.g., “Bill, we’re working together this year, and I really need more reading books. Could you please share some with me?”
- Try to work the issue out together, i.e., without intervention.
- If you really, really tried to work things out together, and after trying hard there is still a problem, then I could facilitate discussion between the two of you. I would say in a good eighty percent of the cases, staff work out the issues themselves. In relatively few cases have I had to get involved.

Various people may not always agree with your decisions, but if you are a good listener, and respond thoughtfully to the issues that staff have discussed, your faculty will often respect you and your decisions.

You will discover that excellent listening skills will be rewarded in so many areas. People who are listened to often want to get involved. As people get involved, a sense of community begins to evolve.

The power of listening is eloquently discussed in Making Sense as a School Leader by Ackerman, Donaldson, and Von der Bogert. These authors note: “Listening lies at the heart of being a leader...We mean listening in the broadest sense; staying tuned to the signals from children, parents, custodians, teachers, the building itself, and other sources that alert you to the state of the school and life within it” (p. 159).

Listening guides the way, and opens the door to so many possibilities.

## Visibility



*Be very visible.* I firmly believe that many issues can be solved by one's ability to be visible. Being visible means staying in the yard before school classes begin, and being in the yard at recess and school's end. Being visible means that families have opportunities to connect with you and to bring up issues. By being visible and listening, you can solve lots of things on the spot. Families may bring up a classroom issue, a yard issue, or a lunchroom issue. Many times you will have solutions. At other times you can listen to the family and let them know you will get back to them. You have your pulse on the situations at the school, and everyone appreciates that.

When you are visible, you instill confidence. The principal is available and knows what is going on.

In addition, being visible offers the benefit of being able to learn the names of every single child who attends your school. This means a great deal to the children, families, teachers, and yourself. A strong school is built on strong relationships. As you are visible and learning the names of families and students, you are forging strong bonds.

## **Substitutes**



Why are substitutes included in this booklet? Because getting and keeping substitutes is critically important. In many places, substitutes are hard to get. They can select the jobs they want. Make your school an environment in which substitutes want to work. How can you accomplish this?

A few simple acts are very helpful for you and substitutes. Greet substitutes personally. Take them to the classroom and tell the class, "Today we have a guest teacher. The same consideration you show your regular teacher, please show our guest teacher." This sets a very positive tone and also lets the guest teacher know that he/she will be supported.

Make a folder for substitutes, welcoming them, and including brief information on recess and lunch times, and other pertinent information. At the end of the day, thank the substitute for coming to your school. With these steps, you will show respect for the substitutes, and since substitutes are often in very short supply, hopefully you will always attract them to meet the needs of your school.

## **Families**

One of the most successful schools I truly have seen had families from all races and socioeconomic levels. The school staff knew this diversity was a strength and built upon it.

Not only were families encouraged to volunteer and become active on committees, but the school had many meetings for families and provided child care and a simple dinner when the meetings occurred. Topics included information on math and literacy curricula, as well as things such as stress around the holidays and positive discipline. The list went on and on.

As parents came together – parents from various racial and socioeconomic groups – relationships were developed around common interests. One result of this successful approach was that many different offerings brought various families together. While some people prefer to discuss academic topics like science and math, other families want to talk about children's trauma and discipline.

Families learned that they have much in common and formed many friendships that strengthened the greater community. This principal learned that it was just fine to start small. You can start with two or three topics for families and build from there.

I recently read something that I think could greatly help school staff and families. An informative article discussed a bilingual teacher who uses a text messaging system called "Talking Points." This system allows educators to communicate with families from many backgrounds and languages (Educational Leadership, January 2020). This possibility of communication is groundbreaking. It breaks down barriers and promotes inclusion.

In addition, I was principal of a school that invested in headsets for the parents who spoke other languages. At our school the primary other language was Spanish. As a person was speaking in English, at the same time it translated into Spanish via the headsets, giving families the exact same information.

The expense for the headsets was well worth it and we were able to lend the sets to other schools, increasing the possibilities for many second language learners and families.

Ask your families what activities they want as you build strong, truly respectful relationships. In doing so, your school is creating the village that it truly takes to promote the very best educational experiences.

## Focus



Focus on two or three things each year.

At one point I interviewed school leaders that were very successful in complicated and challenging schools. The school leaders had excellent advice. Focus on two or three things each year. As one principal said, “When I came in, there were no systems. I decided to focus on two or three things the first year. I chose the front office and made sure we had some Spanish speaking staff in the office who could communicate with families. I also worked on curriculum to make sure everyone was implementing the English language arts curriculum.”

When the principal began, the school was very disorganized. It had low test scores, and a very negative reputation. After five years it was a different school with a coherent curriculum, a positive approach to discipline, and students, staff, and families were thriving.

This principal was very wise to select several things to focus on each year with staff and to go deeply with these things. After five years, the payoff was amazing.

## **Professional Development**

Professional development is an investment in time, energy, and often money. Successful professional development is focused, ongoing, and always includes discussion and reflection.

Whether professional development prioritizes math, English language learners, strategies, promoting safe schools, or other topics, the focus must continue for several years. Activities must be selected to ensure that success can be achieved early in the process. Small, positive steps are fine. Keep your eyes on data and how you define success.

I worked in a school district that focused on literacy for a number of years. This district started small, with a reading recovery program. Every year the district added literacy elements to be implemented at all school sites. A data professional was added who analyzed data each year. The payoff to the district after several years was both expansive and impressive. Even with a change in school superintendents, the district kept its focus on literacy. Often a change in school superintendents brings a total change of programs. However, this district stayed the course with literacy. Their laser focus and commitment showed how significant progress can take place.

## **A Safe School Where Everybody Belongs**

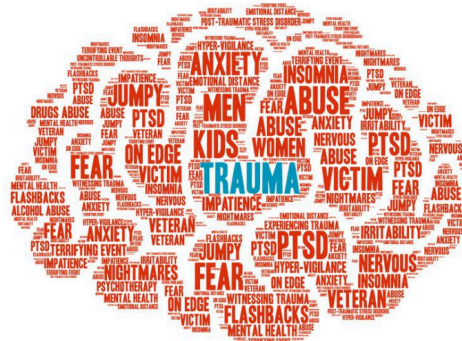
Think back to a time when you were new to a situation and felt welcomed. Also think of a time when you did not feel welcomed in a situation. I imagine an unhappy image emerges when you remember not having felt welcomed. What if this feeling guided you every day? Unfortunately, this is the experience of too many students.

You can create a school that is a welcoming environment for students, families, and staff. A safe school is safe for all when it is progressive and welcoming to all races, genders, and sexual orientations.

Have you worked with staff on how to create an inviting environment for LGBTQ students? Since many LGBTQ students and their families may be in new territory at your school, an excellent article to read is “Rethinking Conventions: Keeping Gender Diverse Students Safe” by Anthony Ciuffo, Educational Leadership, October 2019.

In a school where everyone belongs, discipline is positive, and staff, students, and families know about restorative practices. Discipline is consistent school-wide. It may take several years to create school-wide restorative practices, but the work is well worth it. A school where everyone belongs is greatly appreciated by students, staff, and families.

## Trauma



We now know much more about trauma than we did before. Many families and children have had one or more traumatic events. In children we often see this exhibited in their behaviors.

I recently spoke to a principal who told me, “When a child is acting up, we now ask what trauma might be at play.” Looking at behavior through a trauma lens helps us get to the root of the problem, with the ultimate goal of helping the child, family, and positively supporting the classroom environment.

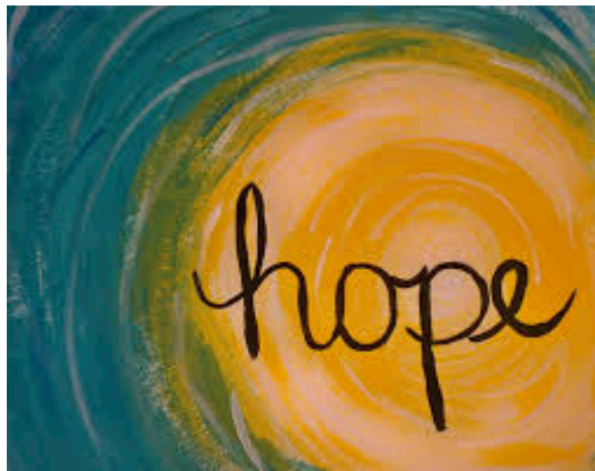
Focusing on trauma informed practices and bringing in experts in this area can really have large payoffs. From this deep understanding, your staff can focus on a behavior system based on deep understanding.

You might have a program such as *Tool Box*, which is a social-emotional curriculum that teaches life skills, including management and responsible decision making.

You can try many ideas. Sometimes something quite simple can have great impact. I heard of a teacher who utilized a chart something like: I’m fine    OK    Not so great    Etc.    Students would put a post-it note on the section of the chart that described how they were feeling at a particular time. This chart opened up the possibility for deep conversations that could lead to critical help. Your staff will have other ideas that will prove helpful.

Once you and your staff select a program and have a good understanding of child development, children and families will sense this support. You are with them and on their side. There is no place for blame. The conversation becomes, “How can we help this child and family?” Step by step, your school will be a very welcoming school.

### Hope



Michelle Obama was asked “What can we give our children?” She answered, “Hope.” But how do we give hope in and for our schools? To me, this is perhaps the greatest question. Anxiety, depression, and suicide are on the rise for our young people. The statistics are alarming. How can we help in the schools?

Perhaps one of the most important things is to create work with purpose. We all want and need a sense of purpose. I have come to believe that the very best schools are schools where students develop a sense of focus and purpose. Students gain a sense of efficacy. Students learn that they are part of something much bigger than themselves, and that they are needed.

One important question is how is your school developing a sense of purpose? This sense of purpose can take many forms and encompass many possibilities. Great learning can take place around purposeful activities.

One school that my grandchildren attended raised money to buy a well in another country. The learning from this experience was immense, meeting the needs of others, participating in ways to raise funds, and focusing on what a particular community needed.

There are many project based activities that create purpose. Often, these are activities that students always remember.

In the end, our schools should be happy, joyful, and purposeful places. When you walk into a school, you should feel that you are in a joyful place, where every child belongs. Martha Graham described the beauty of each individual. Graham stated, "There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique and if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium, and will be lost." We can create schools that cherish each child.

We must include families, teachers, and students in ways to maintain hope, purpose, and meaningful school work. Naming these aspects of schools offers many possibilities and insights

---

***"The more healthy relationships a child has, the more he will recover from trauma and thrive. Relationships are the agents of change and the most powerful therapy is human love." - Bruce D. Perry***